

“TAKE OUR LAND:” Fronts, Fraud, and Fake Farmers in a City-to-Come

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One day in May 2015, a crowd was seen streaming down the unpaved shoulder of a highway stretching across Twante township. This agricultural region lay just beyond Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city and former capital.¹ Residents of nearby villages peered out from their homes, gawking at the group traveling on foot. It was still hot season, after all, with temperatures exceeding 40°C. Villagers watched as the pedestrians strolled lazily with no apparent aim. However, each gripped a plastic water bottle and a printed handout—details suggesting that theirs was not an impromptu gathering. Later, locals told news reporters that a throng of hundreds had come from villages near Twante town.² Once assembled, the crowd marched to their destination in the thousands, snaking behind three men. These three men, U Khin Zaw, U Tin Tun Oo, and U Kyaw Win, were known to their neighbors as members of a loosely organized network of village elders, most of whom were also movers-and-shakers in government and business.³ Despite the heat, the men had donned the long-sleeved formal jackets of state officials, topped by wide-brimmed bamboo hats called *kamauk*.⁴ If passersby had initially thought the crowd had gathered spontaneously, it was clear on seeing the three men that something was afoot.

A few minutes later, the crowd—approaching 8,000—left the highway and followed a dirt path to a clearing. Untended fields stretching in all directions served as a reminder of the ongoing shifts in local livelihoods from agriculture to daily wage labor (Li 2009). Twante’s farming families were proud of their status as “three-season” growers, but they faced exceedingly narrow profit margins, and only a few families still cultivated their farmland. In fact, preparing this field for the arriving crowd was the only agricultural labor that U Khin Zaw had done that year. But with a mass of people now assembled, carrying signs and chanting slogans, the field fulfilled the purpose U Khin Zaw had envisioned—primed not for planting but for protest.⁵ Bright plastic banners hung at the entrance, each featuring a polite if impassioned request, written in formal Burmese:

To the people’s representatives: Please respect the people’s lives and desires!

The success of the New Yangon City Project: Our cause!

Please realize the New Yangon City Project as fast as possible: The locals’ desire!

The slogans—printed on signs and repeated in call-and-response chants—referred to an ambitious effort to develop a “new city” across tens of thousands of acres of farmland in Yangon’s southwestern townships of Twante, Kyeemyindaing, and Seikkyi Kanaungto. This new city project had gone by several names since rumors of its construction first surfaced in 2013: the Southwest Yangon Expansion Project, the Southwest New City Project, the New Yangon City Project and, since 2018, the New Yangon Development Project. The project had been promoted as a landmark undertaking of Myanmar’s “transition era” and fast-tracked as the first of seven high-priority plans to upgrade urban infrastructure across the Yangon region.⁶ But the shifting names of the project reflected its successive suspensions and restarts, triggered by suspicions of corruption, poor transparency, and fears of the project’s technical impracticality. Demands that the New Yangon City be built “as fast as possible” responded to this ill-fated history, which had left residents anxious to see the project move from plan to reality. Tied to land degraded by cycles of flooding and drought, once—but no longer—apt for agriculture, the crowd’s mission was summed up by U Khin Zaw as he stood at the center of the clearing: “Please take my land, I don’t want it anymore. Please make our farmlands a city.”

Demonstrators’ demands would reverberate far beyond Twante, appearing in major Myanmar publications, televised news segments, and online. They also featured in my conversations about the new city project during preliminary field research later that same year.⁷ Interviewees from Yangon’s civil society sector

would routinely reference the “absurdity” of demonstrators’ requests, before pulling up photos of the event published online. While attendees may have resembled farmers, the critics of the project asserted that it was “obvious” attendees were imposters, whose simple clothing, sandals, and farming hats constituted a thinly veiled disguise. Or, as some put it, perhaps these *were* locals, but like a piece of ginger slipped into one’s meal—so the idiom goes—their unassuming presence hid a secret: a bribe, perhaps, or a kickback from a developer keen to keep the project moving.⁸

“Who is in the background, behind this ‘local people’s demonstration?’” asked a reporter for *Kamayut Media* in a segment about a 2014 demonstration, the first of five held between 2014 and 2016. The locals carried professionally printed signs, the reporter observed, so “some group must be behind it.” Attendees interviewed in the segment stayed quiet, but the event’s organizers—a group that included the three men who had led the 2015 procession—quickly responded after the story aired: “We, the Committee for Local Development, are just a group made up of local young people and professionals from the project area. Our main purpose is to disseminate accurate information about the project to be done in our region, so that the residents are kept up to date.” They criticized elite commentators from Yangon in statements they distributed to neighbors and shared on social media: “Some media outlets have attacked us with inaccurate conjectures, based on the empty words of outsiders.” Explaining that they were “genuine” locals with “no background to speak of,” the group asserted something that would become a motto of sorts over the coming years: “If we are cronies, we are cronies of the dullest of colors, smeared with mud down in our barren fields.”⁹

The argumentative impact of this assertion hinged on the peculiarity of what it described. Mud-encrusted farmers were not Myanmar’s prototypical cronies—nor were they typically imagined as the beneficiaries of the New Yangon City and the influx of global capital it promised to lure. For the Committee for Local Development, this incompatibility bolstered members’ claims that demonstrations comprised “genuine” locals, whereas, for skeptics, it suggested the presence of “fake farmers” wielding influence that flowed from the outside. For me, a vigorous debate around the authenticity of this “local people’s demonstration” implied something else entirely: landowners’ own pursuits of profit were increasingly imagined to depend on the flows of speculative capital, and in ways that did not conform to established categories of the “inside” and “outside” or “genuine” and “fake.”

Indeed, in 2018, the Yangon Regional Government’s compensation policy would allocate local landowners a stake in the new city’s speculative land market

by offering them developable new city plots of one-fifth the acreage of their prior farmlands. But even before the value of landowners' compensation was anchored to the success of the new city, Southwest Yangon's residents were already crafting spectacles to spur forward investment in the repeatedly postponed project. In this article, I describe a series of demonstrations-turned-spectacles organized in Yangon's outskirts and ask how spectacle functions when devised by those living at the center of a speculative urban plan and poised to benefit from its impending implementation.

