

Nationalism and anti-ethno-politics: why ‘Chinese Development’ failed at Myanmar’s Myitsone Dam

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In 2011, the Burmese military-backed government stunned global audiences by unilaterally suspending the construction of the Myitsone Dam, the cornerstone of China’s largest hydropower project abroad. This prominent failure of China’s “Going Out” investment strategy reverberated globally. Both Western and Chinese accounts frame the event as a pivotal moment in Myanmar’s celebrated reform process, the cooling of China–Myanmar relations, and US–China geopolitical rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. However, my ethnographic field and media research from 2010 to 2015 reveals that the mega-project’s failure does not originally stem from inter-state geopolitics or contested economics and ecology. Through chronological narration, I show how the Myitsone Dam is primarily the casualty of a distinctly ethno-political causality, whereby three nationalisms clashed and the replication of China’s “anti-ethno-political” model of development failed. Though no monolithic Chinese state directs “Chinese Development” overseas, individual Chinese entrepreneurs nonetheless draw from the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) anti-political and state-centric paradigm when facing foreign social worlds. In the particular case of Myitsone, Chinese proponents drew from PRC’s state-nationalist heuristics of “national minorities and state-led development” and “Western anti-China conspiracy,” when facing Myanmar’s ethnic Kachin and Burman nationalisms. State ideological subjectivities of these developers seemed to blind them to the weakness in their own anti-ethno-political strategies, even when those collapsed publicly. I conclude that the Myitsone Dam’s construction will likely not be restarted, despite the hydropower company’s efforts. The Myitsone case also exemplifies how China’s previous historical entanglements in its neighboring regions uniquely disrupt the progress of “Going-Out” in Asia.

Keywords: “Going Out”; anti-politics; nationalism; state-centrism; Kachin; ethnography

The 2011 halting of China’s Myitsone Dam construction in Burma remains a stunning failure amid the rise of Chinese developmental mega-projects across the world. At the time, Myitsone was China’s largest hydropower project abroad ever proposed. When Myanmar’s reformist President Thein Sein shocked both Chinese and global observers by announcing this multi-billion dollar project’s unilateral suspension, he unleashed a diplomatic scandal, marking a momentous geopolitical shift in the Asia-Pacific. His decision heralded Myanmar’s globally noted partial transition from military dictatorship to quasi-civilian democracy, in which the global democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi took official leadership in 2016.

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I build in this article a three-sided history that traverses the Myitsone controversy chronologically across the social worlds of the ethnic Kachin population, of Lowland Burma/Myanmar, and of the People's Republic of China (PRC). My narrative addresses the two following questions.

First, what caused this unique failure? Most previous analyses have prioritized ecological, economic, civil-democratic, or US versus China geopolitical roots. I build an alternative explanation based on a focus on social history and *ethno-political* causality. I demonstrate how the multi-billion dollar project collapsed due to the clash of three nationalisms: Kachin, Burmese, and Chinese.

Telling this history, I draw from four ethnographic fieldwork sessions, altogether 10 months long, conducted from 2010 to 2015. Fieldwork took place primarily within northernmost Burma's Kachin society and more briefly in Lower Myanmar. It involved conventional ethnographic methods: participant observation within relevant social circles; taking notes on everyday life; semi-structured interviews (approximately 100, averaging 2–4 h); and numerous everyday casual conversations. Demographically, the people I spent most time with and discussed issues with include students and young people; anti-dam, environmental, and other activists; and religious, educational, business, and other social leaders, as well as individuals from a wide range of other backgrounds.

Second, I ask, how does the prominent failure of Myitsone elucidate the logic of "Chinese development" globally? To answer, I first consider the political effects of what I call the Chinese *anti-(ethno)-political* model of development. Among other things, a Chinese company's promotional film will help us visualize how the entrepreneurs' "anti-ethno-political silences" clashed with Kachin nationalism.

I proceed by investigating how Chinese dam proponents publicly responded to their Burmese mega-project's unexpected suspension and how they analyzed the reasons behind this. My analysis here remains necessarily partial (cf. Kirchherr, Charles, and Walton 2016) because I have not been able to interview company representatives due to their relative inaccessibility, the secretive and military-oppressive conditions of my fieldwork in the Kachin region, and concerns about putting my interlocutors at risk. Instead, I analyze public statements and media coverage, which the project leaders intended for Burmese and Chinese audiences in an ambitious, Chinese state-supported effort to revitalize the mega-project. I show how the logic of those pro-dam discourses emerges, to the companies' strategic detriment, from the PRC's domestic social worlds, including anti-political state-nationalism. In the final section, I explain why this replication of China's anti-(ethno)-political development failed.

China's anti-politics on an "Isolated Island"

The proponents of "Going Out" – the Chinese Government's outbound foreign investment policy – conceptualize the PRC's investments overseas as developmental aid that is *a-political*, compared to Western-originated aid practices (Yeh and Wharton 2016). The PRC model is to cooperate with foreign governments primarily in mutually beneficial natural resource extraction, offering much-needed infrastructure and livelihood improvement, while not interfering in the domestic politics of those sovereign countries. Consequently, the model's proponents criticize Western interventionism, which purports to evaluate developing countries and push them toward democratization, human rights improvement, fighting corruption, and other liberal-democratic end goals. PRC actors often call such Western practices, at best, counter-productive to economic development,

and at worst, neo-imperialist. Those criticisms follow the broader anti-interventionist foreign policy doctrine of the People's Republic. Focused primarily on obtaining natural resources for expanding domestic industries, Chinese state enterprises generally adapt to whatever political realities exist abroad and pursue pragmatic mercantilist policies (Holslag 2011). From the perspective of the now-institutionalized world of international aid, many projects which pro-Beijing accounts discuss as contributing to development abroad would be classed rather as for-profit private investments (Nyíri 2006). Critics charge that such development-investments are not truly "mutually beneficial," but rather "Sino-centric" (Ping 2013).

The Myitsone project – launched in the mid-2000s as China's largest ever hydropower project proposed abroad – follows the Going Out model closely. Thus, the story of the Myitsone Dam begins when a large Chinese state-owned hydropower corporation accepts an invitation to invest by the Western-sanctioned junta of neighboring Burma/Myanmar. The company's goal is to generate massive volumes of electricity, transport these across the two countries' border, and feed the growing demand in China. During the 2005 Asian–African Summit in Jakarta, a bilateral agreement for this strategic mega-project receives highest level governmental endorsement from Chinese President Hu Jintao and the leader of Myanmar's regime, Senior-General Than Shwe.¹

The hydropower mega-project envisions constructing a cascade of altogether seven large dams on the Mali and N'Mai rivers of northernmost Burma's sub-tropical Himalayan foothills. This cascade of dams would culminate with the largest and most important dam shortly downstream from these two rivers' confluence, known as *Myitsone*. The Myitsone confluence marks the beginning of Burma's great Irrawaddy River (also spelled as Ayeyarwady and Ayeyawady). If built, the Myitsone Dam, with a designed capacity of 6000 MW, would be among the world's 15 largest hydropower stations. All the seven dams together are to have a generating capacity of around 18,000 MW, nearly equal to the world's largest dam, China's massive Three Gorges. The multi-billion USD project begins as a joint venture between PRC's state-owned China Power Investment Corporation (CPI) as the main investor, the Burmese junta's Ministry of Electric Power, and the Burmese crony conglomerate Asia World, which is owned by the heir of an ethnic Kokang (Han-Chinese) drug lord. Ninety percent of the electricity generated would supply southern China's power grid. In terms of mutual benefit, Myanmar's government would receive tens of billions of USD in revenue, in addition to some badly needed free electricity. Moreover, after 50 years, the facilities would be transferred fully to Myanmar.²

Having made the deal and soon arriving in the Myitsone region to begin construction, the CPI's Chinese entrepreneurs put the Going Out model into practice. They adapt to the foreign government's political conditions, assume mutual political non-interference, import Chinese workers rather than hiring locals, and focus on resource extraction. For Burmese publics, the project remains surrounded by secrecy and silence; no negotiations are held with actors outside of Myanmar's junta. Such exclusion of publics is expected by the country's military-authoritarian rulers.

While this utmost secrecy stirs suspicions among Myanmar's population, it soon wins plaudits in Beijing (Higgins 2011). A report by China's state-owned assets agency hails the advancing mega-project as exemplary for the Going Out strategy. It praises the company's Communist Party units for their "closed management" and describes the predominantly Chinese-staffed construction site as protected from Myanmar's many surrounding dangers as if "an isolated island floating above the national soil of Burma"

(SASAC 2011). Visiting the Myitsone area during my field research in the summer of 2010, I am struck by the ubiquitous presence of sunglass-wearing Chinese professionals in shiny black jeeps making their way along dirt roads muddied by the rainy season. Skinny locals on cheap motorbikes, bicycles, and on foot take to the sides, while soldiers stationed at Myanmar Army checkpoints monitor everyone's movements.

