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## Towards a longer and wider perspective on land politics: insights from a Myanmar case

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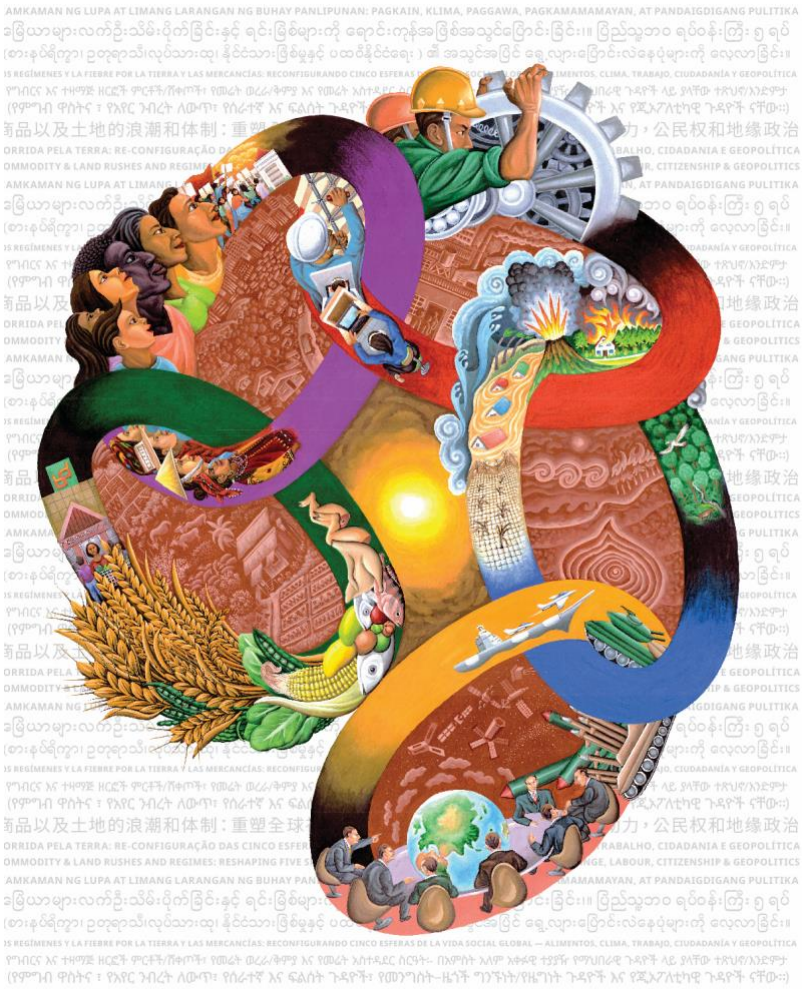

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**Towards a longer and wider perspective on land politics: insights from a Myanmar case**[1]

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## Abstract

Land deal making is far more multi-cornered political process and is temporally long drawn out and uneven than what most studies on land grabs tend to assume and consider them to be. There is a strong tendency on how to govern land deals that follows such a simplified matrix: accountability issues between the three most common actors: the state, big capital, and the affected communities. I have examined the case of Hugawng Valley of Kachin State in Myanmar. This case brings together in a contested political process multiple actors: the central state, an international conservation organization, one of Myanmar's most influential crony capitalists, ethnic revolutionary organization (KIO), mining ventures, and fragmented villagers. This complex set of competing actors is in turn layered upon multiple meanings of land: as a resource and territory, for production and social reproduction. How can we make sense of such a landscape against the historical transformation? The tendency of most observers has been to reduce this 'messiness' or field of vision artificially into one or two dimensions in order to make it 'legible' or to make fit the manufactured visibility for particular ends. This paper argues that such treatment of a complex landscape is insufficient and risk an understanding that is either irrelevant (not grounded in reality) or even dangerous (leaving out important actors, and thus, axis of conflict). One implication of my study is that dominant narratives about land governance, or 'governing' or 'managing' land grabs, or demanding accountability has to be reframed from the minimalist, official politics-centric notion of governance to one that confronts, and does not back away from, the actually existing messy entanglements on the ground. My hunch is that the Hugawng Valley story is not an isolated case in the global context, and that the conceptual, methodological, and political implications of my study may have wider resonance.


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## Introduction

Land deal making is far more multi-cornered political process and is temporally long drawn out and uneven than what most studies on land grabs tend to assume and consider them to be. The quest for how to govern land deals tends to follow such a simplified matrix: accountability issues between the three most common actors: the state, big capital, and the affected communities. This paper examined the case of Hugawng Valley of Kachin State in Myanmar which brings together in a contested political process multiple actors: the central state, a leading international conservation organization, one of Myanmar's most influential crony capitalists, ethnic revolutionary organization (Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)), mining ventures, and fragmented villagers. This complex set of competing actors is in turn layered upon multiple meanings of land: as a resource and territory, for production and social reproduction.

The landscape[2] (Mitchell, 1996) of Hugawng valley have made several headlines across different times as the contested site of the world's largest tiger conservation park; an armed conflict zone between the state military and KIA for territorial control ; a site of land and forest grabbing by a crony company for biofuel crop plantation; or area of expanding gold and amber mining sites by different scales of capital. On the other hand, Hugawng valley is an important socio-cultural formation ground for the Kachin ethnic people, who still make up significant part of local population. It is also located as a strategic location along the famous Ledo road connecting to neighboring China and India (Leach, 1954; Lintner, 2014; Nan, 2013; Sadan, 2013). Different groups of actors did not get to this juncture all at the same time; rather, their interactions were a messy and uneven temporal progression at least for the past 30 years (from the mid-1990s to the post-2021 military coup), in a checkered geographic space, a socially constructed and contested landscape.

