Migration and Women's Relationships to the Land and Food in Myanmar

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Migration and Women’s Relationships to the Land and Food in Myanmar

Allison Joseph, Scripps College, 2020

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Readers:
Professor Char Miller
Professor Joanne Nucho
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Abstract

In the 21st century, Myanmar has become the largest migration source country in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. To achieve its economic and political goals, the government has conducted extensive confiscation and reallocation of communal lands, which has resulted in a growing class of landless and dispossessed citizens. Under the new laws, rural women are disproportionately impacted and more vulnerable to the processes of dispossession, often lacking the rights or resources of their male counterparts to fight for the land of their ancestors. This has resulted in the wide-scale disinheriance of Myanmar’s rural women from their land and food, as they are expropriated from their ancestral homes and forced to migrate to urban centers outside of Myanmar. Through an analysis of ethnographic interviews, participatory action research, and visual images, this thesis will examine and identify the impacts of rural to urban migration on Myanmar women’s individual identity and connectedness towards the land and food. It is argued that in the process of migration, the traditional identities and customs of Myanmar’s rural women are uprooted, altered and damaged. The women find themselves in dialogue with a newfound distance, in which they are increasingly disconnected from the physical, social and intellectual origins of their food and the land it is grown upon. An interdisciplinary approach is utilized to situate the distancing of Myanmar’s women from the natural world within the larger processes of development and globalization. Ultimately, this thesis gives voice to the narratives of Myanmar’s women, whose challenges and experiences have been traditionally under-represented within academic literature.

Keywords: Myanmar, migration, identity, environment, Southeast Asia
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Introduction

When I think of my home, I remember the rows of rice paddies. We planted paw san *(Myanmar’s most famous rice variety)* during the rainy season, and beans during the dry season. But now, there is no future. Local farmers cannot make money, even when they invest a lot. That is why I came to Mahachai, to make more money for my family. [. . .]

But it is different here. I do not know the food that I feed my children. When I cook for them, I do not know where the vegetables or meat comes from. I did not grow it, my neighbors did not grow it. The rest of the time, the food they eat at school comes in packages... - Nu Nu, female migrant from the Ayeyarwady Delta, January 2019

Like Nu Nu’s story, the narrative of migrant women around the world is characterized by disinheritance from the land of their birth. The trend of migration from rural areas to urban centers has become a prominent feature of a globalized world, as migrant women find themselves increasingly distant from the physical, social and intellectual origins of their food and the land it is grown upon. A key feature of women’s disinheritance from the land is the concept of distancing from their ancestral origins, which results from their incorporation into the industrialized food systems (IFS) of their new communities. Food system distancing refers to the physical and conceptual gap between people and their food, i.e., a loss of knowledge regarding what they are eating, where it came from, how it was made, and how it got to them.¹

Given that food is necessary for human life, it may seem obvious that women’s connectedness to food and the land it is grown upon is intimately connected to their health.

Extensive research exists supporting the idea that incorporation into IFS presents serious challenges with respect to the dietary, social, cultural, and ecological health of women.² Perhaps less obvious is the fact that the distancing that comes with the growth of the IFS has significant impacts on women’s psychological health and sense of identity.

This thesis grows out of my previous ethnographic and participatory action research with women in Myanmar and the Myanmar migrant women in Mahachai, Thailand. The work serves as the foundation for the thesis’ larger argument, in which I seek to illustrate the ways in which disinheritance from the land of their origin now comes with a disinflicted mental noise, altering the psyche and identity construction of migrant women in relationship to the natural world and food. “If we are what we eat,” then food must be considered an active being, an agent of change. The act of producing and consuming food serves as a basis of identity, providing human beings with a sense of self and an intimate connection to the world around them. Thus, when women experience disinheritance from the land, they are forced to dispossess, to cut off, and to distance themselves from central aspects of the self.

An interdisciplinary framework will be utilized to highlight the personal narratives of the female migrants within the larger “master” narrative of the benefits of development and urbanization. Ultimately, the nuances and layers that comprise the personal experiences of Myanmar migrants will be preserved and honored. This bottom-up approach focuses on the individual experience within a cultural context, encouraging a reformulation of binaries and homogenous approaches in migration and identity studies.

Chapter One: Why Does Disinheritance Matter?

Originally, Myanmar women’s distancing from the land and food was not a topic I considered of particular relevance to the women’s modern-day narratives. At the beginning of my research in the Summer of 2018, I set out to explore the various gender norms and cultural ideals which shaped Myanmar women’s sense of self. Under the guidance of Ruth Pongstaphone, a theatremaker (playwright / director / designer), social researcher, and professor of applied theatre for social change, I created a self-designed research project titled “The Ideal Woman”: A Contemporary Ethnography and Empowerment Project for Myanmar Migrant Females, as part of her larger Image of Women (SEA) initiative. Through “The Ideal Woman” project, I worked to explore the feminine identity among Myanmar girls and women living in both Myanmar and Thailand. The goal of this project was to empower marginalized and at-risk

3 The Image of Woman SEA (Southeast Asia) project is an evolution and an extension of the Image of Woman (Myanmar) event, which was curated by Director Ruth Pongstaphone as a celebration of International Women’s Day produced by the Institut Francais de Birmanie (Yangon) in March 2014 and 2015. The Image of Woman Project has expanded to include women in the region of Southeast Asia and to become a continual effort to develop an ongoing dialogue for women, about women. Thus the project is now structured as an ongoing series of events, performances, workshops, and focus groups all of which are designed as participatory social /action research projects that are designed to contribute to a larger process of creating a progressive contemporary arts-based ethnography that focuses on how women are perceived, how they perceive themselves, the various factors that affect these perceptions, how women want to be perceived as individuals in localized and globalized contexts, and the challenges that oppose their ideal visions. Source: http://imageofwoman.weebly.com/
groups of young migrant women to generate and present their own sense of self through embodied research\textsuperscript{4} and participatory action research (PAR)\textsuperscript{5} methods.

My approach and methods were deeply inspired by Ajahn Pongstaphone’s work, in which her use of PAR redefined my notion of “research” and “results.” PAR facilitates a cyclical process of inquiry, reflection, and action between the community and the researcher. A unique feature of this methodology is the recognition of the capacity of the people living and working in a particular area to participate actively in all aspects of the research process. This approach allows participants to be their own source of self-determined and sustainable change. One of the best outcomes of PAR is that it encourages dialogue and communication within the community. The dialogue that resulted among the women and girls I worked with was organic, not controlled or initiated by myself as an outsider. Rather, these powerful females exerted their agency in deciding what to share and what they believed needed to be heard.

This innovative form of research proved challenging at times, for although I engaged in a thorough literature review and interviewed local individuals, the central work needed to happen organically. I could not bring preconceived notions or ideas regarding what I hoped to find. Rather, PAR required me to be constantly open, present, and self-reflective. The research itself required an awareness of one’s positionality and a questioning of one’s own perspective. As an

\textsuperscript{4} Embodiment is the human experience of having and simultaneously being a body. The term conceptualizes the body as a dynamic, organic site of meaningful experience rather than a physical object distinct from the self or mind. In embodied research, qualitative data is collected through a focus on the role of the body in the formation of a sense of self and identity. The method is designed to access how a situation was experienced rather than how it was explained or accounted for by its participants. Source: Vacchelli, Elena. Embodied research in migration studies: Using creative and participatory approaches. Policy Press, 2018.

American student, woman, and *farang* (foreigner), it was essential for me to understand my ideas of feminism, equality and women’s rights, while simultaneously acknowledging that “feminism” within Southeast Asia exists in a unique and complex way. It was not my goal to define or create an idea of feminism for the girls or women that I worked with. Rather, I needed to hear their thoughts, viewpoints, and learn about their struggles and victories during their journey in discovering their own definitions of what it means to be a woman.

Thus, it was through this process that the seeds of this thesis project would be planted and nurtured. Beyond gaining a deeper understanding of the unique gender identities of Myanmar’s women, “The Ideal Women” project would also highlight the centrality of the land and food to women’s sense of identity. I began the project in the city of Yangon, during which time I would interview and befriend women from a variety of Myanmar’s ethnic states. I entered each semi-structured interview prepared with a few questions which I hoped would guide the conversation if necessary. My leading question was “What is the ideal woman?” with a series of sub questions I hoped would encourage women to think critically about their own feminine identity. These included: *Who is a woman you admire, how are women viewed within Burmese society? How are women treated in your village/community? What would you say are the primary issues that women face?*, and *How do you feel about being a female?*. Through these interviews, I came to understand that the experiences of Myanmar’s women are woven within a unique tapestry of cultural values, social norms, and political history. I gathered a deeper perspective of the nuances and layers that comprised Burmese women’s feminine identity construction (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Selected photos from *The Ideal Woman* exhibit featuring Burmese women and girls. Source: Joseph, 2018.

However, an unexpected finding of these interviews would be the women’s intimate relationship to the land, as well as, to the food they both produced and consumed. This topic emerged sporadically throughout many of the interviews, a theme that would later emerge upon analysis of the interviews. Reflecting on this theme now, it is less surprising, as many of the women grew up or lived in rural areas, in which the land was central to their community, families, livelihood and health.

This connection to the land and food would continue to be of importance in my interviews with the Burmese female migrants in Mahachai, Thailand, a fishing community
Joseph

located a few hours outside of Bangkok. Under the guidance of Ruth Pongstaphone and another mentor, Pawaluk Surawswadi, a theater teacher at Mahidol University, we created a two-part participatory action research project that would reflect the voices of Mahachai’s youth and serve as embodied, ethnographic evidence regarding those in their community. Through interviews within the community and the participation of Mahachai’s young girls in the “The Ideal Women” workshops, I would begin to discover the underlying experience of disinheritance and disconnection from the natural world that occurred during the process of rural to urban migration.

In the hope of being fully transparent, this was not something I desired nor was prepared to discover in my research process. I can even recall frustration and confusion, as I worried that the women and girls were misinterpreting or failing to resonate with my questions. However, upon reflection and guidance from Ruth, I came to realize that this narrative of disinheritance was instead central to my exploration of the female identity. After engaging in thematic analysis of the ethnographic interviews I had gathered, it was clear that the process of disinheritance was a significant and connecting experience for the migrant women. Most of the migrant women in Mahachai came from rural areas, assisting in agricultural work, the cultivation of medicinal plants, forest management, water collection and cooking. They shared in their experiences as nurturers, protectors and daughters of the land. They expressed to me a longing to return to a life in which they lived more intimately with the natural world. They shared a desire to once again grow, collect and prepare their own food. They wished to trust and understand the food that they

An estimated 200,000 Burmese migrants fuel Thailand’s billion-dollar fishing industry in Mahachai, also known as “Little Burma.” The majority of workers come to Thailand with the hope of escaping a legacy of political and economic oppression under the Burmese military government. Source: Yuan Fu Yang, B. (2006). Life and death away from the golden land: The plight of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. APLPJ, 8, 485.
were placing into their families’ bodies. Upon completion of “The Ideal Woman” project, I left with a deep curiosity regarding the implications of this disinheritance on the psychological and physical health of the migrants and the youth I had become so closely tied to.

The following thesis contains the personal words and stories of Myanmar rural women and migrants in Mahachai, Thailand. Interviews were conducted with the help of interpreters. The names and other identifying details of some interviewees and villages have been withheld or changed to protect their identity.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and the ways in which the data would be collected and used. All orally consented to be interviewed. Most interviews were conducted in the women’s homes or at a mutually agreed upon location. In addition, I have also included interviews and information from academics, nongovernmental organization workers, and local community leaders. It is my hope that by including such personal narratives and relevant contextualization, the stories of Myanmar’s women will be given the space and acknowledgement they deserve.

Meeting Myanmar

“We have one week before you leave,” declared Ajahn Ruth as she hurriedly searched her computer for information to add to our shared “Ally_Internship” folder. “I cannot stay with you in Myanmar for more than a few days, so we must prepare you the best we can. Now it is time to read. You must read anything and everything regarding Burma, its history and its people.”

7 May Thet Zaw, Pawaluk Suraswadi, Fah Chaitosa, Ruth Pongstaphone
I sat across from Ruth, on a small wooden stool with my knees awkwardly in line with my face. I wondered how embarrassing it might be to ask her where Burma was located. After all, I wanted to impress my new mentor, but within my own Western education, I could not recall learning about the country of Burma.

To be fair, my friends will tell you that I am undeniably terrible at anything related to location or geography. However, in the two years since the beginning of my work, I have found that I am not alone in my overall lack of knowledge regarding Burma.

First and foremost, Burma is now known to the world as Myanmar. I feel it is important to note that many citizens still prefer to call their country Burma, as Myanmar was a name put into place by the military junta in 1989, a year after thousands were killed in the suppression of a popular uprising. Through the Adaptation of Expression Law, the military introduced English language names for other towns, such as changing the name of its previous capital from Yangon to Rangoon. Throughout this paper, I have decided to use the country’s modern name of Myanmar, merely to provide temporal and academic cohesion.

Geographically, Myanmar is a Southeast Asian country, bordered by India and Bangladesh to its west, Thailand and Laos to its east and China to its north and northeast. Myanmar is the largest of the mainland Southeast Asian states (Figure 2). Myanmar is estimated to have a population of 54-60 million people, with the most recent census occurring in 2014.8 87.9% of the population identifies as Buddhists, with Buddhism being the most widespread.9


Myanmar is a country of great ethnic diversity, having more than 135 different ethnic groups, each with its own history, culture and language. The majority Burman (Bamar) ethnic group makes up about two-thirds of the population and controls the military and the government. The minority ethnic nationalities comprise the remaining one-third, traditionally living in the upland and highland areas. However, more recently, ethnic minorities have moved into lowland urban and rural areas to earn a livelihood, attempting to assimilate into Bamar society. The seven largest minority nationalities are the Chin, the Kachin, the Karenni (sometimes called Kayah), the Karen (sometimes called Kayin), the Mon, the Rakhine, and the Shan.10 Thus, to acknowledge and respect the great diversity present in Myanmar, I have chosen to refer to the women in this paper as “Myanmar migrants,” referring to their country of origin rather than ethnic identification.

Figure 2. A map of Myanmar and its main ethnic states. Source: College of Asia and the Pacific Australia National University.

10 Ferguson, 7.
Myanmar is a low-income country with a high poverty rate. Poverty is predominantly rural with more than two-thirds of the country’s population and 70 percent of its poor living in rural areas. The livelihoods of Myanmar’s poor, rural and urban, depend primarily on agriculture, as at least two-thirds of the total labor force is engaged directly or indirectly in agriculture-related enterprises.

Although not a central focus of this thesis, it is important to note that Myanmar has a long and complex history of ethnic conflict, civil war and human rights abuses which have influenced the larger movement and migration patterns of the country. The United Nations and members of the international community have criticized the military junta’s consistent and systematic use of violence and brutality. In spite of the end of the military junta’s oppressive military rule in 2011, there exists continued criticism regarding the government’s treatment of ethnic minorities, its response to ethnic insurgency, and religious clashes. In particular, the Burmese military remains a powerful force in politics, in ethnic cleansing against the Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State.

The country’s history of ethnic conflict, civil war and unrest have contributed to Myanmar's current high levels of poverty and slow economic progress and development. The following chapter will seek to provide a brief overview of the country’s political and economic history, which play an integral role in the larger process of Burmese migrant women’s disinheritance from the land.


Chapter Two: The Origins of Disinheritance

*British Burma*

To fully understand the contemporary narratives of Burmese migrant women’s disinheritance, I believe an examination of the historical origins of this distancing from the land must occur. I argue that the seeds which reaped Burmese migrant women’s shifting relationship to the land and food were first planted during the colonial era. However, unlike its Southeast Asian neighbors who underwent rapid development and industrialization beginning in the 19th century, these seeds would take longer to mature due to Myanmar’s unique economic and political history of isolationism. The country’s large-scale incorporation into the industrialized agricultural system and the trend of rural to urban migration are recent features of contemporary life in 21st century Myanmar. The delay in these processes is largely due to the desire for isolation which grew out of a predisposition towards nationalist, State-led development, a reaction to the *laissez-faire* economics that began during the British Colonial Era (1885-1948).

The Colonial Era formed the foundations of the process of disinheritance, as the new colonialist market economy would alter land and agricultural production infrastructures. The Burmese economy would become one of redistribution, in which the transfer of income and wealth moved from Myanmar’s citizens to those privileged under the British monarchy. The early British economic interests focused on the development of the rice industry, which would result in the rapid industrialization of Myanmar’s agricultural sector.