However, while the investors have come with a primarily economic and supposedly a-political rationale, they do not arrive at an isolatable "island." Rather, they arrive in a specific social world, in which their mega-development is bound to become entangled and make a political intervention. That development projects, which conceptualize themselves as a-political, end up being very political interventions is not a novel theoretical argument in critical scholarship on international development. In this article, I merely draw on cultural anthropologist James Ferguson's (1994) seminal Lesotho-based ethnography. Ferguson famously critiqued Western aid organizations and the apparatus of "development" intervention for *anti-politics*: for tending to construe themselves as "a-political" and their projects as "impartial, a-political machines." These organizations, he wrote, refuse to acknowledge that development projects involve blatantly political decisions, such as how to allocate limited resources, and thus inevitably participate in and inadvertently influence local politics. In this paper, I will more specifically explore what I call the Myitsone project's "*anti-ethno-politics*."

Even though – or, especially because – China's globalized model for development differentiates itself from Western aid models by stressing state sovereignty, non-interference, and a mutual mercantile benefit, Ferguson's (1994) argument resonates. Myitsone area's Himalayan foothills, sub-tropical rainforests, river confluence, and sparse, impoverished villages where in the mid-2000s the Chinese hydropower businesspeople arrive are sites of deep historical conflict, tense military geography, and embattled ethno-political pursuits. As in Ferguson's Lesotho study, the outside organizers of "Upstream Irrawaddy development" refuse to recognize that the given "Third World" government is neither identical with the area's people nor a neutral, legitimate representative of them. Myanmar's military regime, which demands the dam companies partner exclusively with itself, is primarily an entity through which certain social classes advance their own control and interests. This involves suppressing the country's various ethnic populations, pro-democracy and ethno-nationalist resistance, and the diverse armed quasi-state organizations that rule territories in ethnic minority areas. In the Going Out arrangement, these hydropower entrepreneurs are bound to help both expand and de-politicize the authoritarian power of the Burmese military state in northern Myanmar's ethno-politically contested territories. The entrepreneurs will strengthen the side of the state in vicious state versus society conflicts and sideline relevant ethno-political actors beyond the state.

How the anti-political Myitsone project immediately participates in Burma's state-society conflicts materializes clearly in five villages around the confluence, where the companies soon begin to construct the largest of the seven planned dams. Because the entrepreneurs partnered exclusively with Myanmar's military-allied actors, neither they nor their collaborators ever negotiate with local populations. While CPI offers compensation, Myanmar's military authorities begin relocating village residents from the soon-to-be-flooded dam reservoir into company-built "model villages." This initial round of resettlement becomes largely a violent displacement of two thousand people. Village houses, schools, and orange orchards are forcefully bulldozed; threats and brutality are used; communities are broken. Many residents are severed from their agricultural

livelihoods because they are resettled onto infertile land. In a routine practice, the military-state-and-corporate alliance subdues local protests and ownership claims, causing many displaced and brutalized residents to resent the hydropower project. Moreover, village elites and activists allege that the intermediary Burmese state and crony actors stole much of CPI's original compensation money. Much larger amounts are alleged to have gone to senior figures in Myanmar's military as rewards for brokering the original deal. The project thus contributes to the country's decades-long pattern of social oppression and elite enrichment over impoverished populations, enforced by one of the world's most unrepresentative governments.

Simultaneously, the project's official name – “Upstream Ayeyawady Confluence Basin Hydropower Co., Ltd.” – veils only thinly its bold entrance into the geographic heart of northern Myanmar's fiercely embattled ethnic *Kachin*-dominated region. The complex populations that have become the Kachin nation consist of approximately one million people from several tightly integrated ethnic groups. Unlike Myanmar's majority Burman Buddhist population, Kachin people are predominantly Christian. The majority belong to the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), with the rest belonging to a sizable Catholic minority and other Protestant denominations.³

Intermittent war, militarization, and continuous political conflict have ravaged northernmost Burma's Kachin areas since the early 1960s. This history has pitted the insurgent Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) against Myanmar's military regime, dominated by ethnic Burmans (Dean 2007, 2011; Lintner 1997; Sadan 2013). The KIO has been characterized by differing levels of popular support, business corruption, violence, political prominence and sophistication, and military success throughout this history, while it has sought Kachin self-determination through independence or federal autonomy. The organization has approximately ten thousand troops under arms, making it the second largest army among Myanmar's diverse armed ethno-national quasi-states. Similar to several ethnic Karen, Wa, Shan, Mon, and other armed organizations, the KIO has for decades de facto governed certain autonomous territories across northern Burma with significant populations. It runs its own school system and includes departments of health, economy, culture, foreign relations, and so on. CPI does begin to communicate with the KIO, but still generally sidelines this popularly legitimated second government in the region, even though the Myitsone project also impinges upon KIO territory. The entrepreneurs thus take a state-centric approach and bolster the Burmese junta's contested vision of state sovereignty (Dean 2011; Grundy-Warr and Dean 2011) (Figure 1).

Beyond the KIO quasi-state, much of civilian Kachin society is today committed to a broad nationalist struggle for self-determination and the vision of a future ethno-national homeland. As I have learned through field research, many people collectively circumvent and navigate daily the hostile and risky political structures of Myanmar in order to prepare ground for such envisioned futures through work in education, religion, environmental protection, arts, NGO activism, youth mobilization, and so forth (Kiik [forthcoming](#)). The Myitsone hydropower project thus arrives not merely at the upper reaches of the great Irrawaddy River, but also into these complex, intense, ethno-politicized social worlds.

Therefore, as the Chinese mega-project embarks in the mid-2000s on ambitiously reshaping a historically contested landscape, it becomes an actor in broader political conflicts.



Figure 1. Map showing the location of northern Burma's Kachin State (in dark yellow) and the Myitsone Dam.

Source: Voice of America.

Ethno-politicizing development, in the Kachin region

Already before the first construction machines arrive on the Myitsone soil, the complexity of Kachin ethnic politics begins to entangle the ambitious Chinese mega-project. This story begins in Tanghppe, a major village near the confluence that is destined to be forcefully resettled. One day in 2002, a few Christian religious leaders of this ethnic Kachin village accidentally find out about the unannounced plans for building on their native lands a large hydropower dam. Some individuals, while scared of military persecution, initiate collective protest. One of these people tells me later, breaking into tears mid-conversation, how frustrated he was when not only Myanmar's junta authorities ignored their protest letters, but also most of their fellow Kachin ethno-national and religious authorities responded with no interest to his concerns about this mysterious future dam.

Despite initial hesitancy, there eventually emerges a broad anti-dam campaign beyond Tanghppe village and across the ethnic Kachin society's activist and Christian church networks. Starting in 2004, some transnationally linked Kachin activists launch underground research and protest mobilization. In 2007 and 2009, the Kachin Development Networking Group (KDNG) publishes reports both in English and Burmese, which are disseminated transnationally and get widely cited (2007a, 2009a). The reports describe and fiercely criticize the current and prospective damages to Tanghppe and the wider region. Such reports, everyday updates, and general anti-dam messages begin circulating within Kachin society through exile-based news organizations and, as I observe during fieldwork, through various church, youth, and other trainings and ethno-nationally exclusive gatherings. Risky signature collections are organized, to no other response from state authorities but arrests. Gathering momentum from the circulating reports about ill treatment of impoverished Kachin villagers and about how the dam reservoir would displace even greater populations, a pronounced opposition to the project soon

becomes widespread among Kachin activists, politicized youths, and social elites. In some politically active circles, I witness the Chinese mega-dam become a topic of everyday, heated conversation.

Yet, to show why an ethno-politicized opposition to this Chinese-led project grows so strong in Kachin society, I need to travel back in time and consider this region's broader context of large-scale resource grabs. In 1994, a historic ceasefire deal between Myanmar's military government and the KIO suspends decades of harsh warfare. Following this ceasefire, the government, the KIO, and other regional military-political actors cooperate in opening up the resource-rich landscapes for large-scale extraction. Primarily Chinese and crony Burmese businesspeople monopolize the booming resource economies, alongside some Kachin elites. Their various activities include clear-cut rain-forest logging (Global Witness 2003, 2005, 2009; PKDS and KESAN 2004); the multi-billion USD business around the world's only commercial jadeite mines (AKSYU 2008; Global Witness 2015; KDNG 2009b); hydraulic gold mining (Images Asia and PKDS 2004; KDNG 2007b); mono-crop plantations of cash crops (KDNG 2010; Kramer and Woods 2012); the Chinese-led strategic Shwe oil-and-gas pipeline (ERI 2010, 2011; SGM 2011); and wildlife trade (Sapai Min 2012). Soon, ethnic Kachin and transnational activists begin to document all these processes in considerable detail in research and advocacy reports, referenced here above. They find that while natural resource companies, military authorities, and the Chinese economy profit greatly from this little-known region's resources, the local populations gain little, yet many suffer greatly. Locally, most of these resource grabs accelerate violent land dispossession, ecological destruction, exploitation of impoverished labor, and social disruptions, including a very wide spread of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS.

For the local observers I know, the Myitsone hydropower project becomes inseparable from that much larger extractive complex. Indeed, after the Irrawaddy mega-project arrives to this tumultuous landscape, it proceeds along locally familiar patterns of militarily enforced and Chinese-led resource extraction and native dispossession. However, by these mid-2000s, individuals within the Kachin ethno-nationalist social movement have initiated a burgeoning stream of activities in the transnationally recognized genre of "environmentalism" to respond to the large-scale resource grabs. They have gained experience and are determined to fight the Myitsone Dam similarly.

