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The politics of the emerging agro-industrial complex in Asia's 'final frontier': The war on food sovereignty in Burma

Kevin Woods

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Abstract[1]

Burma's dramatic turn-around from 'axis of evil' to western darling in the past year has been imagined as Asia's 'final frontier' for global finance institutions, markets and capital. Burma's agrarian landscape is home to three-fourths of the country's total population which is now being constructed as a potential prime investment sink for domestic and international agribusiness. The Global North's development aid industry and IFIs operating in Burma has consequently repositioned itself to proactively shape a pro-business legal environment to decrease political and economic risks to enable global finance capital to more securely enter Burma's markets, especially in agribusiness. But global capitalisms are made in localized places - places that make and are made from embedded social relations. This paper uncovers how regional political histories that are defined by very particular racial and geographical undertones give shape to Burma's emerging agro-industrial complex. The country's still smoldering ethnic civil war and fragile untested liberal democracy is additionally being overlain with an emerging war on food sovereignty. A discursive and material struggle over land is taking shape to convert subsistence agricultural landscapes and localized food production into modern, mechanized industrial agro-food regimes. This second agrarian transformation is being fought over between a growing alliance among the western development aid and IFI industries, global finance capital, and a solidifying Burmese military-private capitalist class against smallholder farmers who work and live on the country's now most valuable asset - land. Grassroots resistances increasingly confront the elite capitalist class' attempts to corporatize food production through the state's rule of law and police force. Farmers, meanwhile, are actively developing their own shared vision of food sovereignty and pro-poor land reform that desires greater attention.

Introduction

Burma[2] is at a rare agrarian crossroads. The second agrarian transformation is digging in and beginning to take root in ways unforeseen just a few years ago. The newly formed military-led government since early 2012,[3] in cooperation with global international finance institutions (IFIs) and the international development aid industry, has laid down the foundations for a neoliberal economic order. Burma's new political order under the current reform period has reinvented the Burmese military such that they have gained international (and more poignantly 'western')

[1] **A ragged rendition...do not circulate or cite without permission**

[2] I use Burma in this paper not as an explicit political statement but more following US government nomenclature for the country and my own familiarity of the country as Burma and the name I use when speaking in Burmese in Burma.

[3] The new constitution mandates that 25 percent of parliament seats be allocated to military officials.

legitimacy - and thus access to global finance capital and markets. From America's 'axis of evil' to the Global North's newest economic frontier as part of America's Asia-Pacific geo-political repositioning, Burma is being manufactured as its own 'American dream', rising from the ashes of poverty and war under China's heavy-handed orbit.

My research project seeks to explain this almighty neoliberal transformation under the guise of American-championed democracy and freedom through the power and politics of one word that carries both discursive and material weight: land. Land, in this case smallholder farmlands since Burma is a rural country of smallholders, has become a battleground for this global (post-) Cold War struggle between the Global North (specifically USA, EU and Japan) and China (including Russia and North Korea).

But land is not just being defined by this geo-political playground due to oil-rich Burma being wedged between the world's two most populous countries, India and China, and flanked by pro-USA Thailand. More significantly, land has become Burma's must trumped commodity recently put on sale to the international investment community, advertised as Asia's 'final frontier'. The Burmese government brags to potential investors the millions of acres of 'wastelands' lying idle in the country, waiting for an injection of finance capital to awaken the unproductive lands from its dormancy. Burma's awesome wild rivers that flow from the Himalayas down to the Bay of Bengal, monsoon tropical climate with heavy rainfall, and bordering the world's two largest markets ignite frontier fantasies comparable to the Amazon.

But these fertile agricultural fields which agro-investment dreams are made of are, of course, alive with smallholder communities long-dependent on these alluvial plains and forested hills for their own food sovereignty. But these farming communities live within the on-going legacies of political histories borne through violence, influencing which crops they farm, their available moneylenders, accessible markets, and potential profits and debts. The distinct violent and racialized geographies tied to the country's different political histories shape and are shaped by the decades-old war for resource-rich land. The global agro-industrial food complex and its financial entanglements has become the newest, and the most significant, contending force - both real and imagined - that is shaping what is now becoming the second agrarian revolution.

Burma is predominately an agrarian country with very low (but rising) rural-to-urban migration - very much an anomaly now in the 21st century - where an estimated 75 percent of the country's approximate 60 million population are comprised of rural, largely subsistence with limited cash cropping, households who still rely on buffalo to plow paddy fields and, at least in the uplands, still rely on native seeds and home-grown organic fertilizer. Farmers across the country have been struggling to keep cultivating their farms, to produce food for the household

and local (and in some cases national / global) markets, and to keep the village household together. Smallholders in Burma are discursively engaging in moral economy principles[4] to defend their lands, where 'land' for smallholders are actively lived and dynamic *places* made from and in turn shape socio-cultures and histories.[5] And the material conditions within which farmers make lived spaces shapes their struggles. These rural farmers, who are mostly without electricity or running water and to varying degrees seasonally food insecure, have embattled one of Asia's greatest rural hardships as neighboring tiger economies have leaped over Burma as one of the world's most repressive military dictatorships drove the country into the dirt.

The rule of law and good governance, as championed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel peace laureate and global peace icon that has recently been released from under house arrest to become a rising political leader in Burma, has been transformed under the heavy weight of neoliberal reform. The rule of law now translates into corporate social responsibility (CSR) and an investment-friendly legal environment as the Burmese government has fully swung to the polar opposite of their previous pariah status to pleading for any foreign investment, without any critical stance on the different types of investment and what that means for the nation and its people. Foreign and foreigner, under the Burmese government's undiscerning eye, is all and always good because it symbolizes global power and money - the fetishized desires that tempted the dictator to relinquish an iron fist over Burma and permit piecemeal democratic reforms. National contemporary politics and politico-military figures since reforms began two years ago have formed an alliance with Burmese companies and global finance capital to create a new ruling military-private capitalist class in Burma. This national elite class in-the-making has quickly gained international legitimacy and taken to the western-aligned stage for global access to Burma's incredible natural resource wealth (predominately in (post-) war ethnic borderlands) and Asia's newest and cheapest labor force.[6] But peasants and their attachment to place and culture that is tied to land - now the military-state's prized commodity - has resurrected a new battleground in Burma coming out of one of the world's longest running civil war.

As the Burmese military-state refashions themselves during the reform period, three converging forces are incongruously solidifying in Burma: violent political histories of war and counterinsurgency, national / regional / global finance capital and institutions, and past and present land grabs and the struggles over them. This paper presents empirical evidence for this 'coming-together' of forces during the neoliberal period,[7] which I believe is one of the most significant historical events in Burma since independence and the country's first military coup in

[4] Scott 1977; Neumann 1998.
[5] Kosek 2006; Brown 2004; Verdery 2003
[6] Buchanan, Kramer and Woods, 2013.
[7] See Bobrow-Strain 2007 for a contemporary Latin American example to the merging of politics, military and neoliberal land reform.

the early 1960s. I want my ethnography of 'studying up' of Burmese agribusiness cronies complimented by my participatory action research with community development workers, activists, and farmers movements in Burma to speak for itself without being unnecessarily cluttered by theoretical name dropping. But my research topic and methodologies are clearly driven by a very important set of literature on Marx's primitive accumulation, enclosure a la E.P. Thompson, and a messy back-and-forth between Lefebvre and Foucault on state-sovereignty-territory that has been tremendously insightful for me to make sense out of my muddy field sites. I have conducted field research on resource politics in Burma, particularly along the Yunnan, China border, for a decade. In 2008 I followed the advice from my ethnic Burmese comrades to help them understand the broader forces driving barbed wire fences into the ground to demarcate private agricultural estates into their customary farm fields. Five years later, this is the story that I have so far put together, which is still a work in progress. The story continues, as does my research, mainly because farmers, this time on view to the world, are now increasingly standing up to direct police threats, and in some cases taking bullets, to protect their lands, their carved out meaningful places. As always, my written work and activism could not be attempted without so many unnamed heroic activists, each in their own unknowing ways, in their continual struggle to be recognized as people with rights - in this case land rights - in the eyes of the Burmese military-state.[8]

Rooting race in place: The sedimentation of agribusiness in the violent geographies of Burma's political histories

In order to understand how race, power and politics are imbricated in land grabs and agribusiness[9] I rely upon a political ecology and human geography approach in order to uncover what I believe are the forceful currents guiding struggles over resource use and access in Burma today. Land and resources are used and accessed within a place, a place that is built upon social relations over time that stretch a locale simultaneously into the past and future. These social relations that are borne out of a place's particular past construct and are constructed by space, regional geographies and histories.[10] Burma's varied particular racialized political histories and violent geographies, very much steeped in land politics and property rights, shape the ways in which land is grabbed for agribusiness and conversely, how smallholder farmers struggle to keep their farms. My intention in this section is to argue how land grabs and struggles for food sovereignty - however defined - should be framed such that the sedimentations of race, power and politics over resource use and access are pulled to the surface. While the racialized political

[8] I use the term 'military-state' in this paper, despite the military and the state now as arguably more separate agencies in the country, because of their closely related alliances in rule making, enclosure and business.
[9] See Moore 2006 and Kosek 2006 for how I rely upon race, culture and politics in my political ecology and geographical analysis of the agribusiness sector.
[10] Lefebvre 1991

histories and their specific violent geographies undoubtedly have shaped how land grabs, agribusiness and struggles over food sovereignty are taking root in the past decade in Burma, my goal in this paper is *not* to rewrite that history here. I simply provide an inadequate overview of the geography of Burma's varied political histories largely defined by racial categories that start from the end of the British colonial regime until this current reform period. The point of presenting this history at all is to bring home the argument that the current land grabs and food sovereignty struggles are borne out of these very different yet closely interrelated spatialized and racialized political histories steeped in Burma's violent past.