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Prior to British involvement, rice and other crops were cultivated mainly for home and village consumption, with some small, irregular internal trade occurring mainly from Lower to Upper Burma. Farmers grew food for their families and communities, their land a source of livelihood and subsistence. They engaged in traditional rice cultivation practices and viewed the land as collective property that was to be managed sustainably. In addition, many communities maintained their own unique spiritual relationship with the land they lived on, viewing its resources as sacred.

However, beginning in the 1850s, the British annexation of Lower Burma would result in a shift from traditional cultivation systems, as newly acquired land allowed for the large-scale agricultural production of rice. In particular, the British began to create colonial centers in the Ayeyarwady delta, growing rice as a cash crop for export to Europe and other British colonies. Under British rule, rice came to occupy over 90 percent of the total cultivated acreage of Lower Burma, and approximately 70 percent of Burma as a whole. Between 1855 and 1905, the rice industry in Burma would expand from 162,000 tons of exported rice and padi to nearly 2 million tons by the turn of the century.


17 Yung Hwa, 72.

To the local communities the development of the Irrawaddy Delta was an odd choice. This area was mainly swamps and marshlands. But the British had different tools and a knowledge of industrialized agriculture. - Aye Aye Zin, Yangon, 2018

To protect their new business endeavors, the British implemented infrastructural changes to encourage economic growth. During this time, most communities at the township and village would become governed by appointed British officials, most of whom had little (or no) connection to the communities they ruled. Traditional social life and land cultivation practices would be uprooted, not only with the introduction of new officials but with new rules and procedures. For example, the British Village Act of 1887 effectively broke down traditional township configurations (myo) into individual ‘village’ units that limited the ability of local leaders (myothu-gyi) to govern or develop personal ties with the people under their charge. Such acts not only served as part of the British’s military strategy of severing ties between hereditary leaders and their communities, but were also created to suit the commercial and administrative needs of the new colonial state. The British would also impose a system of irregular and unyielding tax-cycles which for many communities were irreconcilable with traditional agricultural cycles of collection and land management. Rural individual's relationship to the land would be transformed as they became directly exposed to the rhythms and cycles of the global market.

The large-scale agricultural production of rice would require the British to develop infrastructural support, building canals for transport and clearing land for rice cultivation. Under

British control, European merchants, shipping, and banking companies came to dominate Burma's rice trade. The rice millers of Liverpool were the first to send their ships to Burma, obtaining 1,000 tons of cargo rice for their mills and stationing a representative in Rangoon to oversee their interests. Other European firms, as well as, Indian and Chinese merchants, soon followed their lead and established themselves at the four main ports of Rangoon, Akyab, Bassein and Moulmein. By the late 19th century, Myanmar’s rice industry would enter its golden era, becoming the most important source of the country's foreign exchange.

As described in a 1900s English geography textbook, the British viewed their role as a paternalistic caregiver: “Burma has become a member of the great family of Nations, the British Empire. Burma shares in the peace, protection and prosperity the mother country brings her children — natural or adopted. Burma is one of the adopted children. Without protection, there might not be peace; without peace, prosperity suffers. Burma needs these; Britain, the mother country, brings them”.

However, the colonial mother would ultimately fail to provide for her children, as it was during this period that disinheritance from the land began to occur. By the 1880s, small-scale Burmese cultivators found it increasingly difficult to make a profit, as urban creditors, Indian Chettiar (a community of moneylenders and bankers), Indian laborers and large landowners

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21 Cheng Siok-Hwa, 68.


dominated the rice economy. Ultimately, the colonial rice industry resulted in the dispossession of many indigenous farmers, as they became unable to afford the price of cultivation or the mortgages placed on their land.  

> My family’s original land was in Shan state, but I grew up on land in Ayeyarwady [...]

> Our family’s land was taken by Indian migrants. The Indians were poor in their own country and came to work for the Europeans. [...] My family and the village could no longer live like they did before. Now farming was about making money and growing as many crops as possible. ~ Su Ha Nee, January 2019, Mahachai

A class of landless farmers would come to exist, unable to find employment or to compete with the indentured Indian laborers who were brought by the British to work for extremely low wages. The Depression era of the 1920s and early 1930s resulted in further disinheritance, as a crash in global rice resulted in even higher interest rates on farmer’s lands. The dips in the price of rice during the 1920s severely affected cultivators’ ability to pay their mortgages, resulting in the increasing alienation of cultivators from their lands. By the late 1930s most of the lands in the Lower Delta came under the ownership of non-agriculturalists, whose interests were towards renting the paddy fields to cultivators for a profit. Official census figures reveal that in 1921 there were 33,000 landowners who were not directly involved in the cultivation of rice. A decade later, this group had increased to 39,000 while the number of cultivator-owners fell by over 50 percent. These new landlords, consisting of Indian moneylenders and other foreign commercial interests, owned over half of the most important

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24 Nicolas Salem-Gervais, 62.

25 Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 218.
agricultural lands in the Burma Delta.\textsuperscript{26} As a result, most of Burma’s indigenous people lacked a surplus of rice to pay rent or other monthly costs. They began to seek loans exclusively from new sources of credit, whose ties to Indian banks and joint-stock companies connected the rural villager to quick and accessible capital but also to escalating demands that were often beyond the grasp of the ordinary farmer. At best, the Burmese cultivator was now a tenant on ‘his’ own land.

During this time that widespread anti-foreign sentiment, a sense of unity among the nationalist communities, and a call for independence began to develop.\textsuperscript{27} Village reformers, urban nationalists and Buddhist leaders began to engage in acts of resistance and rebellion. In 1930, Saya San, a traveling reformer, led one of the largest peasant insurrections in Burmese history. Deeply affected by the fall of the rice industry, Burmese cultivators began attacking and destroying symbols of the colonial state. They attacked railways, district officers, rural buildings and headmen who were deemed collaborators with the British. Although the uprising was squashed by the British government, peasant rebellions served to confirm the shared perspective among individuals from different classes, experiences and regions. Burmese from rural and urban settings shared a sense of nationalist spirit stitched together by anti-colonialism, anti-foreigner and anti-tax sentiments. The economic hardship of the Depression, though experienced in different ways, was one issue that loosely connected urban and rural constituencies in their criticism of the Government.

Between 1942 and 1945, the Burmese would endure even further disinheritance from their lands, as the competition between imperial powers for supremacy in the Second World War turned the country into a battle-field. As the armed forces of Britain, the United States, and


\textsuperscript{27} Nicolas Salem-Gervais, 62.
China clashed with Japan over control of the country, entire populations were displaced, villages destroyed and families separated and thousands killed. However, it was ultimately through the support of Imperial Japan that Burma achieved its independence from Britain on January 4, 1948. Immediately following, the country erupted into civil war, as various groups with a wide array of interests, loyalties and concerns would seek to take advantage of the sought political vacuum created by the retreating colonial administration.

Rebirth, Restoration and Reconnection: Socialist Agriculture Programs

It was in the Early Independence Period 1948-62 that Myanmar’s farmers would begin to re-connect and re-establish their relationship to the land. Prime Minister U Nu would take over the country, facing the enormous challenge of restoring and managing Myanmar during this time of unrest and uncertainty. However, under U Nu, the government’s economic policies would begin to allow for a redistribution and reclamation of land, encouraging higher indigenous ownership and involvement in agriculture.

In the first decade following our independence, some people returned to their original homeland. Others resettled and formed new rural villages. We say that this period can be characterized by the phrase ‘disorder with meaning.’ It was not an easy time for the people. But it was also a time where the people now had more freedom. [. . .] Even though we were fighting, we were at least fighting from within.—Aye Aye Zin, Yangon, 2018 these are great and pertinent quotes/ well done

In 1962, Myanmar would experience an increasingly critical political shift that would ultimately decelerate the large-scale process of disinheritance for the next 28 years and allow for landowners to reestablish their place in society. U Nu’s Government would be overtaken by
General Ne Win, who staged a coup d’État and arrested the previous government leaders. Under Ne Win’s Revolutionary Council, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was formed, its structure and principles based upon the Eastern European and Chinese models of socialism but with an ideology called the Burmese Way to Socialism. This ideology sought to restore both the material and spiritual landscape of the Burmese people, who had suffered deeply under colonial rule.

According to the new party’s platform: “All material things and souls exist fleetingly and experience changes based on the principles of reincarnation. A human society, too, is subject to perpetual changes; …neither are the ‘eternal’ social system nor the ‘just’ economic system (be they slavery, feudalism, or capitalism) exempt from this absolute law of changes. […] It is necessary instead to stand by, and think first and foremost for, the farmers and the industrial workers who labor for the interest of the society”. 28

Burma’s socialism was in many ways a call for a reformulation of society, a response to the previous economic, social and spiritual destruction brought on by colonial rule. A series of extensive social, cultural, economic and political reforms under Ne Win’s government would call for a rejection of all things Western and a return to the Burmese way of life. Ne Win and his military government would expropriate private businesses and establish an economic policy of autarky, or economic isolation. The military’s socialist and centrally planned economic model cut Myanmar off to the world’s financial markets and main trading routes. Ne Win nationalized all major industries, including import-export trade, rice, banking, mining, teak and rubber, and

prohibited industries from establishing new factories with private capital. A command economy was implemented, whereby the means of production were publicly owned and economic activity was controlled by the government. In many ways this hurt Myanmar’s economic growth and slowed the process of industrialization, as the country would quickly be deemed “least developed” in Southeast Asia. Under the BSPP, economic development and industrialization in Myanmar would be held hostage to the wider desire to be free from foreign Western influence or aid. The post-independence government nationalized the agricultural industry, outlawing foreign ownership of land, and made illegal the use of land as collateral against loans. The new focus of domestic policy was on internal historical forces, rather than external modern agents of development.

Individuals’ relationship to the land under the BSPP was multifaceted and complex, for although many farmers initially reestablished a relationship to the land free from foreign influence, many eventually found themselves struggling to make a livelihood and to meet government-defined crop quotas. The BSPP placed its focus on the peasantry and the rural majority, who were considered the guardians of tradition, and thus, the Government shifted its focus from industry and manufacturing to the peasantry and agriculture. The mid-1970s to early-1980s saw a burst of growth prompted by the investment of capital and the intensification of land use through the use of fertilizer and high-yield seed varieties. A series of initiatives and programs


directed economic investment, resource and infrastructure development towards the agricultural sector.

However, as the BSPP attempted to support the peasantry, the rest of the national economy suffered greatly, as the state had little capacity to generate new sources of income for the maintenance of even basic services. Poor investment and planning left farmers impoverished and unable to meet quotas. By the late 1980s, the government ran out of money to support its agricultural programs, unable to buy fertilizer, which was normally given to peasants and cultivators at hugely discounted rates. By 1987 the price of rice and timber had dropped by 51 percent, deeply affecting the peasantry and others in rural sectors. In addition, the decision to demonetize the currency in 1985 severely hurt many people, as there was inadequate compensation, the government having little credibility in its financial promises.

The government became unable to meet the deadline to pay foreign creditors and in 1987 the United Nations identified Myanmar as a Least Developed Country (LDC). Huge trade deficits caused largely by falling commodity export prices, the increasing costs of imports, and rising external debt payments placed the Burmese socialist government in a difficult position. Despite its strong desire for isolation, the Government would have to compromise, seeking further assistance from the outside world.

A Return to the International Stage: Myanmar Re-Opens

31 Khin Nwe, 255.

The continued economic struggles, internal warfare and political divisions that characterized the country led Ne Win to announce that he and senior members of BSPP would be resigning in 1988. He called on the BSPP Congress to find a way to resolve the domestic situation, asking them to come together to form a plan. However, this quickly opened the government to new opposition and influence, in which competing parties would call for an overall structural change. The situation would quickly become violent and anarchic, as groups who continued to suffer from the diminished economy called for change and rebelled against the government. With the BSPP unable to unite and demonstrate a coherent division, the government dissolved and a new military government, officially named the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), would be established. The new power vacuum was filled by the army, who viewed itself as the only group who could protect the country and restore order.

During this time, many individuals began to voice their resentment over the economy through protests and marches. On August 8th, 1988 an uprising would occur, termed the 8888 Nationwide Popular Pro-Democracy Protests (*hrac le: lum:*), also known as the 8-8-88 Uprisings, or the People Power Uprising, the People's Democracy Movement and the 1988 Uprising (Figure 3). Thousands of people marched on the streets of Rangoon, the capital at the time, and in cities and towns around the country.
Figure 3. Thousands of individuals marched on the streets of Yangon protesting the military dictatorship. Source: National Public Radio (NPR).

*In the summer of 1988, the population finally said, 'Enough is enough.' We all felt lost.
Whether you lived in the rural areas or in the city, we were suffering.* - Josephine, Yangon, 2018

SLORC used extreme violence to quell the uprising, resulting in a harsh military crackdown. Approximately 3,000 people were killed in the uprising, with another 3,000 Burmese being put in prison. Due to the brutal force, disorder and conflict of this time period, outside powers, Western media and anti-government groups began to formulate a movement for democracy and a desire for freedom. English-language media reports characterized the 1988 riots as “pro-democracy” developments. The events in Myanmar were increasingly shaped by the international context of the 1980s, placed into the perspective of post-Cold War politics, in which the United States’ priority for remaining a superpower had shifted from security and anti-Communism to human rights and democracy. Unlike the insurgencies of the 1940s, those of 1988 became observed by an international audience, who framed the Burmese people as “freedom fighters,” rebelling against an authoritarian government for democracy and autonomy.


Burmese Government officials, politicians, soldiers and activists began to see their struggle to shape their community, a process that had previously been a domestic conversation, to be at the center of international concern, judgement and interpretation.

*It was difficult in many ways to see the external picture painted by other countries regarding our political situation. They painted a picture of our country in ways that many people would not agree with it. We had been struggling to re-define our country for decades, and now, these outside sources wanted to place their own Western ideas and principles on us. [ .. ] Their aid was not wanted or desired by many of us. It overshadowed our voices and vision for our country. Josephine, Yangon, 2018*

Following the end of the protests, SLORC rapidly introduced a series of economic reforms in 1988 and 1989 to stave off total economic collapse. This reverse in the socialist policies enacted in the early 1960s would become a critical turning point for Myanmar. After years of isolation the country re-opened itself to the global market economy and the international arena. In November 1988, the Foreign Investment Law was introduced, to coincide with the removal of restrictions on private sector participation in domestic and foreign trade. Various reforms resulted in the active encouragement of foreign investment, considerable liberalization of foreign trade and the renaming of the country to Myanmar.

In terms of Myanmar's farmers, the privatization in 1988 and subsequent land policies by SLORC would have devastating impacts on their relationship to the land. As Myanmar once again began to open to the outside world, arbitrary land seizures and forced evictions by the government, military, and private companies occurred. To overcome the food crisis and social

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instability, in late 1988, the government issued an order on farm production to boost production in paddy and cash crops. Produce was to be sold first to the government and only the surplus could be retained by cultivators. Farmers found it extremely difficult to meet these demands, many unable to meet such quotas.

In 1991, the military government introduced a major land administration measure that would re-ignite the large-scale process of disinheriance. The government expanded the duties and rights of the Central Committee for the Management of Cultural Land, Fallow Land, and Waste Land (Wasteland Instructions) to allow expropriation and reallocation of land categorized as ‘wasteland’, a category covering land without a title. The implementation of the Wasteland Instructions of 1991 marked a policy change favoring large-scale agricultural investments. This led to a surge in large scale plantations and foreign investors, in particular agribusinesses.

*Our land now belongs to the big Chinese companies. They do not know us. They do not know the land. Since 20 years ago, we worked on our land and also planted long-term types of plants. But our land is confiscated now.* — A farmer, from Myikyinar Township, 2018

In theory, smallholders could apply for access to what the government determined to be “wastelands.” However, the government did not allocate any land to small-scale farmers on the grounds that they lacked the capital to develop such land effectively. The government granted land leases to private and public companies, chiefly those closely affiliated with the military, including state-owned enterprises, joint ventures and private corporations. In numerous instances, land was forcibly confiscated and acquired to make it available to investors as part of the Wasteland development policy. Most of the beneficiaries of land redistribution under the Wasteland Instructions were a few large landholders (holding more than 50 acres).
process, they accumulated a large share of resources in the area. It also encouraged absentee
landholders, who rented out part of the land just to prevent it being labeled ‘fallow.’ This
allowed a well-entrenched client patronage system to develop in the land sector, with local
individuals becoming increasingly disinherit.