Moreover, my field research reveals that while many of the anti-dam discourses that are intended for outside audiences center on ecological and human rights concerns, the active Kachin opposition itself stems primarily from a popular analytical ethno-nationalization of perceived threats (see also Qin 2012). Namely, many Kachin observers come to analyze the mega-dam as an issue beyond environmental damage, unfair profit distribution, and human suffering, and rather as part of an alarming set of existential threats to Kachin national survival. For example, a key claim of the Kachin activist NGO reports (KDNG 2007a, 2009a) is that the massive dam reservoir will still uproot a great number of people, causing huge disruptions in the Kachin national society. One activist tells me she fears it will set back decades of the ethnic nation's social progress. Many others fear for security, pointing to previous, smaller, but deadly dam collapses in the region. Opponents claim that, in this area prone to earthquakes, breaking of the gigantic Myitsone Dam would wash away the whole of Myitkyina town, capital of Kachin State, and its 300,000 residents.

Since these observers further situate the Myitsone issue into a broader set of Kachin popular nationalist analyses, the dam project becomes thoroughly entangled in regional ethnic politics and China's previous histories here. Many argue that, like the junta's

other concessions for resource extraction to foreign companies, the seven Irrawaddy dams enable strategic state-military expansion against the KIO and against general ethnic Kachin control in this contested region (see also Zuo 2013). Some Kachin nationalists fear that as the construction of this “isolated island” proceeds, the companies will bring in tens of thousands of Chinese workers, as is common in PRC development projects abroad. Based on experiences of Burman, PRC-Chinese, and other in-migration into jade and gold mining areas, they think this influx of Chinese workers will add to the demographic minoritization of Kachins and to the “moral corruption” of the conservative, predominantly Christian society.

Many situate the ominous Chinese mega-dams within perceived anti-Kachin conspiracies and “genocide” strategies by the Burmese military. One leader of the anti-Myitsone Dam campaign expresses to me his belief that the dams with their massive reservoirs are a key part of a multifaceted Burmese regime strategy to destroy the potential for an autonomous Kachinland. Another young man echoes numerous interviews I have done, when he puts it more simply: “Myanmar Army sold Myitsone to the Chinese, to China, because Myanmar hates the Kachin people and Kachin land.” What I find most important here is that across much of Kachin society of the last few decades, there exists a deep conception of besiegement, conspiratorial foreign threat, and national emergency; large-scale resource extraction projects like the Myitsone Dam are understood within this framework (see Kiik *forthcoming*).

Last but not least, Kachin nationalists approach conflicts like this from an ideological paradigm, whereby Kachins, Burmans, and Chinese form an inter-national triangle, in which Kachins should be an equal actor to the other two, despite not presently having an independent nation state. In my observation, the dominant Kachin discourse often does not view the Kachin nation as part of Myanmar, commonly referring to ancestral populations who were not governed by Burman states. The post-colonial military state has been experienced largely as a “foreign” enemy. Thus, some Kachin activist poetry addresses the Chinese nation on the Myitsone issue by asking rhetorically: “How would you feel if someone destroyed your national pride, the Great Wall?” Such political discourse further sacralizes and ethno-nationalizes the Myitsone confluence area, which already figured in the ancestral migration histories of the Kachins’ dominant Jinghpaw sub-group and during the previous decades of civil war was configured as part of a rain-forested “national heartland” under ethnic Kachin and KIO control. More generally, Kachin nationalist historiographies and Christian cosmologies, which have become increasingly influential, posit Kachin Land as essentially predestined to ownership by the Kachin nation, or *Wunpawng*, despite most of this land having always been multi-ethnic (Kiik *forthcoming*). Within such frameworks, the idea that non-Kachins would decide over this land’s fate, dispossess and hurt natives, initiate massive extraction projects, and take all financial profits without Kachin political consultation is viewed as a grave moral injustice. Therefore, many politically active Kachins conceptualize mobilizing co-ethno-nationals to fight for the Mali and N’Mai riverscapes and homelands as their patriotic duty.

It thus becomes inevitable for the state-centric and anti-political practice of “Chinese Development” to clash with these ethno-nationalist, non-state, and conflict-ridden social worlds. This clash culminates in March 2011, when the KIO decides to oppose the primary Myitsone Dam, despite the quasi-state’s dependence on good relations with neighboring China’s local authorities. The KIO Chairman Lanyaw Zawng Hra sends an open letter to the PRC government warning that the project could spark civil war if Burmese military troops invaded KIO territory to guard construction works (KIO 2011). China

Power Investment quickly becomes caught between Burmese Government pressure to not associate with the KIO, on the one hand, and the KIO and Kachin activist opposition, on the other, in an increasingly heated terrain.

The company leaders decide to push ahead. Protected by a China–Myanmar inter-governmental agreement and Myanmar Army enforcements, they attempt to cordon the Myitsone “island” off from these explosive social worlds and military-political geographies. They continue by publicly ignoring and refusing to negotiate with the KIO, as well as the growing Kachin social opposition. By employing throughout the years of construction a kind of secure “anti-ethno-political silence,” the entrepreneurs discursively erase non-state actors and ethno-political discord. As Zuo (2013, 22) similarly suggests, the Myitsone developers’ discursive strategy of “ambiguity” involves the simplification of local context and distancing themselves from the complexity of social reality.

Amid this silence and ambiguity, a rare public expression by the companies of how they discursively de-ethno-politicize their mega-project is a May 2011 promotional film. It is intended not for Burmese or global audiences, but rather those back in China. The half-hour film is released by Sinohydro (2011), the world’s largest hydropower construction company and a subcontractor of the Myitsone project, and is titled *Aozhan Mizhina*, or “Fierce Fighting Myitkyina.” It primarily describes in the romantic fashion of Maoist era state propaganda how highly motivated Chinese construction workers heroically battle the jungle, malaria and Dengue fever, the lack of infrastructure, and other obstacles in order for the hydroelectricity companies to successfully “enter the Myanmar market.” However, before that, the film needs to perform a tricky task – to introduce where the planned Myitsone mega-dam is located. The Mandarin language film narrator does this by introducing Myitkyina, capital of Kachin State, 40 km south of the Myitsone confluence:

Myitkyina, in Myanmar language meaning “riverside city”; this is a city casually bundled up by the green world. The buildings are sparse and simple. The living pace of people here is slow and easy. On the roadside one will occasionally see a naughty kid riding on an elephant’s back. It seems laid-back and contented. Moreover the endless Buddhist temples of a myriad kind. It is as if we who came on a road from afar were brought into a mysterious primitive world ... (2011)

Video shots of houses, children riding an elephant, and Buddha statues and pagodas accompany the narration. Later, the film concludes with the sound of a Buddhist temple bell.

This film is a carefully calculated representation with which a Chinese company expresses its vision of apolitical development and discursively de-ethno-politicizes its extractive project in a contested region. The exoticizing introduction explicitly turns the Myitsone Dam’s war-torn area, which is primarily home to Christian Kachin populations, into a mysterious, primitive, happy-go-lucky, green and natural, Buddhist Burmese land. Native populations merge with the natural environment in this land, which lacks infrastructure and awaits to be developed and, indeed, civilized, by the hardworking agents of China’s state capitalism. This is all reminiscent of the “colonial gaze” of Europe’s imperial age. Moreover, by presenting the construction site via “Myitkyina town, Myanmar,” the authors succeed in not uttering the word “Kachin,” not even through the administrative unit of “Kachin State,” in the full length of this film. The film thus not only hides problems of ecology, human rights, and military conflict, but goes further: in

the name of the development project, it folds the region's predominant ethnic society into full nonexistence.⁴

Eventually, the anti-political business strategy of creating an "isolated island" fails when the social worlds around the dams flood into the mega-project. In June 2011 – a few weeks after the entrepreneurs released that promotional video – military conflict engulfs the Kachin region. A return to war was brewing for months since Myanmar's military leadership began pressuring the KIO to capitulate and previous diplomatic relations between the two sides broke down. As battles spread quickly, access bridges are blown up and landmines planted; soon the war paralyzes most of the dam construction. Several Kachin activists have argued to me that this fighting already constitutes the de facto Myitsone Dam suspension, even if the project formally still continued until the Burmese Government's official halting a few months later. Certainly, the resumption of war is a vital stage in how the Myitsone hydroelectric mega-project dissolves into an affair not of economy, ecology, or inter-state relations, but fundamentally of state and society conflict and militarized ethno-national politics.