CRAFTING THE FRONT

Speculation on land and property has been extensively studied in relation to transnational investment as mobilized across the expansive geographies of global capitalism (Tsing 2000; Weszkalnys 2015; Fairbairn 2014, 2020). Central to speculative practices are the myriad "acts of looking" that the term *speculation* encompasses: the "statistical picturing" mobilized by investment firms to support large-scale acquisitions; the mapping of "empty" landscapes ripe for investors' discovery; or the polished publicity images of foreign "wilds" ready for taming (Humphrey 2020; Li 2014; Tsing 2000, 2005). These are what Laura Bear (2020) calls the "technologies of imagination" that lie at the heart of the affective, physical, and intellectual labor of speculation (see also Bear, Birla, and Puri 2015). Speculation on the construction of a new city, too, requires imaginative labor from outside observers (Wittekind 2022); but rendering a region "investible," to borrow Tania Murray Li's (2014, 2017) framing, also involves crafting what is to be seen—a process of "spectacle-making" that attracts outside attention and renders sites visible and valuable. Research into high finance has clarified this dynamic, showing that, as Anna L. Tsing (2000, 57) put it, "the self-conscious making of a spectacle is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds" (see also Ho 2008; Wu, Li, and Lin 2016). But what becomes of this "self-conscious making" when producers of spectacles are not corporate entities and neither distant nor detached from the site of investment?

In asking this question, I build on a growing literature on so-called speculative urbanism and, in particular, studies that see project-affected populations as "stakeholders" in the booming markets that transnational investment in "world city making" proposals create (Roy and Ong 2011; Goldman 2011; Upadhy 2020). Over the past decade, a cross-disciplinary commitment to documenting the unprecedented extent of dispossession carried out in the shadow of a "global land grab" has motivated a reanimated focus on the impact of large-scale land

acquisitions on farmers and other agrarian populations (Hall et al. 2015). Yet in analyzing local responses to such projects, this research has tended to emphasize peasant agency and sought to identify cases of resistance (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011) and, when absent, has attributed compliance to the value of compensation provided to impacted residents (Borras and Franco 2013; Cai et al. 2020; Jiang, Sargeson, and Tomba 2020; Shin and Kim 2016; Steel, van Noorloos, and Klaukus 2017). Recent studies of large-scale infrastructure development in India, in contrast, suggest that developers may reduce local discontent and tamp down on protest movements by creating avenues for affected populations to benefit from speculative land markets, even when conventional compensation in cash or comparable property remains absent (Rouanet and Halbert 2016; Levien 2018; Goldman 2020). Indeed, as Vinay Gidwani and Carol Upadhy (2023) have shown in a strikingly similar case to my own, local action may involve aggregating land and driving up prices, with resulting profits accruing to landowners, land brokers, local real-estate companies, and large project developers. In such cases, new imaginaries of value or "land fictions" draw in willing subjects (Ghertner and Lake 2021), prompting a range of responses beyond resistance; these include cool indifference, cautious acceptance, and even unmitigated enthusiasm on the part of affected populations (Harms 2016; Smith 2021; Paik and Lee 2012; Cross 2015; Woods 2020).

My analysis of demonstrations held in support of the Yangon New City contributes to research on local responses to "speculative urbanism" by underscoring not merely that project-affected populations might respond positively to new city construction; I also explore how these populations carve out spaces for profit through everyday practices of speculation and spectacle-making. More specifically, I propose that local participation in spectacle-making involves manufacturing a *front*,¹⁰ in the sense of a forward- or outward-facing representation that also consolidates and coheres what lies behind. In places such as Southwest Yangon, speculation often functions through this kind of front, which mediates between foreground and background or an inside and outside. Rather than veiling or screening, which produce concealment by blurring or inhibiting vision (Mazzarella 2010; Strassler 2009; Jusionyte 2015), the front presents a simplified representation to elide controversy or gain support from an external audience. As such, I suggest, spectacle-making undertaken by community leaders in Southwest Yangon is less about truth and falsity than about a flattening of contingent and sometimes convoluted relationships between diverse actors with diverging interests. By foregrounding the plight of the region's farmers and their support for a coming New Yangon City, demonstration organizers sought to ensure that prospects for the project's

realization—and, likewise, prospects for future profit—would appear as immediate and accessible as possible. When circulated on and offline, I suggest, manufactured representations or fronts can refine local dynamics as much as conceal them outright. Challenging zero-sum accounts of exploitative cronies and farmers, these spectacles magnify the overlapping forms of aspiration and anxiety experienced by diverse coalitions in (post)authoritarian Myanmar.

All this became clear to me in 2016, during fieldwork in the three townships poised for absorption into the new city, where speculation on property and politics surfaced side by side (Morris 2019). This was just one year after Myanmar's 2015 general election delivered a supermajority in parliament to the National League for Democracy (NLD)—concluding, if only temporarily, a half-century of military rule. As early as 2011, reforms in Myanmar were “dual” in the sense that a political transition to a multiparty electoral democracy paired with market liberalization (Tin Maung Maung Than 2013; Jones 2014). In the aftermath of such shifts, Myanmar quickly emerged as Asia's “final frontier” for foreign investment (Parker 2016), slated for multiple projects aimed at imagining, pursuing, and realizing new forms of profit (Li 2014). In this sense, Yangon—the most recent Southeast Asian city to “come into its own” (Simone 2018)—is but the latest stage on which the twin dramas of economic and dramatic performance are playing out (Tsing 2005). Yangon's new city project thus provided a site from which I could track speculative practices flourishing alongside interlinked proposals for the construction of a “new Yangon city” and a “new Myanmar nation,” with both reliant in part on outside investment from China (Wittekind 2021). Yet uncertain project timelines and a changing political climate meant my inquiry into a proposed new city and new nation ultimately made for an account of unfulfilled promises (Aung 2023). Successive project delays, a global pandemic, and, ultimately, Myanmar's 2021 military coup rendered Southwest Yangon's highly anticipated transformation endlessly—and, in most cases, ruthlessly—deferred.

