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Editor's Note

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**Environment and Resources:
Burma/Myanmar and the (Un)Natural**
A Special Issue of *The Journal of Burma Studies*

Editor's Note

From touristic impressions to geopolitical analyses, ubiquitous are the tremendous and varied natural resources of Myanmar. Teak forests, oil and gas reserves, precious gemstones, biodiversity, and the list goes on. The very meaning of the concept of *resource*, however, suggests that the country contains things of tremendous potential human, economic use, and therefore value. With the resources, mapping, and study of them, there is the seemingly boundless potential for greater wealth to be accumulated. On the other hand, discourse regarding natural beauty and wonder can be a purposeful distraction from ongoing issues of war and exploitation. Discussing the country's abundance of resources, however, is never a neutral proposition: for outsiders looking in, there is frequently a value-laden assumption which guides the observation that the various regimes and economic interests are not responsibly conserving these resources for the greater good (however nebulous that may be). Life itself (before we even label it a natural resource) is already an active zone of economic production, engineering, banking, commodification, and exchange (Palsson 2016:4). The definition, mapping, laws, and social relationships which name and frame resources in Myanmar are of ongoing heuristic, cultural, economic, and inevitably political concern.

With this problematic in mind, in this Special Issue of *The Journal of Burma Studies* (JBS) we have gathered together an interdisciplinary set of research articles surrounding questions of what nature is and what its resources might be. With the four authors' varied focus on historical and contemporary Myanmar, this set of papers offers challenging new vistas for the exploration and interrogation of how resources

and the environment have been approached and brokered by local and transnational actors.

(Un)Natural People

What is natural? Nature, as a common definition would assign, is the physical world, the environment comprising earth, atmosphere, plants, and animals; this physical and organic world is set in contrast with what has been built by people, the makers of the artificial, as it were. On the other hand, the “nature” of something can be its essential quality; the stuff that makes it real instead of its counterpart, the unreal artifice. Within the social sciences, the concept of nature has long been a contentious term, animating discussions in the nature/culture debate; which parts of human behavior are biologically immutable? Which parts are socially achieved? As anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has pointed out, there is not a human who is entirely “unmodified by the customs of particular places” therefore nullifying the proposition that there would be such thing as a “uniformitarian man” (Geertz 1973:35). Nevertheless, the argument of a “human nature” still has considerable strength at the political level, particularly in the power of taxonomic categories of the state, and how those manifest themselves in the social milieu. The artifice which is socially constructed is experienced as very real to its participants.

In another example of the natural versus the artifice, the political institutions of the state, from the enlightenment-fuelled colonial models posit that human intervention is what can bring a society to civilization; the opposite being a state of primitivism or barbarism. But revolutionary discourses are highly critical of hubristic ideas of civilization as tied to empire. Friedrich Engels’ phrase “Socialism or Barbarism” was popularized by Rosa Luxemburg in 1916 by her argument that the current world war was a reversion to barbarism (Luxemburg 2004:321). For this model does not see either as a state of nature, so much as an argument for a different class hegemony. These kinds of ideas were increasingly latched onto by anticolonial nationalist movements in Southeast Asia as well.

(Un)Natural Places

With the natural and the artificial, what does it mean to designate a zone as a nature reserve? As far back as Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (around 300 BC), land which was inhabited by elephants was considered off limits; forest people were assigned to guard the Elephant Forest, and were to kill anyone slaying an elephant (Kautilya 2.26-9 in [Trautmann 2012:104](#)). The modern state exercises its claims over sovereignty using land laws, and how spaces are designated can be an important indicator of what is valued by that institution. However, what the state codifies does not effectively describe how locals navigate their access and use to these lands.

The management of land zoning can very well be challenged by the terrain's resistance to stasis. Benoit Ivars' article in this issue, "Alluvial Tactics: Land Access and Control on the Ayeyarwaddy River" looks at how communities of people navigate and negotiate their access and use of alluvial land. Given the intrinsically shifting "nature" of these areas—which include both land and islands that are part of the great Ayeyarwaddy River—there are multiple ways in which people commodify, trade, compromise, and work with authorities regarding the allocation of the resource, and how the manipulations of these resources can create opportunities for some yet vulnerabilities for others.