As I write this article, the military conflict and social crisis in the Kachin region continue. Over one hundred thousand people have fled their homes from the battles and the recurring killings, rapes, and abuses by Myanmar Army soldiers. For the last few years, likely more than every tenth Kachin person, including many children, lives in a crowded refugee camp. Many local ethnic Shans and others have become caught between the two sides. CPI has evacuated most of its staff.⁵

Re-ethno-politicizing development, in lower Myanmar

Yet, this history of how ethnic politics underpin China's Myitsone failure continues. Beginning around 2009, concern about the hydropower mega-project gradually mobilizes some multi-ethnic networks in the cities of Lower Myanmar, too. This happens despite the fact that anti-dam campaigning previously remained within exclusive ethnic Kachin networks and was largely disconnected from the rest of Myanmar. Crucial to making the initial linkages from Kachin State's Myitkyina to Burma's largest city, the former capital, Yangon, are a few ethnic Kachin activists based in Yangon and a few key ethnic Burman political activists who facilitate the transfer of information. Moreover, because Burmese Government authorities in Myitkyina arrest and crack down on Kachin student campaigners, some of them flee to Yangon. Soon, a handful of mostly ethnic Burman activists, who are connected to Burmese artist and literary communities, begin pushing a process of relatively uncoordinated, loose networking, and underground mobilization (Anonymous 2012a). Then, in March 2011, the Burmese military forms a new quasi-civilian government that soon begins a dramatic reforms process and partial democratization that includes relaxation of speech restrictions. These changes gradually enable increasingly open campaigning.

By autumn 2011, this anti-dam mobilization swells into an unprecedented public campaign in Yangon and other cities. "Save the Irrawaddy" enlists famous political activists, artists, writers, scholars, journalists, cartoonists, musicians, conservationists, and eventually the revered democratic opposition hero Aung San Suu Kyi herself. The movement plays out in non-government media, which is now permitted to carry strident criticisms of the Myitsone project and of members of government, as well as in petitions, works of art, religious sermons, online campaigning, and town hall meetings. Researchers, campaigners, independent media organizations, and opposition politicians demand transparency over the secretive project and its environmental impacts. This is

the first real national debate in the military-dominated Myanmar in decades, while still largely remaining an intellectual elites' endeavor only.

Much of "Save the Irrawaddy" stems, again, from agendas of ethnic politics, including some strategic efforts to build Burman–Kachin inter-ethnic solidarity. Key Burman initiators tell me how they conceptualized their campaign, in the context of resumed war and popular Kachin hatred against Burman society, as an ethno-political project "about peace, and to show solidarity with the Kachin community." Similarly, some 2011 Burman anti-dam discourses warn that a rift between the official "National Races" of Myanmar will deepen if the Myitsone Dam is not stopped. For such campaigners, China's Myitsone Dam embodies an enemy through which to unite ethnicities. Opposition to it becomes tied with peace efforts, which attempt to prove to Kachin publics that "not all Burman people are the same" as the widely hated Myanmar Army.

Beyond these inter-ethnic politics, my research suggests that the 2011 anti-dam campaigning in Lower Myanmar – just as in the Kachin region – becomes popularized primarily through nationalist perspectives. Key initiators tell me that they see it as necessary to tap into mainstream Burmese nationalism to mobilize publics against the Irrawaddy project. The campaigners primarily raise concerns about potential downstream effects of the dam cascade, particularly on the already endangered river's health, the desertification of Burma's central Dry Zone, and the river-dependent agriculture of the Irrawaddy Delta. This transforms the Myitsone project into an issue pertaining intimately to people downstream from the Kachin region; that is, to the majority of the Burmese population, including the majority ethnic Burmans. It becomes not "merely" a Kachin and "minority" issue, as it remained for Burmese publics for several previous years, but instead a Burman and national Myanmar issue. Major events in the anti-dam campaign follow in this register, such as a prominent art exhibition in Yangon depicting the Irrawaddy River in nationalistic terms as the threatened, unique life blood of Myanmar and lamenting its anticipated destruction by the dams as a kind of national demise. The campaign conceptualizes ecological conservation as nationalism, as was earlier done in Kachin society. Thus, the project is re-ethno-politicized.

Instead of Kachin ethno-national concerns, the Lower Myanmar's public uproar generalizes the Myitsone project into Burman ethno-political analyses of a perceived existential Chinese threat. The mega-dam becomes a lightning rod for rising disquiet over growing Chinese dominance in Myanmar's economy. During recent decades, some Burman publics have become increasingly angered over commercial expansion by ethnic Han business people in Burma's second-largest Mandalay city, an influx of low-quality PRC manufactured products, and Chinese-led natural resource grabs across Myanmar (CGA 2009; Fan 2014). Min Zin (2012) has reviewed Burmese language literature and other Burman cultural production, arguing that a nationalist anti-Chinese sentiment has been observable in Burman society since at least the mid-1980s. The public outcry over the Irrawaddy hydropower project, however, becomes the most significant and intense popular expression of this sentiment since Burma's anti-Chinese riots in 1969. The undercurrent of "Save the Irrawaddy" articles, speeches, sermons, cartoons, art exhibitions, book sales, and other expressions, especially the numerous angry social media postings, is a critique of "Chinese exploitation" of the country and China's collaboration with the Burmese junta (2012). The popular Burmese perception of such a threatening "foreign colonialism" makes the anti-dam campaign for many a patriotic mission, as had previously happened within Kachin society.

However, while the "Save the Irrawaddy" effort thus gains much traction domestically by successfully ethno-politicizing the Myitsone controversy, the campaign

culminates by contributing to a global reconfiguration of Myanmar's inter-state relations. When on 30 September 2011, the new quasi-civilian regime's President Thein Sein unexpectedly announces that his government is unilaterally suspending the mega-dam's construction, the news immediately makes global media headlines. Since Thein Sein cites "the people's will," many domestic and outside observers welcome his decision as proof of the authenticity of his proclaimed democratic reforms. Indeed, the government's positive response to the popular anti-dam campaign remains one of the most stunning and symbolic events in the former pariah state's globally celebrated reform process, as well as a widely cited success of grass-roots environmental and civic activism. To the extent that the extravagant unilateral suspension seems to represent a signal to global audiences and a rebuff to Beijing, it also becomes a pivotal event for the later rapid re-engagement with Myanmar's then nominally civilian government by the governments of North America, Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and many others.

Analysts immediately begin debating why Thein Sein responded the way he did. Notably, he halted only the Myitsone Dam, while saying nothing of the project's six other smaller dams upstream. Some argue he tried to prevent another major popular uprising similar to that of the 2007 Saffron Uprising or to the then-expanding Arab Spring, which some Irrawaddy campaigners warned of, when the movement snowballed in the autumn of 2011. Lintner (2011a) points to anxiety over escalating dependency on China among Myanmar's intensely xenophobic military leaders as another reason behind the suspension. Burmese military leaders still remember the decades of fighting against a Communist insurgency that was funded by Mao's China. They see the potential for China to control the water flow of Burma's main river through the dams as a national security threat. To explain Myanmar's whole post-2010 reform process, Lintner (2012) refers to a secret 2004 Burmese defense strategic study, which states that having China as a diplomatic ally and economic patron has created a "national emergency" that threatens the country's independence. That study suggests the US Government would drop its debilitating sanctions, if Myanmar's authorities aligned with US strategic interests against China's domination. Indeed, Pavin (2012), Lintner (2011b), and many other observers argue that Naypyidaw's foreign policy strategy is "to play the China card" in order to win support from countries eager to see pushback against the aggressive expansion of China's influence in Asia-Pacific. Sun (2012) argues that China's policy circles misjudged by not foreseeing that US engagement policy with Myanmar would intensify after Myanmar's reforms. These analyses convincingly show that, besides the relevance of Kachin and Myanmar ethno-political dynamics, the Chinese state and business actors similarly failed to predict the changing geopolitical imperatives of Myanmar's military elites, as well.

Yet, too much of global journalist and scholarly discourse has since narrowly focused on these inter-state and geopolitical dimensions of the highly symbolic Myitsone affair, especially on perceived US-China governmental rivalry. Too often, observers have neglected to study the complex social history that primarily and originally led to the developmental conflict itself. I argue that we should start our analysis from that social history.

Thus, my above narrative is not to try to explain the president's true motives, still unknown. Rather, it goes to argue that while the Myitsone suspension has significant explanations and consequences in terms of inter-state relations, as well as crucial ecological, economic, and civic-democratic dimensions, its original causality is primarily ethno-political. Whatever the true motives of President Thein Sein when he halts the mega-dam construction in autumn 2011 and thus creates a globally noted inter-state

affair that suited the military elites' geostrategic purposes, his decision was made possible in the first place by a long and consequential social history of conflict from Tanghphe village to Kachin networks to Yangon and beyond. This social history originally created the conditions for the new reformist government's policy reversal to become thinkable. Geopolitics is thus always partially produced by non-state social histories. Moreover, Lintner's (2011a) argument that nationalist military elites' anxiety over dependence on China helped motivate the president's decision demonstrates further how clashing nationalisms defined the Myitsone affair. Last but not least, Thein Sein's official suspension remains *de facto* only the "second" suspension, after the outbreak of ethno-political war in the Kachin region already forced a halt to the Myitsone Dam's construction months earlier. Altogether, the history leading up to Thein Sein's decision becoming thinkable is largely defined by ethnic politics, nationalisms, and state–society conflict. I will discuss this Kachin and Burmese social history of the Myitsone affair in more depth in a forthcoming article.