But optimism remained high before the coup of 2021 made evident the stakes of speculation on new city futures. Landowners, in particular, hoped to benefit from the project through formal compensation proposals or through the sale of project area land. In town halls and four months of land-compensation and redistribution meetings held in Southwest Yangon in 2019 and 2020, I met developers, government planners, investors, real-estate brokers, and landowners—a category that included many members of the Committee for Local Development, or CLD. My engagement with these different groups was aided by my Western background, which enabled me to “study up” (Nader 1972) through meetings with government

officials, project planners, and international consultants who were careful to limit their engagement with the public. As a result, community members, too, eagerly shared their perspectives with me. Local farmers, land brokers, and CLD members sought out audiences with me for the front they collectively crafted—and hoped I would reproduce.

PLEASE LOOK

Like many other peri-urban areas lying just outside Myanmar's largest cities, Southwest Yangon is an out-of-sight, out-of-mind landscape at the boundary of the rural-urban divide (Campbell 2022). Yet the southwestern townships of Twante, Seikkyi Kanaungto, and western Kyeemyindaing are uniquely isolated, separated from Yangon's bustling downtown by not only an administrative divide but also the Yangon River, a major marine estuary notoriously treacherous during monsoon season. Supporters of the New Yangon City stressed the vexing nature of their proximity to Yangon's downtown: a mere 850 meters lay between residents and Yangon's central districts. So close, as one resident stressed in a 2018 public town hall meeting about the project, that "we can see their skyscrapers." But with no bridge, the southwest fringes stayed in the shadow of a city just out of reach.

Life on "the other bank"—as most city dwellers referred to the southwest region—meant not merely physical distance but a material divide (Boutry 2017; Harms 2011, 2016). Yangon had expanded generation by generation, absorbing similar areas through a combination of urban expansion and forced relocation (Nwe 1998; Rhoads 2018; Sarma and Sidaway 2020). The southwest, meanwhile, was left to wait, seemingly forgotten. A sense of invisibility compounded what residents described as the "torture" of keeping up hope in an "extended meanwhile" (Weszkalnys 2015; Harms 2013) in which potentiality remains perpetually not-yet realized (Gupta 2015; Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Zee 2017).

U Khin Zaw had reviewed plan after plan for the regional development of the Yangon region, all of which highlighted Yangon's southwest as the necessary site of urban expansion. But by late 2014, he was tired of waiting. He rose from his seat with great urgency to deliver the opening speech for the second demonstration organized by the CLD that November. Hundreds of attendees sat on the ground below. His mission, as he would later put it, was "to be seen." And if the field's bamboo platform could be considered a stage, then U Khin Zaw certainly had his costume at the ready. Standing in the scorching sun, he donned a farming hat and adjusted on his chest a yellow pin that signified his status as a village elder. His presence at the demonstration was significant and seemingly straightforward.

He and the other twelve members of the CLD represented each of their home villages, all of which lay in the project area. Their mission, which they later printed on handouts for future rallies, was as follows: “The Committee for Local Development is made up of genuine local residents who have been selected to implement the dreams of local people at the request of the area’s community of agriculturalists.” All CLD members held day jobs—often as civil servants, but also as shopkeepers, brokers, and businesspeople. Given their roles as community leaders, they also acted as low-level bureaucrats called into meetings to verify locals’ residency or to witness transactions such as land sales or informal contracts. These responsibilities meant that the members’ attire—farming hats atop office wear—was somehow appropriate. It suggested the multiple public and private interests they mediated in their day-to-day work. It also underscored the difficulty of disentangling their dual roles as local leaders responsible for ensuring the visibility of their communities’ needs while remaining private actors with literal and figurative investments in the locality from which they intended to profit personally.

The crowd quieted as U Khin Zaw welcomed the event’s attendees. He then narrated the troubled history of agriculture in the region, which he knew intimately. “I have over forty years of experience as a farmer,” he began, “and so the first point I want to make is that, throughout the many periods of history, we farmers never had enough for our basic necessities. We labored for our country, even though, season after season, we lost money because of our choice to farm.” He then proceeded to narrate the losses faced by each generation from the time of his great-grandparents: “Every farmer knows about this history.” Pausing to gaze at the crowd, U Khin Zaw continued, “And that was when we were benefiting from Pun Hlaing River, when it was still flowing. . . . But now the Pun Hlaing has dried up, and the farm and village lands are no good anymore.” These were the facts on the ground, a situation U Khin Zaw asserted was well-known by every farmer.

In the next speech, U Tun Tun, a resident of a neighboring village, picked up on U Khin Zaw’s points from under a wide-brimmed hat. His comments made clear the dual purpose of the demonstrations, which the previous speeches had only implied. Oscillating between addressing, first, the crowd of residents that sat below him and, second, a temporally and spatially absent audience of “outsiders,” he ensured the narratives presented to both remained in alignment. He began welcoming the crowd, stressing the reasons for their attendance: “You who are wholeheartedly supporting this rally, I wish you all good health, wealth, and peace in your lives.” Pausing, he then switched to address an external audience: “These people are the farmers who are producing rice and grains and laboring for our

country," he said, gesturing to those on the ground below. "These are the farmers who were unfazed by potential dangers in their fields such as snakes, and they continued to labor all year round. If you look at their situation, there are no proper hospitals. . . . If you look at our transportation, our roads and streets are flooded with mud. If you look at electricity, the sky is full of light in the districts to the east, north, and south of downtown Yangon. But here in the west, it is dark." He cleared his throat before concluding his impassioned comments. He again addressed an outside audience he hoped might come to understand his community's situation, even as he stressed the common concerns and shared goal for those present. "If you look, you can see that the quality of life of our farmers is very poor. We believe the New City Project is our hope."