How can we make sense of such a landscape (Barbesgaard, 2019; Mitchell, 1996) against the historical transformations, as 'the unity of past, present and future' (Edelman & León, 2013; Hobsbawm, 1971, p. 16)? The tendency of most observers has been to reduce this 'messiness' or field of vision artificially into one or two dimensions in order to make it 'legible' (Scott, 1999) or to make fit the manufactured visibility for particular ends as many scholars have pointed out. Such efforts could include framing land as financialized assets (Fairbairn, 2020; Li, 2014), as commercial farms to close global yield gap (World Bank Group, 2016), as extractive sites (Arsel et al., 2016), or as conservation zones 'from above' (Brockington & Duffy, 2010), or as sites of special economic zones (Levien, 2013). This paper argues that such treatment is important, but in the context of understanding what happens in the entire complex *landscape* each of these approaches becomes relatively insufficient and risk an understanding that is either irrelevant (not grounded in reality) or even dangerous (leaving out important actors such as KIO, farm workers, migrant workers along the axis of conflict). Attempting to address the current analytical gap, this paper will examine the story of Hugawng valley landscape using theoretical blocks such as the 'merely environmental' argument by Fraser (2021), 'merely agrarian' argument by Borras and Franco (2023), and concepts around state as developed by Tilly (1985) and Fox (1993).

[2] According to Mitchell, a landscape is a produced space through the workings of labour, and a lived and represented space which is shaped by a dominant ideology that erase the labour relations and subject the spatial configuration into a particular way of seeing.

In the following section, key highlights from the history of Kachin as a territory and as an ethnic group with shared identities and grievances are recounted which have lasting connections up until present time. Short introductions to the three cases within the landscape of Hugawng valley together playing key role to the land politics and the broader statemaking processes are also discussed.

**A brief chronology of Hugawng Valley as beyond 'Tyrants, Tycoons and Tigers'**

The title, 'Tyrants, Tycoons and Tigers', is borrowed from the name of the report on Hugawng valley by Kachin Development Networking Group (2010), which talked about how the natural environment of the valley has been wrecked by the doings of tyrants (the military) and tycoons (or state-nurtured cronies). From the early 2000s onwards, the valley is infamously associated with the three elements constituting the title as contested sites of tiger conservation, biofuel crop plantation, and armed conflict. Given the history of the landscape, the title is glaringly insufficient if one aims to provide an analysis of the landscape as it deserves. Similarly, this paper will still fall short of attempting to fill this gap with all its rich socio-political and cultural dynamics as it is also limited to a few main highlights from the history. But they are intentionally selected as they have produced lasting impact up until present time, tying past with present in order to understand the future (Hobsbawm, 1971).

Hugawng valley is an important socio-cultural landscape for the Kachin people, who are one of the country's major ethnic groups (Sadan, 2013). It is located at a crossroad between China and India and played a crucial role during the World War II due to the transversing Ledo Road connecting India and China, used by the western allies to support China's fight against imperialist Japan. At the time, American soldiers whose hard labour went into contructing the road called it the 'Green Hell' or 'the wild and beautiful with a savage heart' (Rabinowitz, 2007, p. 8). The Hugawng landscape played a key role in forming, adapting, negoatiating, and reforming of the system of patrilineal clanship which is the backbone of 'being and becoming Kachin' (Sadan, 2013). Under customary political systems, land was not viewed as an exchange item or a moveable property since on it rested on the basis of chiefly authority (Leach, 1954). In order to do that, a proper ritual has to be carried out with exchange of 'hpaga' or 'symbolic objects' at the level of chiefs (ibid). In the Hugawng valley, villagers relied on monsoon Taungyar (shifting cultivation) which require forest land clearance for one year and then abandoned for another 12 to 15 years. As a result, Kachin villages tended to settle in small population (between 30-50 households) due to the need for large area of farmland, and in some cases, the growing villages tend to fragment into small sizes to find adequate land for the households new land elsewhere (Friedman, 1998; Leach, 1954). Subsistence-oriented agriculture is also supplemented with other livelihood activities, such as hunting, forest foraging, and livestock raising (Andrus, 1947). Another crucial source of income was from the extractive economy. Kachin chiefs or 'Duwas' earned royalty fees from the mining of jade in their controlled areas or from taxing on transportation of jade to Yunnan province (Leach, 1954) which were also shared with the Burmese kings as tribute and later with the British colonizers (Levy & Scott-Clark, 2001). The Kachin hills including the Hugawng valley remained beyond British rule until the 1920s, although the Burmese monarchy fell under the British since 1824. The scale and intensity of extractive activities were limited at the time due to

technological and financial limitations (Penzer & Federation of British Industries. Intelligence Department, 1922, pp. iii–iv).

In 1947, a new sovereign country called Burma[3] emerged, independent from British rule. The formation of the country indeed reflects the definition by Anderson (2006, p. 6) as 'an imagined political community', merging different territories with fluid and informal relationships under a central state rule. Like what Mamdani (2002) has pointed out that the country's history is being identified from the birth of a colonial rule, it takes a similar pattern in Myanmar. Framings of ethnicity and territorial boundaries were based on homogenized codes, identities, statistics, regulations, measures, and discursive materials as created by the British colonizers (ibid). British produced the first Census of Burma in 1872 as part of the Census of India to which it was incorporated into until 1937. Such practices of coloniality would also extend to the later military state regimes. As an example, categories of ethnicity were fixed into eight major ethnic groups, which further divided into 135 sub-ethnic groups. Ethnicity identity became politicized by associating with the status of indigeneity, and the allocation of citizenship rights which in turn provided scope for a range of property rights (Grajales & Chauveau, 2022).