De-ethno-politicizing development thus failed when the project faced the complexity of ethnic politics in Myanmar and both ethnic Kachin and Burman/Myanmar nationalisms. The entrepreneurs misread these forces and did not anticipate the project suspension due either to the Kachin war, Kachin ethno-nationalist campaigning, the KIO's opposition, the Lowland Burmese Irrawaddy activism, or the Myanmar's nationalist military elites' strategic shift. The negative stances both of popular Burman nationalism and of Myanmar's junta elites toward "Chinese colonialism" highlights, similar to the Kachin region, how China's interrelated histories with neighboring countries can uniquely complicate the Going Out campaign in parts of Asia.

Chinese companies, Chinese nationalism, domestic heuristics

The history of why this Chinese mega-project collapsed in Myanmar continues to unfold today. If primarily ethno-political drivers underlie this social history, then we can now begin to gauge why the PRC's anti-(ethno)-political development approach failed at the Myitsone. I turn to the Chinese dam proponents' public responses in the post-suspension aftermath. These demonstrate that the entrepreneurs' reliance on their domestic PRC political heuristics precipitates their eventual failure. These heuristics include anti-democratic and state-centric interpretations of development process legitimacy, de-ethno-politicizing discourse about the relationship between development and ethno-national minorities within a state, and a false explanation of social opposition through perceived Western conspiracies against China. To trace these heuristics, I analyze the post-suspension public discourse of various Chinese project proponents, including interviews published in Chinese and Burmese media outlets, pro-dam newspaper reports, and project advocacy materials.⁶

The sudden 2011 unilateral suspension of Myitsone Dam's construction not only disrupts China–Myanmar inter-state relations, but also triggers considerable controversy in some Chinese media, business, and policy circles. The Chinese Government expresses shock and protest, yet remains cautious in adapting to Myanmar's rapidly changing political environment, reforms, and new foreign policy. Its most immediate concern is to prevent disruptions to its other mega-projects in the country, like the strategic Shwe oil-and-gas pipeline. Soon, Burma witnesses new campaigns against other controversial Chinese, Thai, and other investments, most prominently against the Chinese-owned Letpadaung copper mine. Many Chinese journalists and commentators react to the Myitsone fiasco by gathering "lessons" from the incident for future improvement in Chinese

business practices abroad. Some criticize Chinese investors for taking unreasonable risks abroad, including by relying exclusively on government-to-government agreements. Others suggest that Chinese companies should offer more public goods and transparency to host societies. All the while, the state-owned China Power Investment (CPI), which claims to have already invested over one billion USD into the Irrawaddy project, continues suffering huge costs due to the suspension. CPI managers complain that without the Myitsone mega-dam at the planned seven-dam cascade's center, the whole multi-billion endeavor loses meaning.

My findings about the failure of “Chinese Development” at CPI's Myitsone Dam come with some important caveats against over-generalization. First, next to other more socially responsive and gradually improving Chinese hydropower companies, CPI has a comparatively bad track record abroad (International Rivers 2015). CPI thus does not represent all Chinese hydropower investors or all PRC state-owned corporations well (Julian Kirchherr, pers. comm.). Secondly, the practices of Chinese state-owned enterprises vary from country to country, adapting to radically different legal and political conditions. Myanmar's junta-era conditions produced much of the authoritarian practice around the Myitsone project. Much of the blame for the project's abuses and neglect belongs to the project's Burmese military-state and private partners, including the military crony company Asia World. Burmese and other publics nonetheless tend to single out CPI. This is part of a global pattern whereby popular views tend to unjustly blame Chinese (or other foreign) investors for the misdeeds of local project partners (Kirchherr, Disselhoff, and Charles 2016). This happens especially easily in places like Burma, where general prejudice and hatred against Han-Chinese people is widespread.

State-centricity

Nonetheless, most broadly, the Myitsone case is a failure of the otherwise relatively successful “non-interfering” PRC development model, which may be characterized by state-centric and anti-democratic interpretations of development process legitimacy. The model inevitably clashes with the reality of deep state–society conflict in Burma, this foreign country which the businesspeople are investing into. Many observers in Myanmar, in China itself, and outside conclude similarly after the dam's suspension makes headlines. Yet, in their public statements, the Chinese company leaders continuously stress that the Burmese Government should not break a binding contract already signed and usually deny the relevance or scientific sophistication of social opposition. One observer (Liao 2011) summarizes the problem thus: “The crux of the issue is: does ‘legal’ automatically mean ‘legitimate’?”

When Myanmar's semi-democratizing reforms begin after 2010, the Chinese dam companies nonetheless continue their heavily state-centric approach because they rely upon the state-centric political analyses of their owner – the PRC government. Beijing tends generally to disbelieve that any non-democratic government would willingly give up its absolute power, and hence China's Myanmar policy circle underestimated the country's post-election democratic momentum (Sun 2012). In interviews with Chinese analysts and officials, Sun (2012) finds that they had believed firmly that the Myanmar state would remain “loyal” to its influential ally China and would thus not dare to jeopardize a project as important to China as Myitsone. They mistakenly believed that public opinion in the authoritarian country could not overnight become a determining factor and that Burmese Government's support, which was all one seemed to need during the notoriously corrupt era of military rule, could always be acquired by bribes.

But after the unexpected setback in 2011, the hydropower companies decide to modify their strategy of secrecy and of non-engagement with non-state actors. They begin breaking their formerly consistent anti-(ethno)-political silences, even if only partially. Project leaders and dam advocates attempt to reach out and convince broader publics in Myanmar about the benefits of their project, giving interviews, releasing promotional materials, and lobbying different non-state actors. Yet, the vast majority of this effort revolves around debunking claims about earthquake dangers, ecological damage, and economic fairness, which on the surface seem like the prime concerns of anti-dam campaigners.⁷ Thus, the developers generally fail to address the ethno-political drivers behind much of the public opposition. The Chinese dam proponents' standard narrative is perfectly exemplified by CPI's director of public affairs in 2014, when he says: "There was no activity against the project until just before its suspension. We had a very good relationship with local people" (May Sit Paing 2014).

However, in some statements, the developers and their advocates do eventually address the inter-ethnic dimensions of the Myitsone conflict. Those particular responses are what interest me most here, since I have argued that the project's failure originates primarily in inter-ethnic politics.

The nexus of development and "Traditional Minorities"

CPI's leaders and allies eventually begin publicly making sense of and responding to oppositional ethnic politics during the final days prior to the suspension. An early example is an environmental impact assessment report (CISPDR 2010), which CPI releases to counter a previous, critical report by Burmese conservationists. This extensive advocacy text generally ignores or denies the ecological and social issues that the Burmese conservationists raised. In a brief section, it also remarks vaguely that "the development area is minority zone," but that its study found no negative cultural impact. Thus, it forecloses discussion of ethno-political complexity. Instead, the report discursively naturalizes the forced village resettlements, which were the original cause for Kachin nationalist anger, by labeling the displaced populations "the migrants." Therefore, initially, the companies break their strategic anti-ethno-political silence or ambiguity only very little.

However, it is amid their post-suspension public outreach in Myanmar that Chinese dam proponents are prompted to openly verbalize their anti-ethno-political position toward the Kachin nationalist opposition. In January 2012, CPI publishes a rare, relatively unknown, but rather extensive statement by a Chinese dam lobbyist on the Myitsone project's website (Zhang 2012). Presented by CPI as a "senior expert," the lobbyist purports to "clarify the facts" in response to concerns raised by Burmese nationals during the "Save the Irrawaddy" campaign. One question that the lobbyist chooses to address relates to how the mega-project will substitute the loss of "natural scenery" and "the precious traditional culture" at Myitsone. In this discourse, "traditional culture" is a de-ethno-politicizing proxy term for how the Kachin anti-dam activists publicly frame the confluence area as their essential ethno-national heritage. After first explaining how, thanks to the mega-dam, the region's nature will become only "more beautiful," Zhang (2012) takes up the issue of "traditional culture":

The traditional culture is unlikely to vanish either due to the construction of a reservoir and the improvement of living conditions after resettlement. [...] Some old culture and customs related to the past poverty and ignorance are sure to be gone. For instance, the United

States, the most developed country in the current world, develops after changing the old culture of the local native tribes. [...]

Tibet in China is also a region with striking characteristics of traditional culture. [...] With the economic development and social progress, the majority of Tibetan will make their own choice and some traditional culture is bound to disappear. Take the serf system of Tibetan for example. A few Tibetan serf-owners always wish to keep the serf system as the traditional culture, but the Tibetan people will not allow it.

[...] we must prevent some people from using the slogans of protecting cultural heritage to obstruct the social progress. For instance, we cannot preserve the black slave system in the US and the serf system in Tibet with the reason of protecting the cultural heritages for generations. [...] We should have a correct understanding of traditional and cultural heritage. [...] As far as we know, no sites in the Myitsone area have been listed as the world cultural heritage so far. If any, we will provide proper preservation absolutely during development and construction.