Burma has had a tumultuous (post-) colonial history to say the least. The land struggle story starts with the near the end of the British Raj's colonial experiment in manufacturing Asia's rice bowl in Burma's delta region, which crashed out from under paddy farmers held up on credit from Indian moneylenders (Chettiars) after the Great Depression going into WWII. The debt-ridden paddy farmers, at least those that survived malaria in clearing out the local marshy habitat, lost their land and livelihoods to the Chettiars, which ended the first agrarian revolution in the country in a liberal colonial miserable failure.[11]

Part of the colonial independence movement that led into Burma's first experiment with democratic rule was fueled by the nationalist sentiment of injustice from the transfer of a large amount of farmland (estimates widely vary) from predominately Burman smallholders to Indian Chettiars. Various local and national post-colonial movements gained traction citing anger over Indians, brought over by their colonial overlords as a 'native' ruling class, owning more land than Burmans (which contributes, in part, to anti-Muslim and Indian neo-fascist racism today with the 969 movement). When Ne Win staged the country's first military coup in 1962 and began to engineer the "Burmese Way to Socialism", these land injustices were in part fueling Ne Win's socialist-leaning (yet misdirected) land reform.

The other important aspect of British colonial and post-colonial Burmese rule with regards to land was the particular geographies of governance over land and populations at those times, which play a fundamental role in the anatomy of land grabs and resistances today. The British colonialists centered their geography of power in central Burma in the 'dry zone', as well as the 'delta zone' that stretches down the Andaman sea coast along the border with Thailand in what is now Karen and Mon States and Tenneserim (Tanintharyi) Region. In northern Burma the British to some degree were able to gain only nominal control over limited areas of the Shan plateau, as well as what is now eastern Kachin State along the Yunnan border, through strategic alliances with local ruling chieftains.[12] The British colonial power base - following their Burman

[11] Scott 1977; Brown 2005; Adas 2011
[12] Furnivall 1948; Leach 1964

royal predecessors - was centered in lowland Burman areas stretching thinly to the ethnic periphery, with their economic hub in the newly-constructed colonial city of Rangoon (Yangon). Since independence, not surprisingly perhaps, the Burmese government's political stronghold mirrored that of the British colonial government, which was centered in the then capital Rangoon, matched by government authority over the delta and central dry zone areas. Governmental authority over land and people weakened in strength as distance increased from the center, not unlike the mandala of power in neighboring (pre-) colonial Southeast Asian countries.[13]

A very different political history and geography engulfed the ethnic hilly regions along Burma's many national borders, however. Chieftains, for example Kachin *Duwas* and Shan *Saophas*, continued to tentatively govern the ethnic upland borderlands for a period of time after independence during the country's shaky attempt at democracy until just before the first military coup.[14] Local ethnic elites played an important role in political and economic governance over land, resources and populations, which largely excluded Burmans. For the case of Kachin and Shan States along the Yunnan, China border, for example, ethnic Yunnanese traders had long been an integral part of the uplands border economy, much to the dismay of the colonial British overlords and traders and then Burman government officials and businessmen.[15] Chinese jade traders based in Tengcong, Yunnan, China, for example, have been plying their trade, sourcing from the world's best quality jade mines in Hpakant, Kachin State, for generations, creating complex patron-client webs based on the rich mineral resources located in Burma's sub-Himalaya chiefdoms.[16]

For the case of northern Shan State, opium production and trade became a mainstay livelihood and economic backbone in the uplands, partly (but not entirely) in response to the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power and subsequent opium prohibition. This burgeoning opium economy knitted together a complex resource patronage across the China-Burma border, which grew in strength and complexity during the Cold War era. The Nationalist Chinese (Kuomintang, or KMT) retreated from the country's newly-established China's Communist Party (CCP) reaches and subsequently set up some militia units in Shan State along China's and Thailand's borders in the early 1950s.[17] United States' government-backed KMT leaders hiding out in these remote border areas soon became involved in the opium business, working closely with US diplomats, Thai police, and local bandits.[18] The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) set up their underground

[13] Thongchai 1994
[14] Furnivall 1960
[15] Leach 1964
[16] Wen-Chin Chang 2004
[17] Chin and Zhang 2007
[18] Gibson and Chen, 2011

base in the Wa hills right on the China border after being run out of mainstream politics, which added yet another layer of politics and - as it turns out - drugs. During this tumultuous Cold War era in the Shan hills, ethnic Chinese became a crucial source of finance capital and access to markets for farmers and traders, largely based on the dominant currency of exchange, opium.

The Burma Army, or *Tatmadaw* in Burmese, rose out of the political culture of central Burma's nation-state building operations during post-colonial independence.[19] Soon after independence from the British in 1948, the *Tatmadaw* - as a way to deal with armed ethnic groups challenging the nascent Burmese state - contracted out local ethnic strongmen in the northern uplands to help fight these armed political opposition organizations. The government initiated the *Ka Kwe Ye* (KKY) program (literally 'defense') in 1963 after Ne Win's coup, and later the *Pyithusit* ('People's Militia') several years after the KKY program formally ended a decade after it began. These programs entailed the military to hand-select ethnic strongmen to engage in counterinsurgency on behalf of the *Tatmadaw*. In exchange for these arrangements, the central military-state permitted the 'paramilitaries' (which is not exactly an accurate descriptive of *Pyithusit*) to use their 'territories of influence' for producing and taxing poppy production, and government-controlled roads and towns for opium trafficking.[20] These groups also often had gentlemen agreements with state and police agents on the other side of the national border, who purchased the opium in exchange for more arms.[21] One of the most prominent strongman arising from these counterinsurgency programs was Lo Hsing Han (in Chinese pinyin, Luo Xinghan), the infamous Kokang Chinese strongman in the golden triangle, who tied just a few months ago[22,23] The military strategy of contracting out counterinsurgency to local armed strongmen has continued until today to fight against rogue non-state armed groups, some of which who have been transformed into 'Border Guard Forces' (BGFs) under the *Tatmadaw* directives with the lead up to the reform period. The legacy also continues of *Tatmadaw*-backed militias being involved in drugs production, tax and trade - but over the years has diversified into the licit economy as well, most recently the agribusiness sector.

With the fall of the CPB in the late 1980s following in large part the shift in China's global engagement strategy, ethnic armed political opposition groups based in the ethnic borderlands splintered off, many of whom then signed ceasefires with the Burmese military-government at that time. Ceasefire groups stopped openly fighting against the Burmese military in exchange for retaining their armed troops and territory, as well as receiving lucrative concessions and

[19] Callahan, 2005
[20] Lintner, 1999
[21] Gibson and Chen, 2011
[22] McCoy, 1973
[23] His company, Asia World (now run by his son, Steven Law), is one of Burma's most prominent enterprises involved in construction, logging, mining, and hydropower, especially in northern Burma.

cross-border trade rights (much like the *Pyithusit*, many of whom came out of this ceasefire brokering process). The ceasefire agreements in some instances further strengthened semi-autonomous, non-state territories and the politico-business and non-state armed actors operating there as they then received greater protection (although constantly negotiated) from the central military under their ceasefire agreement.[24] These ethnic military-cum-business leaders then began to more aggressively extract and tax various valuable resources, including poppy, within their territorial zone of influence, oftentimes with the blessings of (and bribes to) Burmese military officials.[25] Meanwhile, in government-controlled territories, buttressed by the ceasefire agreements, the Burmese regional military commanders granted resource concessions to their own patron clients (Burmans, ethnic Chinese as well as local strongmen), some of whom helped to broker the ceasefire deals. Starting in the mid-1990s until now, a profusion of state and no-state armed actors doled out resource concessions to as many varied elite businessmen, blurring battlefield enemies with business colleagues.[26]

This, in short, is a very truncated overview of the dominant political histories with their particular violent and racialized geographies that land grabs, agribusiness and struggles over food sovereignty are embedded within. The rest of the paper will demonstrate how these spatialized political histories tied to race manifest in the emerging agro-industrial complex in the country at both national and regional scales. We must look at land politics in the government stronghold territories in the Burman-dominated central dry zone and delta zone as coming out of the (post-) colonial histories of violence and enclosure centered there. And similarly, the WWII China-Burma theatre (of flying 'the hump' fame) and Cold War border histories of war, counterinsurgencies and drugs in northern Burma has considerably defined how land grabs and agribusiness deals arise.

The geographies of the countries' varied political histories are closely overlain with racialized ethnic identities, that is to say the Burman 'center' and the ethnic (i.e., non-Burman or Bama) 'periphery'. Central Burma includes the Dry Zone surrounding Mandalay (the second largest urban center of the country, after Rangoon) as well as the Delta Region surrounding the southern region south of Rangoon, the British Raj's capital that was once a not-so pale reflection of the grandeur of Calcutta. These two very different geographical regions of the country - the former one the driest and perhaps poorest region in Southeast Asia, the latter a low-lying labyrinth of waterways that receives 4-5 feet of rain in just as many months of the year which in the early 1900s was the rice basket of Asia - are the ancestral home of Burman (or Bama) Buddhists. The Burman Buddhists, which are now receiving unflattering fame as 'the face

[24] Lintner, 1999
[25] Smith, 1999
[26] Woods 2011

of terror' against Burmese Muslims, form the backbone of the nation's ethnic and religious identity. The Dry Zone area around Mandalay was the seat of generations of Burman Kings. The British included the dry zone, including Mandalay as the last royal capital, as within their center of power, but also included the drained marshes of the Delta Area to become Asia's rice basket, as well as Rangoon as the new economic powerhouse of the Mekong region. The British, however, were only able to obtain nominal control over upland ethnic areas, and never realized their economic dream (much like the colonial French) of opening trade channels to China via the Burma-China borderlands.[27] Not surprisingly, these royal then colonial centers of power built up in the Burman lowlands then became the same racialized geography of the post-independent Burman military-nation-state.

