<Book Review>

Trin Aiyara

SiuSue Mark. *Forging the Nation: Land Struggles in Myanmar's Transition Period*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2, August 2025, pp. 390-394.

How to Cite: Trin Aiyara. Review of *Forging the Nation: Land Struggles in Myanmar's Transition Period* by SiuSue Mark. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, August 2025, pp. 390-394. DOI: 10.20495/seas.br25007.

as well as spatialized? How might the militarized rhetoric of "collateral damage" reflect an apathy with the potential to unravel the peripheral/central dichotomy? How might apathy function alongside antipathy in empire's uneven distribution of injury and death? Such additional engagement could contribute to the reckoning Tyner evokes in the Acknowledgments section, a framing of the deployment of US sovereign violence in service to the spatial expansion of corporate interests and finance capital as "war crimes and other crimes against humanity" (p. 261).

Lina Chhun
Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies
Department of American Studies, The University of Texas at Austin

Forging the Nation: Land Struggles in Myanmar's Transition Period

SiuSue Mark
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023.

In *Forging the Nation*, SiuSue Mark tackles a dual transformation in Myanmar during the second decade of the twentieth-first century: the fragile democratization process and the trend toward a free-market economy, although both were short-lived. Mark reexamines and analyzes these transformations based on the literature on the political economy and ethnic politics in Myanmar as well as her extensive fieldwork with the stakeholders involved in land (re)allocation and management at the time.

Forging the Nation is organized into seven chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. The introduction presents the main argument, which revolves around the political economy of land tenure reform and land politics, since both represent changes in the system of property rights as well as land administration and governance (pp. 3–4). Mark argues that the democratization process did not only allow commoners to participate in the political sphere to some extent but also empowered common people in contestation over the land, as an economic asset, amid the "land rush" driven by global capitalism (pp. 16, 22). The democratization process, in particular, enabled the coexistence of "pacts between a reformist and political elites, and pressure from grassroots mobilization" that reconstituted land institutions (p. 7).

The first four chapters of *Forging the Nation* portray the dynamics of land politics at the national level. In Chapter 1, "The Context of Land Tenure Reform," and Chapter 2, "The State's Quest for Legitimacy Opens Space," Mark describes the history and reform of Myanmar's legal-political institutions and their impacts on the allocation of political power and economic resources. The author notes that Myanmar's legal system was plagued with "stacked laws," which resulted in people having to deal with different types of laws enacted by various regimes throughout the country's

history (pp. 28–32). This problem disproportionally affected commoners, whose lands were usually expropriated by the elites—both state and private—because the elites could arbitrarily rely on a set of laws that allowed them to claim landownership. Concomitantly, the changes in political institutions, especially the guarantee of commoners' rights through "official channels of negotiation and compromise," created a political space for social groups that had suffered from land appropriation to bargain with the state (p. 44).

In Chapter 3, "The Ethnic Politics of Land," and Chapter 4, "New Market Incentives Shape Norms," Mark explains the impacts on land politics of "new" politico-economic conditions: the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement signed in 2015, and the transition to a neoliberal economy promoted by international organizations. Initially, the ceasefire agreement incentivized "ethnic armed organizations" and unarmed ethnic groups to reshape institutions in order to enhance their land rights. The economic transition also motivated the previously autarkic Myanmar state to adopt international standards based on the idea of promoting competition in its regulatory framework (p. 90). Notably, the state's adoption of these standards resulted from the opportunities created by inflows of new foreign capital—apart from that coming from China—and pressure from the public for a more equitable economic system. As it turned out, the changes did not lead to a freer or fairer economy since they could not break the domination of military capital—both personnel and entities—and well-connected entrepreneurs. Due to the limited ability of the state to implement policies, these actors were able to access lands endowed with natural resources at low, if not no, cost and circumvent certain environmental and social regulations (pp. 99, 110).