The armed struggle against the central state by the Kachins started shortly afterwards in 1962. Main reasons for grievances included ethnic- and religion-based political repression by the ethnic Bamar Buddhist majority central government. A new armed movement led by the Kachin World War II veterans took an oath in Kachin state to struggle for '*dimokrasi*' (democracy) (Sadan, 2013). As much as extraction has played a crucial role in the earlier times, it continued to shape state building processes – contestation, negotiation, and adaptation. In the early years of its establishment without no funding, KIO used raw jade boulders to exchange for guns and minitions from the Kunmington (KMT) forces who had retreated across into Burma border, and who are also waging their own war against the Chinese Communist Party (Levy & Scott-Clark, 2001). Negotiation talks between the state and KIO took place in 1960s and 1970s but did not succeed. From that time on, the villages in the Hugawng valley faced substantial impact of war. Respondents from the household survey recalled the period beginning from the 1960s as the period of forced relocation from the hills to the plains where the settlements were accessible by the state administration. It was also part of the four cut strategy of the military - no food, no funds, no intelligence, or no recruitment to the KIO (Smith, 2019). In 1964, the Burmese Socialist government (led by military generals) would stop private jade mining operations and restrict exporting jade and other precious stones under state control (San, 2018). In 1988, the military refashioned itself through the act of coup d'é·tat and formed a State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) Government, later renamed as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The name of the regime changed but it was still led by senior military officials, who continue to commit gross human rights violations and genocidal atrocities, particularly in the insurgent areas until present time. At the same time, the struggle to expand and consolidate control over jade mining areas and other extractive zones continue within the Kachin state, including in the Hugawng valley.

The greatest land rush in Kachin state unfolded[4] incomparable to any point of time in its history. Quite contradictorily, it took place in a time of 'peace' as the ceasefire agreement was signed

[3] The name Burma was changed later to Myanmar in 1989 by the SLORC government.
[4] Interview with a key land actvist where he refered to the period

between the KIO and the military in 1994. The central state started to deploy strategies for reproducing conditions of hegemony in the newly opened frontiers. One blueprint was the 'Master Plan for the Development of the Border Areas and National Races' which the military regime developed in 1989. The plan included allowing limited administrative autonomy of KIO, rapid extension of central state infrastructure such as building schools, hospitals, transportation routes, dams, hydroelectric plants, communication lines, and religious (Buddhist) buildings (Taylor, 2009). In 1994, a new Ministry for the Development of Border Areas and the Progress of National Races and Development Affairs (DBANRDA) was also set up to orchestrate the master plan (ibid).

In the Hugawng valley, while ceasefire agreement allowed the central state to extend its presence, casting of state territorial control was rendered possible through the establishment of World's largest tiger conservation park, technically and financially supported by World Conservation Society (WCS) (WCS, 2010). Woods and Naimark (2020) pointed out that conservation as territorialization is politically effective for the state when carried out in conflict areas before reaching a final political settlement. It has the effect of legitimating state's past crimes and violence (ibid) while making the region 'legible' for further statemaking processes (Scott, 1998). As the territorial interest overlaps with the state, Rabinowitz, head of the program, was quoted as singing praises of an authoritarian regime as followed: "It's much harder to get conservation done in democracies than in communist countries or dictatorships; when a dictatorship decides to establish a reserve, that's that" (Shnayerson, 2005). Political stability provided by the ceasefire agreement and equipped with legal instruments such as the 'Protection of Wildlife and Conservation of Natural Areas Law', proposal for world's largest tiger park was approved in 2004 and in 2010, it is expanded up to 2 million hectares by SPDC government (KDNG, 2010). Due to lack of media freedom and internet inaccessibility, the news was not widely discussed within the country; but was excitedly dramatized among the international circle by the environmental enthusiasts and scientists. Despite the spectacular buzz generated internationally, an 80,000 hectare land concession was given to a crony company called, *Yuzana* for large scale production of biofuel crops (tapioca and cassava) on top of the tiger park in 2006. Eleven villages with an estimated population of more than 5,000 people suffered partial or complete displacement (KDNG, 2010).

In the similar span of time, a general gold rush in the area emerged, which brought in gold dealers, mine workers, street peddlers, gambling operators, owners of bars, karaoke shops, and opium dens, and casual wage workers, as symptomatic of a 'boom town' in the valley (KDNG, 2007). The military provided large scale mining concessions to its affiliated companies. At the same time, small and medium scale gold mining sites appeared wherever opportunities arise by paying bribes to the local authorities or the KIO or to both to obtain lands under the radar. The local state authorities collected rent through concession fees as well as 35%-50% tax on annual profits (ibid). Payment as bribery also had to be paid to the regional military commander, state authorities and officials from the Ministry of Mines (now known as Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation) (KDNG, 2007). In place of artisanal gold mining carried out by the local people in the past as part of their ways of life, large-scale industrial mining controlled by the military and the cronies quickly expanded (ibid), adding another layer of land use on the same landscape.