The ethnic border states (e.g., Kachin, Shan, Arakan, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Chin), however, are populated by non-Bama ethnicities that are predominately but not only Christian, with a long history of resistance to foreign powers (especially Bama Kingdoms), with historical trading and familial ties across political borders (e.g., China, Thailand, Bangladesh, and NE India). The constructed mono-ethnic states are complicated racialized territorial mosaics of state and non-state authority, with a plethora of non-state armed groups of various ethnicities operating both nominally as part of the Burma Army as well as those fighting against the Burmese military-state. Ethnic states in the north (Kachin, Shan), for example, include government-controlled provincial capitals (Myitkyina, Lashio, Taunggyi) that serve, since ceasefires were signed in the early 1990s, as business centers for resource extraction and the drugs trade, as well as significantly regional military centers. Outside of the provincial towns is a mosaic of government and non-government-controlled territories, overlapping or apart from 'insurgent' areas where ethnic rebel groups have been fighting against the military-state for over six decades. In addition, 'paramilitaries' (*Pyithusit*) are interspersed throughout the state-controlled areas, making them de facto non-state spaces much like the 'insurgent' spaces due to *Pyithusit's* relative autonomy from the Burmese military in day-to-day militia governance and trade affairs. The ethnic states in the south and southeast have different ethnic political histories yet again, although are still tied to the national ethnic struggle against Bama domination. This includes Arakan State along the Bangladesh border, and then Karenni, Karen and Mon States along the southeast border with Thailand, including Karen populations along the eastern part of Tenneserim Region. Their respective racialized political histories are embedded in their own armed struggles, cross-border trading networks, and politico-business relations with the Burmese military-state.

In each of these territorial configurations, agribusiness operates differently, with different

[27] Furnivall 1948

players directing financial capital flows into the areas under their authority. Most Burmese companies (of Burman and Chinese ethnicity) based in Yangon and Mandalay receive their concessions in lowland Burman areas in the Central Dry Zone, the Delta Region and in government-controlled areas in Tenneserim Region where the military-state has greater territorial authority and control. The national military has been the single largest agency facilitating land grabs for decades, and since Burmese companies oftentimes rely upon the military to obtain their estates (although this is now changing with the reforms), it is no coincidence that their concessions are in Burmese military-dominated areas that are predominately located in the Bama-populated lowlands. They do not have the patronage networks *or* the police force to obtain concessions in areas where the military-state is weak - with some very notable exceptions. In ethnic states in the south there is in general less insurgency (apart from Karenni and Karen States), with the central government controlling most territories in Arakan and Mon States and most areas of Tenneserim Region, and therefore the presence of national military-facilitated private estates in these areas as well.

This is in contrast to Kachin and Shan States in the north, however. Burmese businessmen in Yangon lack patron-client ties there and thus are not able to conduct business in those locations, along with the continued threat of insurgency that makes business deals there more risky. Therefore, most agribusiness contracts in the north are carried out by local ethnic businessmen from those areas, in particular those with Chinese ethnicity such as the Kokang Chinese who have long been tied to (il-)licit resource patronage networks. Company agricultural estates in the north are predominately fronts for mainland Chinese investors, supported by China's national opium crop substitution program (see more below).[28] However, as the military-state gains in strength in ethnic areas, there has already been an increase of large-scale agricultural concessions to Burmese companies based in Yangon, which is expected to increase dramatically during this neoliberal reform period that I argue lends to military-state building.[29]

Chinese agribusiness ventures in northern Burma along the China border become mixed into the deep historical sedimentation of contentious ethnic politics, political violence, war and (counter-) insurgency. No previous (pre-/post-) colonial rulers have gained effective control over northern Burma's frontier uplands[30], which has been engulfed since independence in ethnic political strife and illicit economies and trafficking.[31] A complex territorial mosaic operates instead, with overlapping state-like authorities competing and cooperating to control

[28] Kramer and Woods 2012
[29] Woods 2011
[30] Leach 1964; Scott 2009
[31] Smith 1999; Lintner 1999

valuable resources and cross-border trade routes.[32] Agricultural concessions as new spatial productions have become intertwined with these messy territorial entanglements, which itself are linked to the history of (counter-) insurgency, ethnic political conflict and drugs. Chinese financed agricultural concessions in northern Burma's ceasefire zones is not the case of finance capital replacing coercion, but rather an interplay between the market and military force, something I have coined 'ceasefire capitalism'.[33] Instead of the silent compulsion of the market shaping industrial agricultural landscapes, northern Burma's contemporary enclosure movement continues to rely upon the barrel of a gun. Counterinsurgency[34] is rendered specific to the case of Burma's northern borderlands during the ceasefire period as post-war development - in this case industrial agriculture - becomes an adapted extension of Burmese war tactics, yet refracted by ethnic politics and emerging forms of capital accumulation.

One of the major themes of more than a century of history in Burma is the role of militaries - the Burma Army, militias, ceasefire groups and remaining rebel or insurgent organizations - in violence and enclosure. These (non-) state armed groups are the significant actors in land grabs, past and present, which is tied to the histories of war and violence Burma has been long embattled in. In July 2012 the Union Parliament established a Land Investigation Commission to compile a mid- and end-of-the-year report for the President's Office on investigated land grabs across the country. After the first five months of operation, thousands of land grab cases were reported by farmers who believed an injustice was committed with losing their land; only just over 1,000 cases made it through their vetting process (for example, must have occurred after 1988, and the grabbers did not follow the 'rule of law' in land confiscation). The conclusion of the mid-year report was startling not just in its conclusion, but that it was actually reported: the Burmese military were responsible for about 50 percent of the nation's land grabs, predominately in Burman areas (much less so reported in ethnic minority areas, despite being the main militarized area of the country and where there is a long history of land grabs). The report recommended that the military should return unused farmlands and compensate farmers for the seized land. Burma's Defense Services finally agreed in July this year to give back all the nearly 250,000 acres of land (except that which already has existing structures on) that they have been accused of taking after heavily pressured by the Commission and President U Thein Sein. Then a week later the Ministry of Defense said they reassessed the situation and will give back only about 18,000 acres of the land the military has been accused of wrongfully taking (less than 10 percent of the amount accused). It remains to be seen if any of this land is given back, what process is followed, and how the military will be held accountable for past, present and future land grabs. Meanwhile, there is no mention of the role of militias (BGFs and

[32] Grundy-Warr & Dean 2011
[33] Woods 2011
[34] Kilcullen 2010

Pyithusits) in land conflict despite being at the front line of land grabs in their territories of influence. So far civil society organizations are remaining silent for the most part on different militaries roles in land grabs in the country, and instead is focusing on other more safe scapegoats (relative to the military institution at least): Burmese 'cronies' and foreign companies (in particular from China).

One of the noteworthy aspects of the emergence of the agro-industrial complex in Burma today is how regional and global finance capital is bleeding into the pockets of these armed actors and organizations, in some cases tied to illicit economies. It is not so much as “turning battlefields into market places”, as coined by then Thailand’s Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhaven, referring to the Thai-Burma border in the 1990s after the first round of ceasefires, but more like using global markets to do unfinished battles. This resonates with William Reno describing Sierra Leone as a 'shadow state' where “state officials chose to exercise political control through market channels."[35] And for areas of 'disorder', the “commercialization of shifting political alliances” leads to a situation where “foreign firms become important political actors, helping to shape factional struggles and consolidate the power of particular groups."[36] The first priority among the IFIs, in particular the World Bank, as soon as the new President took office was to overhaul the financial system such that (trans-) national finance capital and the western development aid industry can access Burma's economy (and resources). The awkward pairing between regional / global capital with politico-business networks in Burma that arose out of these varied violent military histories is currently shaping the ways in which land investment proceeds.

The government, with technical assistance from the UN, has begun land titling as a technical response to land tenure insecurity threats, following such interventions in post-war Laos and Cambodia. In addition, the government has established a land investigation commission and a land use planning committee to deal with land grabs and national land use planning so not to derail the reforms from discouraged investors. A business-friendly agricultural protection policy and farmer's association is being established to further bolster financial support for corporate modern food production controlled by Burmese business elite with good military connections. And finally, the NGO industrial complex itself is setting up shop in Yangon to help 'manage' potential political and economic risks for companies interested to invest in resource extraction sectors, especially in agribusiness. This is the new Burma, Asia's so-called last corporate market frontier, where land, militaries, and farmers located in lived places with their specific geographies made through particular racialized political histories have suddenly been thrown onto the international stage of global finance capital and institutions.

[35] Reno 2000:44
[36] Reno 2004:608

Fixing global capitalisms in lived places

In an address at the United Nations Summit Meeting on Millennium Development Goals in September, 2010, Burma's Minister of Foreign Affairs declared the country was self-sufficient in food production and contributing to food security in the Asia-Pacific region (i.e., exporting high-quality rice to regionally rice-deficient countries). Liberalizing state-controlled resources is being aggressively pushed by the World Bank, IMF, and ADB over the past two years since the reforms began. The financial and agricultural sectors are center-stage, which fits neatly within the re-emergence of the global agro-industrial food complex since the 2008 food/oil crisis. Burma's agribusiness sector, whereby private companies implement the country's large-scale industrial agricultural development goals, is now being studied by IFIs and the development aid industry to be folded into global agro-industrial food chains as part of the country's reform process. Despite the government's partial liberalization of the agricultural sector since the mid-1990s, only very recently has agribusiness really gained momentum in the country. The current agribusiness boom in Burma is an extension of a historical trajectory of Burmese military (and its border para-militaries) capitalist accumulation strategies, whereby agribusiness is the principal way through which new capitalist relations are being concretized as part of the country's second agrarian transformation.