*I am not an educated person, I am just a farmer. But we farmers know professionally how
to grow and work on the land. Our lives depend on the land. People (authorities)
confiscated our land and built buildings on it without discussing and negotiating with us.
Now we don’t have land to work. Or we work on land that was once our own. We find it
very difficult to survive without having land to work. — A male farmer, from Dawei
Township, 2018*

As SLORC continued to make agriculture changes a high priority, the number of farm-
dependent households increased steadily between 1993 and 2003, from 2.7 million to 5.4
million. However, average farm size decreased from 6.23 acres in 1993 to 4.5 acres per
household in 2003. Landlessness or near-landlessness was on the rise, especially in the
Ayeyarwady Delta, where one fifth of the households in some villages visited was landless and
engaged in wage labor; an equal number had marginal landholdings of less than 1 acre. Village
tract leaders and residents reported that landlessness had been increasing during this time, with
forced sales due to indebtedness being the leading cause of land alienation. Rates of landlessness
in Upper Myanmar were generally lower but still ranged from 25 to 40 percent in every village.

*Land is like our vein; it is vital for our living. After our land was confiscated, we don’t
know what to do for our livelihood. -A farmer, from Dawei Township, 2018.*

When comparing their current conditions (e.g. depressed prices, lack of credit, few off-
farm employment opportunities, etc.) with earlier periods in their lives, individual reported that
the situation of landlessness beginning in the mid-1990s was the worst they could recall. Many households claimed that their landholding had dwindled drastically from their parents’ time, indicating fragmentation or loss of land. Most households asserted that it was not just the poorest who were suffering but that everyone was affected by SLORC’s policies.

In 1997, SLORC was abolished and reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). SPDC added to the policies of its predecessors by creating a Roadmap to Democracy. Yet, under the SPDC, farmers’ conditions only worsened, as the SPDC would further deny citizens’ rights of ownership and cultivation. The SPDC would be the first to change land laws since its predecessors in the socialist and military regimes, announcing large land grants for over 5,000 acres for thirty-year leases to organizations and entrepreneurs. Under the management of the Central Committee for Cultivable Land, Fallow Land, and Waste Land, over one million acres were distributed among 100 enterprises by 2001. As these large land grants benefited big businesses, more than 30% of rural households would be landless and another 37 percent would live off five acres or less of land. Farmers only maintained cultivation rights to the land they tended, lacking any legal ability to sell, lease or dispose of their land rights to others or consolidate holdings. Thus, although farmers worked hard to comply with government regulations, registering their land and paying taxes, the SPDC would implement large-arbitrary land confiscations. The Government's priorities paid no attention to the rights of farmers, but rather focused on the establishment of military control in disputed areas, the creation of infrastructure development projects (i.e. the Salween River Sams), the facilitation of natural

resource extraction, and the provision of foreign investors with continued agricultural and commercial opportunities. At the beginning of the 21st century, the disinherit ed farmer would be transforming into a social and cultural norm, as the majority of the population found itself unjustly cut off from its source of livelihood.

Myanmar in the 21st Century

The process of land seizure and inadequate government support has had profoundly debilitating effect on rural communities. We must find work elsewhere. But do you realize that it is already difficult to find any type of job in Myanmar. Many are now leaving to our neighbors. We hear tales of better pay and life there ~ May Thet Zaw, Yangon, 2018

In the 21st century, the SPDC would continue to re-route economic flows from local farmers to corporations and foreign investors. A re-assertion of the state’s control of land would occur from 2004 to 2008, as the SPDC re-convened the National Convention (NC), suspended since 1996, to draft a new constitution as part of the SPDC’s “roadmap to democracy.” In the 1990s, the NC was abandoned because an opposing political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and minority representatives resisted the regime’s plans. The Constitution of 2008 would be created, in which the promise for the sharing of power between the army and civilian political parties occurred. Yet, the ownership of rural land remained vested in the state:

The Union is the ultimate owner of all lands and all-natural resources above and below the ground, above and beneath the water and in the atmosphere in the Union” (Section 37a, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

The National League for Democracy (NLD), which was led by former General Aung Gyi, former General Tin U, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, rose to become the favored opposing party beginning in the 1990s. In particular, the party and its Western supporters, argued that they represented the “Burmese people” and their democratic aspirations.
State control of land continued even following the national elections of November 7th, 2010, which transformed the government from a military junta to a multi-party representative system. In early 2011, the new parliament would be seated as the legal Government of the country, followed by the dissolution of the SPDC officially ending military rule. The reformist candidate Thein Sein became president. The new government faced formidable challenges in rebuilding the economy and addressing growing calls for restitution of land confiscated during earlier regimes. The increasingly growing class of disinherited and landless farmers engaged in widespread protests. Violent conflicts arose in some areas against monetary incentives and land access to favored business groups. In addition, farmers lacked functioning courts free from corruption, as well as, public spaces to advocate for their rights.

Even after our transition, things were the same. I do not see any changes. We do not have a space to share our concerns. The military continues to be dangerous. If we speak out, we may still be punished. Many farmers feel it is not worth the risk. – a farmer from Shan state, 2018

Farmer uprisings forced President Sein to acknowledge public anger and dissatisfaction with past efforts to resolve forcible land takeovers and lack of compensation for such acquisitions. To assuage this growing social anger, the government initiated a set of measures. The establishment of the Land Allocation Utilization Scrutiny Committee (formed in July 2012), an inter-ministerial cabinet level committee was created. The committee was to focus on preparing a national land-use policy, land use planning and allocating land for investment, including agricultural projects. By October, this body was converted into the intermenstrual Central Committee for National Land Resources Management (CCNLRM) to implement the land-use policy upon adoption and draft an umbrella national land law. In 2012, the Farmland
Law was passed, resulting in significant environmental and socio-economic impacts. This law states that land can be legally bought, sold and transferred on a land market with land use titles. This is a significant law for Myanmar’s people, as it made land a commodity to be sold on a land market. While farmers have been doing this informally for a long time, the legalization of a land market makes local farmers vulnerable to becoming landless. The government also established the Parliamentary Land Confiscation Commission in August 2012, which was mandated to address allocation abuse and recover land from unauthorized holders. However, the commission could only investigate and had no authority to resolve land disputes. It developed numerous reports on historical land acquisition disputes that needed to be addressed through payment of appropriate compensation and prepared reports for follow up actions. Due to poor historical records and the complexity of the various ethnic states, the commission struggled to sort out what happened when, who had what rights, and how compensation should be calculated. During its roughly four years of operation, the commission claims to have received some 20,000 complaints, though estimates of the number of complaints received, reviewed, and left unresolved by the commission vary widely. According to the commission’s secretary-general, as of June 2015, the commission had heard thousands of cases and returned over 335,000 acres of land, benefitting more than 30,000 families. But according to Namati, a local charity that works on land issues in Myanmar, of the cases the commission reviewed, many were reportedly “collective cases”—those in which claims were made on behalf of a group of people or a community—and just 4 percent of complainants were deemed entitled to compensation. In

addition, the power to act was assigned to a separate agency, the Ministry of Home Affairs (through the General Administration Department [GAD]), who were not required to follow through on any of the commission’s recommendations. Government officials frequently continued to confiscate land without providing notice or compensation, often instantly depriving farmers of their only source of income and regular source of food. Thus, although disinheritance from the land would be acknowledged, seen and discussed by the government, it remains a reality as Myanmar’s people find themselves unable to re-establish a connection to the land.

When the National League for Democracy (NLD) took power in March 2016, it dissolved the commission attempting to undertake several new initiatives to address land confiscation. In 2016, a government official, citing the findings of the Farmers Affairs Committee in the Upper House of Parliament, said “as many as 2 million acres of land across Burma could be considered ‘confiscated.’” However, landlessness remains a serious and growing problem throughout Myanmar, as the government proposes contradictory policies which further privilege economic development and growth. Landlessness or near-landlessness seem to be on the rise, especially in the Ayeyarwady delta and dry zone (Bago-Bagan-Mandalay region), where more than 20 percent of the households in several villages are landless and engaged in wage-labor. An equal number (20 percent) of households had landholdings of less than an acre. Village Tract Leaders and residents reported that landlessness had been increasing over the past 4-5 years, partly due to frequent crop failures. In addition, rates of landlessness in Upper Myanmar were generally ranged from 25 to 40 percent in every village.\footnote{Shivakumar Srinivas and U Saw Hlaing. "Myanmar: Land tenure issues and the impact on rural development." \textit{Food and Agricultural Organisation} (2015).} As the country continues to open up more to
global markets with reform measures, new forms of land grabs have continued to emerge displacing local farmers.

In addition, the current land administration is characterized by overlapping laws and weak land classification. For example, many areas classified as ‘fallow’ are actually farmed or may include roads and human settlements. Such arbitrary classification results in a mismatch between the law and the reality on the ground. In addition, the division of land administration responsibilities across various agencies, again with overlapping authority, further encourage disinheritance and prevents farmers from knowing their rights. This is further complicated by indeterminate entitlements to land; a lack of comprehensive land registry and related geospatial information; lack of formal ways and means to protect and recognize customary rights to land; excessive application of the state’s power of eminent domain; and a policy for the allocation of land concessions that ignores or overrides the customary rights and interests of other rights holders.

*During this time nothing is certain. We had to move to the city. We found work in the factories, but our income is even lower. - Myint Khin, Yangon, 2018*

With the majority of people in Myanmar, nearly three-fourths of the population or about 40 million people, living in rural areas and relying on farmland for their daily needs and livelihoods, serious and wide-ranging consequences exist. As disinheritance from the land becomes an increasingly present feature of Myanmar’s society, one must begin to wonder what changes are occurring and what impact this will have for generations to come.

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Chapter Three: Female Nature

Burmese women’s sense of individual identity is deeply connected to the land and food. The land is used interchangeably to refer to the natural world, which I define in this paper as the physical environment, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations. I chose to use the term land, because it was the term used most often by Burmese women. For Burmese women, nature was a category that existed outside of human and other political, economic and cultural processes. I will highlight the ways in which this understanding reinforces a dualistic understanding of nature and culture, ultimately allowing for the exploitation of Myanmar’s women and the land they depend upon. In addition, food will be defined as any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink in order to maintain life and growth. This definition highlights food’s role in sustaining and augmenting human life. My goal is to interweave concepts and frameworks from feminist literature, ecological theoretical perspectives and food studies scholarship in order to explore the intersections between gender, the environment and identity.

I begin this exploration by situating the experience of Myanmar’s women in relation to previous literature regarding rural women’s connection to the land and food. Although there is no one-size-fits-all narrative of women and the natural world, I feel that previous linkages between women and the natural world can provide a critical lens through which to view the experiences of Myanmar’s women. An ecofeminist perspective rooted in third wave feminism will be introduced, in which the interdependence of humans, nature and nonhuman processes is highlighted. I then share and examine the primary data obtained from my ethnographic interviews and field observations of women in Myanmar. My hope is that this section will provide an intimate glimpse into the way in which Myanmar’s women conceptualize their
relationship to the land. I invite the reader to reflect on the ways in which the experience of Myanmar’s women may feel both familiar and distinct from their previous understandings of women and the environment.

**Literature Review on Women and the Land**

This section will provide a brief overview of the link between rural women and the natural world. The perspective of feminist scholars will be highlighted, as they have worked to situate rural women’s connection to the land and importance in agricultural work within feminine identity, construction, and gender roles.

It is here that I must offer a caveat; it is important to note that literature and scholarly work regarding Burmese females and the land is relatively scarce. For the literature that does exist, Burmese women are primarily discussed in terms of their economic role in agricultural production. This section seeks to go beyond a purely economic formulations of Myanmar’s women’s relationship to the land, theorizing that connection to the land serves as an essential aspect of women’s identity.

Although this thesis highlights the experiences of Burmese migrant women’s unique lived experiences, an understanding of the origins of ecofeminism and its development are valuable to conceptualizing the relationship between women, the land and larger global processes. The term ecofeminism refers to a variety of different feminist perspectives on the nature of the connections between the domination of women and the domination of others.42 Ecofeminism utilizes the basic feminist tenets of gender equality, a revaluing of non-patriarchal

or nonlinear structures, and a view of the world that respects organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration. The ecofeminist framework utilized in this paper views the nature/culture dualism, the dominant male model of humanity, as leading not only to oppression of women, but also to the destruction of nature and to racism and social inequality. This theorization of how environmental damage is related to women's oppression and the oppression of other people, together with theorizing from the perspectives of the women involved, including women in the so-called developing world (e.g., Diamond and Orenstein 1990 and Shiva 1989), became evident during the emergence of third wave feminism in the late 1980s and 1990s. Third-wave feminism refutes dualistic thinking that divides the world into hierarchical dichotomies with one aspect regarded as superior and the "other" regarded as inferior, recognizing instead the existence of multiplicities. Today’s feminists recognize the social constructedness of categories, question the related notions of dualism and hierarchy, and work to further develop theories from women's situated and embodied perspectives.

The benefits of ecofeminist theory rest in these feminist developments, however it is distinct in its insistence that nonhuman nature is a feminist concern. Ecofeminism has developed, and continues to focus on developing, a body of complex theory in its attempts to explain and act upon the interconnected subjugations of women, other humans, and nonhuman


nature. It is this inclusion of nonhuman nature, that ecofeminism contributes to a more thorough analysis or "reweaving" of the nature/culture dualism. In the nature/culture dualism, man was seen as representing culture, and needing to be unconstrained by and to have domination over natural processes, both of a nonhuman nature and of human embodiment. Men were identified with disembodied characteristics such as order, freedom, and reason, existing in opposition to women’s alleged more natural or embodied characteristics, such as disorder, physical need, darkness and passion. This continued to take root, particularly in Western thought, as early modern philosophers developing classical liberalism (e.g., Hobbes and Locke) continued the association of men with culture and women with nature. Further, in concurrence with the then new and highly proclaimed scientific method, early modern philosophers broadened the concept of culture to include an even more enlarged notion of the human capacity to dominate nature. This period was also marked by the rise of capitalism and rapidly increasing colonization in which the view of the colonized and/or enslaved people as "other" begins to intersect more thoroughly with the perceived "otherness" of women and nature. Man's (i.e., white, West- ern, and middle- or upper-class man's) freedom and happiness, in both these ancient and modern Western viewpoints, depended on an ongoing process of emancipation from nature, both human embodiment and the natural environment.

Taking significant issue with this dualism, third wave feminists believed that women situated and embodied points of views needed to be transformed. Sherry Ortner’s classic essay,


48 Brown, 108.

49 ArNELi, 32.

50 Mack-Canty, 158.
“Is female to male as nature is to culture?” challenged biological determinism and rejected essentialist associations between women and nature. Ortner, argued that "woman is being identified with or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of something that every culture devalues, defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself.... [That something] is 'nature' in the most generalized sense.... [Women are everywhere] being symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture".\(^{51}\) Ortner called for the reweaving of this dualism, which can keep ecofeminist issues removed from larger globalized processes and political/economic issues. Val Plumwood (1996) also acknowledges the way in which these conceptual frameworks can be oppressive, deconstructing the notion of rationalism to explain how structures of domination are based in hierarchically organized value dualism (such as man/woman, nature/culture, mind/body). Their focus on reason and rationality is ultimately divorced from the realm of the body, nature and the physical. The understanding of women and nature as existing outside of this dualism is essential when understanding the experiences of Myanmar’s rural women. Women’s relationship to the natural world does not exist outside of the sphere of “culture,” but rather, is directly implicated by changes in the political, economic, and social factors within their local and global environment. These forces create, shape and alter Myanmar’s women’s connection to the natural world.

Ecofeminist thought has also challenged the positing of “woman” as a unitary category and the failure of previous feminist thought to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on. The work of those such as Vandana Shiva demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the lived and embodied perspectives of Myanmar’s women. An environmental activist and Indian scholar, Shiva would take ecofeminist discourse into the realm of the

\(^{51}\) Sherry B. Ortner "Is female to male as nature is to culture?." Feminist studies 1, no. 2 (1972): 29.
economic, acknowledging the lived experiences of women’s material relationship with nature. Shiva discussed the traditional Indian cosmological view of nature as Prakriti, “as an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos.” This unique religious viewpoint had significant material implications on Indian women’s association with nature and connection to the land. Drawing upon the lived experiences of women activists in the Chipko movement, the environmental movement for forest protection and regeneration in the Garhwal hills of northwest India, she brought the connection between women and nature into the material realm. In her writing, Shiva demonstrated the Chipko women’s physical dependence on nature "for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families, their societies.” In the material realm, the land was the source which kept Chipko women alive. Additionally, she argued that "Third World women" have a unique knowledge of nature. As women were often the people who were most directly involved with subsistence work, Shiva viewed women as the safeguards of the land’s natural resources and cycles, arguing that women’s material relationship with land provided them with a special knowledge of biodiversity and cultivation. Thus, women were the best custodians of the Earth’s health through their knowledge of heterogeneity of life. “Women's work and knowledge is central to biodiversity conservation and utilization both because they work between 'sectors' and because they perform multiple tasks.” This work "found in spaces 'in between' the interstices of 'sectors'" is what allowed the reproductive cycles of the earth to sustain life.