Two more speakers would volunteer to share their own strife, each marshaling their identities as farmers to distill the struggles of those situated behind the front for an outside audience. Both described a decrease in productivity so dramatic as to make farming "pointless," a reality I had observed in many interviews with self-identified "farmers who no longer farm." For them, an existence "not yet urban, no longer rural" (Oakes 2020; see Harms 2011) amounted to an ever-tightening vise, each unproductive planting season a turn of the screw (Bernstein 1979). Yet these events were not merely an effort to render the plight of the southwestern townships visible, as one instantiation of Asia's well-researched "urban margins" (Harms 2016; Elinoff 2016; Herzfeld 2016; Simone 2018; Campbell 2022). Rather, participants' plea to "look" was a pointed one, an attempt to manipulate the attention of those deemed able to guarantee a way out of the suspension that the new city—and its future population—faced.

With thousands of his neighbors crowded in front of him, I found it striking that U Tun Tun addressed his comments to others not present at the demonstration site. Yet given that the farmers knew firsthand the trials they faced, it made sense that U Tun Tun's goal was to inform others about "what every farmer knows." The plurality of the gathering's intended audiences emerged not only in the speeches but also in the layout of the demonstration site.¹¹ First, three rows of plastic chairs sat alongside the stage, shaded by a large red tent, set aside for members of the media. That some reporters had been enticed with exclusive interviews or "tea money" to travel across the river suggested that the resulting articles were the outcome of extensive planning. The CLD knew intuitively that the image of farmers rallying in support of a megaproject could prompt an explosive "image event"—to borrow Karen Strassler's (2020) term—with the potential to reconfigure the conditions they confronted. Second, flanking the stage were photos of

key government officials from the then ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government and the opposition party, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD. Above each photo was a request that the depicted leader "please fulfill the people's wishes." While CLD members often directed their comments to officials, they clarified that their allegiances were not to a party but to a cause: "We are not campaigning for votes on either side, just asking for our representatives to work hard for local desires." Last—and most ambiguous—were the dozens of signs the CLD had distributed to the crowd, directly addressing "those who are advancing the New City Project."

I would later ask U Tin Tun Oo about the identity of "those who are advancing the New City Project," and he emphasized the capaciousness of this category—that it could encompass anyone who might propel the project forward if they understood the region's "real" conditions,¹² and acted accordingly. This included elites from Yangon who may otherwise have opposed the new city project on principle. Again and again, U Tin Tun Oo and his neighbors had opened the newspaper to see that the pending proposals had been criticized, that the plan would be revised, and construction delayed or suspended outright. The project's skeptics—lawmakers, scholars, and policy experts turned "watchdogs"—expressed concern not only about environmental harms, governmental transparency, and logistical complications but also about the future of the farmers affected by the plan (Sandhi Governance Institute 2020; Kyaw Phyoo Tha 2020). While farmland—at least in the abstract—could sustain a family's basic needs and potentially provide a stable livelihood for generations, in interviews, the project's critics expressed concern about the population's ability to transition into wage labor. This concern was one U Tin Tun Oo could not countenance. Watchdogs might proclaim they are "watching," but "they have never been here to see us. For us, this project is a dream come true [compared to farming]. Even if others reject it, we farmers will not." He sought to make the local stakes of the project abundantly clear to those across the river: not only would the residents refuse to obstruct the new city; they would in fact vocally champion its restart and speedy completion.

A LOCAL PEOPLE'S DEMONSTRATION?

Despite impassioned declarations from public figures like U Tin Tun Oo, as the demonstrations grew in size—from 8,000 in 2015 to more than 10,000 in early 2016—skepticism about their authenticity persisted. Nearly a dozen articles repeated the question first asked by *Kamayut Media*: "Who is in the background?" Two theories about what lay "behind" the spectacle of farmers protesting

in support of a megaproject gained notable traction, circulating widely in Burmese-language print media and online. The first suggested that the demonstrations comprised “fake farmers,” manipulated by a shady network of real-estate developers, property brokers, and investors—an assortment of actors commonly glossed with the English-language term *cronies*. The *Myanmar Post*, a Yangon-based paper, would spread this theory widely, accusing crony businesspeople of bribing alcoholics from the neighboring industrial township of Hlaingtharya, encouraging attendance by offering them liquor.

By March 2016, the month of a final demonstration held, meaningfully, on Myanmar’s Farmers’ Day, a second theory had surfaced on township-wide Facebook pages. The posts still referred to attendees as “not real farmers,” but they now suggested a different force operating in the background. This time, demonstrators were cast as protesters-for-hire, known locally as “5,000 eaters,”¹³ a name referencing the meager payment of 5,000-kyat (then about \$5) paid to attendees. With 5,000 eaters long associated with Myanmar’s dictatorships and their pro-military rallies, this suspicion revealed a growing fear that the real force behind the demonstrations might be the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party.

The supposed answer of who operated in the background remained unsettled, but, in either case, the rumors confirmed civil society activists’ worst fears. Not only had military-aligned “crony capitalism” so wholly penetrated Myanmar’s rural regions that local farmers were advocating for a plan that would spell an end to their agrarian way of life; but, as the criticism went, they did so by appropriating transition-era ideals of accountability, authenticity, and popular protest for a purpose activists worried was less-than palatable.

That CLD demonstrations generated accusations of fakery and fraud underscores that the desires for new city development voiced in Southwest Yangon persist in an interpretive vacuum. While “local people’s demonstrations” were common in Myanmar throughout the 2010s, they had a decidedly different purpose. In 2012, the government passed two laws that encouraged investment and granted individual usufruct property rights, effectively erasing the socialist property regime that had structured land governance in Myanmar for the past sixty years. Legal reforms, combined with moves toward a self-styled transition to “discipline-flourishing” democracy, together set off what international organizations’ reports, local civil society groups, and media narratives often glossed as a “rush” for Myanmar’s land. On the ground, those threatened with landlessness faced a series of deep-seated constraints on landowners’ ability to claim and maintain claims to land,

including a weak (or in some places, non-existent) tenure system, outdated legal protections, and a powerful network of military-state aligned cronies whose companies faced few curbs on their ability to scoop up whatever acreage remained following large-scale land acquisitions (Mark 2016; Woods 2011). The resulting “land rush” was one slowed or halted, most often, by efforts that drew on “weapons of the weak” (Scott 2008), increasingly possible after the lifting of military-era restrictions. These restrictions included, in January 2013, a twenty-five-year ban that had outlawed public gatherings of more than five people. Soon, collective meetings, letter-writing campaigns, and, most commonly, “farmers’ protests” became a mainstay on the front pages of Myanmar newspapers and in scholarly accounts of the global land grab’s emergence in the country (Kiik 2016, 2023; Prasse-Freeman 2012, 2016; Kirchherr et al. 2017; Faxon 2023; Kramer 2021).