The agriculture ministry's 30-year Master Plan for the country's agriculture sector (2000-01 to 2030-31), for example, aims to convert 10 million acres of 'wasteland' - a term signifying 'modernity' where the only 'good' land is 'productive' and 'efficient' - for private commercial agricultural production. Examples of government 'crop campaigns' include palm oil development in Tenneserim Region, a nationwide *Jatropha* (physic nut) campaign (which targeted 0.5 million acres per state and region, for a national total of 8 million acres), rubber for the Chinese export market, and biofuels (mainly cassava and sugarcane). These national agricultural policies serve to increase the export of industrial crops to increase foreign exchange revenue for the central government and now the international pressure to assist in filling regional food reserves. The government plans to achieve these industrial agricultural export goals by relying upon Burmese 'crony' companies who maintain good connections to top military officials to develop agricultural concessions granted to them on behalf of the military and government. The government has thus transformed its 'forced crop campaigns', that up until the 2000s dictated what farmers were supposed to grow and when, to enlisting preferred Burmese businessmen and now foreign investors to realize its agricultural commodity export goals.[37] This vision - according to the global industrial food regime - involves transforming

[37] Woods 2013

smallholder farming to industrial monoculture estates because it is considered as the only viable option to feed global exponential population growth.

This polarized global food regime position - large-scale industrial agricultural monoculture estates as the mode of production to feed global supply chains - has been encouraged by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Burma since the Green Revolution ideology gained prominence. All during Burma's turbulent political history since the 1970s (socialist, emerging capitalist, and now neoliberal), FAO in Burma had been promoting modes of production based on industrial-scale, monocrop, high-capital input and high-yielding seed varieties that pay little to no attention to smallholder farmers or their particular land rights claims. And since the reforms have begun, which significantly coincided with the post-2008 food/oil crisis that led to a spike in global land grabs for agricultural estates, Burma's rice bowl is considered a potential savior for Asia-Pacific's rice security. But the mode of production to realize Burma's agricultural potential, harking back to their former colonial legacy, is now being violently contested in the muddy trenches of everyday farm fields.

Many convergent factors since the late-2000s help explain the current-day emerging agro-industrial complex, starting in the early to mid-2000s. While the following series of events I have pieced together may have led to building the initial agribusiness foundation in Burma, it is notable how the current reforms - backed by the Global North's financial industry - are building on top of this military-private platform established before the current economic reforms. The Burmese government liberalized an agricultural trading policy in the mid-2000s to allow Burmese companies not directly involved in the production of a crop (i.e., buyers/traders) to export rather than just the state as before. This policy change came about after lobbying from the nascent Burmese capitalist class who were looking for new avenues for capital accumulation in the opening market. Following the military leaders' push for an export-oriented agricultural sector in the mid-2000s, a select group of well-established Burmese companies obtained large-scale agricultural concessions, oftentimes in lowland old-growth forests that would then be sold on global timber markets worth far more than any agricultural commodities produced.

An extra-added push for an agribusiness model in the country came with the tidal wave from Cyclone Nargis in 2008 that smashed into the Delta shores, sweeping away over 150,000 paddy farmers, leaving their fields empty…which were then coldly perceived as open for business. This natural disaster (aggravated by rampant mangrove deforestation from charcoal production, paddy development and industrial shrimp farms) seemed to have a significant impact in terms of the degree to which the military-state at that time decided to push agribusiness in the country through their favored business associates. Burmese companies were granted paddy

land concessions in the delta 'on behalf of the nation' (and military) on these freshly 'empty' paddy lands, with newly provided government loans to provide a small financial incentive. This was just before monsoon planting season, which the country, and indeed the region with the food/oil crisis simultaneously unfolding, is reliant upon for rice supplies. This (un-)timely natural disaster gave an extra boost to the nascent military-agriculture complex. It is unknown the degree to which regional agricultural advisors pressured the military regime at that time to adapt an agribusiness model to plant paddy in time as the Asia-Pacific region dipped into a rice shortage scare. The top military officials found 'dead' land in the delta as a cleared slate to experiment with private industrial agriculture, backed by the military, Burma style. This then further helped strengthen the degree, power and seductiveness of the industrial agro-complex in the country. For example, the military-government then established in 2009 the Myanmar Rice Industry Association (MRIA), now called the Myanmar Rice Federation (MRF), along with 31 special agricultural development companies (SACs). The MRF enables greater private-public cooperation in the paddy rice sector, the most agricultural crop in Burma, which is controlled by powerful business interests close to top military officials who are an integral part of the emerging agro-industrial-military-complex (see more below).

By 2001 more than one million acres of large-scale agricultural concessions had been allocated to nearly 100 Burmese private companies. But by 2011, the number of companies more than doubled to 204, which had been allocated nearly 2 million acres of private agricultural concessions, with Tenesserim Region (mostly palm oil) and Kachin State (rubber, sugarcane, cassava) together receiving over half of those concessions. Kachin State and northern Shan State have received the highest rate of increase in concessions in the country, which is from the significant increase in Chinese agribusiness deals supported by China's opium substitution program in northern Burma. Precisely during the time when Burmese farmers put land grabs on the national and international agenda through their various forms of both legal and extra-legal resistances, the Burmese government *increased* the allocation of large-scale agricultural concessions to the domestic and foreign private sector by a shocking 1.5 million acres from January 2011 to March 2012, marking a 75 per cent increase. By March 2012 nearly 3.5 million acres of private large-scale agribusiness concessions had been awarded to predominately Burmese companies, according to official government statistics. The areas that already had the most agricultural concessions awarded witnessed the biggest increases in additional concessions demarcated - Ayeyarwaddy Region (Burman-dominated), Sagaing Region (Burman-dominated), Tenesserim Region (predominately Burman and Karen) and Kachin State (predominately Kachin). The last three region/states have the largest remaining forest cover in the country, which is now quickly under threat from converting forestlands into industrial

agricultural estates - perhaps one of the actual incentives to receiving these agricultural concessions.[38]

There is wide agreement in Burma not to believe government statistics at face value, however. This is more than just because the government will report what they want the public to believe - even during these slightly more transparent times - or because farmers will misreport their harvests as their own small form of resistance. For one, there are blatant inaccuracies that could be due to a host of reasons, including lack of proper training and suitable technologies. The 2012 agribusiness data cited above seems nearly impossible; for example 1.5 million acres in Kachin State alone in March 2012 up from nearly 600,000 acres the year before. Another issue is that official statistics do not include concessions in areas not under government control, such as those administered by the various ethnic political groups that control most of the frontier areas of the country. Moreover, according to a Burmese agribusiness consultancy firm and advisor to the President's office, only about 20 to 30 per cent of the area of agricultural concessions is actually under cultivation. The government is not following their own land laws, whereby the concessions need to be planted according to a yearly percentage of the entire concession size within a few years of receiving the concession or else the land will be reverted back to the state (note, not farmers from which the land was taken). The government-allocated concessions to companies are so far not producing good results or achieving national objectives of increased agricultural production for export, according to government data. This shortfall of expected increased productivity and efficiency from following the industrial agricultural model is precisely what the international development community and IFIs hopes to contribute to so that it can done 'right'.

The country's only Burmese agribusiness consultancy firm is owned by the Burmese billionaire businessman Serge Pun of Serge Pun Association (SPA). Mr. Serge Pun, who has since returned during the reforms from his Hong Kong hideout where he made hundreds of millions in unexplained business deals, runs First Burma Investment (FMI), which is involved in real estate and agribusiness ventures. In addition, he owns Yoma Strategic Holdings, Ltd., a subsidiary company listed in Singapore that provides a range of services to Burmese companies. He is also chairman of Yoma Bank and recently started a new charter airline to usher foreign businessmen to and from the new hinterland capital from Yangon. He also owns the subsidiary Plantation Resources Pte Ltd (PRPL). PRPL plans to develop up to 100,000 acres of agricultural land, mostly of *Jatropha Curcas* but have also received rubber concessions.[39] The agribusiness consultancy company that he owns in Yangon is run by a well-spoken Burmese man who obtained a Ph.D. in

[38] Woods, K. forthcoming.
[39] May Thandar Win.2005. See also the company website at http://www.yomastrategic.com/business_agriculture.asp

agricultural science from the USA in the 1970s during the height of the green revolution. He is now also an economic advisor to the president who steers the President's Office's vision on the model of agriculture development in the country. Smallholder farmers, according to the logic he was taught, should relinquish their smallholder farms to big private estates to increase efficiency and productivity for the nation, and instead become Asia's newest pool of labor in peri-urban factories fueling the country's economic engine of growth. The only problem, he admits, is that those supposed factories have not yet materialized. The other problem is that farmers don't want to work in factories, or even on other people's farms. In a meeting full of ethnic land rights activists in Naypyitaw, after they clearly articulated their case again and again for the growing problems of land grabs in their areas, the economic advisor repeatedly allayed their fears of a pandemic in comforting them with promises of factory jobs, much to the disbelief of the activists. Serge Pun stated in no uncertain terms at the very recent World Economic Forum (WEF) in Naypyitaw that the government's main problem with the land grab issue is being too weak on land governance issues and too soft on the 'squatters' who refuse to vacate the farmlands.