53 Shiva, 31-33.
54 Shiva, 166.
55 Shiva, 167.
Shiva furthered dismantled the nature/culture dichotomy in her discussion of the links between the processes of developmental change and the impact of these processes on the environment and women. She highlighted the systematic marginalization of women under the impact of modern science: "Modern reductionist science, like development, turns out to be a patriarchal project, which has excluded women as experts, and has simultaneously excluded ecology and holistic ways of knowing which understand and respect nature's processes and interconnectedness as science." When the environment, specifically farming, is fragmented by the productive desires of scientific progress, capitalism and colonialism, Shiva argued that it is women who move between the interdependent systems that have been falsely and dangerously isolated from each other. As Shiva illustrated, “although they (women) appropriate nature, their appropriation does not constitute a relationship of dominance or a property relationship. Women are not owners of their own bodies or of the earth [. . .] Their interaction with nature, with their own nature as well as the external environment, was a reciprocal process.” Shiva’s work ultimately situates the lived experiences of the Chipko women within the unique cultural, economic and political environments they occur. Such a formulation is necessary when examining the distinct experiences of Myanmar’s rural women, which are interwoven within a unique cultural, social, economic and political fabric.

In the same manner, Bina Agarwal’s work argued that women's relationship with nature needed to be understood as rooted in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment and larger economic mechanisms. Argarwal considered the ways in

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56 Shiva, 39.

57 Shiva, 42-43.

which gender and class-based division of labor, as well as the distribution of property and power, influenced the land and women. “For instance, poor peasant and tribal women have typically been responsible for fetching fuel and fodder and in hill and tribal communities have also often been the main cultivators. They are thus likely to be affected adversely in quite specific ways by environmental degradation.”

Argarwal acknowledged that in the course of their everyday interactions with nature, women become more intimately linked with the environment and certain economic structures. Rodda (1991) also demonstrated the way in which Asian women and girls were more closely linked to the land due to the social role of supplying their families with water. These roles facilitated a dependence on the environment’s resources, as they must know how to locate water sources, assess water quality and adjust for seasonal fluctuations in water availability. Similarly, Etta (1999) observed that women, being primarily responsible for domestic and household management, interacted more intensively with both natural and built environments when compared to men. As a result, Argarwal, Rodda and Etta assert that women were the primary victims of the destruction of the land and its resources, more likely to suffer from a degraded or changing environment as a result of increasing development or new economic infrastructures. On the other hand, this close connection to the natural world also allowed women to serve as active agents of environmental protection, regeneration and knowledge. Similarly, Ester Boserup noted how rural women’s social and cultural roles resulted in a unique scientific knowledge of plant and animal growth. Boserup argues that women also generate a scientific understanding, which is largely overlooked and ignored due to the

59 Argarwal, 126.


nature/culture dualism that dominates discourse regarding progress and development. From gathering seeds to the production of food to slash and burn agriculture, rural women have not simply been linked to nature, but rather, developed a knowledge of plant maturation and fruition. In addition, Boserup credited women with the discovery of domestication and cultivation of plants and animals, as well as for inventing selective breeding.

In the 21st century, other scholars writing from culturally centered perspectives have continued to unravel and reweave the nature/culture differentiation. For example, Bruun and Kalland have focused on both locating and disentangling this thread. The authors assert that a “common theme is nature-culture symbolism being applied to gender relations. Women are extensively associated with life-giving nature as opposed to the cultured, but more aggressive male-universe, on which a foundation of rich symbolism is constructed.” Examples provided by the authors include the Chinese yin-yang pair, the natural beauty and capacity attached to Japanese women, the Kalasha analogy between female, impurity and wilderness, and the Isan fertility rites linking women to Mother Earth. The authors acknowledge the way in which such a symbolism has functioned to constrain and limit the influence and agency of women within larger society. A particularly relevant example of the existence of this nature/culture dualism within Asian society can be found in the anthology entitled Taming Nature, Controlling Fertility: Concepts of Nature and Gender among the Isan of Northeast Thailand. In this work, author Stephen Sparkes discusses the deep connection of women with the environment, which he suggests comes from the villagers’ anthropomorphizing of nature by giving it the characteristic


of gender. All-important nature spirits are female: Mother Earth, Mother Rice, Mother Water and Lady of the Wood. In addition, Isan rites and ceremonies frequently highlight feminine principles, establishing women’s association with the natural world. Throughout the anthology, the authors discuss the way in which this association has constructed women’s roles throughout history and into the present.

Modern scholars have further worked to situate women outside of this dualism by through case studies which highlight the unique material experiences of women. Contributing to South Asian literature, Farid, Mozumdar, Kabir and Goswami provide a case study rural women’s involvement in agricultural production in Bangladesh.64 The authors assert that women play a vital role in farm production, in general being responsible for most of the agricultural work in the homestead.65 In the areas analyzed largely took part in homestead gardening, harvesting crops, post-harvest operation, selling labor, sewing katha, ‘buying daily necessities’ and rice husking by dheki (an agricultural tool). For example, the authors found that “In the areas in North West Bangladesh, women equally share all tasks in rice production, even the presumably male task of irrigation.”66 Thus, in Bangladesh women were closely linked to the natural world in order to meet basic family needs, increase family income and meet additional family requirements.67 Similarly, Ireson analyzes the relationship of women’s work and power in

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65 Farid, 256.


67 Meinzen-Dick and Zarteveen, 342.
rural Laos, focusing on the way in which the socialist reorganization and economic liberalization of the country have altered and expanded Laotians women’s relationship to the land. In this way, Loatian women exist outside the nature/culture dualism, playing central roles in resource access and control, as well as in their familial and local economies. In addition, through the personal stories and ethnographic interviews of Laotian women, Ireson illustrates the essential role of the natural world in Lao women’s daily lives and the sense of personal power and status that can result.

Finally in the current age of technology and development, the writings of work of Carolyn Sachs also works to situate women outside of the nature/culture dualism, in which she demonstrates the way in which women’s connection with the land provide them with a scientific knowledge that is often devalued and overlooked by scientists, agricultural policymakers and patriarchal structures. "Feminist critics of science point to women's knowledge as providing alternative angles of vision, and they question the legitimacy of Western science as the sole source of authority. Scientists breed hybrid seeds with little recognition that rural women farmers not only know about a diverse array of seeds but understand how to adapt them to particular ecological conditions.” Sachs declares that rural women's connections to the natural world can work to inform scientific theory, as their knowledge and experiences offer “a materialist base for ecofeminism and suggest practical strategies for solving ecological crises.” This perspective


70 Sachs, 20.

71 Sachs, 8.
goes beyond the nature/culture dualism which continues to inform even discourse today, demonstrating the way in which women can provide useful and invaluable insights into current environmental issues.

Ultimately, through an understanding of ecofeminism and its inclusion of the nonhuman in its theorizing, the experiences of Myanmar’s rural women can be situated within cultural, social, economic and political frameworks. The work of ecofeminists, along with other third wave feminist movements, continues to deconstruct the oversimplified association of women with nature and men with culture. It works to situate the women’s point of view, acknowledging the diversity and difference in perspective among women. Ultimately, ecofeminists call for a discourse and understanding in which the concepts of nature, human and the nonhuman are all in continual dialogue.

*Literature Review on Women and Food*

In many ways the ecofeminist framework described above which highlights the interdependence of nature, human and nonhuman processes can be used to conceptualize women’s relationship with food consumption and production. Women are occupied in and preoccupied with food on a daily basis, irrespective of class, culture, or ethnicity. Myanmar’s women are no exception, as food plays an essential role in both the rural and urban environment. Food and its significance in women’s lives, status and identity has become a great focus of food studies scholars. Food studies is an interdisciplinary field which relates food to a vast number of


academic disciplines. Philosophers, historians, scientists, literary scholars, sociologists, art historians and psychologists have been attracted to this growing field.

Food scholarship acknowledges that food is necessary for individuals’ physical survival. Therefore, food is not simply crucial to the construction of cultures, but to the people within them. Cultural studies scholar, Deborah Lupton, takes a post structural approach to food and the construction of identity. She argues that food is centrally implicated in who individuals are and who they become. Providing a sophisticated and complex version of the idea that humans are what they eat, Lupton identifies “food and eating... [as] intensely emotional experiences that are intertwined with embodied sensations and strong feelings... central to individuals’ subjectivity and their sense of distinction from others.” Food discourse and the power relations embedded within it and which it produces, along with early bodily experiences of eating, she theorizes, construct who individuals are.

Many food studies scholars have taken a feminist lens, studying the relationship between women and food. In Food and Gender: Identity and Power, the significance of food-centered activities and meanings to the constitution of gender relations and identities across cultures is explored. The authors assert that gender matters in food centered activities as it does in “structuring human societies, their histories, ideologies, economic systems and political structures.” However, throughout the chapters the authors hold contrasting views on whether women’s food work gives them power in the family or society, or rather, reinscribes their subordinate gender roles. The difficulties in associating women and food echoes the troubles that exist in the nature/culture duality mentioned above. Some theorists argue that women’s ability to


produce, provide, distribute and consume food is a key measure of their power. This ability varies according to their culture, their class, and their family organization, and the overall economic structure of their society. Thus, like their relationship to the land, women’s connection to food exists within cultural, social and economic infrastructures. Food is seen as related to both societal and personal power, in which women’s relationship to food and its meanings contributes to a valued sense of self.76 Women’s attitudes about the food they eat, the legitimacy of their appetites, and the importance of their food to work can reveal whether their self-concept is validating or denigrating.

Food can also serve as a means of differentiation for women from men in their personal identity. Although this theorization of food can continue to reinforce gender norms and hierarchical social roles, it can also highlight the way in which food serves as a vehicle through which women can create an individual and personal identity. Through their distinct roles regarding food and distinct attributes through identification with specific foods, women define their femininity and men their masculinity. Pollock shows that among the Culina of the western Amazon, men and women similarly establish their distinctive identities as well as their social and economic interdependence through the production and distribution of food.77 A clear sexual division of labor allocates most of the gardening and cultivation to women and the hunting to men. The sexes are identified with the different products of their labor: women with vegetables and men with meat. Similarly, Counihan looks at how women and men in Florence construct their identities around giving, receiving, and making food. Through the documentation of food-


centered life histories, the author demonstrates how Florentine women’s identity and power is attained and wielded through control of food provisioning. In addition, the author analyzes the impacts that occur on women’s lives and personal well-being, as they increasingly take on wage labor jobs and can no longer cook and feed in the way they used to. Before 1950, women in Florence were totally identified with their domestic role, providing nurturance for the families primarily by feeding them. However, Counihan argues that “While women may now have more economic power than their mothers did, they have less security in their new identities as women, given the persistence of the demands of their former roles and their inability to satisfy these demands because of time constraints. They are also unhappy with their diminished ability to control what their children eat and the attendant feeling that they are not adequately passing on their cultural legacy.” Counihan’s analysis of these women’s personal histories and the struggles they experience in distancing themselves from food are echoed later in this paper by the narratives of Myanmar women, demonstrating the way in which food is a central and grounding aspect of women’s well-being and sense of self.

March and Van Esterik further work to deconstruct the relationship between women and food by situating this connection within their spiritual and religious environments. The authors assert that in women’s religious practices, food is used to honor the power of supernatural beings and to “coerce” spirits to act favorably towards humans. March discusses Sherpa and Tamang Buddhists who live in the highlands of Nepal. Although distinctive peoples, they share many


79 Counihan, 56.

religious beliefs and rituals. Among both populations, hospitality, especially in the form of commensality, is central to maintaining relations between humans and gods. The importance of food in maintaining a strong spiritual life will also be reflected in the experiences of Myanmar’s women, the majority of which also identity as Buddhist, albeit a different strand. March points out that “women and symbols of femaleness are crucial at all levels of exchange.” Women play a central role in food production, while also serving as symbolic representations of strength, health and fertility, through which the offerings are secured. Van Esterik also underlines the significance of women’s role in feeding and food gifts. Because women prepare and control food, they are agents for ritual and religious knowledge and food offerings. The preparation of food for their ancestors and the giving of food to the Buddhist monks and deities are central to women’s religious expression and spiritual practices.

When looking at the current world, authors Forson and Counihan assert, “Nearly all women spend a significant portion of their day occupied and preoccupied with food. This responsibility, a key component of women’s identity, also serves as a key component of their exploitation, oppression, and accordingly their resistance.” Similarly, Allen and Sachs assert that “today, in most societies women continue to carry the responsibility for the mental and manual labor of food provision- the most basic labor of care. Women’s involvement with food constructs who they are in this world as individuals, family members and workers.”

and Haber have called for a new field of feminist food studies, in which “the connections
between women’s food work in the labor market (material), their responsibility for food-related
work in the home (socio-cultural), and their relationship with eating (corporeal) must be studied
and adequately theorized.” 85 In many ways this echoes the goal of third wave feminists, in which
women’s lived experiences and embodied perspectives are honored. An example of such a
conceptualization can be seen in the study of gender identity throughout the food system,
particularly in relation to the global commodity chain. 86 This form of feminist scholarship
provides an examination of women’s attempts to redefine their place within the food system, in
which they play essential roles in both production and consumption. By doing so, it is argued
that women simultaneously work to redefine their sense of self and place in the world. “As
women work to reshape the food system in the interest of better health, social justice, and
environmental soundness, they are also creating possibilities for women to gain control of their
bodies and their lives.” 87 By discussing women’s relationship to food through this interdependent
understanding, one can more deeply understand how women form their personal identities and
define their sense of self through food. 88

Based on these various and diverse constructions of women in relation to the land and
food, the next section will seek to build upon this scholarship through an analysis of Myanmar’s

85 Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber. *From Betty Crocker to feminist food studies: Critical perspectives on women and food.* Liverpool University Press, 2005.


rural women. Ethnographic interviews will highlight the unique nature of Myanmar women’s environmental interactions and perspectives, situating them within larger religious, social, cultural and economic structures. Myanmar women’s relationship to the land and food is at the heart of the identity, intimately connected to larger cultural and globalized processes.

*Stories of the Land*

*“Women in the villages are very close to the spirits. You may not see, because you are not from here. But we have the red-turbaned coconuts . . . or the small shrine under the tree. Those are for the nats.” Aye Aye, Yangon, 2018*

*Religious Beliefs*

As briefly mentioned above, Burmese women’s identification with the land and food is rooted in the country’s tradition of Buddhism. The religious tradition, which continues to the present day, is a mix of what might be termed ‘pure’ Buddhism (of the Theravada school) with deep-rooted elements of indigenous animism or nat worship, as well as strands of Hinduism and the Mahayana tradition of northern India. A sense of environmental consciousness and spiritual perception of the natural world are instilled in women through Buddhist teachings. The Buddha believed that plants, animals, and humans all had a place in the world and should be treated with a respect that acknowledged the interdependence of all things. In Buddha’s teaching, the planting of trees, creation of gardens and parks, construction of bridges, digging of wells, and building of monasteries are described as acts of merit. The tradition of earning positive merit for environmental protection has a long history in Myanmar. In 1084, King Kyanzittha ordered the reforestation of the Ayeyarwady valley and created game preserves as part of a series of merit-based programs. Centuries later, the increased role of the Buddhist *sangha* (the Buddhist
community of monks, nuns, novices, and laity) in Burmese society led King Shembuan to issue a proclamation forbidding the killing of animals.\textsuperscript{89} In the 1800s, pious King Mindon took one of the first steps in conservation land management when he declared the area surrounding present-day Mandalay a wildlife sanctuary.\textsuperscript{90} Additional past records show that environmental conservation works were initiated by the last dynasties of Myanmar kings who with far-sightedness proclaimed the valuable teak forests as royal property and levied royalties on teak properly extracted with royal permission.\textsuperscript{91}

Stemming from Buddhist tradition, many rural women play a central role in worshipping nature spirits. A central aspect of women’s identities involves living in communion with the thirty-seven Great Nats and all the remaining spirits (spirits of the trees, water, soil, etc.), who are believed to have great influence on human affairs. Every Burmese village has a nat sin (နတ်စင်) which essentially serves as a shrine to the village guardian nat called the ywa saung nat (ရွာစစ်နတ်). A shrine is attached in honor of the nat sin to a tree or pole near the entrance of the community, which is believed to protect them from wild animals, threat, and illness (Figure 4).