From the next section onward, the case for why Hugawng valley landscape should not be reductively treated as a single issue will presented, using Fraser's 'merely environmental'

argument as the theoretical backbone. In particular, the three non-economic spheres or the back stories of capitalism – nature, social reproduction and political will be explored in relations to the context of Hugawng valley, to identify linkages which have been intentionally hidden.

**Hugawng Valley as 'beyond environmentalism'**

In early 2021, the Hugawng valley once again grasped public attention with the news of the KIA (Kachin Independence Army – army wing of KIO) destroying a massive establishment constructed by a crony company called Yuzana, including its staff housing quarters, primary processing facilities and other building structures. Locals saw the place as an isolated foreign city, completely out of place to the neighbouring rural villages. Having driven the company's staff and migrant workers from the enclave, KIO declared to have reseized the land concession area which was allocated by the military government back in 2006 for biofuel crops (cassava and tapioca) production (Kachin News Group, 2021). The vast concession area which has been the political arena of intense social struggles is now left with ruins on the company's former premises and abandoned fields. The only sense of 'life' seems to be stemming from the gold mining sites which have been rented out by the company staff on the plantation area. A local elder decried how to calculate the damages the company has cost and started to list environmental impacts such as extinction of tiger, biodiversity loss, deforestation, water pollution, changing water flow, and et al (IDI 02, personal communication, February 2022). In fact, one of the headline grabbing about the valley has been the environmental damages caused by Yuzana company as well as intensive scale and scope of extraction unfolding across the landscape. As such, key demands have been centered around regeneration of nature - of forests, biodiversity, and water resources (KDNG, 2010). Using the questions asked by Mitchell (1996, p. 6), of landscape 'why does the landscape look like it does … and who made it look that way?', limiting our focus on the environmental dimension of the landscape would stop us from seeing the broader processes leading to this situation as well as the inter-connected crises in other social spheres.

Nature is one of the non-economic spheres from which capitalism freerides for raw materials to generate profit (Fraser, 2021). It's 'capacity to support life and renew itself constitutes another necessary background conditions for commodity production and capital accumulation' (Fraser, 2014, p. 63). But for capitalism to turn the nature into creating value without having to pay any cost, the landscape has to be transformed in its geographical and ideological configuration (Mitchell, 1996). Li (2014) discussed about the value of land, in this case, nature, as not intrinsic and requires the invention of inscription devices such as the creation of private property. Around the same time as making ceasefire agreement, the Wasteland Instruction was issued by the state to allow expropriation and reallocation of land categorized as 'wasteland', a category covering land without a title (Transnational Institute, 2023). The Central Committee for the Management of Cultural Land, Fallow Land, and Waste Land (Wasteland Instructions) was provided with the authority to allocate VFV land for agricultural and non-agricultural businesses. Grant period could last for an initial period of 30 years, with the ability to renew 10 years at a time up to a total of 50 years.

In reality, majority of the Kachin ethnic people practising customary tenure system do not have any formal land registration (see also Ra et al., 2021). It applied to all the different types of land they are accessing, for both production and social reproduction. Nor could they even secure for a

title even if they try due to many constraints imposed on them[5]. On the other hand, a formal state land title would render the ethnic areas more legible and subjected to the interests of the state and the neoliberal institutions (Cardenas 2012) while undermining customary tenure rights of other areas without a formal title (Dwyer, 2015). The wasteland also invoked a frontier culture as described by (Tsing, 2005) by superimposing a form of landscape which does not yet exist, but to make possible by erasing existing populations' legitimate rights and creating 'wild and empty spaces' (2005, p. 68). Such ideology in turn stemmed from John Locke's meaning of 'waste land', tying property right to 'productive labour' (Locke et al., 1978, p. 25). And in the eyes of the state, 'productivity' (the right to exploit nature) should only be achieved through the class of cronies who have either developed patron-client relationship or have familial ties with the military officials. Together, the business of capital accumulation takes on in the Hugawng valley as a frontier landscape.

While the wasteland instruction provided legal access pathway to the valley, the ceasefire agreement posed another institution that gave access to extract from nature with unparalleled pace and intensity (Woods, 2011). Especially from 1994 onwards, 'ceasefire capitalism' (Jones, 2014) unfolded in full force whereby 'the Burmese regime allocates land concessions in ceasefire zones as an explicit postwar military strategy to govern land and populations to produce regulated, legible, militarized territory' (Woods, 2011, p. 747). Also called as 'neither war nor peace economy', there was no longer a clear distinction for what is legal or legitimate (Kramer, 2021). Dams, conservation projects, mining, large-scale agricultural plantations, and logging, are lined up to be implemented, planned or in the formulation stage within the area. Ceasefire agreements have preference for the class of ethnic elites, regional army commanders, KIO officials, and national and foreign investors to reap benefits by 'turning land into capital' and 'battlefields to marketplaces' (Jones, 2014; Woods, 2018). Armed violence was transformed into violence against natural ecology while 'peace' was forged between the elites from the armed groups and the ceasefire brokers. It reflected Tilly's analysis that 'war-making, extraction, and capital accumulation interacted to shape' state making (Tilly, 1985). He implied it for the European context which nevertheless can also be applied to the context of Kachin state, Hugawng valley and the broader state making processes which will be explored later. Quoting the words of a KIO senior official, "But it must also serve our purpose and serve the revolution. Remember that our people must eat. And we need money for the cause. Sometimes this causes conflict. Conflict is part of life." (Rabinowitz, 2007, p. 135)