The agribusiness companies that the consultancy firm and economic advisor is advocating on behalf of, including their chairmen, is to garner greater state and financial support for companies carrying out the national duties of industrial agricultural production quotas. So far the lack of any substantial state financial support, lack of available infrastructure in the area, and other obstacles to employing modern industrial farming methods have encouraged agribusiness investors to turn to other models of production on their allocated concessions to boost commodity production. The companies have a huge financial incentive to reap high volume and quality harvests for export as they receive coveted export permits either through their military-government connection or the agricultural business association to which the company belongs, which is where substantial profits can be made, thus helping to offset the costs of developing the land concession. Companies are under considerable pressure from the government to cultivate the entire concession within a certain number of years, or risk losing their investment back to the state. In response some are bringing in migrant on-farm wage laborers (who are oftentimes landless themselves, and in many cases include the farmers whose lands were taken for that very concession) to work their agricultural estate. This 'feudal" arrangement involves the wage laborers being paid a monthly salary (although not in all cases), but must pay a rental fee for their subsistence plot, often paid in kind. Burmese businessmen refer to this model as *the* model of 'contract farming', despite the more normative arrangement involving farmers working on their own land rather than working on an estate as an on-farm laborer.

In interviews with Burmese agribusinessmen leading up to the national elections in 2010, I usually ended with the same question: "What are the biggest challenges presented to you in realizing your agricultural development objectives?" And almost every time I got the exact same answer: "farmers and labor." Farmers as in cultivators who have been working this now declared 'wasteland' for generations and then become labeled as 'squatters' who resist the land grab. And 'labor' in the sense of on-farm wage labor that is unskilled in modern farming techniques, including planting high-yielding hybrid seeds, using heavy doses of chemicals, and not knowing how to operate big John Deere tractors. In effect, the problem in one of the most agrarian, poorest countries in the world is farmers are 'un-modern', 'backwards', and 'unruly'. In many cases, estate managers had to constantly refill their labor supply because workers would keep running away looking for better fortunes, such as in the mines, escaping across the national border, or in the illicit economy. My interviews would jarringly slip between the traditional 'reality-Burma' and the modern 'Burma-imagined'. Through relentless efforts by the military, government and private companies, there is a daily struggle in the countryside over the discourse and material conditions of 'modernity-in-the-making'. This discursive contestation and battle in the trenches has taken a dramatic spin during the current reform period.

Since the first national elections in over two decades in the end of 2010 and the nomination of the former military commander U Thein Sein as President in early 2011, the new military-backed government's hallmark economic development policy has been centered on industrial agricultural development (along with special economic zones for dirty industries). The new central government's political will to transform Burma from a peasant subsistence economy into a modern agro-industrial nation has been demonstrated through orchestrating several agribusiness investment global summits in Yangon, in June and October 2012. The investors participating, however, couldn't avoid farmers, activists and representatives of ethnic political parties protesting outside the 4-star hotel venues over agribusiness land grabs.

Land, and more specifically agribusiness ventures, has become the new post-2008 economic crash 'safe sink' worldwide for trillion dollar assets to wait out the storm. This has led to a huge spike in land grabs throughout the world, which is hotly debated within civil society and academic circles.[40] Since the military leaders have allowed for greater political freedoms, including wider space for rights to free speech and media, land grabs have become the most contested and reported issues in the country. For example, land grabs are the most common reported case to Burma's new National Human Rights Commission as well as to the Lower House Committee for the Rule of Law and Stability, headed by Daw Aung Suu Kyi. Ultimately, these land grabs have become articulated as a fight between smallholder farmers and

[40] On land grab debates, see Borras and Franco 2012; Anseeuw *et al.* 2012; *Journal of Peasant Studies* vol. 39 nos. 2 and 3–4, *Globalizations* vol. 10 no. 1; and *Development and Change* vol. 44 no 2.

mechanized large-scale private estates. In an email correspondence earlier this year with the non-Burmese Asian head of the FAO in Burma and members of a land-based coalition in the country, smallholders were disregarded as irrelevant in the country's agricultural future. "Agriculture policy in particular the food production and contribution to the GDP as a whole is the most important point to be focused. I don't see any solution in terms of the food security as a whole if it is only the way that the small piece of land will be allocated to the small and landless farmers. Please note that this country has a big responsibility to cover the national and regional food security, and should contribute to the part of the 9 billion population in 2050. At the same time we need to consider how to increase GDP per capita of Burma. Small land allocation may help for the small farmers but this is very short sight[ed] and [we] need to consider rather more long and insightful approaches."

The newly-shaped development aid industry in Burma, which is intricately folded into global financial institutions and capital, traded in a human rights platform to help facilitate investment business opportunities in Burma from their home countries. When US President Obama arrived in Yangon in November last year to present his historical speech at Yangon University's famed student union (recently rebuilt after the military regime bombed it out to attack pro-democracy student activists in 1988), he brought with him an entourage of American big business, including the world's leading American agro-industrial food corporations. The only problem is that Burma's most influential business leaders were nearly all on America's sanctions list due to their close association with the former military regime - or rather, until the US government began to remove some of them from their lists, despite continued allegations of their involvement in business ventures with military officials, the illicit economy (especially drugs), human rights abuses and land grabs. The Burmese tycoon business community is now desperately trying to recreate their image to whitewash their former participation in accumulating wealth via military terror so they can more easily team up with western big business that must conduct due diligence reports and escape any possible public relations disaster.

The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the American government's development aid arm (USAID) and the UK's development aid arm (DFID) have all pledged to throw their political and financial heavyweight behind agriculture development in the country - which is seen as the country's gateway to obtaining economic development without the 'resource curse' quickly trailing behind. The global development aid and IFI industries are to varying degrees advancing the agro-industrial complex despite on-going biting critiques against this model of food and biofuel production. These agencies entertain a rather schizophrenic oscillation between supporting smallholders and that of the global agro-food industry by commissioning a series of consultancy reports to inform their future programs. A clearer picture emerges after

spending time perusing through this growing pile of agricultural sector and land tenure security analysis reports: the trend amongst those with the cash to implement global/national programs in Burma seems favorable to integrate smallholders into an industrial agro-food complex organized into consolidated vertical chains managed by the world's top agribusiness and chemical firms, much like the case in other industrialized nations. This, of course, would be a monumental task, which will require the backing of global finance capital from Wall Street, London and Tokyo. All the ingredients needed to actually implement and then scale up industrial modern agriculture in Burma is still far from available, but the active making of that investment-friendly reality is a fascinating vortex of global (geo-) politics, military-state politics, and national / local state-society dynamics. This aggressive game of 'making capitalism' has been put on the table just this year, which is further solidifying a military-private class, this time with major finance capital injections from the regional private sector and IFIs.

To date there are only a few 100 per cent foreign-operated agricultural operations in Myanmar, although every month a new big foreign-owned agricultural concession is announced, almost exclusively from the region. Before the current land reforms, foreign investors could only engage in joint ventures with the government. But very few foreign investors opted for this because of very high taxes for foreign companies and political risks were exceedingly high (mainly from military predation). Therefore, the vast majority of agricultural concessions in the country to date are *formally* run by Burmese companies. Although there is very little formal foreign agricultural investment in Myanmar so far, foreign investors are suspected in some cases of financially backing many Burmese companies who receive large agricultural concessions because of their relations to top military officials, with proceeds distributed accordingly. And for the case in northern Burma, China’s opium crop substitution program is behind most of the agricultural concessions in northern Myanmar, particularly for rubber. With the country opening its doors to foreign business, and the foreign investment law recently passed, there is now a lot of regional investment interest in Burma's agricultural land, although so far little actual money on the floor from western agro-corporations.

While western-based agro-companies are so far largely not yet investing actual finance capital in Burma due to these still high political risks and lack of global financial systems securely in place, regional Asian investors are already starting to set up shop. Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam are taking the leading role in agribusiness investment in Burma as its new legal environment for foreign investment is established, although not yet implemented. In April 2010, before the national elections at the time when land grabbing started to take off with domestic Myanmar companies, the Vietnamese and the previous military regime signed agreements in twelve key investment areas in Myanmar after a bilateral visit, one of which included the Vietnamese agriculture ministry to reach an agreement on a 120,000-acre rubber

concession located in southern Rakhine State near the Bangladesh border.[41] This land concession followed the opening of the Bank for Investment and Development of Vietnam in Myanmar, as well as the launch of direct flights from Hanoi to Yangon.[42] As part of the rubber concession agreement, the two sides agreed to help facilitate Vietnam's rubber investment activities in Myanmar, to be implemented by the Vietnam Rubber Group, Ho Chi Minh City Youth Volunteers, and Hoang Anh Gia Lai Group.[43] The latter company, with direct ties to the Vietnam state, has been recently exposed by Global Witness to their rubber land grabbing and social-environmental impacts to communities in Laos and Cambodia. After signing the MoU for the rubber concession located in southern Rakhine, however, a Vietnamese delegation did not receive permission to visit the concession due to 'security concerns', and has since been temporarily suspended by the Vietnamese government. With communal violence on-going in Rakhine State which is still under martial law with hundreds of thousands of Rohinga IDPs, it is not expected that the concession will go ahead anytime soon. If violence ends in Rakhine, it is expected that the Yoma Mountain Range that passes north-south through the middle of the state will be targeted for agricultural concessions as parts of this hilly terrain is categorized as 'wasteland' on agriculture ministry maps, despite generations of swidden cultivation in these mountains.