From the CLD members’ perspective, their gatherings resembled these recent farmers’ protests and would resonate in a political landscape that viewed mass mobilizations as a sign of impending disaster for planners, developers, and investors alike. Take, for example, the widely celebrated movement that arose in opposition to the Myitsone project, a hydroelectric power proposal featuring a dam that, if completed, would be the fifteenth largest in the world (Kiik 2016; Kirchherr et al. 2017). A joint venture between Burma’s Ministry of Electric Power, the military-associated Asia World Company, and China’s state-owned China Power Investment Corporation, this Myitsone Dam project attracted strong resistance, particularly among the affected Kachin community (Kiik 2016). Critics highlighted the project’s poor transparency, its links to military businesses, ties to Chinese state-owned industry, and its potential environmental impacts. Ultimately, the Myitsone project would be suspended in 2011, amid further political reforms promising democratization in Myanmar. Buoyed by the success of the Myitsone case, protest efforts would take off in the intervening years, as civil society grew increasingly bold (Buschmann 2018). Public outcry caused protracted delays, if not reversals, in projects such as economic zones, new regional highways, and mining ventures.

The parallels were clear to U Tin Tun Oo, who first envisioned the pro-project demonstrations: If local opposition forced megaprojects to decelerate, local support would surely speed up a project on hold. If Myitsone activists routinely underscored the prospect of millions of farmers losing their livelihoods, then CLD members could certify that their livelihoods had already vanished. Finally, in the Myitsone case, activists worried that the project’s profits would flow to “crony companies.” Supporters of the New Yangon City countered these fears with what

they considered an uncomplicated local people's perspective on the project's benefits. As U Tin Tun Oo declared at the May 2015 rally: "If I can speak frankly, for us, cronies of any kind . . . we don't really care much. What we care about is whoever can best implement the New Yangon City Plan in line with the wishes of the local people."

In the end, for U Tin Tun Oo, Khin Zaw, and other members of the CLD, that their gatherings did not trigger the project's restart implied a double standard; local perspectives on development proposals seemingly mattered only when they mirrored the preconceived notions of urban elites who, as the group would post on Facebook, cared more for the flourishing farmers they imagined than the "real ones," who "sat starving in their mud-filled fields." This supposition by CLD members was not without merit, given region-spanning debates about farmers' "genuine desires." But doubts about the supposedly true nature of the CLD's events suggest a more far-reaching conclusion. They highlight the ambiguous status of not just demonstrations but also fronts—able to project persuasive local perspectives outward, if also to obscure the presence of background forces, left unseen.

NO BACKGROUND

In 2019, I sat just minutes away from the site of the first demonstration, on the floor of U Tin Tun Oo's wooden home. I balanced my laptop on one hand as I scanned through an hour-long video of the first demonstration. "Ah, you opened it," he gasped with surprise. Believing the file corrupted, he had stored the DVD behind the thick doors of an old wooden cabinet. From inside, U Tin Tun Oo proudly pulled out hundreds of newspaper clippings that he had bound together—a self-made archive of the troubled trajectory of the new city. As he sorted the documents, I looked around his home. Across from the cabinet stood a makeshift divider covered in motivational posters, hung side by side with professional headshots from his career with a timber company. We sat between the photos, on the one side, and, on the other, the cabinet, full of papers from his years supporting the new city—bookended by his life's greatest achievements.

While I had never visited before, U Tin Tun Oo's home seemed familiar. Years before, in 2015, this small wooden house had emerged as a source of conflict between residents of his peri-urban neighborhood, minutes from the river's western bank. Photographed and circulated on social media, the wooden home's small size and simple construction provided evidence of its owner's status. The following caption, posted with the photograph, underscored the intended message: "This is the small little house of U Tin Tun Oo, a member of the CLD, which is actively

promoting the new city project as much as possible.” The message addressed several rumors, including that CLD members had “bought and held onto a lot of land” and therefore were promoting the project for their own benefit, to continue increasing the price of land in the area. The house gave proof of U Tin Tun Oo’s modest status, which he repeatedly underscored to me in our conversations: “I do not own any land at all. All I own is the dirt in my flowerpots.” The photographs of his house, combined with the details of his career as a low-level employee, evidenced his assertion: “Look, I can say openly, I have no background.”¹⁴

In Myanmar, it is not uncommon to be asked about one’s background. *Background* can refer not only to identities of ethnicity and religion, for example, or to one’s home region or village. As in English, *background* can also refer to formal training. But in Burmese, the term encompasses other less obvious resources. These include social ties, professional networks, or other accumulated connections that might smooth one’s path. In this latter sense, it is often an indirect way of inquiring about contacts or resources available behind the scenes. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social capital, in a related case, [Michael Levien \(2015, 2018\)](#) describes an “unequally distributed form of power that allows certain people to differentially exploit new economic opportunities because of ‘who they know’” (2015, 80). In Myanmar, *background* is used to capture similar dynamics. However, to ask about someone’s background there is to ask not only about “who they know” but also “what they know”—resources necessary for economic success, if not basic survival ([Thawngmung 2019](#)).

As [Jayde Roberts and Elizabeth Rhoads \(2022\)](#) have argued, across periods of military rule and in the shadow of state violence, people in Myanmar have relied predominantly on *nalehmu* arrangements, defined as a set of informal relational practices for negotiating differential access to power, resources, and knowledge. This holds particularly true among land brokers who—as part real-estate agents, part fixers, and part mediators—rely as much on their fluency with formal mechanisms for land transactions as they do on informal contracts outside the state ([Rhoads 2020; Wittekind and Faxon 2023](#)).