Out of different types of land rush transforming Hugawng valley into a commodified landscape, WCS's tiger conservation park seems irrelevant. Afterall, WCS claimed its attempt as protecting the tigers on the brink of extinction and the surrounding biodiversity, which was morally right. But such perspective reduces the landscape into a single ecological issue. In the words of Büscher (2013, p. 33), it is 'arguably one of the biggest contradictions of our times'. He called current form of conservation as a 'fictitious conservation' which is 'free from the material contexts and relationships that produced them' (2013, p. 29). The logic of conservation under capitalist social order also separates nature from the two other non-economic spheres which capitalism exploits and expropriates from – social reproduction and political dynamics (Fraser, 2021). Instead, conservation is transformed as a tool to provide a 'fix' to the crises of capitalism such as the environmental fix (Harvey, 2003) or the institutional fix (Brockington & Duffy, 2010). Through

[5] Findings from household survey

the designation of tiger park, Hugawng valley was made legible, visible, and opened up to draw in forces of capital accumulation. On the other hand, how the Hugawng valley landscape embedded in social and political relations became chosen for the conservation project – a form of land control grabbing is not accidental. In fact, land grabbing is 'part of a long racial-cultural project with specific targets for change and in some cases erasure' which deserve more scholarly scrutiny in relations to the ongoing racialized logics of land and territorial control (Mollett, 2016, p. 416).

In 'Climates of Capital', Fraser (2021) put forward the case for building a new common sense that is beyond 'merely environmental' in order to face multiple crises faced by our societies under a capitalist social order. More specifically, she proposed connecting ecological crisis with other 'strands of injustice and irrationality' such as exploitation, dispossession, exclusion, slavery, and violence. The purpose is to unravel the deeper bloodlines giving life to these societal diseases. In this section, some of the processes leading to exploitation and expropriation of nature by capital have been explored, which are actually made possible through manipulations of the two other spheres – social reproduction and political.

**Hugawng Valley as 'beyond agrarian'**

In 2006, the state newspaper started headlining military state's narrative that 'more land around Ledo road (or the Hugawng valley) should be used for agriculture pillars of the country' to develop into a self-sufficient nation. Despite being a 'regime of dispossession' (Levien, 2013), state must still carry out dual contradictory tasks: capital accumulation and political legitimation (O'Connor 2002; Fox 1993). The catchy slogan of 'national self-sufficiency' was its justification for big land concession to a crony company. In response, most visible social struggles 'from below' (Franco & Borras, 2019; Hall et al., 2015) from the Hugawng valley has also been centered on land grabbing by Yuzana company, organized by the small and medium peasants. Squeezed in from different sides, peasants in the villages reacted in different calculated ways within the matrix of land/labour and production/social reproduction. They carried out land occupation, public campaigns, lawsuits against perpetrators, voice out their pleas through media, send letters to the authorities, and so on, through constant scanning of political space availability. In the words of a local land rights activist, '*We made protests, launched press conference, sent letters to KIA, and declared that it (Yuzana land concession) is an intentional way to make us obsolete – a genocidal act*.' (IDI 01, personal communication, February 2022). He was referring to the imminent danger of disappearing as smallholders and as Kachin people. The demands of the protests centered around land restitution and to a lesser degree on compensation. When the KIO reseized land concession from Yuzana company in 2021, how the land would be repurposed, redistributed, and managed for long term is still uncertain[6]. For now, the lands are under the control of KIO. The 81,000 hectares of land land not only contain the farmlands, forests, rivers, and a range of other lands and water sources supporting both production and social reproduction of the valley communities. Much of the land grab literature frame land deal to be land grab and the dominant tendency would be to protest as land grab when farmlands were taken over. When commons were taken over, it tends to be not always automatically seen as land grab. Hence, it led to the land struggles to focus on farmlands and a much lesser extent on the re-taking control of the commons, which have been crucial for social reproduction as workers, people, and communities.

[6] Findings from household survey

This gap became obvious when WCS enclosed vast hectares of the valley into a tiger conservation park. It was not popularly contested as land grabbing, perhaps partly because there was no outright displacement of villagers. But it completely alienated labour of the people from the landscape, the interaction between which have led to the development of social values, norms, identities and in general, 'way of life' that shape a Kachin ethnic identity (Mitchell, 1996). To make sure they stayed separated, the park deployed the use of surveillance cameras, wildlife and conservation protection police or seconded police officers and set up frontline camps, all paid for by WCS (KDNG, 2010). It invokes resemblance to the condition of 'green militarization'- the combination of conservation and militarization, in a social landscape already made fragile by years of armed conflict (Lundstrum 2014). In many areas, villagers have to bribe the police officers to gain access into the forest to collect herbs or other forest resources for uses such as house repair, traditional healing, and food. Without paying bribes, they face possibility of punishment including fines, physical harms and arrest (Woods, 2016). One of the villagers was sentenced to 3 months for selling part of his house plot[7]. Most importantly, they were restricted to conduct shifting agriculture, a traditional form of livelihood, that is branded as the cause of deforestation, the usual state narrative. Villagers claimed to no longer receiving tax receipts and were illegible to apply for a land title (Kachin Conservation Working Group & The Northern Green Lights, n.d.). They were allowed to continue farming but were denied a legal property right. In fact, large-scale land enclosure for conservation interact with existing processes of socioeconomic differentiation, and tend to worsen degrees of inequalities (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen, 2022). Turning the valley into 'a place of life' or 'co-existence between people and nature' as declared by WCS (Rabinowitz, 2007, p. 136) proved fraudulent.