Thailand is also a major upcoming rubber investor in southern Myanmar, due to close geographical proximity, political ties, and for economic reasons – Thailand is the world's largest producer (predominately smallholder) and exporter of rubber. Thai Hua Rubber Plc,[44] Thailand's third-largest rubber producer, plans to invest in rubber production in Myanmar for export. Sri Trang Company,[45] one of Thailand's largest rubber companies, is also expressing investment interest. Thailand and Vietnam are also cooperating with their Myanmar colleagues on major agricultural production schemes as Myanmar increasingly becomes more conducive to foreign investment and Myanmar conglomerates are opening subsidiary agribusiness firms to engage in global production schemes. For example, one major project activity among these three countries, although for ethanol production from cassava, is the technology transfer of Very High Gravity- Simultaneous Saccharification and Fermentation (VHG-SSF) technology developed by NSTD in Thailand. Under the project, two pilot scale ethanol production plants, one each at Thailand (200 l/d) and Vietnam (50 l/d), respectively, will be implemented. The

[41] Maung Aye 2010.
[42] The MoU followed a visit by Vietnam's Deputy Foreign Minister Doan Xuan Huong to Myanmar in January 2010, during which he pledged to increase commercial ties. Cooperation was furthered with Vietnamese Agriculture Minister Cao Duc Phat's visit to Myanmar in early March. Bilateral trade had already reached US$60 million in the first nine months of 2009; Deustche Presse-Agentur. 2010.
[43] *The New Light of Myanmar.* 2010.
[44] For the Sino-Thai company Thai Hua, see www.thaihua.com.
[45] For Sri Trang Co., see www.sritranggroup.com.

project will also facilitate the establishment of one commercial scale ethanol production plant project of 400,000 l/d in Myanmar under Kaung Kyaw Say Group of Companies (KKS) for USD 25 million (79 per cent of financing). This major agribusiness investment plan is facilitated by the World Bank's Global Environment Facility (GEF), although it is not clear at what stage this project is currently in.[46]

Malaysia is taking a very active role in leading foreign investment in Myanmar's rubber plantation sector, as well. Felda Global Ventures Holdings Bhd (FGV), Malaysia's largest agro-business company (state protected, connected to ex-PM Mahathir.[47] FGV, together with their selected local partner, Pho La Min Trading Ltd (PLM),[48] plans to develop a complete supply chain of rubber (along with palm oil and sugar cane). PLM, a Myanmar agro-company, is already invested in rubber production in Tenesserim Division. FGV's Myanmar partner will also apparently be Htoo Trading, headed by Htay Za, an infamous Burmese 'crony' with 100,000's of acres allocated to his company by the military in the same area, much like other areas of the country. Several other Malaysian companies have signed MoUs for rubber and palm oil development in southern Burma, all of which appear to hold ties to the Malaysian state.[49] Many of these potential huge rubber and palm oil investments will be located near the Dawei port as part of the new Dawei special economic zone (SEZ) plan, orchestrated by the huge Thai conglomerate Italian-Thai Development Corps. However, the mega-project that requires billions in investment has lagged due to lack of confidence and adequate benefit sharing, with an unknown future at time of writing.

Global political-business alliances merging with the Burmese military-private capitalist class are taking form at precisely the time when the most egregious human rights abuses are occurring in the country in perhaps two decades, but which is no longer highlighted as the cornerstone of western-aligned diplomacy. Very soon after the new Burmese President was sworn into office, for example, a war was launched by the *Tatmadaw* against the country's last remaining ethnic political resistance organization without a ceasefire with the new government (the KIO/A). Then Buddhist Rakhine mobs attacking against the stateless and now internally displaced Rohinga in Rakhine State began to spread. This, in turn, led to traveling Burmese Buddhist mobs under the 969 movement banner attacking ad-hoc Burmese Muslim communities in many rural towns. There are also reports of increased militarization in newly created ceasefire zones in ethnic border areas.[50] Meanwhile, smallholder farmers in Burma - who are majority population and are the backbone of the rural economy - continue to be arrested and brave bullets to protest

[46] Thailand TT-Pilot (GEF-4), 2012.
[47] For Felda, see www.feldaglobal.com and www.felda.com.my.
[48] On PLM, see www.gmdu.net/corp-542.html and www.alibaba.com/member/pholamincoltd.html.
[49] *The New Light of Myanmar*. 2012; Myat May Zin, 2012.
[50] KHRG 2013

land grabs marked for industrial agriculture to Burmese crony companies and foreign investors.[51]

A fundamental recurring battle is being waged between two (admittedly simplified) sides: the coercive formation of early-industrial forms of capitalisms led by the military-private alliance, and the smallholders struggle to protect their land from enclosure. An essential slippage between reality and surrealism exposes this struggle between these good vs. evil opposing forces: a modern industrial developed country, like an agricultural version of Singapore if you will (Singapore being the model of development most often glorified by Rangoon's entrepreneurial class) versus some sort of agrarian utopian envisioned by smallholders. The agrarian vision is not necessarily one that smoothly fits into normative definitions of food sovereignty, however. Farmer leaders and activist representatives in many different forums explained to me their desire to stay on their farms as smallholder farmers, working for themselves on their land (i.e., not as on-farm wage labor). They want electricity, TVs, mobile phones, and a motorbike, and for their children to get a good state education so to have the opportunity to work in the city off the farm (supposedly to make a livable wage and better access to state services). They want access to government low-interest loans, freedom of crop choice (lack of crop choice was reinserted into the new land laws, despite strong civil society objections), better access to domestic and international markets and information, and freedom to sell their produce as they wish at market price, among others.

Their agrarian desires come out of their own lived realities, in response to the rights they have been denied and their own specific types of poverty. Partly due to the glaring historical lack of grassroots (i.e., non-state aligned) farmers' organizations in the country until just now, farming communities in Burma are mostly not informed about any sort of international food sovereignty struggle, let alone an 'indigenous' struggle, etc. There is just starting to develop some sort of shared collective smallholder farmer vision for agrarian justice and perhaps food sovereignty, although so far it is perhaps too built upon an NGO-led process. But the regional and ethnic differences in the country detract from a perhaps more powerful unity over an agrarian utopian vision to work towards. 'Sovereignty', let it be referring to political states or food production, is a dangerous word in Burma depending on how it is translated into Burmese. So far mostly only ethnic land rights activists are willing to hang out in Burma's more discursive sovereign spaces, discussing and arguing for human rights for their people, broadly defined, after six decades of civil war. A federalist political system that would decentralize political power and authority to individual regions/states has been gaining significant national political attention. Lowland Burman farmers in government-controlled areas, however, seem to more

[51] Amnesty International 2013

inhabit a different discursive space…following their place's own political histories. Paddy farmers representatives which I have interviewed as well as through press statements and protest letters have professed a much stronger economic agenda, desiring greater integration into global food chains where their harvest can obtain a more reliable and higher market price. A shared agrarian food sovereignty vision in Burma becomes fractured along lines of race, place and power.

The making of the rule of law: Enclosure through legalized dispossession

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's reform mantra is the 'rule of law', repeated to such an extent in her public appearances that no one seems to know what is meant anymore by this now loose catch-phrase. The 'Lady of Law' chairs a parliamentary committee on the very name. Auntie Suu (as the nation affectionately refers to her), as the leader of legal reform and good governance, backed by her iconic status as a non-violent Buddhist global peace leader raised in Oxford, has entered into a deeply political game with the military 'old guard' since becoming an elected MP in the last by-elections. Very interestingly, however, is how her good governance and rule of law platform has matched up quite fittingly with the very same agenda of IFIs and the international development community. Daw Suu, in an appearance at Hawaii's East-West Center at the same time that the Burma Army was bomb diving the last armed rebel group to hold out against the military (the KIO/A), admitted she "has always had a soft spot for the military." Moreover, in referring to the Monya copper mine at the conference (which is a joint venture between the Burma Army and a state-backed Chinese weapons manufacturing company where police scorched Buddhist monks in solidarity with farmers whose lands were being further confiscated), she supported industrial resource extraction - especially because it was partly foreign-owned - over Buddhist Burmese villagers. "If we unilaterally break off ongoing projects [with foreign firms], we stand to lose international trust [with regards to rule of law]."Suu Kyi's comments came after Burma's Defense Minister Lt-Gen Wai Lwin warned at the 5th session of the Lower House of Parliament that the influx of foreign direct investment would be deterred if contracts with foreign firms were cancelled and promises broken.

Immediately following the national elections at the end of 20110, which were largely heralded as a success by the international community, foreign investors lined up to assess the business environment in post-election Myanmar. However, most foreign investors originally held off from signing MoUs until more favorable land and investment legislation would be signed into effect in the country. In March 2012 two new land laws, with bylaws signed into effect in August 2012, laid the legal framework for large-scale agricultural concessions in the country. But foreign investment still largely kept cool until a somewhat favorable foreign investment law passed at the end of 2012, despite heated discussions behind closed doors between the state-

backed Union of Myanmar Federations of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI), the central Burmese government, the Burmese military, and foreign private interests.

In early 2012 the newly-formed government rushed through parliaments their first two highly anticipated land laws that turn land into a commodity for sale to domestic and foreign investors. The 2012 land laws blatantly serve the purposes of military-state-private capital accumulation, merging military-state building with transnational finance capital as part of the second agrarian transformation. The laws were first proposed by the former agriculture ministry and now one of the top officials of the military's political party (USDP). The written law bills - the first time proposed to make land into a saleable commodity - were further pushed by the former Northeast Regional Military Commander and current agriculture minister. In addition, one of the former top military officials of the former regime and now speaker of the House and next presidential contender seemed to play an important role in orchestrating the bills. Finally, U Htay Myint joined this military old-guard alliance as the military's private arm, who is now an elected MP and owner of the well-known Yuzana Company, is involved in several high-profile cases of land grabs for agribusiness ventures, and appears to be one of Burma's largest non-military private landowners.

The Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Law (or VFV Law), which passed in March 2012, legally allows the government land management committee, which is chaired by the agriculture ministry (who helped mastermind the law to begin with), to hold monopoly power over farmland management and reallocation, without the ability to be sued in the court of law. As very few farmers have official 105 land title certificates from the agriculture ministry, most farmers have no statutory land use rights with the introduction of the VFV Law. This law is meant to convert what the government labels as "vacant, fallow and virgin land", which is oftentimes cultivated by local households for perhaps several generations, into industrial agricultural estates. The former cultivators whose land is disposed are then termed 'squatters' under this law, punishable to prison and/or fines if they do not vacate the allocated land. The total acreage for industrial crops is up to a maximum of 50,000 acres for a thirty-year lease. There is potential contradiction here with the Foreign Investment Law (see below), which allows for a maximum of 70 year lease for land.

The other land law, also passed into law at the same time as the VFV Law, is known as the Farmland Law. This law states that land can be legally bought, sold and transferred on a land market with land use titles. This is a very significant law because it means that land has become a commodity to be sold on a land market for the first time in the history of Burma. Much like the VFV law, anyone without an official land use title no longer possesses land use rights. Land use titles are to be issued by the agriculture ministry, but that will take decades to title all the

land in the country. Moreover, it will be impossible to title shifting cultivation land (*taungya* in Burmese). This means that the uplands - now labeled 'wastelands' or 'fallow lands' – have no land tenure security under these two new land laws. Therefore ethnic upland areas are under the greatest threat, which are precisely the area's most heavily targeted by industrial agricultural concessions. Another concern with this law is the monopolistic power that rests with the farmland management body (the twin sister of the committee under the VFV law, chaired by the agriculture minister), on decisions over farmland use, management, and allocation.

Land grabbing and land speculation by companies, both domestic and international, is further incentivized by the new Foreign Investment Law (FIL), which passed in November 2012. The much anticipated FIL, after months of debate, still left much to be desired by the international investment community, but with still some very significant liberalization measures that have been shown to satisfy certain criteria to encourage Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the country, especially in the natural resource extraction and production (i.e., agribusiness) sectors. For the specific case of foreign investment in land, land use rights are up to a total of seventy years, which if for agricultural purposes contravenes the VFV Law with thirty year leases. And even still, if the investor wants a lease longer than seventy years, they may get permission from the Union Government if their land concession is located in the 'less developed' and 'poor communication' areas of the country (as then it will be especially suitable for the economic development of the whole country, states the law). Provincial governments (state and region-levels) are not required to give consent to investments within their jurisdiction. The Union Government does not need to give approval to large-sized investments, although they have to be informed. The state's Myanmar Investment Corporation (MIC) can allow foreign investments in restricted sectors if it considers it is in the national interest, especially for ethnic minorities. The MIC thus retains a lot of power over the approval and direction of foreign investment in the country, much like the land management committees over the reallocation of smallholder farmers to the private sector. Several noteworthy exemptions are included to disallow FDI in the agricultural sector, however; but so far the rules are not being closely followed, and no civil society organization so far is applying these statutory by-laws to challenge agri-business ventures illegality even according to their own stipulated laws.

Burmese civil society and several international organizations have openly criticized these laws as legalizing land grabs. Land grabs are now one of the most reported stories in Burmese media, and the international development community and the Burmese government considers land grabs and conflict, underpinned by land tenure insecurity for smallholders, as being the main sticking point keeping back the desired flood of international investment in land-based deals. In response to the growing criticism, two government agencies were established to 'fix' the

problem and stem the tide of mounting farmers' protests. In June 2012 the President established the Land Allocation and Utilization Scrutiny Committee, headed by the environmental and forestry minister. This committee is to advise the President on land use policy and land laws, and was partly created to offset the agriculture ministry's monopoly of power over the land laws and land allocation (see above). The committee so far has proven ineffective, has tabled no recommendations after over a year of existence, is not transparent, and has not opened the doors to civil society to partake in their meetings despite asking to. In the same month an inter-parliamentarian Land Investigation Committee was created. This is composed of MPs and is headed by a high-level representative of the military-backed political party (USDP). The committee has no decision making power and is only mandated to investigate land grab cases, which must not go back before 1988 (the period before the previous military regime). Its mid-year report, which was covered by national media, concluded that most land grabbing was done by the military, with strong recommendations for the military to give back all that land to farmers who were illegally forced off. While the military has agreed, after pressure from the President, to give back less than 10 percent of the quarter million acres it has been accused of wrongfully taking, no military response has yet actually followed, with little pressure from civil society being applied.

In the lead-up to the 2015 national elections, new political alliances and configurations are taking shape, increasingly along populist lines following the largely agrarian (i.e., Burman paddy farmer) voting population. With legally-registered associations now a political reality, the country's first farmers association has been formed, called the Myanmar Farmers Association (MFA). Its leader, Dr. Soe Tun, is a top board member of the Myanmar Rice Federation (MRF), the most powerful business group under the government-backed Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI). The MFA, backed by agribusiness cronies with close connections to previous military leaders, is in some ways part of the core military-aligned group of people who helped push through the new land laws. The MFA fashions
itself as a national farmer’s network to support smallholders, but in reality represents the interest of middle and high-income rice agribusiness men, the very business members of the MRF who were responsible for establishing the MFA.

A Bill on Enhancing the Economic Welfare of Farmers has been tabled in parliament to be passed as a law, which is a collaborative effort - although not without compromise - by the same military-aligned land reform group that was behind the land laws, the MRF and the MFA. The bill is framed as addressing the land conflict issue that has increasingly been turning violent by specifically addressing the marginalization of smallholder farmers. However, in fact the draft bill does not address land tenure security, land rights or on-going accusations of land grabs

which smallholder farmers have united on, but rather only focuses on increased access to credit and other inputs for middle to large-income farm businesses. The farm businesses that would solely benefit from such a law are paddy businesses that are members of the MRF, who are precisely those that are pushing the bill. The former top-level military official and now speaker of the House had a private meeting with USAID and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi together in an attempt to get more broad political support to pass the bill. Smallholder farmers, on the other hand, would continue to be further marginalized with this legislation - for political and economic gain by the solidifying military-private capitalist class - despite the rhetoric that the bill is precisely for the smallholder farmers' class.

The exclusivity of these public-private partnerships enshrined in the new legal apparatus, has not escaped the attention of smallholder farmers, however, who have been organizing their own grassroots networks to support their political and economic aspirations. In response to this galvanizing military-private alliance over land acquisition and capital accumulation strategies, newly-emerging grassroots farmers' networks are organizing over common grievances, such as land grabs, lack of access to low-interest loans, lack of freedom to crop, the land laws, and previous economic injustices and human rights abuses. Ethnic land rights activists have increasingly come together across racial identities - in hand with supportive Burman activists - to politicize their economic grievances, focusing predominately on land grabs in the ethnic militarized periphery which threaten their communities' livelihoods and food security. Ethnic land rights activists use explicit rights speak to talk of their marginalized past and present positions within the country's development trajectory. This rights-based discourse, which mostly puts the military-led atrocities under the microscope, is certainly testing the waters of Burma's new political system, and for most government officials is still too sensitive a topic to publically address by the national government.

The central government feels more comfortable in publically dealing with Burman-led land struggles, by sending out officials to meet with them and hear their grievances - although in some cases this has ended in police forces arriving with sometimes violent results. Semi-autonomous farmers' networks, which are largely Burman-dominated but with some ethnic representation, are beginning to take shape and strength. The Delta Area has the strongest and most vocal farmer's network, which has successfully had their collective smallholder paddy voice reach the capital. Other grassroots farmers' networks are arising in other areas, exclusively in lowland Burman areas, with ostensible linking among the country's various growing grassroots farmers' networks. This summer a non-state aligned national farmer's network began to take form, with the hope to help merge many of the semi-autonomous networks into an overall association to amplify and unify smallholder farmers' political voice at the national level. The emerging national farmer's network is in direct opposition to the legal

Myanmar Farmers' Association (MFA), which has the statuary blessings of the military-private agribusiness community. The national farmer's network, as a specific grassroots counter-movement to the military-business elite, is carefully following democratic principles to organize their network in order to ensure democratic representation at the local to national level. Grassroots mobilizing is on-going to find a ground-swell of community support, electing leaders at district, township, state and national levels in all Burman regions and ethnic states. They are so far united over common grievances as smallholder farmers: to properly address land grabs, the state to provide very low interest-rate loans, no forced cropping, better access to markets and information, and following the democratic principles of transparency and accountability with rural land development, among other common points. In effect, they desire to be more incorporated into Burma's nation-state, but where they have more political-economic power so to economically benefit more from the on-going agricultural reforms. Farmers' political mobilization, I believe, is one of the most significant rural-wide movements since independence, although are mostly so far discounted by the urban-based elite since they are mostly not perceived as a 'class' with any political purchase. With the lead-up to the highly politically potent 2015 national elections, the 'farmer-bloc' could potentially shape national-level politics since they are the majority (lest not forget) - which we are beginning to see as the military's political party (USDP) is backing the pro-business MFA and the Bill on Enhancing the Economic Welfare of Farmers as a rural populist propaganda stunt. How and which farmers are allowed to enter the political arena is being carefully constructed by the politico-military establishment though - the MFA is a legal entity that represents private company heavyweights, while the national farmers' network that is a grassroots democratic front of smallholder farmers has been repeatedly denied legal authorization by the state.