U Tin Tun Oo was not the only member of the CLD targeted as a part of efforts to uncover the backgrounds of organizers and the direct or indirect ties that might motivate their actions. Online, project watchers from neighboring urban areas shared photographs of another CLD member, U Kyaw Win, drawing attention to his Chinese features—assumed to prove his links to Chinese companies rumored to have a stake in the plan. This included not only the Chinese businesses awarded a contract to implement the original project in 2014 but also the

majority state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), which would later agree to build the New Yangon City's basic infrastructure. More often than not, U Kyaw Win laughed off these accusations with a shrug of the shoulders, pointing to his family's generations-long residency in a village to Twante's south. Only once were the accusations commented on publicly, via a 2015 Burmese-language post to the CLD's Facebook page: "Some suggest that U Kyaw Win is an expatriate Chinese man who is cooperating with Chinese nationals to buy land." To this, U Khin Zaw was said to have replied with a chuckle, "U Kyaw Win is a genuine Burmese person, born in this area to a Chinese father and Burmese mother. . . . I have no idea who he is related to, except that he is a genuine son of his village. He has no land to speak of, since he recently had to sell it for [the CLD's] purposes." This last comment shed light on another point often stressed by CLD members to explain their authenticity. "We knew we needed to demonstrate our support of the project," explained U Kyaw Win during a gathering in Seikkyi Kanaungto. "So . . . four of us divided up and sold pieces of our land so we would have money to support the work." If there were something "in the background"—these explanations seemed to assert—it was project-area residents themselves: simple people who believed so deeply in the New Yangon City project that they willingly invested the value of their land to ensure its success.

Shuttling between community discussions, formal land-redistribution meetings, and the makeshift offices of local land brokers, however, I began to have doubts. U Khin Zaw always seemed to be in Yangon, and, after months of stories about his life as a farmer, I would learn he lived in an apartment downtown. In government land-redistribution meetings, which officially existed to assist landowners in claiming new developable plots provided in lieu of monetary compensation, CLD members held court along the edges, chatting with brokers about their latest sales and introducing them to the villagers who filtered in and out. There was talk of a rented office in Yangon, used for business meetings. And area residents would occasionally refer to CLD members as "brokers" or, even more ominously, as "twisted people,"¹⁵ a term used for tricksters, cheaters, or crooks. In the end, the doubts created by a slow accumulation of whispered insinuations (on the part of residents) and momentary slipups (on the part of CLD members) collided with a document sent to me after a subset of the committee grew frustrated with the group's leadership. Addressed to the group's leaders, the document referred to their conditions of employment. It was printed on the letterhead of one of the largest construction companies in Myanmar. The same company whose logo was

emblazoned on that letter would later secure a contract for part of the new city's construction. At least some accusations, it appeared, had had a basis all along.

PUSHING FROM BEHIND

The CLD's gatherings were clearly a spectacle: a carefully crafted series of events that mobilized the established model of farmers' protests for seemingly paradoxical—and therefore attention-grabbing—ends. By the end of my field research, I felt equally convinced that the demonstrations also served as a front. As an outward-facing projection of local desire, the demonstrations situated area residents and farmers in the foreground—to conceal the presence of entities seeking profit in the background. Yet conventional understandings of a front, for example, in the case of an illegal business operation, equate its existence with an instance of fraud—a categorically false representation turned outward that conceals a truth behind. The defining characteristic lies in the contradictory relationship between the foreground and background—a relationship all the more evident in an alternative usage of *the front* as a site of battle: that is, as a boundary where opposing forces come into contact. This latter connotation was certainly present for the journalists, commentators, and civil society actors who observed demonstrations held in support of the new city from across the river and who sought to penetrate the appearance of so-called fake farmers to reveal what lay concealed in the background.¹⁶ But if the front amounted to a site of contestation and boundary between opposing realities, where was the local opposition exerting pressure on the front from behind?

Despite the best efforts of journalists, including a team of investigative reporters from *Mawkun*, Myanmar's major investigative news journal, opposition from project-area residents unaffiliated with the CLD remained subdued. In my conversations with villagers formally represented by the CLD, all recalled the events, and many had attended one or more demonstrations. But none opposed the effort's core aims, even if they paused when endorsing the tactics of the CLD's leadership. "I don't want to say much about [the CLD]," one woman told me as her husband sat at her side, nodding in agreement. "I'm not sure about them. But do we want the new city? That is for certain. We do."

This was a viewpoint echoed by U Than Sein, then the representative for Kyeemindaing in Myanmar's national parliament, to whom landowners referred me. While on record as supporting the new city's construction, and thus aligned with his constituents, U Than Sein worried about corruption and demanded transparency in project planning. In an interview with *Myanmar Daily*, he was asked

explicitly about the demonstrations in his region and the “rumors that there are leaders behind.” He responded, “What I can say, as a representative of this region, is that I think no matter how much someone may push from behind, it is only the local people that can make [these events] happen. What kind of demonstration would this be if it was instigated without the people? This is something we have to think carefully about.” U Than Sein did not confirm the presence of others, pushing events forward from behind, but he also did not refute the possibility. For him, this was beside the point. Turning to list the numerous benefits that would accrue to those living in the project area—rising land prices, higher housing valuation, ease of transportation to and from Yangon—he concluded, “of course [locals] support it.”

Such a statement does not mean to suggest uniform approval of the CLD or their motives. Southwest Yangon was crosscut by deep class, ethnic, gender, and generational inequalities that resulted in differing opinions, including about the CLD, the new city’s anticipated trajectories, planners’ calculations for measuring farmland, and the order of stages in the plan’s progression. But the insight that area residents with differential access to the project’s benefits can collude—and sometimes enthusiastically—in the creation of a front underscores why, as I see it, the front is a modality of spectacle-making that is illustrative, ethnographically and analytically. I have shown how residents living in the shadow of a large-scale urban development effort use carefully manufactured fronts to manipulate attention and attract the gaze of those otherwise indifferent to their plight. The decision of CLD leaders to foreground farmers, project-affected villages, and area residents’ desires was simultaneously a strategy to obscure varied “backgrounds”: from personal contacts to professional capacities, financial backers, and networks of overlapping private and public interests. But to construct this front, CLD members had to render themselves and their neighbors visible, as objects of sympathy and guarantors of the project’s uninterrupted and undisputed implementation. While related to well-documented processes of “global conjuring” (Tsing 2000)—operating through performances, dramas, tricks, and illusions that seek to define, value, and shape “truth” to promote investment—this case describes a collective conjuring of self and locality likely to become increasingly widespread amid compensation proposals that absorb residents into large-scale investments’ speculative land booms.

