

to a once-thriving community, illuminating their unity, resilience and enduring contributions to Malaysia's multicultural tapestry. By safeguarding their cultural heritage and showcasing their remarkable adaptability, this work goes beyond simple historical documentation to serve as a rich and invaluable resource for Malaysianists and scholars of diaspora studies. Its treasure trove of stories will inspire future generations and highlights the urgent need to celebrate underrepresented narratives. For those passionate about preserving the legacies of diverse communities, this work is essential—serving as a powerful reminder that, if left untold, these histories risk fading into obscurity.

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Forging the Nation: Land Struggles in Myanmar's Transition Period.
By SiuSue Mark. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023.
xix+225 pp.

More than four years since the military *coup d'état*, the political and economic landscape of Myanmar has changed so drastically that it can be challenging to remember the direction the country seemed to be heading in before the putsch. In the decade prior to the 2021 coup, the military pursued civilian, institutional, economic and democratic reforms that created limited but meaningful political opportunities for activists, civil society organizations and political parties. It was a period full of contradictions, including the intermittent reminder that the military remained the ultimate power holder. Central to this era were struggles over land, in which peasants and their allies sought to resolve past injustices and violence as well as contest new rounds of land dispossession. In this book, SiuSue Mark expertly guides us through this tumultuous recent history.

Throughout the book, Mark develops nuanced arguments that capture the complex changes that were at work. One of her key arguments is that although the military orchestrated top-down reforms to serve their own interests, these led to genuine forms of democratization as pacts struck with reform actors and grassroots movements placed bottom-up pressure on the government. These changes were particularly evident in the creation of land institutions that enabled the investigation of past injustices as well as the restitution and enhancement of farmers' land rights. At the same time, she recognizes how the democratization of land institutions was felt unevenly across the Bamar majority and ethnic minority groups. Furthermore, many injustices went unacknowledged and unresolved while new infringements on land rights took place.

Mark develops a comprehensive and nuanced analysis based on her long-term and extensive coverage of land issues as both a researcher and a development consultant. She covers extensive ground throughout the book that provides an empirically rich account of the transition. She accomplishes this in the first section of the book by examining three themes of change occurring at the national scale: (1) political and institutional reforms in search of state legitimacy, (2) ethnic land politics associated with the national peace process, and (3) the effects of new investments and market reforms. In the second section of the book, she examines how these processes manifested across different regions of the country, inflected by local political dynamics in (1) Ayeyarwady Region (state-citizen relations), (2) Chin State (state and customary institutions), and (3) Kayin State, or *Kawthoolei*, the state proposed by Karen nationalists (dual administration). Each chapter is full of rich accounts of complex and dynamic land politics, supported with vivid quotes from a range of actors.

The book succeeds in capturing the zeitgeist of land politics during the reform era, which was both hopeful of the opportunities emerging and the prospects of a better future while also highly critical of how past injustices were being handled and new abuses were taking place in a rapidly changing political and economic

environment. At times, though, it can seem overly sanguine about the potential that the government's reforms had in leading to meaningful change. For example, the drafting of the National Land Use Policy is highlighted as an example of input by civil society actors that led the government to adopt rights-based language. However, less is said about how little effect the policy had on land-related laws and farmers' de facto land rights. Similarly, the inflow of investment by "responsible" international investors is described as full of potential for improving investment standards and norms. Yet there is scant evidence presented of a substantive shift in the business environment.

Optimism about this era can seem particularly misplaced in light of the 2021 coup, the brutal violence that followed and the displacement of land politics to the battlefield. While Mark briefly addresses the effects of the coup at the end of the book, especially the uncertainties it has created for the future, the coup does not play a fundamental role in her analyses of the transition. This is understandable considering that the coup took place late in the writing process. Nonetheless, the book raises important questions about how we ought to view that era and its relevance to the current moment. Were the political openings of the transition genuine opportunities or did they merely serve to appease the opposition? Is there any value in the institutional reforms made, considering that they have been practically wiped out by the military?

Ultimately, these questions are beyond the scope of the book and require further investigation of the links between land politics during the transition and the country's ongoing revolution. *Forging the Nation* is an excellent foundation for pursuing such a task in an unpredictable and ever-changing Myanmar.

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