With the advent of land as a commodity, and Burma being imagined as the 'final frontier', land titling has become of paramount importance to the international development community and the agriculture ministry. The Farmland Law necessitates that land users (not owners, as the state still owns all land and resources above and below) obtain land use titles to prove their legal land use claims with respect to the state. Suddenly, up to 40 million rural households await land use titles to formalize their land use claims who have been largely following, at least in the ethnic uplands who practice swidden cultivation, customary land use laws, practices and management. The agriculture ministry claims they can title the entire country in 3 years; no small feat for the largest landmass of all the Mekong countries with derelict state institutions, very low capacity, low technologies and few financial resources available. Farmers have been given only one year to obtain land use titles from their township agricultural office, which has since been extended for one more year. Farming households still hold a deep-seated fear of not only the military, but also state agencies; few are eager to run to the nearest agricultural office to legalize their land use claims after generations of informal use yet paying taxes in forms of

'bribes' to military and state officials if in the lowlands. Moreover, those farmers who do go to the township office are discouraged by the amount of bribes they need to pay in order to obtain a title, despite it supposed to being a free service on behalf of the state.

Moreover, it is impossible to give individual land titles for swidden cultivation land because swidden plots, by their very definition, move, and therefore are not fixed in place as land titles (at least as configured by the government) demand. While the Burman lowland agricultural cultural practices abides to more state regulatory cropping patters following greater military-state control and authority in those locales, ethnic upland communities mostly operate under customary law and communal land use rights following the lack of state governance in the uplands. Again, the manner in which land titling proceeds, and the way land formalization has been conceived by the national government, is based on a lowland Burman-centric framing, which aims to formalize permanent cash cropping agricultural household land claims. However, this land formalization system is completely at odds with upland land management, which has never really been governed by any kingdom or (colonial) state.[52] But perhaps this is precisely the point - the VFV land law erases upland land use claims as there are no formal land use titles available (due to lack of state presence but also because of the nature of swidden cultivation practices) and customary land use practices and law are not officially recognized by the state in any new laws passed so far. The VFV law, then, re-categorizes the messy upland customary swidden fields into 'wastelands' and 'fallow lands' to be reallocated to military-backed corporations, invisibilizing the very population that the post-independence military-state has since its very existence - in fact it owns its very existence - to both simultaneously conquer and incorporate into the lowland Burman military-nation-state.

The international development community has jumped on board with formalizing land use claims, providing legitimization and technological support to the agriculture ministry. The UN-Habitat and FAO Burma offices have been working alongside the government to provide trainings and some financial support to build the capacity of the young agricultural cadets-turned surveyors to formalize informal land use rights into state-sanctioned and taxed private permanent agricultural plots. In interviews with UN-Habitat, they seem willing to follow - or unaware of - the Cambodian World Bank land titling strategy that focused their efforts in mostly peri-urban areas to avoid any rural land use conflicts…which eventually led to World Bank pulling out after mounting civil society pressure. The UN's FAO office in Burma, which has made public remarks about the worthlessness of smallholder agriculture in Burma, led a land use survey for the government last year as the land laws were being passed that categorized informal land use claims as ‘private’, ‘squatter’, or ‘other’. So far, no major development agency

[52] Scott 2009

or IFI has stepped up to finance this monumental state-led land titling program, presumably because it lands dead center on the most pressing and contentious reform issue in the country - who has rights to land? The private land titling operation provides the technological cover to erase smallholder land use rights to legally reallocate land to the private sector, which now includes foreign investors. It is no coincidence that the land use titles can be bought and sold by foreign investors, and that those who passed these land laws (the military-private alliance) 'own' millions of acres of land in the country obtained over the last two decades through land confiscation using a mixture of police force and legal instruments. E.P. Thompson would be rolling over in his grave.

Concluding Remarks

The current reform period in Burma is not a new country being created on a wiped-clean slate as the international community is being led to believe. Military generals and high-ranking officials, including para-military leaders, have exchanged their green army uniforms to adorn the white government costumes, bringing with them to parliament their own patron-client relations. What I find so intriguing about the agribusiness sector is how it provides a viewing window into the politics and power of business in Burma. As I have illustrated in this paper, business in Burma involves patron-client relations among national military high-level officials and regional commanders, para-military and ceasefire leaders, and crony capitalists. In the 2000s a military-private capitalist class had been solidifying, which had stretched its tentacles into agricultural development. This emerging agribusiness sector leading up to the 2010 national elections is now the building blocks for constructing the global industrial agro-complex in Burma. Finance capital from IFIs, the international development community, and regional agribusiness investors is beginning to merge with the military-private alliance that originally built the foundation for agribusiness in the country. Access to global finance and agricultural markets creates a potential win-win situation for Burmese military-private capitalist elites and for the global industrial food industry. Unimaginable profit margins await western investors if, and only if, a western-compatible political, economic and legal system is established by the reform government and international development and IFI industry. Asian investors seem less interested in such a streamlined system, however, following their more common culture of business deals through personal trust rather than a robust legal system in place.

Forms of capitalist systems are not just created out of nothing. Market-based relations arise out of social relations that are grounded in peoples' lives. Burma offers a fascinating case study for how political histories, in this case deeply embedded within a racialized geography, shape and are shaped by biophysical landscapes, such as agribusiness projects. Race becomes rooted in the landscape in Burma as the country's varied political histories have been largely determined

by racial underpinnings of the post-colonial Burmese nation-state. Moreover, largely as a colonial construction, race is tied to geography with ethnic upland versus Burman lowland, ethnic state versus Burman region, core versus periphery, etc. Each of these racialized regions hold their own specific political histories and patron-client resource relations which shape how agribusiness deals unfold. This is true not only for how business contracts are made, but also how farmers resist enclosure in their personalized places. Peasants do not view 'land' as being taken; they experience their place, formed over generations of active and dynamic socio-culture and history, as being pillaged and raped. This is both a discursive and material struggle over lived places, not just about equating the correct compensation package to give 'wastelands' to corporations.

The new government is hell-bent on creating a strict Singapore-style rule of law environment to conform to western standards, as championed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, perhaps overcompensating due to their country holding one of the world's lowest governance indexes. The first set of laws to come out of parliament by the new rule-makers, a quarter of which were hand chosen military officials as enshrined in the constitution, was on legalizing land enclosure. The two new land laws uncannily reflect British colonial and post-colonial land laws (the same land use categories the British enforced are still used today). The rule of law has become the state instrument of dispossession for capital accumulation to the rule makers - a classic Marxist example of a modern-day enclosure movement in the making. It is unnerving to witness how Burma's reform government - now legitimized and financially supported by the industrial north - is using the same exact toolkit as British overlords during their own, and then of their colonies, industrial enclosure. While the rule of law and good governance is a common mantra that civil society and the development industry have come together over, in reality this concept has been rendered into a neoliberal mechanism to create a pro-business foreign investment environment. Corporate social responsibility, due diligence, international trade treaties, free prior and informed consent (FPIC), land titling and revenue transparency (e.g., EITI) have become the new norm. In effect the way that the rule of law and good governance is being construed by the development industry is itself facilitating global finance investment in resource extraction and production sectors. Suddenly a shared vision is born: a modern, industrial capitalist nation run by urban factories and industrial agriculture, operated by dirty oil, greasy machines and Asia's poorest and cheapest industrial labor pool.

Only one problem - smallholder farmers, the majority population, hold onto the country's greatest asset that is needed in order to create an agrarian version of Singapore. Land is *the* missing ingredient from this neoliberal mix of Burmese military-private capitalists, the development and IFI industry, and transnational finance capital. While law and police / military force is being used to take land away from farmers, just as before the reforms when the world

seemed to care about human rights abuses in Burma, farmers this time are not just using everyday forms of resistance anymore. They are actively organizing to openly confront the military-state in full display of local and international media, a reflection of the changing political climate in the country. Farmers are protesting across the country against land grabs, in many cases occupying their confiscated plots by cultivating their fields as forms of 'ploughing protests'. Farmers are defying the new laws for the lack of land cultivation rights given to them (despite NGOs doing land law trainings to farmers to instruct them how to follow these exclusionary land rights laws), in a clear message to the new governing regime in Burma that the state's rule of law is not the farmers' law. The farmer's moral discourse is being confronted with police brutality, including a recent spike in detention and prison sentences, and in a few cases unarmed protesting farmers being murdered by police. Despite over six decades of civil war in the country, Burma's biggest discursive and material battle is just now beginning, one that is squaring off the majority population of smallholders armed with sticks, strong words and numbers against the well-financed, internationally-sanctified, military-private elite class who is using batons, bullets and the rule of law to take what they want.

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Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University and the Journal of Peasant Studies, and co-organized by Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute (TNI), the conference "Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue" will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an "intellectual future" in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Woods has been engaged in research and activism on land politics in Burma for over a decade. His initial research focused on the Burma-China timber trade, but since then has expanded to include research on the country's emerging agribusiness sector as the frontline of land grabs and conflict. Most of his work has focused on examining Chinese agribusiness in northern Burma as part of China's opium substitution programme, and its entanglements with drug militias, counterinsurgency and land grabs. Most recently Kevin has conducted participatory action research on farmers' resistances to land grabs during the current reform period under the new military-backed government. Kevin is currently a Ph.D. candidate at UC-Berkeley in the Environmental Science, Policy and Management Dept. (ESPM) as a political ecologist and geographer, as well as research analyst for both the Transnational Institute (TNI) based in Amsterdam and for Forest Trends based in Washington, D.C. Kevin's collaborative work with local community activist networks attempts to overcome the problems that our research uncovers.