This holds particularly true given the likelihood that large-scale urban development in Myanmar will continue under the banner of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development program that provides debt

financing and technical expertise for the establishment of trade and infrastructure corridors across Asia, Europe, and Africa. While scholars have underscored that the BRI is better imagined as a set of contestations than a cohesive whole (Lee 2018), BRI-associated projects nevertheless share similarities, including a model of spectacular infrastructure construction first developed domestically. Numerous scholars have underscored the solution of “land exchange” mobilized by the Chinese state in sites like Shenzhen, where formerly rural counties were transformed through a forward-looking process of plot-by-plot urban development (Karaman et al. 2020). Crucially, this policy compensates landowners for acquired farmland by granting village collectives the ability to develop a percentage of what they owned (Lai, Chan, and Choy 2017), a strategy not dissimilar from the speculative mode of compensation employed in Rajasthan (Levien 2018). For New Yangon City-affected residents, in 2018 authorities announced their intention to replace agricultural farmlands with new “developable” urban plots at a rate of 20 percent of landowners’ original agricultural holdings (NYDC 2019). When I completed my field research in 2020, members of the CLD—joined by their neighbors—were hurriedly advertising the location of their new urban plots, eager to attract investors who might help them build dormitories, apartments, and even factories. A new method of spectacle-making was to follow—but this time, as one landowner-turned-broker told me, “we can’t seem like farmers if we want to develop. We’re professionals now.”

The launch of a new city project in Southwest Yangon unsettled relationships between the city and its agricultural margins and created a viable, if fragile, pathway into urban life for the project area’s struggling farmers—one that expanded access to potential profit promised by the city-to-come. While these speculative dynamics are most concrete when identified in overlapping models for BRI projects and their speculative land-compensation proposals, they equally speak to broader theorizations of urban life in global cities’ rapidly expanding edges (Simone 2004). The story of Southwest Yangon and the speculative practices that have flourished in the new city’s shadows are, too, a story of what AbdouMaliq Simone and colleagues (2023, 3) have called urban life “at the extensions,” within spaces and amid processes that cut across established categories of the rural and urban, and that demand residents’ collective experimentation with “different itineraries of engagement with ever-expanding urban regions.” Like the CLD’s demonstrations-as-fronts, experiments at the extension are multifaceted and fleeting, but they amount to efforts to speculate on “where things are headed” by hedging bets across multiple locations and affiliations (Simone et al. 2023, 3). They require new

strategies and maneuvers that fit poorly within the oppositional models that have, for too long, structured relationships between the city and its margins, urbanites and agrarian populations, and even rural farmers and the businesspeople, cronies, or professionals found in urban centers.

This indeterminacy ultimately rendered attempts to peer behind “the front” futile. In the end, the CLD offered only an ambiguous idiom, which they posted online when confronted with accusations of their involvement with developers: “Dust isn’t stirred up because a flea jumps.”¹⁷ This seemed to me, initially, to constitute a confession, confirmation that, given the extent of the havoc caused by the demonstrations, entities much more powerful than the CLD—Myanmar’s prototypical cronies—must be involved in their execution. But puzzling over the statement months later, I was struck by another interpretation: that Southwest Yangon’s impoverished, struggling farmers—in the context of the idiom, the fleas—would be unable to disrupt the status quo alone, no matter how much energy they exerted. In the latter case, rather than a confession, the phrase simply justified their choice to align their speculative efforts with the interests of those who might help extricate farmers from the fields in which they were suspended.

ABSTRACT

Focusing on demonstrations held outside Yangon, Myanmar, in favor of urban development, this article intervenes in the binaries of “truth” versus “falsity” and the “genuine” versus “fake” to advance anthropological theorization on demonstration, speculation, and spectacle. The article traces contrasting claims about “real farmers” and their “genuine desires,” as marshaled by both supporters of a large-scale urban project and those who oppose it. It argues that the notion of “the front” helps illuminate the strategic and pragmatic frames in which spectacles are staged, as well as amid the “economy of appearances” that Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues are generated by transnational investment. Narrating the flattening of social relations and political motivations by project-affected residents, the notion of the front displaces simple binaries by emphasizing a conjuring of self and locality increasingly widespread when residents are, themselves, absorbed into the speculative land markets that large-scale investment creates. [speculation; urbanization; spectacles; agrarian change; land and property; Southeast Asia; Burma/Myanmar]

ဆောင်းပါးအနှစ်ချုပ်

ယခုဆောင်းပါးသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ ရန်ကုန်မြို့ပြင်နေရာများတွင် ဖြစ်ပွားခဲ့သည့် မြို့ပြ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေး ထောက်ခံဆန္ဒပြပွဲများကို အာရုံစိုက်လေ့လာကာ၊ “အမှန်တရား” နှင့် “လုပ်ကြံ ဖန်တီးမှု”၊ “အစစ်အမှန်” နှင့် “အတုအယောင်” အစရှိသည့် ဘက်နှစ်ဖက်အနေအထား