As a result, crises faced by the people living in Hugawng valley is not only of agrarian nature as in farming but encompass other non-agrarian production and social reproduction dimensions. In building the 'merely agrarian' argument, Borras and Franco (2023, pp. 4–5) make a case to transcend the current limitation of agrarian struggles by forging alliances and building movement across multiple sectors (both agrarian and non-agrarian) and along the rural-urban continuum. The goal is to become anti-systemic and anti-capitalist all-encompassing social movement. Applying in the context of Hugawng valley, the struggles of small-medium farmers can join with those of forest foragers, traditional healers, those practicing shifting agriculture, small-scale artisanal miners, fishers, and a range of livelihoods taking place across the landscape. It is not to say that one household carries out one livelihood since a household can be sustained through a mixture of livelihoods needing access to a range of land. But overcoming the 'merely agrarian' character in the Hugawng valley can bring to center the productive activities sustaining rural households which capitalist economy has relentlessly been corroding. Squeezed in different land claims from different angles, many rural households have to start making a living as 'working people' (Shivji, 2017) or classes of labour (Bernstein, 2006). There is no longer a pure iconic form of 'full-time peasant[8]' or 'a full-time proletariat'. They 'make live' (Li, 2010) along the continuum of urban-rural, rural-rural, agriculture-non-agriculture, formal-informal, long-term-season, and so on. As many of them migrate out temporarily or permanently to work in different sectors within and outside Kachin state, flows of migrants are also coming into the valley from different rural and urban origins of the country.

[7] Findings from houehold survey

[8] The word 'peasant' may carry different meanings for different people. In this research, 'peasant' refers to those who are subsistence-oriented, produce cash crops mainly for survival and for maintaining social status (Edelman, 2013).

In the context of Myanmar, social identity in the form of ethnicity is more salient in terms of current political domain and struggles (Faxon, 2021). 'Tensions around ethnicity run deep in the country, reinforced by 'divide and rule' political dynamics since colonial times, and made worse under successive Bamar-dominated military governments since independence' (Ra & Ju, 2021, p. 56). As such, the demands for right to self-determination and equality have taken center stage by the ethnic groups which could draw important lessons from other country contexts. The article by Becker (2006, p. 450) pointed out that race hides behind itself class exploitation through unequal distribution of land and only through developing a class consciousness can the racial divide be broken and progress into a socialist struggle. He also acknowledged the interactive nature between the two – class and race/ethnicity and similar to the position taken by E.P Thomson, he understood 'how race can color a person's experience of class' (2006, p. 473). His nuanced discussion on class and race led towards deeper investigations around the racial question and how it is underpinned by 'land issues; the history of conquest, colonization, and slavery; linguistic differences; a rich variety of ethnic groups; and a situation of imperialism which exploited racial tensions' (2006, p. 474). Taking the case of Myanmar, Campbell and Prasse-Freeman (2021, p. 2) referred to 'Burman-ness' as privileged identity associated with material ideological wage to recompense for the conditions of social exploitation, extending to include non-Burman elites as well. They argued that this 'wage' deterred the solidarity between poor Burmans and workers and peasants of other ethnicities, sustaining their oppression (ibid). And continued stating, 'This interconnected race-class dynamic has been central to the formation of racial capitalism in Myanmar' (Campbell & Prasse-Freeman, 2021, p. 2). In Hugawng valley, not only politics of 'Burman-ness' but also 'otherness' is being played out as land claims of different scales and uses interacted with class and other social identities within and outside the state 'that have historically specific expectations, aspirations and traditions of struggle' (Hall et al., 2015). Increasingly squeezed out by such forces, Kachin peasants felt compelled to 'defend' the lands that are left from 'outsiders' especially (non-Kachin) migrant settlers from other areas. It led to tense sentiments as followed, '*If the locals do not keep holding onto the land, others will come and take. But our lands are becoming less. We will serve Kachin state with our land.*' (a local elder in Kachin State, January 2022). In the eyes of outsiders, a superficial look will describe it as a mere inter-ethnic tension in a race after land, however, the problem stems from much deeper dynamics of exploitation and expropriation.

From 1994 ceasefire period onwards, a significant pattern of labour migration from other parts of the country to Kachin state has been observed, particularly to Hpakant and Danai townships (which include Hugawng valley) to search for work in the mining sites. According to a report by Kachin research institution, the largest ethnic groups to have migrated into Kachin state are Bamar (69%) and Rakhine (13%). Other ethnic groups include Shan (4%) and Chinese (3%), Kachin from Shan State (1%), Karenni and Karen (1%), Chin (1%) and so on (Naushawng Development Institute, 2018). A research study in the dry zone (from where most ethnic Bamar come from) reported the main push factor for migration included insufficient farm income, unfavorable climate conditions for farming and low wage from on-farm work (Chan & Myint, 2015). Moreover, other reasons included the presence of surplus labour due to small farm sizes and few off-farm work opportunities (ibid). Common similarity for both incoming or outgoing migrants is all have been affected by capitalism's forces of dispossession, exploitation, and expropriation, reaching a state of social reproduction crisis that compel them to migrate (Borras et al., 2021). This leads into the role of social reproduction sphere that has not been widely discussed in relations to the capitalist

economy instead, the tendency was to focus on economic risks or ecological dangers by both Marxist and mainstream forums (Shah & Lerche, 2020). In this paper, definition of social reproduction is referenced as below:

> "… the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis and intergenerationally…. (it includes) how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and the elderly, and the social organization of sexuality" (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, pp. 382–383).