Since the lobbyist presents a clear-cut dichotomy between “some traditional culture,” which is “related to the past poverty and ignorance,” versus a supposedly singular notion of “economic development and social progress,” he asserts that the issue at hand is devoid of politics. There is no place for political negotiation or even disagreement about whether to build the dams at all, who gets to decide, how are benefits distributed, or the responsibilities and rights of different people involved. This approach resonates with Ferguson’s (1994) critique, referenced above, whereby Western aid organizations assert technical solutions to deeply political questions, which they have re-cast as merely “technical problems.” This move results in “the suspension of politics from even the most sensitive political operations.” Thus, this lobbyist for CPI transforms the Myitsone Dam suspension from a political conflict into a question of “correct” expert technical assessment and the professional realization of “development.” In several other of his advocacy articles, this de-politicizing approach is bolstered by his monopolizing claims to “science and facts,” for example, through detailed accounts of producible megawatts and anticipated economic benefits. These accounts, the lobbyist argues, should be used to “educate” publics toward a “correct understanding” of the dichotomous relationship between social progress and cultural heritage. That purportedly technical issue stands proxy for the complex political question about the legitimacy of an authoritarian state’s economic development versus the legitimacy of an ethno-nationalist claim to self-determination. The hidden political question is: How should the Upper Irrawaddy hydro-power project and Kachin nationhood relate?

On that conflictual question, this lobbyist’s answer testifies powerfully to how Chinese project advocates consistently voice their anti-ethno-political stance through proxy, ambiguity, and selective silence. As in the promotional film discussed above, even though the lobbyist introduces an elaborate rhetoric of global comparisons from Tibet to USA, his extensive published advocacy texts never make an actual mention of Kachin people by name. Indeed, besides a few recent conspicuous counter-examples, none of the Chinese pro-dam advocacy materials I have reviewed ever name “Kachins.” The total absence of such references reflects a strategy of evading, which has the political effect of marginalizing and de-legitimizing the Kachin nationalist publics and the KIO. The advocates of the state-capitalist companies choose to avoid naming or discursively engaging these ethno-political actors in order not to destabilize their own anti-political developmental narrative. The goal is not specifically “anti-Kachin,” contrary to Kachin

popular conspiratorial analyses. Instead, the goal is to exclude fundamental ethno-political dimensions of the mega-project from complicating business activities, state-to-state agreements, and plans for profit sharing. It is a mere side result that (as the entrepreneurs construe themselves as if apolitical providers of technical development who do not participate in the intense ethnic politics of this landscape) they also do de-ethnicize that landscape discursively.

What interests me most here is that in its denial of the relevance of ethnic politics in conflicts over development, the CPI-commissioned lobbyist's response draws on the heuristic toolkit of the developers' own Chinese nationalism by invoking the PRC's dominant discourse on the nexus of "national minorities" and development. The contemporary Chinese state de-ethno-politicizes its own domestic population with a powerful set of largely Soviet-inspired state-nationalist representations and rigorously regulated cultural production about ethnic minorities. An extensive body of research has shown how these methodically exoticize, barbarize, and infantilize non-Han groups in an asymmetric relation to dominant Hans, who in turn are represented as natural carriers of modernity and development to the "tradition-bound" and "wild" minority peoples (Gladney 1994; Litzinger 2000; Mueggler 2002; Schein 2000). Most of all, PRC state discourses and extravagant cultural productions essentialize an a-historic belonging of all state-recognized ethnic categories to the "colorfully multi-ethnic, yet racially united *Zhonghua Minzu* ('Chinese nation/race')." Such state racial-nationalist discourses work to undercut non-Han identity politics, ethno-political autonomy, and cultural rights. The Chinese state advances such anti-ethno-politics to explain and naturalize its strict political primacy and monopoly over producing modernity and development when faced with those non-state nationalisms, such as Tibetan and Uighur, which threaten state power.

The lobbyist cited above draws from these Chinese state heuristics to parallel Kachins in Myanmar and Tibetans in China, and to assert "correct" understandings of culture versus obstructions to "progress." He construes Myitsone's "traditional culture" with tropes from decades of strongly anti-ethno-political PRC discourse. These tropes have long included routine comparisons of pre-annexation Tibetan serfdom with historical US enslavement of African people and deadly conquest of native North American populations to legitimize the PRC's policies in the Tibetan, Uighur, and other contested regions. The "correct" understanding, which the lobbyist expects Myanmar's publics to obtain, is that the issue in places like Tibet, and thus with the Myitsone and the Kachin case, is not one of self-determination or political autonomy, but of benevolent state-led development, which helps tradition-bound, apolitical "minorities" develop and which their broad "masses" are said to support. The lobbyist's quote thus demonstrates how PRC's state-nationalist discourses on ethnic "others" may easily spill over into social contexts abroad, when Chinese development actors attempt to mobilize these native anti-ethno-political means to deal with foreign ethnic nationalisms and non-state ethno-political actors.

Yet, the dominant developmentalist ideology of China brought by the dam entrepreneurs conflicts with social realities in Myanmar. The contemporary PRC government relies upon a developmentalism, whereby government legitimacy stems fundamentally from being able to produce economic growth and improve livelihoods (Sun 2012). The "correct" choice that the lobbyist intends to introduce for Myanmar's audiences is for economic development to eclipse all other social projects, such as of non-state ethnic politics. In this view, development should not be politicized, even less, ethno-politicized. The glaring problem with this approach is that history in Myanmar has been distinct; ethnicity in Myanmar works differently. Ethnicity is central to the country's political life

in ways unimaginable in China. Myanmar's military regimes have not been nearly as successful in nation-building and integrating diverse ethno-national populations into a "majority/minorities" framework as the PRC has (Grundy-Warr and Dean 2011). This is particularly true for those ethnic societies in Burma that have armed quasi-state organizations, as a comparison between Myanmar's forceful Kachin nationalism and China's respective "Jingpo nationality" well exemplifies (Ho forthcoming).

"Western Conspiracy against China"

To explain and discredit the Kachin and Burmese social opposition, Chinese company leaders and their proponents similarly turn to their own nationalism's heuristic toolkit, when invoking notions of a "Western conspiracy against China." Largely drawing from USSR political discourse, the authoritarian state actors in (post)-communist China have commonly dismissed social protests as supposedly intellectually vulnerable masses who have been instigated by evil-intentioned "bad elements" or "external forces." China's nationalist discourse commonly accuses Western countries of trying to undermine "China's rise."

In autumn 2011 – when opposition to the Myitsone mega-project in Myanmar can no longer be ignored – CPI's leaders, as well as many allied Chinese journalists and analysts, begin routinely mobilizing this heuristic. Tens of articles and statements are published on CPI's behalf that divert attention away from the Kachin and Burmese ethno-political motivations of resistance and toward alleged Western, especially US and Japanese, "anti-China plots." This specific reaction to the Myitsone Dam suspension spreads rapidly across Chinese media and other public fora, where the controversy becomes often interpreted as "yet another humiliation" to the country's national pride by those "conspiring, encircling, and bullying" the "still-weak China." In this way, the Myitsone scandal becomes about national self-determination not only for many Kachins and Burmese, but also for some concerned Chinese people.

These heuristics of conspiracy and suspicion are richly exemplified in one pro-Beijing newspaper's 2013 pro-company reportage. In it, the journalist dismisses the possibility that "Westerners" would likely travel to Kachin State's capital Myitkyina for reasons other than undermining China's interests and its relations with Myanmar (L. Li 2013; Ta Kung Pao 2013):

On the flight from Myitkyina to Yangon, a Chinese Myanmar lady named Guo Yumin [...] told me that "there is nothing but jade minerals and the Chinese-backed Myitsone Hydropower Project in northern Myanmar. The NGOs are clearly not interested in jadestones; therefore, their goal is just the hydropower project." [...] Although not visiting home much each year, she has felt an obvious change in her hometown, i.e., an ever increasing number of western visitors. "Surely, not all of them are tourists. Most of them are NGO workers and journalists," she said.

In the completed Aung Myint Thar resettlement village [...], there are NGOs quietly funding the resettled people to incite them to oppose the hydropower project constructed by the Chinese company. [...] Such things have led to a saying popular in the local area, i.e., "some people just leave while carrying the US dollar cash after inflaming the locals."

Numerous other Chinese conspiratorial analyses that I have reviewed similarly use a certain set of vague trigger phrases, such as "some NGOs," "external forces," and "ulterior motives." In PRC's domestic pro-regime discourse, such phrases are all commonly

read to insinuate Western anti-China meddling. For example, in a post-suspension interview, Lu Qizhou, CPI's President, was reported to say that there are "some people" who falsely criticize the project and that those are a "few Western NGOs," whose "real purposes" are suspiciously unclear (China Daily 2011). Elsewhere, proponents have insinuated that the opposition is US-led "evil people" who have damaged the future of Myanmar.

This particular explanatory approach is part of a longer term and very common pattern. One relevant example is southwest China's large-scale Nu River hydropower project, initiated near the Kachin border only some years before Myitsone. Its leaders also blamed "Western-funded NGOs" for misrepresenting the project, creating the opposition, and leading to eventual cancelation (McDonald 2007). Some Chinese scholars have likewise portrayed the controversies around China's resource investments in the Greater Mekong sub-region (J. Li 2013).⁸

Consistently promoting these vague phrases in Chinese and Burmese media allows the Chinese companies to avoid directly naming the Kachin or Burmese organizations that originally initiated the anti-dam campaigning. This is a conscious strategy. CPI's leaders are actually aware that Tanghphe village's leaders and the broader ethnic Kachin activist networks have since early on actively organized an anti-dam campaign and had received no reply from CPI to their protest letters. Indeed, at the time, CPI even contacted and asked to meet the Kachin activist group KDNG, which published influential anti-dam reports. KDNG members have described to me how the Chinese state-owned company used the help of PRC's secret services, unsuccessfully, to try identifying and tracking the activists down in their mobile exile bases in China near the Kachin border.