များကို ဝင်ရောက် ဆွေးနွေးသုံးသပ်ခြင်းအားဖြင့်၊ ဆန္ဒထုတ်ဖော်ခြင်း၊ ထင်ကြေးပေးခြင်း၊ သရုပ်ဖော်ပြသခြင်း ကိစ္စရပ်များအပေါ် မနုဿဗေဒရှုထောင့်မှ သီအိုရီများ ပိုမိုတည်ဆောက်ဖော်ထုတ်နိုင်ရန် ရည်ရွယ်ရေးသားထားပါသည်။ ယခုဆောင်းပါးသည် အကြီးစားမြို့ပြစီမံကိန်းတခုကို ထောက်ခံနေသူများနှင့် ဆန့်ကျင်ကန့်ကွက်ကြသူများ နှစ်ဖက်စလုံးက စီစဉ်ပုံဖော်နေကြသည့် “လယ်သမားအစစ်” ဆိုသည့် နှင့် ၎င်းတို့၏ “လိုအင်ဆန္ဒအစစ်အမှန်” ဆိုသည့်တို့အပေါ် ကွဲလွဲစွာ သတ်မှတ်ကြေညာပြောဆိုနေကြခြင်းများကို ခြေရာခံ ရေးသားထားခြင်း ဖြစ်ပါသည်။ သုတေသီ ANNA LOWENHAUPT TSING တင်ပြခဲ့သည့်အဆိုဖြစ်သော ပြကွင်းပြကွက် ရင်းနှီးမြုပ်နှံမှုများကြောင့် ပေါ်ပေါက်လာသည့် “အသွင်အပြင်ပဓာန စီးပွားရေးစနစ်”အလယ်တွင် “မျက်နှာစာ” ဆိုသည့် အယူအဆ ရှုမြင်သုံးသပ်ပုံသည် ပုံဖော်ပြသမှုများကို ဗျူဟာမြောက်ပြီး လက်တွေ့ကျသော မူဘောင်များအတွင်းမှ စီစဉ်ဖန်တီးနေကြခြင်းဖြစ်ကြောင်း နားလည်မြင်သာစေရန် အထောက်အကူပြုသည်ဟု ဤဆောင်းပါးက အဆိုပြုတင်ပြလိုခြင်းဖြစ်သည်။မြို့ပြဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးစီမံကိန်းဒဏ်ခံကြရသော ဒေသခံများ၏ လူမှုဆက်ဆံရေးနှင့် နိုင်ငံရေးစေ့ဆော်မှုများ ထိုင်းမှိုင်းရပ်တန့် သွားရခြင်းအကြောင်း ရေးသားတင်ပြရာတွင်၊ “အပြ မျက်နှာစာ” ဆိုသည့် ယူဆသုံးသပ်ပုံက၊ ဒေသခံများအနေဖြင့် ကြီးမားသည့် ရင်းနှီးမြုပ်နှံမှုစီမံကိန်းများ ကြောင့်ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာသည့် မှန်းဆတွက်ချက် မြေယာဈေးတက်မှုများ အကြား ၎င်းတို့ကိုယ်တိုင် ရောက်ရှိသွားကြရသည့်အခါတွင်၊ ကိုယ်တိုင်ရှုမြင်ထားသော “မိမိ” ဆိုသည့် အတ္ထု နှင့် “နယ်မြေအနေအထား”ဆိုသည်တို့ ပိုမိုကျယ်ပြန့်လာသည်များကို အလေးပေးခြင်းအားဖြင့်၊ အစစ်နှင့်အတူ ဘက်နှစ်ဖက်သာ ရှိသည်ဆိုသည့် ရိုးရှင်းသောအမြင်ကို ပယ်ဖျက်သွားသည်။ [မှန်းဆမှုများ၊ မြို့ပြဖွံ့ဖြိုးမှု၊ သရုပ်ဖော်ခြင်းများ၊ စိုက်ပျိုးရေးပြောင်းလဲမှုများ၊ မြေယာနှင့် ပိုင်ဆိုင်မှု၊ အရှေ့တောင်အာရှ၊ ဗမာ/မြန်မာ]

NOTES

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1. In 1989, the military junta changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar. To maintain consistency throughout this essay, in English, I use *Myanmar* and *Yangon* as transliterations for the official names used from 1989 onward.

2. In this essay, “Twante” will refer to the township and not the town, unless specified.
3. Names and identifying details of individuals and some locations have been changed to protect anonymity.
4. The *kamauk*, ခမောက်, is a conical hat plaited with bamboo, considered emblematic of Myanmar’s deltaic farmers.
5. In this article, I use the terms *demonstration*, *rally*, and *mass gathering* to refer to what might also be called “pro-project protests.” In Burmese, these efforts were called *hsanda pya* (ဆန္ဒပြ), a term commonly translated into English as “protest.” Literally, the term translates to show or put on display (*pya*, ပြ) one’s desires or views (*hsanda*, ဆန္ဒ), without an explicit reference to a stance of support or opposition.
6. I use the notion of a “transition” critically, aware of the teleological assumptions of a natural progression from authoritarianism to liberal democracy—an assumption core to the problematic framework that Katherine Verdery (1996) has called “transitology” (see also Wittekind 2018; Rhoads and Wittekind 2018; Girke and Beyer 2018).
7. Research described in this article encompassed two-month preliminary research trips in 2016, 2017, and 2018, as well as an extended fieldwork period of in situ and digital research between 2019 and 2021.
8. The phrase *gin hte* (ချင်းထည့်) or to insert or “stick in” ginger, implies an unseen surprise, a trick, or scam.
9. Cronies, in Myanmar, refer to those with state- or military-affiliated business interests, commonly suspected of receiving undue favors or profiting from corruption.
10. A front or facade, in Burmese, carries similar connotations as *she dou*, ရှေ့တိုက်.
11. For a related discussion of social action and its (un)intended audiences, see Prasse-Freeman 2023.
12. In his comments, U Tin Tun Oo used *asit* (အစစ်), meaning that which is pure, real, genuine, unadulterated.
13. Here, I refer to 5000 eaters, or ငါးထောင်စား.
14. When discussing their “background” in this multivalent sense, CLD members would use the term *nauk kan*, နောက်ခံ.
15. Here, I refer to the common phrase *lu leint* (လူလိမ်), an epithet that parallels the concept of being “two-faced,” though the term *broker* or *pwe sa*, itself also occasionally has connotations related to “taking a cut” or securing one’s own profits. For a detailed account of the overlapping usages, see Rhoads 2020 and Brac de la Perrière 2014.
16. Chloe Ahmann (2023, 325) similarly narrates the way in which youth activists were diminished into a front, as “players in somebody else’s game.”
17. ခွေးလှေးခုပ်နီလို့ ပုန်မထညှူး or, literally, “Dust doesn’t rise because a flea jumps.”

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