The following three chapters deal with contestation over land at the subnational level. Case studies from three regions—the Ayeyarwady Region, Chin State, and Kayin State—are presented to "demonstrate how outcomes in contests over land are contingent on the specific historic, political, and geographic contexts that characterize each region" (pp. 8–9). The author focuses on these three regions to demonstrate the variety of land politics in Myanmar, where pluralism is the norm rather than the exception. The chapters do not merely describe the history and state of land politics at the subnational level but rather reexamine land conflicts in each region by analyzing specific variables: pressures on the land due to the historic, geographic, and economic conditions of each region; political opportunities created by the interaction of authorities at different levels; and responses by civil society groups (p. 111). Each variable is directly related to Myanmar's transformation. The first tackles the liberalization of the economy, while the second and third deal with democratization and the ceasefire agreement.

In Chapter 5, "Ayeyarwady Region: State-Citizen Negotiations," Mark gives an account of land governance and contestation in the predominantly Burman lowland, which is known as Myanmar's "rice bowl"—implying high pressure on the land (pp. 112–113). Thanks to the growing importance of elections, various political actors—for example, members of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party—were eager to assist farmers, who formed the majority in the Ayeyarwady

Delta, to regain and protect land use rights (pp. 116–117).

In the delta, civil society organizations such as farmers unions and nongovernmental organizations chose to negotiate with government agencies rather than using the courts that had hurt them (p. 126). However, some farmers movements relied on unofficial protests rather than official negotiations, due to their distrust of the ruling government (pp. 129–130). These varying strategies used by farmers groups discouraged the formation of horizontal farmers movements (p. 133).

In Chapter 6, "Chin State: Between State and Customary Institutions," Mark moves the focal point from the lowland Ayeyarwady Region to the mountainous Chin State, bordering India and Bangladesh. There were fewer conflicts over land in Chin State than in the delta due to insufficient infrastructure and poor resource endowment in the former (pp. 134–135). In Chin State, thus, people were able to maintain customary land tenures that allowed swidden farming, where farmers would move to different plots of lands annually. This situation was changed slightly by the state-led market transition. Notably, the state restricted swidden farming with the Farmland Law and the Vacant Fallow Virgin (VFV) Law in 2012. These laws defined swidden farmers as outlaws who were trespassing on government-claimed lands.

Unlike in the Ayeyarwady Region, political opportunities for progressive land politics were limited by the Chin State authorities' incentives to attract businesses to invest in VFV land. The authorities also had limited power to "challenge national land laws that did not recognize customary land" (p. 145). Furthermore, civil society movements in Chin State had insufficient human and financial resources to effectively engage in land politics (p. 146). Rather, the movement to promote customary land rights was driven by Chin political elites playing the role of intermediaries in regional and national politics (pp. 147–148). These traditional elites participated—and continue to do so—in official politics to create new sets of institutions that allowed the continuation of customary land practices.

In Chapter 7, "Kayin State or Kawthoolei: Dual Administration," the author explores a situation where there were two administrative bodies in land politics: the government and the Karen National Union (KNU). The people of Kayin State were faced with increased land pressure after the ceasefire agreement, which allowed investors to acquire lands and natural resources in this area (p. 152). The increased pressure on land worsened the lives of commoners in "mixed-control areas," where people suffered from an incoherent governance structure, multiple tax regimes, and conflicts among rival armed groups (p. 155).

Despite the suffering caused by the existence of two governing entities, people in Kayin State could rely on the KNU as an alternative to the government when they had a land dispute problem (p. 166). The KNU used the situation to cement its status as the "protector" of the Karen people. As in Chin State, civil society movements were not well developed in Kayin State; but some of them, such as the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, provided the KNU with technical assistance in land governance (p. 168).

In the conclusion chapter, the author provides some suggestions for further study and raises questions about Myanmar's uncertain trajectory after the coup of 2021, which reversed the reforms of the country's democratization period.

This book can, to some extent, be compared to Thant Myint-U's *The Hidden History of Burma* (2019), since both reexamine the history and democratization of Myanmar. The former focuses largely on land politics as the center of Myanmar's political economy, while the latter presents a more general account of the country's political and economic liberalization during the 2010s.