Those who allege Western anti-China politicking often cite as proof a classified US Embassy cable, published by Wikileaks (2010). Penned in January 2010 by diplomats in Yangon, the cable mentions that dam-opposing "civil society groups in Kachin State" included "recipients of Embassy small grants." Referring to this cable, for example, one Chinese journalist writes: "Some analysts believe that the demonization of the Myitsone project became the breakthrough for destroying China-Myanmar relations as western countries like America and Japan are expanding their influences in Myanmar" (X. Li 2013). However, many activist groups in Myanmar, whose members I know from field research, often apply for such small grants by various Western embassies to complement their usually scarce funding sources. They do not consequently follow foreign marching orders.

Indeed, my ethnographic fieldwork has generally revealed to me how deeply the vast majority of Kachin social activists are motivated by their ethnic and religious nationalisms, rather than dollars or inter-state geopolitics. I have described this briefly above. In Yangon, I have mentioned the Chinese claim that Western governments coordinated "Save the Irrawaddy" to several initiators of the campaign. People react with disbelief, shock, and amusement.

"Chinese Modesty" and "Pauk-Phaw Friendship"

Finally, in explaining the suspension, Chinese dam proponents often draw on their domestic political paradigm when juxtaposing insinuations of "anti-China conspiracy" with the notions of China-Myanmar *Pauk-phaw Friendship* and ethno-cultural "Chinese modesty." *Pauk-phaw Friendship* has been traditionally invoked by the PRC and previous Burmese Governments to claim a special relationship between the two countries. However, it has remained an inter-governmental discourse, rather than a popular one.

Moreover, the Chinese state has promoted the narrative much more actively than Myanmar, especially to promote its many resource investments, such as the Irrawaddy dams. After the suspension, Chinese dam proponents often argue that in this international “Friendship,” and specifically with the Myitsone project, the Chinese side has provided much help without advertising it. They highlight the “model village” where Tanghphe residents were resettled, its new infrastructure, and various donations, all of which Burmese society “had not heard about.” In 2013, a Chinese Embassy counselor invokes this notion of ethno-cultural “Chinese modesty” thusly:

Chinese enterprises should change the concept of “doing without saying anything and doing more than saying” when competing with the west on the same platform. Our culture advocates “doing good without seeking recognition.” However, we must say something in the international arena especially when some political forces having ulterior motives say something underhand[ed] about us in the media. It is the lesson we learnt from the Myitsone project. (X. Li 2013)

Elsewhere, a CPI representative combines these notions – of “vulnerable Chinese modesty” in its “special friendship” with Myanmar – with the insinuation of “Western manipulation of vulnerable masses”:

Let’s say if you have a good friend who is very kind and contributes to others’ benefit very much but never tells anyone about him- or herself. One day, a bad person puts blame on your friend in the international arena and makes them believe that he/she is not a good person. Do you think such action is fair for your friend? (May Sit Paing 2014)

Domestic paradigm

Altogether, the ways in which the Chinese dam developers and their allies publicly explain the politics of their project in Myanmar show how much they rely upon their native state-nationalist paradigm, even when addressing a foreign social world. In this sense, we can trace the failure of the Myitsone mega-project to the clash of three nationalisms: Kachin and Burmese, both discussed above, and also PRC-Chinese/Han.

The Chinese dam developers’ public responses further indicate that while not even Chinese state-owned companies straightforwardly advance the political interests or spatial expansion of a monolithic “State,” the individual projects and investors may, to great consequence, carry with them abroad strong state-ideological subjectivities from their home society. On the one hand, PRC’s state-owned companies have become increasingly independent from the state and focused on their own business interests (Gonzalez-Vicente 2011). On the other hand, individual businesspeople and groups of investors concurrently rely on their native conceptual toolkits, which Chinese state-nationalist heuristics have provided them with, when materially producing “Chinese Development” encounters abroad. Nationalistic Chinese scholars may thus celebrate how their state cultivates an ideology of “national pride” in state-owned enterprises, making them “usually unintentionally indulge national missions in conducting overseas strategies” (Ren, Liang, and Zheng 2010). Most broadly then, the avowedly anti-political approaches by Chinese state-owned corporations abroad stem not only from business leaders faithfully following official PRC policies of Going Out, but perhaps also from a more general “anti-political tendency” in post-Mao Chinese society and public thought (Moody 2001, 2007).

Why Chinese anti-politics failed

In conclusion, the story I have told illustrates the limitations of China's current model of development-investment abroad. China's hydropower mega-project at Myanmar's Myitstone failed because its Chinese leaders and proponents have continued replicating their domestic political paradigm – even when it was clearly failing them. They seem unable to escape this routine replication. What could this case say about China's globalizing of its Going Out development model? It is already well established that Chinese development projects abroad often ignore the foreign site's politics and social worlds. Studies have shown that this ignorance of “non-market aspects,” in turn, can sometimes cause the projects to fail (e.g. Gonzalez-Vicente 2012). What is more interesting, though, is when this ignorance stems from developers replicating China's domestic politics and state-nationalist heuristics when facing foreign social worlds. This becomes even more interesting when the developers fail not merely because offering economic incentives or using brute force do not subdue the foreign site's inescapable political dynamics, but because, due to their domestic ideological subjectivities, they may be unable to recognize the weakness in their own anti-political strategies, even when those collapse publicly.

To explore such patterns, we need ethnographies and social histories, which begin from the specific social worlds of the Chinese development encounter rather than from a globalized geopolitical narrative about a monolithic Chinese “State” directing projects abroad. We need to investigate the politics and social worlds that preexist around a specific foreign investment site, as well as the native Chinese social worlds of the developers. A basic assumption of such studies is recognizing the inevitable political nature and consequences of China's anti-political development ideology, including how it strengthens and de-politicizes state power in contested landscapes.

In the Myitstone case, global media, NGO, and scholarly accounts have instead treated the controversy as primarily about environmental conflict, economic development and profit-sharing, the success of civic democracy, or global inter-state geopolitical rivalry. Both Western and Chinese public discussions have been particularly excited about narratives of US–China geopolitical rivalry over Myanmar's foreign policy direction. But casting Myitstone as all about global geopolitics underrepresents the agency and role of various social actors around Myitstone, such as Kachin nationalists and Lower Myanmar's activists, whose politics are absolutely not about those inter-state contests. Such overly state-centric analyses of Myitstone exhibit problems similar to some popular media representations that falsely suggest that the current Kachin war is merely about natural resources. Such analyses remind us of misguided explanations of the 2008 Tibetan protests through mere external manipulation (see Yeh 2009) or explanations of Ukraine's recent Maidan revolution as stemming primarily from a Western-vs-Russian inter-state geopolitical turf war. Such interpretations ignore the histories, intentions, and calculated decisions of the many people on the ground. Non-state agency always partially makes “the geopolitical.”

To dislodge those popular accounts and build a different history of Myitstone, I first used ethnographic research to show a primarily *ethno-political* causality from Tanghphe village to Yangon city and beyond, which eventually led to the project's suspension. It was first ethnic Kachin nationalists, who began actively campaigning against the mega-project, since they came to view the suffering of displaced Tanghphe villagers as an ethno-national issue and the project as a whole as a threat to the pursued futures of Kachin ethno-national self-determination. Many Kachin observers analyzed the

mega-project – which sidelined Kachin ethno-political actors and the armed quasi-state of KIO – in the broader context of Chinese-led resource grabs. Within Kachin nationalist social cosmologies, people sometimes diagnosed the Myitsone Dam as a Burmese regime conspiracy against the Kachin nation. When war resumed in the region in June 2011, it effectively suspended the mega-dam construction. As some ethnic Kachin campaigners and Yangon’s activists linked up, some Burman initiators of the later “Save the Irrawaddy” campaign in Lower Myanmar used the Myitsone project as a common enemy to build cross-ethnic solidarity at a time when Kachin popular hatred of Burmans had intensified due to the war and the Myanmar Army’s war crimes. “Save the Irrawaddy” became popular across Myanmar, though, primarily because many ethnic Burman opponents framed the dams on the country’s main river as an existential threat to the Burmese nation by China. For Burmese campaigners, the Myitsone symbolized the perceived Chinese exploitation and “takeover” of Myanmar in alliance with the country’s hated military regime. Thus, there was altogether a social history beyond global geopolitical rivalries. This history eventually made President Thein Sein’s controversial decision to halt the project thinkable in the first place. The decision had important explanations and consequences in terms of inter-state relations, but it was preceded by an originally and primarily ethno-political causality.