Figure 4. Shrines in or under trees are evidence of nat worship in rural villages. Source: Joseph, 2018.

Most households also have a nat, for which a traditional offertory coconut (နတ်အုန်းသ်း) is hung on the main southeast post (ဥရူတ်) of each house. Wearing a gaung baung (headdress) and surrounded by the perfume of the mayo flower, women are the leaders in performing the offering to the Min Mahagiri (Lord of the Great Mountain), also known as the ein dwin (အမ်တင််းနတ်) or ein saung (အမ်စစွာင်နတ်) (house guardian) nat. The offerings are typically food or flowers, which are taken from the Earth and land they inhabit. Some women may also inherit a certain nat, or in some instances two of the 37 Nats, to worship depending on where their families originally come from. Burmese women take care to honor all appropriate nats, as they believe that their offerings maintain harmony with the spirits and protect the natural balance.

Burmese women also continue to be caretakers of the larger environment, honoring forest guardian spirits called taw saung nats (စတွာစစွာင်နတ်) and mountain guardian spirits called taung saung nats (စတွာင်စစွာင်နတ်). When the women go to collect wood they often bring an
offering to the forest spirits, thanking them for their gifts and asking for their continued protection of the natural world. In addition, women hold the belief that trees are the dwellings of spirits called yokkazo (ရုက္ခစ်). Thus, the indiscriminate felling of large trees is considered to be a great offense, as the destruction of the yokkazo’s home would bring the wrath of the nat on the perpetrator and the perpetrator’s land.

The spiritual and sacred viewpoint of the land was expressed by the women I interviewed within Myanmar. It was also seen in my field observations, as temples and shrines scattered the country’s landscape.

During my first week in Yangon, I can recall examining the shrines in the trees beneath my living space. They reminded me of the miniature tree houses I would build as a young girl. I can recall hoping the garden fairies would use them when they needed a rest. I continued to be fascinated by the shrines, as each morning I would observe them. I wondered what the mythical figures and braided faces of part-animal creatures standing guard symbolized.

One morning I was engrossed in the fragrant and vibrant arrangements of flowers that were placed beneath the shrine. Entranced by their beauty, I did not see Daw Soe, the local flower shop owner, watching me. Eventually, we made eye contact and I smiled. She did not smile back. Instead, she rose from her chair and picked a handful of yellow flowers. “Give merit. They do not know you.” she said, giving me the flowers. She was referring to the spirits, who protected and watched over the land and my residence.

From that day forward, Daw Soe would hand me a flower each morning, sometimes adding in a smile and a pat on the shoulder if she felt inclined (Figure 5). I would walk over to the shrine on the nearby tree and thank the spirit nats for protecting me and allowing me to stay in their home.
Other Myanmar women also shared with me their own spiritual connection to the land:

*Women understand that nature is feeding and taking care of them, so they understand the value of the nature. Women get to be more close to nature - they love it more than men. Even when a tree is cut down, they will feel sad. They feel it is an extension of themselves.*

- Aye Aye Zin, environmental journalist and writer, Yangon, 2018

*It is in our religion to respect the Earth. If we kill something - even if it small, like an insect, we must pay merit. The Buddha honored all life [ . . . ] We are told to abstain from killing Life. It is how we are raised.*

- Kyi Kyi, Yangon, 2018
Are we environmentalists? No, we do not see ourselves this way. We simply see that this is the way to live. We treat the forests with great respect. We honor the nature spirits. It is our way. - Tuan, Yangon, 2018

Cultural Influences and Economic Roles

Traditional gender roles also facilitate women’s close connection to the land and food. As mentioned within the ecofeminist framework above, the association between women and nature can facilitate and reinforce gender roles and social structures that limit women’s power and agency. It is fair to argue that in many ways this association has limited and hindered the gender equality and “feminists”92 movements within Myanmar. For younger women in the cities, I discovered that this link to the natural world could at times be limiting and confining. For the first time, some of the young women found themselves able to go to school and to find work beyond the home or farm. I interviewed young female students, journalists, artists, and political activists, who sought to go beyond “traditional” roles.93 However, in contrast, I believe it is important to acknowledge that for the rural women I interviewed, this link was valued and deeply interwoven within their own identity construction. It was not expressed to me from the rural women themselves that they found this relationship or identification with the land to be limiting or confining.

92 Although similarities may exist between societies and cultures, the experiences of Myanmar’s women are woven within a unique tapestry of cultural values, social norms, and political history. The background and dimensions of the country’s gender roles are multifaceted, not easily discussed nor simply defined. As gender equality and women’s rights gain increasing attention with Myanmar society and government, it is vital to acknowledge that the Myanmar women may not identify or see themselves as “feminists.”

93 Further interviews and information can be found at http://imageofwoman.weebly.com/2018_aej/previous/2
Rather, for the rural women this association with the natural world allowed them to provide, fulfilling their roles as homemakers and caretakers. Women’s daily duties require them to both engage with the land, as they are responsible for collecting firewood and water. From childhood, young Myanmar girls are trained to undertake work in and around their house (Figure 6). It is common in rural areas to see young girls caring for their siblings, collecting firewood, and bringing home water.

Figure 6. Women can be seen bringing home woods for forests outside the village.


*I grew up in the Tharrawaddy Hills. My mother and I would wake up the earliest- before my father. The morning dew on the leaves. We needed to rise early so we could go to the forests.* - *a woman from the Bago Region, 2018, Yangon*

Women in rural areas are traditionally aware of where to find fuel wood, how to use it properly and the appropriate way to store it for further use. In a study of Ngaputaw Township in Ayeyarwady Region, survey results revealed that almost 95.3 % of the women used firewood

94 Aye, 2.
for cooking while only 1.6 percent used wastes from agricultural crops (Figure 7). Women reported carrying loads up to 35 kilogram over a distance as much as 3 miles from home. The task of collecting wood take many hours per day, requiring an intimate relationship with the local trees and forests.

Figure 7. Women carrying wood in Ngaputaw Township. Source: Joseph, 2018.

Women are also known as water mothers (မခင်စရ mihkain ray), providing water for domestic and agricultural activities (Figure 8). Where women do not have access to tap water, they make use of rainwater, wells, and rivers. At the household level, the burden of fetching water for cooking and washing falls on the women and girls.
Figure 8. Myanmar woman in Bago Region brings water back to her home. Source Joseph, 2018.

*I remember walking with my mother with our empty buckets to get water. We went early in the morning. We needed to make at least three trips per day to have enough water for my family. We tried to go before it was too hot [. . .] Once this was done, we would go work in the garden or the field. ~ Daw Maa Dee, Ngaputaw Township, 2018.*

It is often women who decide where to collect water, how to draw, transport, and store it, what sources should be used for which purposes, and how to purify drinking water. Aye’s study of women in Ngaputaw Township further demonstrated their pivotal role in water resource management. Although the township is located between numerous creeks and rivers, there is no accessible fresh water for drinking. The task of fetching water and determining a safe source for drinking usually falls to the women and young girls.

*Aye, 2011.*
Women’s economic roles are also closely tied to the land, as they find themselves extensively engaged in agricultural work. Rural women in Myanmar work in all sectors of agriculture, cultivating crops, rearing animals for food or trade and working in forestry and fisheries. For many years, women have played an integral role in the agricultural production activities of their communities. When asked what trees or flowers they planted, 84.4% of the women interviewed in Ngaputaw indicated a preference for the planting of fruit trees, e.g. gourds and mangoes. The women believed that the fruit trees provided a two-fold benefit, pleasing the nature spirits and providing fruits for the household.

In the rural communities, the women are closer to nature because they like taking care of trees, plants and gardening. Usually they are the ones who feed and take care of their families, household, children [...] so it’s natural for them to take care of the environment they live in also.” Aye Aye Zin, 2018, Yangon

Additionally, Myanmar women are actively engaged in rice production, which facilitates a knowledge of the land and larger environment. Women hold great knowledge of Myanmar’s unique climate, as the country’s dry and wet season require differential systems of planting. For example, women rice farmers grow rice with the help of the monsoon rain that begins in late May (Figure 9). During this time, they uproot paddy sprouts and remove the mud from the roots, in order to propagate them in rain-fed rice fields. They have a system for managing the land, one in which stems from a rich history of customs and traditions.

We know the land and its value. Thus, we do not try to take too much of it. We accept what it gives us, and it is enough. - Daw Soe. female farmer Mandalay, 2018

As Soe illustrates, for female farmers, the goal of agricultural land is sustenance, which is maintained through the ability of the land to renew and regrow. Burmese female farmers have a deep-seeded knowledge of the land, as they are predominantly involved in crop establishment, weeding, harvesting and post-harvest activities. Women’s workload in rice farming varies between lean and peak season, however, it has been found that they evenly distribute agricultural work with their husbands. During peak seasons, planting and harvesting seasons, women find themselves constantly in connection with the land.

The month when I am in the field every day from 5am to 9pm is in June. I do transplanting in our farm and I get hired as a transplanter in other farms in this village and nearby villages. I am constantly outside working. - women rice farmer, Maubin township, 2018

Ultimately, through their social, cultural and economic roles, Myanmar women find themselves in intimate connection with the land. The use of the natural world by women and their close dependence on its resources for their daily lives has resulted in women having a special relationship with the environment, existing as both its users and managers.

Rural Women as Food Producers and Consumers

Many of the same religious, cultural and social factors that encourage and situate Myanmar’s women’s close relationship to the land, also facilitate the women’s connection to food. Buddhists have a long tradition of offering food to the Buddha at pagodas and monasteries. As one monk explains, the practice also takes place at home, with women setting aside the first portions of rice and vegetables they cook, as well as, the first fruit grown on their trees to be offered at their household shrines.

The practice comes from a deep reverence for the Buddha. After offering the food in the early morning, Buddhists feel they have done a good deed for the day. [. . . ] Buddhists also believe the person who eats the food which is offered to the Buddha is free from danger and will possess good health. - U Nay Main Da from Nanda Gone Yi Monastery in Yangon
For Burmese women the act of giving merit is part of their daily lives, for merit is a beneficial and protective force which accumulates as a result of good deeds, acts, or thoughts (Figure 10). Merit-making is essential to the Buddhist practice, as merit brings good and agreeable results, determines the quality of the next life and contributes to a person's growth towards enlightenment.

*My daughter and I, we get up early to prepare the food for the monks. They come each morning with their bowls around the village- to the house, tea shops, market stalls. We give them rice, curry, chicken, as a form of merit. -Shwe Thaing, from Chin state, 2018*

Figure 10. Myanmar woman preparing food. Source: Joseph, 2018.
We give food to the Buddha each day in our home. The Buddha eats before we eat. It is a sign of respect. - Khin Kyi, Yangon, 2018

Myanmar women are also seen as the bearers or protectors of culture, a role that comes with the responsibility of preserving and passing down the traditional knowledge surrounding food resources. 99 Myanmar women have the established position of being “healers,” taking care of their family through food’s medicinal functions. Traditional medicine is widely practiced in Myanmar by the majority of the population either as an alternate or as a supplement to modern medicine 100

In my village we rely on the traditional or spiritual healers for our health. They are all women. We trust this more and they are easier and cheaper to access than hospitals. [. . .] The medicine, it is made from plants and animals. In my region, we use mondaing for colds, we use pazun-sar for an upset stomach. You cook them into a soup and can add meat or other roots. Sometimes we use [tree] bark. - Naw Dah, from Kayin State, 2018

Cultural norms as homemakers and caretakers also facilitate the centrality of food to women’s lives. I feel it is important to note that many of Myanmar’s women that I interviewed are working to challenge and go beyond these traditional roles.101 However, in terms of the current realities of rural women, these cultural norms and gender ideals continue to play an


100 T. Swe and S. Win. "Herbal gardens and cultivation of medicinal plants in Myanmar regional consultation on development of traditional medicine in the South East Asia region, Department of Traditional Medicine, Ministry of Health, Myanmar, Pyongyang, DPR Korea, 22-24 June 2005." World Health Organization (Regional office for South-East Asia) (2005).

101 My fieldwork and ethnography regarding Myanmar’s women who are challenging traditional norms can be found at http://imageofwoman.weebly.com/2018_aej.
integral role in shaping their sense of self and relationship to food. Many women reported having the main responsibility of providing food for the family. As a result, food serves as the vehicle through which rural women can fulfill their identities as wives and mothers.

_For me, food is the most important thing. It is my life. I am most concerned with feeding my children._ - female palm fruit farmers, Kyaiklet, 2018

_I feel that when I feed my children, I am a good mother. When I cook for my family and they are full, then I am happy and feel good._ - Daw Moe, from Mandalay, 2018

In addition, women are not simply involved in the cooking of food, but in its cultivation, care, management, sanitation and storage. To meet their family’s needs, women engage in the production of plant-based and animal foodstuffs. Generally, women produce food through the following means: 1) crops grown in fields or paddocks owned or controlled by households (Figure 11); 2. plant-based foods grown in home gardens or on trees/vines in and around homesteads; 3. livestock kept by households; 4. fish held in ponds or caught in waterways, and 5. plant and animal foods obtained through hunting and foraging. 102

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Recent research has highlighted connections between Myanmar’s women’s autonomy in household food and nutrition outcomes, as well as in agricultural production. It has been found that females control over decision-making in regard to food is the norm. On average, females had overwhelmingly sole control over the cultivation, cooking and daily household food purchases. In addition, a large proportion of working women in Myanmar are concentrated in the informal sector as “own-account” workers. Rural women are more likely to work on their own than urban women, as income may be generated through the sale of goods produced directly related to agricultural products (prepared meals, snacks).

*I love to make mohinga (popular fish noodle soup) for my family. I also always make laphet thohk (pickled tea leaf salad). [...] I sell my food too in the village. I earn some extra money for my family this way.* - San, Yangon, 2018


104 Asian Development Bank, 44.
I love to cook. I also love to eat. In the morning, I have a stand and the men come by before they go work in the field in the morning. [...] What do I sell? It depends. But I make fried chapati (crispy, blistered, and topped with boiled lentils/peas), eggs, samosas for breakfast. -Nay Thet, Dawei region, 2018

Many rural women reported as well that the importance of food in their lives went beyond simply economic value. Rather, many discussed the personal and social value inherent in food.

Burmese women- we are different I think than women in other countries in this way. We love to eat. We need to be strong. Food brings us joy. -Daw Win, Yangon, 2018

The women in my village, we cooked together. We loved this and learned from the older women [...] We taught the young girls beginning at an early age how to cook. Such as, what plants or ingredients to use for certain things. [...] Food is very social for us women. It is also when we get to talk or discuss things in our lives. -Kyawt, from Irrawday, 2001
Food is part of a woman’s soul. In your country, maybe it is not the same. But here, food is involved in all aspects of our life. - Tyin Mint, from Mandalay, 201

Thus, women’s connection to food is closely tied to the religious, cultural, social, and economic aspects of Myanmar women’s identity. Through my interviews, field observations and research, I would come to learn that the value of food in the material and spiritual landscape of rural women’s lives and daily experiences.
Chapter 4: Distancing from the Land and Food

The previous section examines the intimate connection between Myanmar rural women’s sense of identity and relationship to the land and food. Furthermore, the personal narratives and stories of rural women are discussed within larger economic, social, cultural and political systems, demonstrating the interdependence of women’s relationship to the natural world with nonhuman processes.

In this chapter, I ask that the reader keep in mind this understanding of Myanmar women’s special relationship with the land and food. This knowledge is necessary as we begin to discuss the contemporary process of disinheritance and its impacts. Through the aforementioned process, Myanmar female migrants find themselves increasingly distanced from their place of origin, disconnected from the natural world and food systems.