Since the characteristics and patterns of capitalist development in Myanmar are not comprehensively discussed in *Forging the Nation*, the reviewer would like to mention them here. Borrowing Karl Polanyi's (2001) concept of "double movement," *Forging the Nation* shows the various ways in which Myanmar transformed into a market economy. Unlike Polanyi, who highlights the dislocation of commoners due to marketization, Mark observes that adherence to neoliberal policies, accompanied to some extent with the liberalization of politics, created contradictory conditions for commoners. On the one hand, the policies resulted in "accumulation by dispossession"—land appropriation by powerful state or private actors (see Woods 2011; and Jones 2014). On the other hand, the same policies broadened spaces for commoners to legally participate in contestation over lands as they could employ political means to reacquire their lands and voice their demands to employ customary land institutions. In other words, marketization weakened the power of the military and its partners, particularly Chinese capitals, to grab land and exploit resources in the border areas. These areas were pacified through the ceasefire agreement between the government and armed ethnic groups.

Despite its inadequate discussion of the pattern of capitalist development in Myanmar, *Forging the Nation* is worth reading for a number of reasons. First, it is a good introduction to the politics of economic development in Myanmar. Second, it is an excellent example of research involving various levels of analysis. The book seamlessly connects analysis at the national level with investigation at the subnational, particularly regional, level. Last but not least, it shows how it is possible to link analysis at the micro level (case studies) with the macro picture of politico-economic changes.

Trin Aiyara ตฤณ ไอยะรา
Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3425-8969

References

Jones, Lee. 2014. The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44(1): 144–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2013.764143.

Polanyi, Karl. 2001. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Second

Edition. Boston: Beacon Press.
Thant Myint-U. 2019. *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*. London: Atlantic Books.
Woods, Kevin. 2011. Ceasefire Capitalism: Military–Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military–State Building in the Burma–China Borderlands. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(4): 747–770. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.607699.

Emplacing East Timor: Regime Change and Knowledge Production, 1860–2010

Kisho Tsuchiya

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2024.

In *Emplacing East Timor: Regime Change and Knowledge Production, 1860–2010*, Tsuchiya Kisho examines the relationship between regime change and the production of knowledge about Timor-Leste, presenting a global intellectual history of the territory. Tsuchiya argues that this understanding must begin with a critical analysis of sources that reflect how different regimes and communities of knowledge generated categorizations that classified Timor and its people within a specific ideological order. These relationships, in turn, shaped and modeled the ways of imagining Timorese people that are still influential today. By exploring these relationships, the author reveals biases and errors, as well as the intentions behind historical narratives allowing for a more accurate representation of Timorese voices and experiences, highlighting the importance of considering both prior knowledge and contemporary discourses in constructing the history of Timor-Leste. Instead of a teleological view of history that presents Timor-Leste's independence as a completed success narrative, Tsuchiya analyzes the political and social history of the space that is now Timor-Leste based on the heuristic concept of the "cycle of violence," which consists of a recurring pattern of (1) mass violence and migration, (2) regime change, and (3) stabilization, resulting in violent regime changes.

The first chapter serves as a starting point for tracing the genesis of the dominant existing visions regarding Timor-Leste and its people. In it, Tsuchiya examines Anglophone perceptions of the history and identity of East Timor between 1975 and 2002, in a politicized context of decolonization and the Indonesian invasion. The narrative of Timorese history in English begins in 1974, relegating the precolonial past and the five hundred years of Portuguese colonialism to a "prehistory." Representations in these studies highlight three narratives: Timor-Leste as a nation separate from Indonesia, as a victim of genocide, and as a space of resistance. The author points out biases in these studies derived from a lack of diversity in sources and outdated methodologies.

The first part of the book, "Emplacing the Timorese in the Colonial Wars, from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the 1940s," focuses on the various approaches and "emplacements" that