Taking the point from Fraser (2016, p. 4), 'non-waged social-reproductive activity is necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value and the functioning of capitalism as such. Social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility for economic production in a capitalist society'. The two spheres are co-constitutive and are both subjected to appropriation for surplus value by the capitalists (Shah & Lerche, 2020). In addition to producing labour power, this paper also looks at social reproduction as reproducing of people, where land is thus not only to survive or accumulate – but also to reproduce conditions of socio-ecological, sociocultural (as ethnic people), and sociopolitical (as ethnic group doing its own territorialization and subject-making). It is to encompass the role of social reproduction to satisfy needs beyond the classical Marxist take as reproducing food/clothing/shelter (and additional feminist take on 'care' and 'affect'). Cousins et al. (2018, p. 1082) highlighted that 'social reproduction and its contradictions and contestations are key to struggles both within and against capitalism as such, and are as significant as the dynamics of production and capital accumulation'. Hence, local agrarian struggles could transcend the 'merely agrarian' character by also forming alliances with migrants going out and coming. Such action will help to address the underlying driving factors that are causing the state of crisis in social reproduction sphere – which is also caused by and causing crisis in the other two spheres – ecological and political (Fraser, 2021).

**Hugawng valley as beyond local politics**

The case of Hugawng valley with competing claims over its land control, meaning and land use is usually viewd from a simplified matrix: state, affected communities and external actor, in this case, they are WCS, Yuzana company or the gold mining ventures. In relations to the tiger conservation park by WCS, one key reason for land conflict is assumed as due to the lack of community consultation and failture to obtain free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) (KDNG, 2010). Mainstream analysis of land conflicts caused by land concession by the state to Yuzana company since 2004 until present time stemmed from the lack of 'clean' property right (MCRB, 2018) or violation of customary tenure right (Ethnic Community Development Forum, 2016). Main narrative put out, including by civil society organizations as reason for increasing land conflicts due to expansion of extractive activities in the Hugawng valley is the illegality nature of extraction, as many of them did not receive official permission from the state and operate out of regulatory control by the state authorities (Myanmar Resource Watch, 2023). They highlighted that many of the extractive operations can operate illegally due to the ability to take advantage on the instability of the landscape. Hence, peacebuilding for development or natural resource governance became a popular recommendation by international community, as they poured in million dollar funding to sponsor negotation talks between ethnic armed organization such as KIO and the state-military complex (Woods, 2019). As the ceasefire agreement brought in 'neither war nor peace' economy

(Kramer, 2021), peacebuilding brought in a fresh round of capitalism but with the same 'modus operandi' (Fraser, 2021). Since 2011, ceasefire agreement broke between the KIO and the military, so when peace talk was no longer possible between the two parties, majority of funding instead went into supporting IDPs' emergency needs and capacity building including promotion and protection of IDP land rights.

These perspectives come from the two (out of three) political tendencies in terms of transnational governance of land grabbing as categorized by Borras et al. (2013). They are '(a) regulate to facilitate land deals; and (b) regulate to mitigate negative impacts and maximize opportunities (2013, p. 168). The first tendency's assumption that 'if done right, positive outcomes can be achieved' calls for state intervention, based on administrative and technical perspectives, in the provision of 'faster, cheaper, and clearer land titling' and creation of 'transparent land transaction' in an efficient free market (Borras et al., 2013), which are what World Bank (2015) has prescribed for the Myanmar Government in its assessment of Myanmar's investment climate. The second tendency - regulate to mitigate negative impacts and maximize opportunities – builds from the assumptions of the "'inevitability" of large-scale land deals and the "impossibility" of redistributive land and rural development policies' (Borras et al., 2013, p. 169). This tendency has been most pronounced during the last two quasi-military governments during the country's widely applauded democratic political transition period. State transfers land from the war zones and the associating landscape to the alliance of state-non-state elites. Under the narratives of modernising agriculture and generating economic growth and development into the conflict-affected regions, this class of elites are supposed to bring in capital and modern technology to generate local jobs. But impacts of such schemes have frequently shown to produce opposite impacts than are claimed (Li, 2011; Oya, 2012). Nevertheless, the second tendency is sustained through a variety of international governance instruments as the basis for its legitimation: 'strengthened property rights to protect the land rights of people, environmental and labor standards, greater community consultation, and particularly the use of transparency instruments such as free, prior, informed consent' (Borras et al., 2013, p. 170).

Combined, all the prevailing framings of the Hugawng valley landscape have been centered around the insufficient application of the technical and administrative instruments of land governance which have to be solved between locally that only have impact on local politics. At the same time, institutional mechanisms, legality, and narratives/discourses 'make fit' into the context of Hugawng valley landscape did not address the underlying power relations. Instead, they further entrenched existing social relations of exploitation and expropriation which built foundation for the making of a thing called 'state' (Abrams, 1988). Many studies linked processes of state-making to violence (Abrams, 1988; Grajales, 2013; Tilly, 1985). Tilly even went as far to parallel war-making and state-making to organized crime using examples from Europe (Tilly, 1985). It involves 'eliminating or neutralizing' their opposition forces outside and inside the territories under their control (Tilly, 1985, p. 181). In the Hugawng valley, processes of war-making and state-making continues, manifesting as between the state military, the Kachin armed group and Kachin civil society until present time.