Semi-structured interviews and participatory action research with Myanmar female migrants living in Mahachai, Thailand will serve as a primary case study. Through the narratives of those in Mahachai, I argue that for Myanmar’s women, migration from rural to urban areas is characterized by a process of physical and conceptual distancing from the natural world. I seek to demonstrate the complex impacts of this disinheritance, as women work to reconfigure and reconceptualize their sense of self in reference to the land and food. My goal is to bring together the globalized processes of industrialization, migration and disinheritance, in order to understand and explain the impacts of these intersections on women’s psychological health and personal lives. Ultimately, this section will give voice to the often hidden and unknown experiences of Myanmar migrant women’s disinheritance as they attempt to navigate a foreign landscape.
The “Roadmap to Democracy” (ဖိသားရွေးကောင်းစရာစိတ်အယ်ဒီလိုခန်း): Disinheritance and Migration

Leading Questions: Why did the female migrants in Mahachai leave Myanmar? Was it their choice? How have they changed as a result of migration? What impact does migration have on them and their families? - notes from the author’s personal journal, July 7th, 2018

As part of its “seven-step roadmap to democracy,” the Myanmar government has embarked upon an ambitious series of reforms aimed at liberalizing the country’s political and economic systems. Since 2010, a marked increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) has made Myanmar one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Both the Thein Sein government (2011 – 2015) and the current government under the National League for Democracy (NLD) have committed to building Myanmar’s manufacturing and service sectors. Myanmar is currently undergoing a structural transformation, moving away from an agricultural-based economy and towards a more urban, industrial, and service-based economy. This shift involves both spatial and sectoral reallocation of labor, or both labor migration and changing labor patterns in rural areas. 105 A research report observes that amid this kind of transition an increasing proportion of output and jobs are becoming based in urban areas, where most manufacturing and services are located. 106


As outlined in Chapter Two, the government’s priorities of “democracy,” FDI and development have resulted in the wide-scale process of women’s’ disinheritance from the land and food. To achieve its goals, the government has prioritized the confiscation of communal lands, reallocating them to foreign agencies and private investors. As with the government, companies have reportedly taken land from people with little or no compensation. The companies have justified the land seizures on the grounds that the government is instituting development projects, creating industrial zones, and punishing people for not having legal papers.

This has resulted in the formation of a class of landless and dispossessed farmers, as smallholders are expropriated and forced to migrate to urban centers. Recent estimates declare that more than 5.2 million acres of what the military government called “waste land” were awarded to private agribusiness companies. The government’s re-assignment of lands has resulted in the destruction of customary tenure systems and traditional land use practices, including the recognition of women in the management of resources and proper land use under shifting cultivation. Under new laws, women’s rights to land are often ignored, being easily dismissed or denounced by corrupt officers and officials. Women’s exclusion from the law is matched by their unfamiliarity with its stipulations.

_The discrimination of Myanmar’s women is often reinforced by a lack of awareness; inequality is so much a part of society that many of the women do not even know that they are being discriminated against. This is particularly true when it comes to fighting for land of labor rights._ -Khin Ma Ma Myo, Yangon, 2018

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In a survey (n=400) conducted with Land Core Group in 2012, men were twice as likely as women to have heard of at least one of a dozen land-related laws and policies.\textsuperscript{108} Whereas, about two-thirds of men reported being confident about approaching township authorities or courts for help with a land-related issue, less than half of women reported being confident to do so. In addition, women reported being fearful of approaching authorities.

May Khin, a woman from Mandalay Division, described how a court and land authorities failed to protect her rights when a local cooperative seized her land. She explained:

\textit{No sooner than I harrow my land, about fifty people led by . . . an employee from cooperative destroyed the harrowed land and later they fenced my land and raised the cooperative flag on my land. The police asked me to apply my case directly to a court of law. The court arranged hearings only on holidays. I thought the court neglect[ed] my case . . . The authorities neglected our complaint by saying ‘this is nothing to do with us, we have no idea.’ . . . Even though we submit[ted] complaint letters several times to the authorities who are responsible for land disputes, our case is still neglected.}

This experience illustrates some of the challenges that women face in accessing justice when the government or private actors take away their lands. There is no adequate complaint mechanism in Myanmar to raise issues regarding development projects implemented by the government or private actors. Due to such barriers, rural women are disproportionately impacted and more vulnerable to the processes of disinheritance, often lacking the rights or resources of their male counterparts to fight for the land of their ancestors.

\textit{In my village, I knew the land, forests, rivers, and fields better than any of the men. Like my mother, I understood the earth better than my own father and the men in the town.}

But when the big Chinese companies came, I was ignored and forced to leave my home. [. . .] After this, the only thing I could do was move away. I now work in Mahachai’s canning factories. - Ae Ae Saw; Mahachai, Thailand. (Pongstaphone & Joseph, 2017)

There are no jobs there now. It is all foreign laborers and companies. We cannot cultivate our land. [. . .] My sister told me about a friend who went to Thailand to work. She said I should go there and make more money.- Chaw Su Khaing, Sanchaung township, 2018

Some men in the village, they got to keep their land. But even they cannot compete with the big companies. Small-scale farmers can no longer make a living. It is too expensive to make profit. - Ae Zin, Yangon, 2018

Within this context of Myanmar’s current industrialization and economic development, the narratives of Myanmar’s rural women are quickly being uprooted, devalued and rendered invisible. Those women that previously depended on the land for income and subsistence are now forced to find alternative forms of livelihood that directly alter their relationship to the land and food. Some find work as laborers for larger agricultural companies, in construction, in the sex industry or in factories in Myanmar’s major cities.

If women choose to stay, they work as paid laborers for foreign companies who damage the land and pay them so little. The pay is very poor and conditions are very bad [. . .] I had to leave. My husband found work in the paddy fields, but I did not. [. . .] It was too difficult for me to stay and to see what was happening to my home - Ae Ae Saw; Mahchaei, Thailand, 2019
A large number of women are forced to migrate, due to an inability to find work or earn a living within Myanmar. Some women also choose to leave with the hope of receiving better wages in neighboring countries. In the 21st century, Myanmar has become the largest migration source country in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, with over sixty-five percent of migrants being females coming from rural areas. According to estimates, up to ten percent of the population in Myanmar migrate abroad. Thailand and Malaysia are the most common destination countries for Myanmar migrants, with some three million migrants living and working in Thailand and over 500,000 in Malaysia.\textsuperscript{109} The broad trend of increasing labor migration from Myanmar to Thailand has continued for the last decade and is predicted to increase into the foreseeable future. The number of non-Thai residents within the country has increased from an estimated 3.7 million in 2014 to 4.9 million in 2018, with migrants currently constituting over 10 percent of Thailand’s total labor force.\textsuperscript{110} A remarkably high proportion of migrant labor is now women’s labor. Around eighty percent of Thailand’s Burmese migrant workers in factories are women.\textsuperscript{111} With Thailand’s ageing population, low unemployment rate and continuing economic growth, the high demand for labor, the need of Myanmar migrant workers will continue. In addition, Thai individuals are also growing increasingly well-educated and less inclined to take on low-skilled, poorly paid jobs. Factories employ predominantly migrant workers and few Thais are found working on fishing boats.


\textsuperscript{111} Kusakabe and Pearson, 78.
Most women from my old village have left to go work in Thailand. We are told that the pay is better. We believe we can make a better living for ourselves and also send money to our families who are still in Myanmar. - Su Su, migrant from Kayin region, 2018

All of my cousins have moved to Thailand. It is the most popular country that we go to. It is said to have the best pay and it is easier if you know someone. - May Khin, Yangon, 2019

The next section will highlight the experiences of Myanmar’s migrant women living in Mahachai (Samut Sakhon), Thailand. Locally known as Mahachai, the province is more widely known as “Little Burma,” home to an estimated 400,000 Myanmar migrants. Although the following case study is not fully representative of the experiences and perspectives of Myanmar’s migrant females, I believe it provides valuable insights into the ways in which migrant women work to simultaneously evaluate, alter and adapt aspects of self in a foreign environment. Specifically, I will work to highlight the impacts of migrant women's experiences of disinheritance on identity construction, as they attempt to navigate a new-found distance from the land and food.

Case Study of Mahachai: Thailand’s ‘Little Burma’

Before the reader can begin to understand the complexity and relevance of disinheritance within migrant women’s identity construction, it is essential to know more about their new physical and conceptual space. As such, I find it helpful to reflect on my ethnographic process in which I arrived at Mahachai without any lived experience of the area or specific connection to its people. Prior to my first interface, I sought to develop an understanding of Mahachai from Ajahn
Ruth, believing that I needed to be “prepared.” As we sat on Ruth’s small garden patio attempting to shade ourselves from Bangkok’s heat, she cautioned me from categorizing or generating an idea of Mahachai and its people. As she observed her fish swimming around a floating lotus flower, she said to me:

> Ally, you are looking for evidence based on an idea you have already formed. But this idea about Mahachai’s women may not even be true. By having a research question or hypothesis as your Western education requires of you, you already have made up in your mind that things are a certain way. You leave no room for the women’s voices or authentic ideas. You leave no room for other answers or questions [. . .] Be like water. The water fits the vase, yet when the vase cracks, the water merely shifts into a new form. It is not destroyed. Flow like water. Be fluid in your thoughts. We do not have to form ourselves into one thing.

In many ways, this is the goal of ethnography, which historically calls for openness to what is foreign; to what is not yet articulable.112 “It tolerates, indeed cultivates, open-endedness.”113 As Fortun declares, “Our task now becomes creative. We must try, through the design of an experimental ethnographic system, to provoke new idioms, new ways of thinking, which grasp and attend to current realities. Not knowing in advance what theses idioms will look and sound like.”114 Thus, ethnography is a creative process, which allows for the production of new ideas and narratives to exist. Often these ideas go beyond expected formulas or hypotheses.


114 Fortun, 453.
but rather, produce explanations that resist, challenge and go beyond available terms, conditions and ways of thinking. Thus, let us meet Mahachai from this position, in which openness allows for discursive and novel understandings.

Observations: Sight: fish, fish guts, factory clothes (boots, masks, coats), small convenience shops, concrete, clothes hanging, food stalls, young children playing, women working in lines, buckets, men on boats, men unloading; Smell: fish, moisture, food cooking, meat, cigarette smoke, fish again (overpowering); Touch: cold, slimy, sticky, dirt” - notes from the author’s journal, Mahachai, 2018

Mahachai is located to the South of Bangkok and is geographically situated near the Gulf of Thailand. The city is more popularly called Mahachai by the community, translating from the Thai language to "the City of Luck." Mahachai is also known to Thai individuals as Samutsakhon, a port town whose name translates to “City of the Sea and River.”

The area surrounding Mahachai appears to be like other Thai urban neighborhoods. I can recall driving past shops, restaurants, temples and car dealerships. However, as I moved towards the heart of the city, it would become clear that this area was heavily involved in the production of fish and seafood (Figure 13). The smell of fish- this is something I will always associate with Mahachai. It was everywhere, not contained to the factories or docks. The smell also seemed to linger on my clothes, long after I had left.
I would learn that Mahachai supports Thailand’s billion-dollar fishing industry. In 2018, the fishing sector contributed approximately 108.79 billion Thai baht to the country's GDP, with Thailand becoming the world’s third largest seafood exporter. I would come to know the factories, factory housing areas, processing zones, fish sorting areas and boat docks intimately, as all of the women’s livelihood were tied to the fishing industry.

Over the course of my interviews, I discovered that many of the women came to Mahachai through migrant networks. Often, friends, family members, or other relatives already worked in Mahachai, making the destination appear increasingly secure and safe. The vast majority of female migrants from Myanmar choose to migrate through these informal avenues. For many women, migrating abroad is not a choice, but rather a necessity. Thus, a dependency

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on brokers and an urgency for employment exposes many female migrants to exploitation and extortion.

*The Burma government doesn’t care that people come to Thailand for work. I contacted my cousin in Mahachai. He had already been here for 4 years. He paid a broker 12,000 baht to come to our village [in Mon state] and to get me and bring me to Mahachai. [...] It is scary. You do not know if you can trust them. Many women are trafficked and never make it to where the broker promises.”* says Kyio, female migrant from Shan state, 2019

*The government [Myanmar] does not address the challenges we face in any way. They do not take responsibility for us. We must fight for ourselves and cannot even find work in our own country. [...] My mother and father are both old now and have nothing. I came here to earn money to help support them. - Tyin Min, Mahachai, 2019*

In general, most migrant women find jobs commonly referred to in Thailand as the “3 Ds” – dirty, dangerous, and difficult. Migrant women earn a living in Mahachai by finding work as factory workers (คนงานโรงงาน Konngan rongngan). The women work on the docks or in the factories, peeling, cleaning, and packaging the fish. Often, migrant men work alongside them, or work on the boats as fishermen (ชาวประมง Chaopramong) (Figure 14).

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However, although all female migrants reported finding work relatively easily, they face numerous challenges in their new homes due to both their status as migrants and gender. Recent research on migrants’ working conditions in fish-processing factories in the area has identified a series of challenges to migrants’ security and well-being. The fishing sector has come under scrutiny in recent years, after investigations by the media and human rights groups showed slavery, trafficking and violence on fishing boats and at onshore processing facilities. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations have found signs of continued forced labor, despite pressure from retailers to clean up the industry, including abusive working conditions and excessive overtime.

Seeking to learn about the challenges faced by the migrant women I was working with, I met with Mahachai most well-known human rights organization, the Labour Protection Network (LPN). Although progress has been made, particularly within the area of Mahachai, the words of the LPN staff and volunteers demonstrate that migrants continue to face significant difficulties. 

I see this as the issues: the migrants cannot make a living in Myanmar. They come here extremely poor. Thailand, we have a demand for cheap labor. Our government and police are corrupt. It is the perfect storm for abuse, says Somong Srakaew, who co-founded LPN in 2004 to pursue justice for migrant workers.

The migrants, they lack the basic rights afforded to us Thai nationals. They cannot move where they like or change employers. They lack access to education, health care and the ability to organize. This makes them extremely vulnerable. - Pawaluk Suraswadi, Mahachai, 2019

Migrants face great injustices. They face discrimination and inequality here. We have worked with some factory owners and managers to improve the conditions of the migrants. Yet, many will not meet with us. - a staff member, Mahachai, LPN

If the UN just come and do research and collect data, that doesn’t really help, said Patima Tungpuchayakul a co-founder of LPN, who is involved in rescuing migrant fishermen from labor abuses. Her rescue work and activism earned her a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017.

I share the interviews with LPN’s staff to provide one perspective on the conditions of Myanmar’s migrants living in Mahachai. In spite of this, one must refrain from oversimplifying the experiences of migrant laborers, as progress has been made to ensure the protection and rights of the laborers. The current work conditions vary across Mahachai, as some women shared
with me that they are now treated fairly, while others find that they continue to work in inhumane conditions.

In my interviews with migrant women, I refrained from using strong or specific language regarding human rights or asking about the abuses they may have experienced. Although I was curious, I did not want to scare them, as this topic can be both sensitive and taboo for the workers to talk about. In addition, I did not want to assume this was their experience, as such questions may have led them to an answer that was not representative of their experiences.

Regardless, I discovered numerous commonalities among the Myanmar migrant women’s narratives when I asked them about “life in Mahachai.”

First, many migrant women reported arriving to Mahachai with large debts, which leaves them vulnerable to further exploitation.

*It cost me and my family so much money for me to come here [ . . . ] When I arrived in Mahachai, I took the first job I could find. This was in the shrimp factory. I needed to begin paying off all of my debt. - a female migrant from Mon state, Mahachai, 2018*

*I thought I would have more money when I first came. But the broker charged more than he told my mother. [ . . . ] I was in debt by the time I made it here. So, I worked long hours in the shrimp peeling factories. [ . . . ] My arms had cuts all over. They got infected. It was very painful. - a female migrant from Kachin state, Mahachai, 2019*

In addition, female migrants reported facing great hostility from Thai policymakers, citizens and police. In my work in Mahachai, I discovered a prevailing feeling of fear and distrust towards the Thai people. The Thai people often refer to the Burmese migrants as *Kontangdao (คนต่างถิ่น)*, a term that implies an inferiority and negative attitude towards foreign
laborers. Burmese migrants are reviled by many Thai people, who view them as a threat to social stability and job opportunities for themselves.\textsuperscript{118} A common barrier that migrants face involves interpersonal difficulties with Thai laborers, factory owners and the police. Immigration raids on factories are common and immigration laws are strictly enforced. Many migrant women live in fear of the Thai police discovering their illegal status and sending them back to Myanmar.

\textit{While I was working in the factory, I had to escape from the authorities two times. We [the workers] had to run outside and hide. One time the police came to our factory and I was so scared that I ran into the bushes without my shoes. It was raining and it was almost midnight. The police finally left, and by the time the manager came to get us it was nearly 4am. - Nai Lawi Chan, Mahachai, 2019}

Women also shared stories of their fear of Thai police scrutinizing their identity documents and employment papers, looking into whether they have permission to legally work in the country.

“The police ask for money to make extra income when they suspect our documents [are incomplete],” said one woman working in the shrimp market, in both a hushed voice and on the condition of anonymity.

“Even if they are documented migrant workers, they are often being preyed upon,” said Sai Sai, a staff member at the Migrant Workers Rights Network, an organization assisting migrants from Burma in Thailand. Sai Sai explained that authorities’ suspicions can be raised by a worker’s lack of Thai language skills, as most migrants from Myanmar do not speak Thai. The authorities also arrest migrants for suspected drug use, or for traveling between provinces within Thailand in spite of having a “pink card” (employ permit). The employ permit does not facilitate

\textsuperscript{118} Pearson and Kusakabe, 82.
freedom of movement and only allows migrant workers to remain in the part of the country in which their documents are registered.