This social history shows how especially in neighboring Asian countries, China’s previously existing historical entanglements influence its development projects, as the articles in this Special Issue collectively argue. These entanglements are generally beyond the power of Chinese investors. The Going Out campaign and the potential for the Chinese state’s economic expansion are thus seriously complicated in places where popular or elite nationalisms have historically come to disfavor China. Vietnam and Japan are examples, but now, too, is Myanmar.

What followed the Myitsone suspension demonstrates how Chinese developers abroad carry with them and may directly replicate their domestic ideological subjectivities when tackling foreign social worlds. Their responses against the Myitsone Dam suspension focused on disproving prominent claims of ecological and seismic dangers, economic exploitation, and mistreatment of resettled people. However, toward the ethno-political motivations of dam opponents, the Chinese dam advocates generally continued to put forth an anti-(ethno)-political silence. Other times, they mobilized Chinese state-nationalist heuristics. These included PRC notions about how the state brings benevolent development to “tradition-bound” ethnic minorities and about alleged Western, especially US, conspiracies to instigate intellectually vulnerable masses against China.

The prevalent anti-political, state-centric approach of Chinese developers abroad itself may be best understood as an extension of the dominant political paradigm in Chinese society today. State-owned companies may be particularly likely to extend these state-ideological approaches to places abroad, for example, by assuming that government visions of social progress align with those of society broadly. Such ideological carry-overs are one reason why it is helpful to parallel “Going Out” with the domestic “Go West” campaign, as done elsewhere in this Special Issue. These carry-overs also show that Chinese development abroad is not directed by a monolithic Chinese “State,” but may nonetheless be shaped by the PRC’s political paradigms when individual Chinese businesspeople bring the country’s nationalist heuristics with them. For example, the quasi-colonial developmental discourse of “imposing progress” onto native “others,” which Chinese investors and managers abroad routinely articulate, replicates

the social-evolutionist theories of “Race/Nation” that are prevalent today among PRC citizens (Nyíri 2006).

Considering these Chinese ethno-centrally conceived responses alongside the Kachin and Burman ethno-political causality of project opposition, we may conclude that ethno-centric paradigms and nationalist suspicions about hostile conspiracies deeply marked the Myitsone conflict as a whole. The Kachin conspiratorial analyses about “Burman ethnocide strategies” were matched by Chinese conspiratorial analyses about “Western plots” and by Burman popular analyses of Chinese desiring to “take over” Myanmar. Many of those suspicions on all sides grew because of the secretive “isolated island of China” model, on which the mega-project ran in its tumultuous foreign surroundings. This model inhibited mutual communication and negotiation further in the already risky, conflict-ridden, and authoritarian conditions of Myanmar, feeding conspiratorial analyses and a continuous reliance on native nationalist heuristics on all sides. Concurrently, the model’s anti-ethno-political silences about everything “Kachin” attempted to re-signify and re-territorialize lands, which Kachin nationalists conceptualize as “their” “God-given” *Wunpawng Mungdan*, or “Kachin Land” (Kiik forthcoming). In this discursive way at least, then, the anti-ethno-political development model of Myitsone confirmed the Kachin popular theories of “covert ethnocide” or ethno-national “disappearance.”

To explore these dynamics, I found it helpful to bring aspects of Ferguson’s (1994) account of “anti-politics” into the specific sphere of nationalisms and ethno-political conflict. I described the dam companies’ approach to conflicts around their Burmese project as an *anti-ethno-politics*. This lens of anti-ethno-politics can elucidate situations where state, NGO, business, or other actors de-politicize sensitive questions about how their activities clash with a nationalism.

Yet, this is a story about the failure of anti-ethno-politics. The ongoing efforts by Chinese proponents to revitalize the mega-project remain strategically inadequate because their replications of China’s anti-political and state-nationalist paradigm cannot win over either popular or elite opposition in Burma. With each day that goes by since the project’s suspension, the hydropower corporations are losing considerable amounts of money. But even though their responses and policies may satisfy some domestic Chinese audiences, they still cannot address the inescapable realities of the intense ethnic politics around Myitsone and the historical entanglements between China and Burma. Indeed, the “mystic faraway land” that the developers arrived to in their promotional film was not only a land of pagodas, elephants, and tropical diseases. It was also a specific place, with diverse peoples, complex histories, a brutal state–society conflict, popular negative readings of Chinese-led resource grabs, contested ethno-political movements, and nationalist social cosmologies. The trajectories of all these forces are not guided by supposedly omnipresent Western conspirators and neither were they subdued by the strategic anti-(ethno)-political silences of the Chinese developers.

In sum, my ethnographic study of these social worlds and their diverse people suggests a desperate future for this embattled mega-project. The project’s main proponents and alleged benefactors within the Myanmar Army, such as former Vice-President ex-General Tin Aung Myint Oo, have left politics. Burma’s nationalist military leaders fear China holding control over the country’s main river and new popular uprisings. The Chinese Government will likely not heed CPI’s pleas to pressure future Myanmar authorities on the issue because the PRC has too many vital geopolitical and economic interests in the country to risk open conflict. Some media and academic discourse may continue reproducing the dominant, yet misleading, narrative about an all-powerful and

monolithic China, but those accounts fail to assess the multiplicity of Chinese actors that have diverse interests (e.g. Beijing vs Kunming), as well as the decisive power of Kachin and Myanmar social worlds.

Indeed, strictly opposing and defeating the Myitsone Dam has now become a key symbol for altogether too many competing social futures: (1) for the Kachin popular commitment to ethno-nationalist futures (thus binding future KIO governments and other Kachin national leaders to not reverse their opposition); (2) for the globally celebrated “New Burma,” which purports to pursue democracy, an end to civil war, economic growth, and non-dependence from China (thus binding Myanmar’s future governments, democrats, many nationalists, and some military); and (3) for the Burmese activisms that pursue environmentalist futures, inter-ethnic solidarity amid war horrors, and land rights for dispossessed populations (thus binding much of the country’s civil society to not give up this idolized victory). Metaphorically speaking, the currents of those social worlds flooded the “isolated island” of this massive project. The mega-dam collapsed under the weight of three clashing nationalisms. If my analysis proves to be correct, then the final failure of this anti-ethno-political model of development might be in not recognizing this.

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Notes

1. As the PRC economy’s need for electricity has rapidly grown, the country’s hydropower lobby has successfully argued that dams offer a clean alternative to carbon-belching coal plants, most famously embodied by the grand Three Gorges Dam. In 2000, Beijing launched the policy of “sending electricity from west to east,” pushing for new dams on rivers in Tibet, Sichuan, and Yunnan to provide for the country’s industrialized eastern coast. The Irrawaddy mega-project, even though across the Yunnan province’s border in Burma, serves this policy (Higgins 2011). Crossing this inter-state border made sense for the Chinese companies because in 2004, under pressure from environmentalist campaigners, the PRC government suspended a hydroelectric mega-project on the Nu River in China, right next to the Kachin border (see McDonald 2007). In Myanmar, as well as across mainland Southeast Asia and the Himalaya, there are contested damming projects, which are similar to but mostly in smaller scale than Myitsone, proceeding on almost every major river. Thai or Chinese companies usually lead these projects. Increasingly, Chinese state-owned companies have become major dam promoters globally, facing controversies in many places (McDonald, Bosshard, and Brewer 2009). In Asia-Pacific, some of the most controversial Chinese hydropower projects

- have been on the upper reaches of Mekong River, accompanied by considerable protest from downstream Southeast Asian countries, where large populations depend on the Mekong.
2. See a chronology of events around the Myitsone Dam, from its start to current suspension, in Anonymous 2012b.
 3. Kachin society was made famous in Social Anthropology by Leach's 1954 classic *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (see also, Sadan and Robinne 2007). The contemporary pan-ethnic identity of "Kachin" in Myanmar includes six, seven, or more distinguishable ethno-linguistic groups, which have gone through a gradual historical process of social and political integration around the somewhat hegemonic ethnic Jinghpaw center (Sadan 2007, 2013). Besides Jinghpaw, the other "Kachin" peoples are Zaiwa, Lachid (Lachik), Lhaovo (Lawngwaw), Rawang (and Nung Lungmi), and some Lisu.
 4. The film has since been removed from the company's website, but is available with English subtitles at <http://vimeo.com/33389414>.
 5. For a more detailed picture of the first years of renewed Kachin conflict, see the compilations of reports and media analyses in Project Maje (2011a, 2011b, 2013).
 6. Many of these are collected on a website set up by the Upstream Ayeyawady Confluence Basin Hydropower Co., Ltd. (UACHC), as part of an ongoing effort to promote the Myitsone project to Burmese and other audiences (<http://www.uachc.com>).
 7. For instance, on its project website, CPI refers to seismic safety studies that it commissioned from institutes in China. It argues that the seven dam sites "are located in the relatively stable area against the background of intense regional tectonic activity, and none of the project dams crosses any active fault. The dams are safe." (UACHC 2011).
 8. Two Chinese studies concluded that Western-funded environmental groups are "irresponsibly attacking Chinese investors and misleading local communities with biased reports" to limit China's economic influence. The studies argued – in line with the Going Out model – that the green groups "bear Western ideology and are deeply influenced by Western politics [...] and tend to over-emphasize the significance of environmental protection, while ignoring Mekong countries' demand for economic development, threatening the sovereign rights of these countries."

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