Moving in from the river banks, Stéphen Huard shifts to examine how land relations are crucially shaped according to kinship and moral obligations in ways that interact in what he describes as stewardship; these are still salient despite colonial and postcolonial regime changes and successive changes to the ways in which the state has sought to systematize land tenure. His article, "Nobody Owns the Land: How Inheritance Shapes Land Relations in the Central Plain of Myanmar," draws on ethnographic experience in Gawgyi, a Buddhist Burmese village.

At yet another twist at the fabric of the urban jungle, capitalist planning has been seen to have produced places entirely

devoid of organic culture, or what Marc Augé ([1992]1995) has termed the “nonplace.” For Augé, it is places such as McDonald’s franchises, airports, and shopping centers—places which are purpose-built—that lack a local cultural input in their fashioning. Local places of organic meaning are bulldozed in favor of new concrete jukeboxes with flashing neon lights. One stands outside a McDonald’s franchise anywhere on the planet and anticipates buying a Big Mac. But does that surface sameness make the franchise devoid of organic, local culture? Will that Big Mac be the same sandwich everywhere, both in terms of its composition and what it means to the consumer, let alone the people who work there?

A similar tension animates concerns about Yangon’s downtown heritage. Cinema Row on Bogyoke Aung San Road is a stark example: all but two of the decades-old cinemas were turned to rubble to make way for new construction. But, while local ghosts remain, those buildings are gone. Another dilemma faces refurbishment: what happens when a storm of international investment seeks to reinscribe meaning on architectural landmarks? This controversy is brought into relief with the recent bid to install a Krispy Kreme donut shop and a KFC fast food restaurant within the Secretariat Building in Downtown Yangon. Although both American brands already operate numerous franchises in Myanmar, the Secretariat Building holds special meaning for the country’s postcolonial history, as it was the location of the assassination of General Aung San and his cabinet on 19 July 1947. The event is commemorated at the building every year since, with the 19 July marking the country’s Martyr Day. Will Colonel Sanders be in attendance at next year’s solemn event?

(Un)Natural Things

What happens when an object is removed from its original, natural, or even native context and reinscribed with new meaning? In her article, “Buddhist Teak and British Rifles: Religious Economics in Burma’s Last Kingdom,” Alexandra

Kaloyanides weaves an intricate story regarding the resignification of teak: the tropical timber abundant in Burma. As Kaloyanides narrates, in the 1860s, King Mindon sought to purchase Enfield rifles from a Scottish merchant. At the same time, the British government had created legal obstacles to restrict Konbaung acquisition of said weapons. King Mindon, however, had an ace in his pocket: he had a royal monopoly on teak, a product which the British coveted for its utility as a shipbuilding material. Through careful leveraging which involved King Mindon's presentation of the teak as uniquely and sublimely connected with Buddhism, coupled with the newfound British apprehension of violating religious sovereignty and taboos, the penultimate Burmese king effectively got what he wanted. As such, this story of negotiations tells the tale of how teak can take on multiple meanings, and the negotiation of these signifiers can be means to instrumental ends. The article raises the tantalizing question as to the extent to which Mindon was manipulating what might later be called "strategic essentialism" ultimately to acquire additional firepower for his soldiers.

Moving from the changing meanings of flora in historic Myanmar to contemporary controversies, in her article based on ethnographic fieldwork at Inle Lake, Shan State, Anthea Snowsill examines discourses about commodity and ecology through the biography of *inthi*, or the Inle Lake tomato. As Snowsill explains in her article, "Toxic Tomatoes: Using Object Biography to Explore Inle Lake's Sustainability Crisis," the lake itself comprises an important attraction in the country's tourism circuit for both the ethnic performances of the Intha, a group whose social identity is predicated on its lake-bound existence and practices, as well as for their cultivation of tomatoes on beds which literally float on the surface of the lake (picturesque lake-borne vistas included). The fertilizer and pesticide-intensive cultivation methods have attracted the ire of lake conservationists, as they potentially threaten the sustainability of the lake as an ecosystem as it were. The tomato thus becomes the bullseye center of the target, even though its vines of interconnection reach outward.

Across these four exciting and original articles, we can challenge our approaches to nature in the many complex and interdisciplinary fields of Burma/Myanmar studies. What other issues can be interrogated by this theme? We will leave that for our readers, and we welcome future explorations in the *Journal*. Thank you for your continued interest in—and support for—JBS.

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