In addition, many female migrants reported feeling more vulnerable than men due to their gender. It has been widely understood that female migration has very distinct features when compared to male migration. Dominant gender social representations lead to different ways of organization, whereby women are often discriminated against.

The fishing industry in Mahachai is no exception, as women are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations and exploitative conditions that exist. From the migrant women, I heard many tales of poor factory conditions, health hazards, extremely long work days, abusive bosses and low pay (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Many of the migrants live in housing provided by the factories. The conditions of this housing are often poor and unsanitary. Source: Joseph, 2019.

These Thai factory owners have all the money and power, as well as connections with the police. They can easily take advantage of us workers. There are many factories with

119 Kusakabe and Pearson, 70.

120 Sanganet, 107.
extremely low pay, with work hours from 5am to 10pm, and bosses who are violent. But there is nothing we can do. - Ma Mya, Mahachai, 2019

The migrant women in particular stressed the fact that they are typically paid less than men and are at increased risk of being sexually harassed or abused. There is no workers’ union, and thus women’s salaries tend to only ensure a very humble standard of living in Thailand. Most workers live in small rooms shared with several people. In order to be able to earn money to support their families back home, migrant workers try to work overtime regularly. In addition, when women experience sexual harassment they lack the resources and support to report it. Even if women do choose to report it, they lack legal rights and face the risk of being deported.

Any slight mistakes we make, we are scolded or beaten. Some of the Thai men try to take advantage of us . . . of our bodies. - Thong, female migrant from Karen state, 2019

Thus, although major rights issues still exist for women migrants, many females also shared the opinion that life is better for them in Mahachai. Many of the women challenged my previous conceptualizations, in which process of migration was not simply a narrative of struggle, but also a story of agency and strength.

I would not return to Burma- there is no opportunity there. It’s difficult in Thailand, because many of us do not have papers. But it is better for me and my children. [. . .] I have made a new life here. - Yesawmorn, Mahachai, 2018

I miss my home. But even then, would I go back you ask? . . . No. I have made a life here on my own. I can provide for myself and send money back to my family. - Meo, Mahachai, 2018
I do not wish to go back. I have made a life here. I met my husband here and now we have our own shop. [...] Yes, we must still work in the factories, but our children can run the shop. They would not be able to find work in Yangon. - Ma Mya, Mahachai, 219

The stories of Myanmar’s migrant women contain nuances and layers, unable to be simply defined. It is impossible to generalize or create a single narrative. However, I hope to connect larger themes, so as to illustrate the way in which the globalized processes of migration have impacted the lives and well-being of women. In the next section, I will seek to highlight the physical and conceptual distance between Mahachai’s women and the environment that has resulted from the process of rural to urban migration.

Migration and Transforming Identities

In this section I argue that during the process of rural-to-urban migration, Myanmar female migrants’ traditional identities in relation to the land and food are stripped, disregarded and irrevocably damaged. Myanmar female migrants find themselves increasingly distant from the physical, social and intellectual origins of their food and the land it is grown upon. Without engaging in their familiar relationship with the natural world, the women find themselves in dialogue with this newfound distance, which alters their connection to the environment, themselves and their identities. This dialogue is multivocal, as urbanization and modernity do not automatically replace tradition. Myanmar migrant women in Mahachai are undergoing a process of self-actualization and reflexivity, in which they are working to re-configure their sense of self and cope with a disinheritance from the land and food.

I will begin with a brief literature review of migration scholarship and identity theory in order to outline a series of frameworks and ideas that can contextualize the experiences of
Mahachai’s migrant women. I will then build upon this literature, presenting the ethnographic interviews of Mahachai’s female migrants. Through these interviews, the reader will gain a deeper understanding manner in which distancing from the land and food has created a simultaneous distancing from the self.

*Literature on Identity and Migration*

Place Identity and Migration

Previous literature demonstrates the powerful effect migration can have on an individual’s sense of place and self-conception within society. In today’s world, it has been argued that the impact of modernity on place has led to its “commodification,” “devaluation” and “globalization.”121 Additionally, as migration becomes a prominent feature of society, place no longer lends itself to a definite interpretation, as its scale, meaning, and purpose are no longer coherent, bound or settled. Rather, place has become fluid, not simply a locale, but a socially and personally constructed aspect of the self. The radical changes in physical and social environments have been associated with significant stressors on individuals’ sense of place and identity.

A relevant theory to the experiences of migrants is that of Place Identity, proposed by environment psychologist, Harold Proshansky. Place Identity built upon previous concepts of self and social identity, arguing for the inclusion of the physical environment within the framework of an individual’s identity.122 Proshansky argued that just as much as groups and

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social values form identity, one’s spatial environment also serves to define who a person is.

“Place-identity is defined as those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment.”123 At the center of place identity is a sense that the “place” is part of “my identity”, or more abstractly, part of “me.”124 Therefore, it is argued that an individual’s identity involves an intrinsic awareness of place, an awareness that “there is no place without self; and no self without place.”125 Place identity is also based on its interrelationship with individual's internal psychological and social processes, attributes and activities performed at the place.126 It is argued that the place cannot be separated from people who make places and invest meanings in them as stated by Soja, "places are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood and imagined."127 Place identity is also strongly linked to place attachment and sense of belonging, which are crucial in establishing an emotional and cognitive bond with a place. Environmental psychologists assert that the development of emotional bonds with a place is

123 Proshansky, 150.


necessary for psychological well-being. Thus, place is not merely important in developing and maintaining self-identity, but it also has a significant effect on human well-being and behavior.

Place identity has been further explored through empirical work on the nature of the rural identity, as well as on the study of farmers’ identity. For example, in rural China, migrants form a provincial identity standard (e.g. ‘I am a peasant’) as they have deep ancestral ties to farming. Similar to many of the Myanmar women in this proposed study, their ancestors tilled the same soil for centuries, creating a deeply rooted sense of identification with their rural identity. The urban environment has also been studied within place identity scholarship, as development and modernization have led to individuals’ increasingly residing in urban spaces. Thus, scholars such as Cheshmehzangi have worked to include urbanization within psychological studies, covering the effects of urban growth on place identity theory. He takes this concept towards a new direction in analyzing how built environments affect identity at

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different levels, concluding that identity has become not only a term, but rather a comprehensive theme and concept in making new places and built environments. Thus, individuals’ self-concepts can be deeply connected and influenced by the urban environment around them. While place-identity theory asserts that spatial changes are connected to identity changes, Cheshmehzangi’s work also makes evident that particular settings can facilitate major influence on the perceptions of self. The influence of urban infrastructure on place identity has been further examined through a study of data from residents of Charleston, South Carolina following hurricane Hugo. The study found that participants sense of self and sense of connection was directly linked to community icons, homes, and structures within the community. Therefore, even ordinary, everyday and non-famous architecture has the potential to influence and create a strong sense of place identity for individuals.

Additionally, Proshansky (1978) and Cheshmehzangi (2015) assert that place identity changes to some degree over one’s life cycle, as a result of shifts in the physical and social environments. For Mahachai’s female migrants, their external sense of place shifts, as they move from their rural homes to a foreign, urban setting. This movement is accompanied by shifts in migrants’ self-identity, as they work to reconstruct connections with place in a new environment.

Scholarship regarding migration’s impact on place identity has highlighted the experiences of rural to urban migrants. In a study by Qian, Zhu and Liu (2011), urban migrants’ sense of place at two geographical scales—a community culture center and the city of Guangzhou, China, were examined. It was found that urban migrants’ psychological

134 Cheshmehzangi, 401.

connections with their place of destination have significant impacts on their well-being.

Furthermore, the authors argue that the urban migrants are faced with predicaments in re-establishing psychological bonding with place. In a study of Poles living in Oslo and London, Trąbka (2019) found that place identity is a dynamic process, which works to significantly alter migrants’ sense of self throughout the course of adaptation to a new urban setting. Similarly, Cable, Gino, and Staats (2015) argue that when entering urban environments, migrants undergo sensemaking, prompting them to form new ‘situational identities’ based on their urban work and lifestyle.

Other empirical research concentrates on the movement of rural women to urban centers. Joseph (2013) examined Malaysian female migrants and “urban self-construction,” within the foreign, ‘western,’ post-industrial, and capitalist context of Australia. The study found that migrants “re-make: a sense of self, that is dynamic and works to adapt to the new urban setting. Joseph argues that the migrant women engage in on-going processes of interpretation, particularly in regard to re-negotiating social positions and boundaries. This provides insights into the complexities of transnational identities in our increasingly globalized world. Similarly, Resurreccion’s (2005) study focuses on migrant women’s sense of ‘in-betweenness’ as they navigate through host societies and retain tight linkages with their places of origin in Southeast


Asia. Jowell, Wulfovich, Kuyan and Heaney (2018) also explores the experience of rural-to-urban migration among female migrants from Masasai and how this experience affects ethnic identity, resilience, and well-being. It was found that circular migrants hold closely to their traditional ethnic identity and remain isolated from city life, while permanent migrants modulate their ethnic identity and integrate into urban society. Finally, Gui, Berry, and Zheng’s (2012) study examines the urban identity, self-worth and satisfaction of life of Chinese migrant workers who move to large cities from rural areas to seek employment. The authors found that migrants employ different acculturation strategies favoured in social identity and place identity domains in order to increase their well-being. Thus, for many migrants the urban environment can play an integral, dynamic role in the concept of self and well-being.

Identity Strain and Migration

The concept of Identity Strain has also been discussed within the context of rural to urban migration. Originally, Identity Strain sought to highlight the identity changes experienced by minority cultures when transferring to a new society. In the context of migration, individuals experience identity strain when an environment results in a mismatch in expectations for their self-identity. Migrants go through a “sense-making process,” which requires them to revise


their own personal identity\textsuperscript{144} or cognitive model of who they are, to respond effectively to a foreign environment.\textsuperscript{145} A mismatch between individuals’ sense of self and their environment results in psychological distress.\textsuperscript{146} Paik (2014) examined the concept of identity strain for rural to urban migrants, in which many individuals experienced identity strain when their place identity conflicted with the urban environment.\textsuperscript{147} It was found that migrants experienced significant distress when choosing to maintain their provincial identities, regarding village roles in farming, family and civic leadership as central to their self-concept. It has also been found that when rural migrants struggle to adapt, they may dislike, disavow or avoid their urban surroundings.\textsuperscript{148} In a study by Gui, Berry and Zheng (2013) it was concluded that migrants with weaker rural identities may feel less identity strain (or can better lessen it) because they sense a closer ‘fit’ with living and working in cities and thus readily adapt to their new urban environment.\textsuperscript{149} Similarly, Qin (2015) found that a high rural identity for migrant workers in South China can lead to significant identity strain when transition to an urban employment and lifestyle. It was found that “when working and living in cities, migrant workers [...] experience a


\textsuperscript{146} Peter J. Burke. "Identity processes and social stress." \textit{American sociological review} 56, no. 6 (1991): 836-849


sizeable mismatch between their rural identity standards and environmental inputs. Moreover, it becomes evident that “migrant workers role transitions are likely to result in psychological strain and influence their turnover.” Thus, in the process of rural to urban migration, many individuals experience identity strain as they struggle between choosing to retain their rural identity or adapting to the urban environment.

**Literature on the Land and Changing Food Systems**

Rural migrants’ incorporation into the urban industrialized food system has been examined by Blay-Palmer (2016). In the process of migration to urban centers and the resulting incorporation into the Industrialized Food System (IFS), migrants experience an increasing distance from the physical, social, and intellectual origins of their food and the natural world. In addition, research exists supporting the idea that incorporation into IFS presents serious challenges with respect to the dietary, social, cultural, and ecological health of women. A study by Scarpello et al. (2009) provided evidence for the struggle of rural individuals in Norfolk, England to adapt and find healthy food within the industrial food system.


(supermarkets). In addition, data was found to support the idea that rural individuals prefer the food they grow from their own land or of those in their own community.153

Other researchers have worked to explore the relationship between food and identity. Quintero-Angel (2019) demonstrated the role of the cultural transmission of food habits in the identity formation and social cohesion of individuals in Cali, Colombia.154 This case study demonstrated the relationship of food, the environment and cultural identity. It served to illustrate the way in which food practices and identity are influenced by the larger socio-cultural context, including the dynamics of globalization, industrialization and rural to urban migration. Similarly, a study by Naidu and Nzuza (2017) argues that food is a vital and dynamic part of people’s culture and identity, as people often identify and associate themselves with the foods they eat.155 They explore the importance of traditional or ‘home food’ in maintaining a sense of ‘self’, and an articulation of identity for Sierra Leoneans. Findings revealed that for migrants, ‘home food’ can emotionally transport migrants back to the sending country. It also shows that in an attempt to maintain their identity, migrants sometimes form (im)permeable boundaries that appear to aid in preserving and further enacting their ‘cultures’.

Scholars have also explored the essential role of the land and rurality in migrants’ well-being and sense of self.156 Many Native Americans and indigenous studies have explored the


critical role connection to the land and the natural world plays in individuals’ identity and health. Kana‘iaupuni and Malone highlight the significance of the land in Native Hawaiian identity and cultural survival (2006). In particular, the authors discuss the physical, spiritual, genealogical, and socio-political/historical ties to land and sea that nourish Hawaiian’s well-being. Similarly, Fitchen highlights the central role of the countryside in an individual’s cultural identity. He argues that human conception of the territorial area defined as the countryside is a spatial determination of cultural identity. Barbic also stresses the importance of the rural environment in Slovenian cultural identity. He describes the centrality of the natural environment as the basis of economic activities of rural communities (agriculture, forestry, rural tourism) and many traditional social events (spring festivals, carnivals). Gerodetti and Foster (2016) have also examined the important role of the natural world and rurality in migrant identity construction. The authors argue that migrants’ ability to use gardens and allotments to “grow from home” alongside locally established agriculturalists, results in an increased sense of self and well-being. Similarly, in a study by Wiborg (2004), university migrants’ relationship to the land and rural home place were found to be essential aspects of the formation and management of


their identity. Thus, individuals’ relationship with their physical environment, in particular the land and food, can significantly influence individuals’ construction of self.161

*Literature on Migration and Southeast Asian Women*

The changes in relationships to the land as a result of the intensification of migration flows in rural Southeast Asia has been discussed. In particular, the impacts of the agrarian transition have been examined through a traditional economic framework, in which capitalist commodification is inserted into a mode of agricultural production and labor. In the process, a peasant mode of production is undermined, supplanted, or co-opted. Other researchers such as Kelly, have called for a deeper analysis of the political economy in which “Gender identities are brought into question as men and women move and the masculinities and femininities of migrants and those left behind are reworked. The household is stretched across space and seen more clearly as a contested domain. The spatiality of the village is reworked through long-distance linkages, so that scales of analysis are not quite what they used to be. Issues of ethnic identity are foregrounded as different groups come into contact in the same place.”162 Kelly brings into question the impacts of migration on the identity of women, in which a changing relationship to the land and agricultural production has significant impacts. Research by Hew Cheng Sim has highlighted the impact of migration and gender identity in rural Philippine

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farming women, while Adam Lukasiewicz has explored Malaysian women’s ability to cope with rural transformation.

Although such research is relatively scarce for Myanmar’s women, the close relationship of rural women to the land and involvement in food production has been discussed. As outlined in Chapter Three, Myanmar women typically play important roles in environmental management, in which their traditional role has been environmental caretakers. Burmese rural women engage in the collection of water, firewood and medicinal plants, as well as in agricultural production and in the preparation of meals for the family. Similarly, in a study by Than (1986) Burmese women were found to play an essential role in agricultural production, decision-making, environmental education and natural resource management within their villages.

The research on Burmese female migrants fails to address the impacts of rural-urban migration on the women’s intimate relationship to the land and food. However, current literature highlights the changes in mental health and well-being experienced by Burmese migrant women. Meyer et al. (2016) asserts that adverse mental health outcomes are experienced by migrant workers from Myanmar in their transition to working in agriculture, factory, and sex industries in and around Mae Sot, Thailand. It was found that the migrant experienced increased workplace


165 Aye, 2018.

166 Than, 1986.

and security-related stressors, which resulted in higher levels of depression and anxiety
symptoms. Similarly, a study of Noom and Vergara (2014) examined the acculturative stressors,
levels of acculturative stress and self-esteem, coping responses, and the relationship that
acculturative stress may have with self-esteem and coping among Burmese female migrant
workers in Thailand.\textsuperscript{168} The results found high acculturative stress was negatively correlated with
self-esteem and positively correlated with avoidant coping responses such as acceptance and
emotional discharge.