At the same time, the state formed alliance with class of cronies and ethnic elites (including from within the KIO) which lead to a popular saying among the local people that the state and KIO can be both enemies and partners at the same time in many instances. Enemies for territorial control

but partners in business. One example is the villagers formally from the village called Lawt Ja were displaced due to armed clash between the military and KIO[9]. Their village was turned into gold mining sites later, from where both KIO and the military made benefit. While war-making and state-making provided thrust for 'increased extraction of the means of war – men, arms, food, lodging, transportation, supplies, and/or the money to buy them – from the population within that territory.' (Tilly, 1985, p. 183), similar interest in the same landscape led them to negotiate their shares of profit implicitly. In addition, agents of state would form alliance with specific social classes in order to provide 'protection' service through legal privileges, military force and utilizing public goods from whom they are assured of profit making (Tilly, 1985). So in the processes of accumulation, state is 'not only the site of legitimate violence, but as the site of legitimate theft' (Wolford et al., 2013, p. 197), or a 'regime of dispossession' (Levien, 2013).

But even an authoritarian state like Myanmar must also maintain a minimum level of legitimacy. Thus, it needs to balance the two dual contradictory functions: capital accumulation and political legitimation (Fox, 1993). In a recent book by McCarthy (2023, p. 7), he drew conclusion that across successive regimes of the country, state has used the mechanism of 'social outsourcing' to provide welfare services through 'non-state welfare actors and elite philanthropy' such as the plethora of charitable organizations (faith-based and non-faith based) across the country and donations by the millionaire cronies. Such mechanism helped the state avoid its duties and responsibilities, while helping stabilize the socio-political contexts. Though framing the state as outsourcing social functions to the cronies can be true to a certain extent, later taken under the umbrella of corporate social responsibility (CSR), it was barely scratching the surface of crisis ordinary people faced to make decent lives (Borras et al., 2021). Another way state tries to build legitimacy is by building an image as the 'defenders of rural interests' (Thawnghmung, 2001), specifically by protecting and promoting agrarian sector. Her analysis of how authoritarian regime can still garner some level of public support within agrarian societies (but not applicable to the areas under the control of ethnic armed groups) reflected an interactive approach by Fox who offered the two lens: institutional access routes and policy currents (Fox, 1993). Even under the most brutal state regimes, depending on the characteristics of institutions - state actors and departments, their goals, and extent of their autonomy, perception of state can vary in a continuum of scale. Starting from a political transition to democratic rule, active and outward resistance by the people whose lands were grabbed by Yuzana company led to alliance with some members of parliament to get back the lands. In response, Yuzana company returned 9,700 hectares of land concession to the state.[10] Although the alliance resulted in some success, justice has never been materialized as only a small portion of the land concession, the 'so-called' unused land, have been returned, which enabled making up an image of accountability. But the lands are never returned under the control of community.

Looking at the political dynamics unfolded and unfolding in Hugawng valley, it is not only about the local – that is contestation, armed conflict, adaptation, negotiation taking place within the local social structure and institutions. It is very much part of the broader political processes making the thing called 'state' – a historical construct forged by class and other social relationships (Abrams, 1988). Politics of how state balance the two tasks: capital accumulation and public legitimacy building strongly have impact on social reproduction and ecological spheres.

[9] Finding from household survey
[10] Finding from household survey

## Conclusion

This paper attempts to recast how we frame Hugawng valley beyond a single dimension, which is analytically and politically insufficient. If not corrected, it runs the risk of legitimating socio-political, ecological, and economic violence suffered by the working people of Hugawng valley and beyond for decades. Instead of a 'silo' perspective, looking into the impact of different land claims separately, the paper instead try to merge analysis of the drivers and devices used to assert land claims by different actors at a landscape scale (Mitchell, 1996), while being attentive to the temporal dimension. What seem like separate events are not random but designed to transform the landscape into a commodified profit-yielding space, driven by racialized ideology to shape land and labour dynamics. Using Fraser's 'merely environmental' critical lens, the paper attempts to locate and make visible 'strands of injustice and irrationality' operating across the three non-economic spheres of social reproduction, ecological and political to drive the economy where 'the locus of value' is confined to.

In general, there has always been competing narratives and deployment of various means (such as property right, violence, narratives) to gain access to land and consolidate control. State also becomes the main facilitator or broker for making land deals (Wolford et al., 2013) while balancing its dual contradictory tasks of capital accumulation and building legitimacy (O'Connor, 1973; Fox, 1993). To quote Levien et al.,

> Struggles over means of both production and social reproduction remain as important as ever but are not playing out in remotely the same way as Marx predicted. Land remains an important focus of such struggles, even if its precise significance remains fiercely debated. Such struggles are also, Marxists increasingly recognize, inextricably bound up with non-class forms of power and domination, whether patriarchy, racism, casteism, or anti-immigrant nativism. (p 876).

One implication of my findings and re-framing of Hugawng valley is that mainstream narrative about land governance, or 'governing' or 'managing' land grabs, or demanding accountability has to be reframed from the dominant minimalist, official politics-centric notion of governance to one that confronts, and does not back away from, the actually existing messy entanglement around land politics (Kerkvliet, 2009). Since 'land is life, stability, livelihood and social reproduction' (Wolford et al., 2013, p. 205), it is impossible to reduce land conflicts into a single issue if the hope is to struggle for social justice. This calls for reframing into a broader landscape view (at least) that encompasses and digs deeper into the non-economic spheres of capitalist economy at the same time as the production sphere. The approach must strive to reveal the underlying processes of capitalism that is dictating the land and people, by exploiting on social identities such as ethnicity. My hunch is that the Hugawng Valley story is not an isolated case in the global context, and that the conceptual, methodological, and political implications of this paper may have wider resonance.

## Biography

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