Schweitzer, Brough, Vromans, and Asic-Kobe (2011) analysed the mental health status
of people from Burmese refugee and migrant backgrounds that recently arrived in Australia. The
study found higher rates of stress for female Burmese migrants within the issues of post-
traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression.\textsuperscript{169} Pearson and Kusakabe (2012) discuss the
serious difficulties Burmese migrant women factory workers experience in adapting to their new
environment, providing for their families, and creating a sense of place.\textsuperscript{170} Finally, Rosbrook and
Schweitzer (2010) examined the loss of home and its meaning to Karen and Chin refugees. It
was found that a loss of home created serious disturbances in an individual's identity.\textsuperscript{171} The
deep and pervasive effects associated with the loss of home manifested in both emotional and
workers on the Thailand–Myanmar border." \textit{Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology} 51,
no. 5 (2016): 713-723.

\textsuperscript{168} Sai Han Noom and Maria Belen Vergara. "Acculturative stress, self-esteem, and coping

\textsuperscript{169} Robert D. Schweitzer, Mark Brough, Lyn Vromans, and Mary Asic-Kobe. "Mental health of
newly arrived Burmese refugees in Australia: contributions of pre-migration and post-migration

\textsuperscript{170} Kusakabe and Pearson, 2012.

\textsuperscript{171} Bernadette Rosbrook and Robert D. Schweitzer. "The meaning of home for Karen and Chin
refugees from Burma: An interpretative phenomenological approach." \textit{European Journal of
Psychotherapy and Counselling} 12, no. 2 (2010): 159-172.
physical challenges for the migrants. In addition, an intense emotional connection to the landscape was revealed for the participants.172

Ultimately, the next section seeks to expand upon previous literature by discussing the impacts of migration on Burmese female migrants’ sense of identity and attitudes towards food and the land. This topic has yet to be explored within the context of Burmese migrants, serving as a foundation for deepening the understanding of the influence of migration on the identity construction and health of Burmese women

The Stories of Mahachai’s Migrant Females: A Distant Land, Food and Self

I am distant. Distant from my home, the land, my ancestors, my children, my family . . . I am far away from myself. - Su Ha Nee, Mahachai, 2019

Figure 16. Myanmar worker takes a break from work. Source: Joseph, 2019.

Time and reflection would allow me to see the deeper impacts of migration on Mahachai’s migrant women. On the surface, I understood Su Ha Nee’s words in the above

quote-at least in the physical, spatial and temporal sense. However, through the collection of Myanmar migrant women’s narratives in Mahachai, a conceptual distancing would be revealed, in which women’s physical distancing from the land and food coincided with a distancing of the self. As mentioned above, place identity refers to "the symbolic importance of place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life, reflects a sense of belonging and are important to a person’s well-being.”173 Thus, for Mahachai’s women, the distancing and disinheritance from the land and subsequent migration has not only visible consequences, but more importantly, invisible and unrecognized shifts in which they experience identity strain.

Researching and understanding the influence of place on Mahachai’s women, required us to engage in a space of both memory and re-presentation. Together, we worked to establish a space of openness, safety and vulnerability in which Mahachai’s women could talk, critically reflect upon themselves, remember their lives and experiences, and share with me their laughter and tears. In the moment, I tried to allow the women’s words and stories to simply be—to not draw conclusions or predict. Later, I would notice that many of the semi-structured interview questions tended to elicit memories or thoughts from Mahachai’s women regarding the land and food. I designed the questions to be relatively open-ended, however, I did not expect the themes of connection and disconnection from the land and food to emerge so prominently.

For example, I often asked women how they felt about Myanmar. To this question, women’s responses and descriptions regarding Myanmar at large tended to be negative. They spoke of the “corrupt government” or “failed leaders.” However, when asked about their specific place of origin or birth, the women spoke fondly of their villages, communities, families and the

173 Proshansky, 90.
land. I quickly realized that for the women there existed a distinction between “Myanmar” the country and the land that they lived upon. The women’s place identity was embedded and grounded in the land upon which their lives depended. However, in the process of migration the women’s sense of self has been uprooted and replanted in an unfamiliar soil.

*I was forced to leave my land. I tried to send letters to the military to show them it was our land, but they did not care. I had no home [...] I feel lost and hopeless. I do not like it here. It is so different. Maybe I feel this is because I am old.* - *Daw Soe, from Shwe Pyi Thar township, Mahchai, 2019*

*It was better I had the farm. After the land was taken, we struggled to afford our daily mean. My husband was arrested for trespassing on our own land. When he was let out of prison, we decided to come to Thailand. [...] I am not happy here. I have no place of my own.* - *Ma Mau Oo, from Kyaunggon township in the Ayeyarwady Region, Mahchai, 2018*

In further understanding the meaning of place and individuals’ sense of attachment, the concept of rootedness highlights the most natural, pristine, unmediated kind of people-place tie. According to geographer Tuan (1980), rootedness is an unconscious, unreflectively secure and comfortable state of being in a locality. Rootedness is the product of repeated place interactions and experiences, which yields the steady accretion of sentiment and attachment. I believe that Mahachai’s women held a deep sense of rootedness to their place of origin, in which meaningful experiences and emotions became deeply embedded with the land. I do not believe

that the women took this connection for granted, however, it may be that many of the women have retroactively gained a new awareness. Some women expressed having gained a deeper appreciation for their past homes as a result of dispossession and migration to a new environment. With the movement to urban centers, feelings of rootedness were replaced by feelings of longing, loss, and uncertainty.

*Without my farm, without the paddy field, I feel like I have nothing. It is not the same here. We have no space for ourselves […] I miss gardening. I miss the soil.* —female migrant, from Ayeyawady Region, March 2018

*I just remember the tractors destroying everything [farmland] and I saw them working on it. I tried to tell the government, but could make no complaint. So, I came here. […] I hope I made the right choice, but I do not feel at home.* - female migrant, from Mon state, 2018

That so many women retain a strong desire to return to the land or to their previous rural way of life has profound implications on the importance of place. It demonstrates the centrality of their connection with the natural world to their personal place identity and sense of well-being. This point is further illustrated by women’s desire for greenery and natural light, aspects of the physical environment which symbolize the women’s original place identity. Women’s feelings of unhappiness and discomfort with the physical infrastructure or “built environment” of their new urban home was reflected in their internal psyche.

*I miss the plants and the forests. Here there is no green around. It is depressing. […] the factories are cold and dark. We have not natural light. It is so different from the work*
I used to do. I come home sad every day. My husband worries. - Mi Swe, female factory worker from Karen region, Mahachai 2018

It is ugly here in Mahachai. We live surrounded by trash. It is not good. [...] There are also so many cars and noises always. I cannot sleep some nights.- Daw Mya Aye, female factory worker, Mahachai, 2019

Figure 17. Trash and rotting fish can be found all over Mahachai. Source: Joseph, 2019.

I also observed Mahachai’s women’s attempt to re-establish or shift their place identities, as they worked to cultivate new relationships between themselves and the environment. Some attempted to reconstruct aspects of their homes’ physical landscape and their rural identity. Although place influences self-identity, people also tend to create, change or maintain their physical surroundings in ways that reflect themselves. Hence, the physical environment can also
be altered to reflect the identity of its users. In their almost non-existent free time, the women focused on reworking the urban “structure of feeling.” Many of Mahachai’s women creatively and defiantly reclaimed a sense of self through the management and planting of gardens.

On the weekends, I go outside. This is where I’m happiest. I take care of the plants outside of the building. [ . . . ] Oh no, this is not my own garden, but I enjoy doing it. I like to see the flowers. It reminds me of the offering we give the Buddha - female migrant from Shan state, Mahachai, 2019

The women in the factory housing, we have a small garden. But the manager told us we could not have this. When I asked why, he said it was because this was not our land. [ . . . ] I think they want to build another housing so that they can hire more people - female migrant, from Shan state, 2019

I grow vegetables, a few fruit trees, and we keep some chickens for ourselves. But we are lucky. Most migrants in Mahachai do not have this ability. [ . . . ] My husband bribed the Thai police to let us do so. This is the way things are here. - female factory worker, from Kachin State, 2019

Others acknowledged the difficulty of living in an urban environment, yet found it difficult to re-establish a connection to the land and re-assert their rural identity.


To live in a place like this is hard. It feels not good for me [. . .] But I have accepted it. I am used to the grey now. - Mi Mi, Mahachai shrimp peeler, 2018

Now I am not happy. I spend all of my time inside. Inside the factory. [. . . ] Now, on my days off I stay inside because we have no nature. Sometimes I take a walk, but this is rare. - Daw Nee, Mahachai, 2019

It was my favorite to walk in the forests outside of my village. My mother and I would do this together. [. . .] Now, what do I enjoy you mean? I cannot think of anything. Life in Mahachai is much different. - Nai Lawi Chan, Mahachai, 2019

The difficulty of adapting to an urban landscape created feelings of sadness and hopelessness for many of Mahachai’s migrant women. I believe it was not simply the unfamiliarity of the area that brought sadness, but rather the lack of access to the natural world.
Women also reported missing their traditional agricultural work, as they struggled to adapt to an industrialized job. Most of Mahachai’s migrant women worked in the factories, this being their first interface with the industrialized machine.

*The work in Mahachai is more difficult. [. . . ] Back home in the paddy field was hard, but us women know how to do this. We know how to farm and to work with our hands in this way [. . .] I feel I am not a good worker. I do not understand the machine. The manager gets mad at me when I make mistakes. I worry he will fire me.* - Chewa, female migrant from Mon state, 2019

*In my factory, we [women] came from the same area. We all worked the fields in our homes. We were happier in Myanmar. But, we cannot return to where we came from. We continue to work hard for our children’* - Ma Mya, Mahachai, 2019

*Many women, we get hurt or injuries in the factories. It is hard on our health and bodies. I worry I will not be able to provide for my family. I am getting old.* - a female factory worker, Mahachai, 2019

For Mahachai’s women, working in an industrialized workforce has significant implications, as they feel disconnected and incapable in their new positions. In this way, place identity also ties into the women’s economic and social roles, significantly impacting their ability to fulfill their desire behavior goals and functions. In the urban environment, the women’s place identity is altered, prohibiting them from enacting or engaging in the prior roles and ways of living which shaped their sense of self.
The difficulties expressed by Mahachai’s migrant women in relation to the industrialized workforce were mirrored in their viewpoint towards incorporation into the Industrial Food System (IFS). It was through my own observations that I first realized the centrality of food in the women’s place identity. In spite of having relatively little, each woman welcomed and offered me a snack when I came to meet with them (Figure 19). Although not always hungry, I tried to eat, as it was both polite and brought happiness to the women I worked with. This reflects the way in which food is directly connected to the migrant women’s roles as caretakers and providers.

Figure 19. Fruit and other snacks were offered by the women and their daughter upon entering their home. Source: Joseph, 2018.

In addition, almost every single woman I interviewed highlighted a desire for an increased involvement and connection to food production and consumption. Andrea Petö argues that “food-talk,” the act of talking about buying, preparing or consuming food,” is essential to identity construction and belongingness. Thus, the way women speak about food can shed light
on issues of identity, such as negotiating between different traditions of food systems and roles within them. 177

Prior to migration, food existed as a key site for the construction of identity and self for Mahachai’s women. Through food, women fulfilled their spiritual, social and familial roles. However, disinheritance from the land has resulted in women’s distancing from the production and consumption of food. This has created a sense of identity strain for many of the women.

*I feel bad- not like a good woman. Because I cannot cook like before. My husband does not like my cooking anymore. The food is not the same. [ . . ] Yes, Yes. I buy the ingredients but they are not as good. [ . . ] And my children buy food in packages. I do not know what they eat sometimes. It is Thai food. - Meo, Mahachai, 2018*

![Figure 20. Picture of Meo in Mahachai. Source: Joseph, 2019.](image)

*The women in my village we loved to cook together. . . . especially for religious holidays.*

*Now, we cannot cook the same food or we do not have time. - Myin Thin, Mahachai, 2019*

177 Petö, A. (2007). Food-talk: Markers of identity and imaginary belongings. Women Migrants from East to West: Gender, Mobility, and Belonging in Contemporary Europe, ed. Luisa Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Enrica Capussotti, and Ioanna Laliotou, 152-64.
Sundays is the only day I have off, so I cook then. But sometimes I am too tired to cook after working all week. I work long hours. Fourteen hours a day sometimes. [. . .] I want Chompu [her daughter] to know how to cook Burmese food. But she likes only the sweets from the store. - female migrant Shan state, Mahachai, 2019

Increased food insecurity also threatened women’s identities as providers, as they could no longer rely on the land to feed their families.

I miss being a farmer. If we didn’t have any money, we could eat something from the land. We could often find plants, corn or beans. The land took care of us. But when we have no farm, we can’t eat. - female migrant, from Shan state, 2018

Many women tried coping by eating less, skipping meals and borrowing from different sources. However, the struggle to provide food for their families resulted the women question their identity as “good mothers.”

Women also discussed the difficulty in adjusting and trusting an industrialized food system, in which they felt there was a lack of “fresh” and “safe” food. The increased distance from food sources created worry and anxiety for many women.

The food in my home was much better than here. [. . .] It was fresh and had taste. Here things all come in plastic or the fruit does not taste the same. - Yesawmorn, Mahachai, 2018

I do not know who grows my food here. I just go to the big market or the store. In my village, I knew every shop owner and food stall man. I could see where things grew. I prefer this. - Daw Josephine, Mahachai, 2019
Some women responded to these changes by creating their own food stalls on their off days (Figure 21). On Sundays in particular, the day off for most workers, women could be seen wearing traditional longyis and clothing, cooking foods from their homeland and socializing with their community members.

Figure 21: On Sundays Myanmar women can be seen cooking at stalls and walking around in traditional longyi. Source: Joseph, 2019.

_This is important for us to continue making the food from our homes. It is important for our children. We are not Thai. We never will be [...] We must remember where we came from._ - Prew, Mahachai, 2018

_I cook Burmese food for my kids. They do not remember where they were born. This is my way of reminding them that they are Mon._ - Mi, Mahachai, 2018

Mahachai’s women engage in the cooking of food from their homeland to reassert and maintain a sense of self they had been forced to leave behind. In addition, through the
preparation and cooking of Myanmar food for their children, Mahachai’s women ensure that the connection to food is not lost.

Ultimately, these are the narratives of Mahachai’s female migrants distancing and disinheritance from the natural world. Although larger processes of development and modernization have forced the women to leave their place of origin, they are actively engaged in the formation of a new reality, in which they are working to reconstruct their relationship to the land, food and to themselves. The process of rural to urban migration has both challenged and empowered Mahachai’s women to reflect, analyze and redefine their own sense of place and identity. In their stories, we see a process characterized by struggle, sadness and uncertainty. Yet more importantly, we also see the women’s adaptiveness, resilience, creativity and strength in constructing a new physical and internal environment.

Figure 22. Women sitting on the steps of the factory housing. Source: Joseph, 2019.
Conclusion

The narratives of Myanmar’s rural women and Mahachai’s migrant women bring critical attention to the unique experiences of the individual within larger, globalized processes. First and foremost, this paper works to provide the opportunity in which the voices and lived experiences of Myanmar’s women can be acknowledged. Without this space, the women’s experiences of disinheritance from the land and food would be rendered invisible within the large-scale processes of development, urbanization and globalization. The goal of this paper is to honor the nuances, layers and complexities of the individual, which are often hidden within current narratives of contemporary “progress and growth.” Moreover, this thesis seeks to provide an additional framework for the field of environmental studies, arguing for further thought into the subject of individuals’ psychological health within the context of the natural world. As the current Myanmar government continues to prioritize economic development and increased foreign involvement, disinheritance will become an increasingly prominent aspect of the feminine landscape. The influence of these processes on Myanmar’s women cannot be ignored, as their continuation brings unknown and unprecedented changes to our world.

Through future research, I seek to examine and identify the impacts of disinheritance from the land and food through a mixed-method, cross-sectional study of Myanmar’s rural women and urban migrants living in Bangkok. The proposed study will utilize quantitative measures of identity salience and connectedness, as well as, qualitative phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews, to understand the influence of rural to urban migration on Myanmar women’s identity construction. The study will also work to broaden the relatively scarce literature regarding Burmese rural women and Burmese female migrants, serving as an
important basis for beginning to understand the experiences of this under-represented population within psychological literature.
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