

# Rethinking the role of agriculture as a driver of social and economic transformation in Southeast Asia's upland regions: The view from Chin State, Myanmar

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## ABSTRACT

Mainstream analysis of contemporary livelihood transformations and rural development in the upland regions of Southeast Asia has hitherto focused primarily on the role of agricultural commercialization and cash crops. This is reflected in policy narratives that conflate the fortunes of rural households to the expansion of a particular kind of entrepreneurial agriculture. In this article, we problematize the dynamics of economic and social change in the little-studied uplands of Chin State, Myanmar, against this policy backdrop. Using the insights from original field research, we argue that in Chin it is misplaced to explain processes of upland rural change via a cash crops narrative that over-emphasizes the potential of commercial agriculture in household livelihoods in this region. Instead, the dynamics of rural development in Chin consist of a more diverse set of interconnections, reflecting the manifold ways in which Chin households are differentially inserted into local, regional and global social and economic processes. We illustrate this via an examination of the patchy emergence of a cash crop, elephant foot yam, vis-à-vis non-local livelihood formation and the organization of livelihood pathways around the maintenance of social and cultural practices, including swidden production.

## 1. Introduction

Once a refuge of relative autonomy for upland peoples, upland regions of Southeast Asia have become progressively incorporated into the modern state and market since the rise of the nation state in the latter half of the 20th century. Scott (2009), in his seminal book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, calls this 'the last great enclosure', as technological developments in transport and communications, as well as the apparatus of the modern nation state, have enabled governments to bring hitherto isolated frontier populations to heel through national economic integration and development projects. The ongoing incorporation of the uplands represents a seismic shift in the livelihood possibilities and pathways of upland households. Much of the critical analysis of the contours of social, economic and environmental change in the Southeast Asian uplands has placed issues about land tenure and land governance at the forefront of conceptual models of change. While some of these critiques have acknowledged the complexity of upland livelihood transitions (e.g. Turner et al., 2015), most have tended to privilege the decline of swidden cultivation and its replacement by commercial agriculture as spectacular examples of change, focusing on

'boom crops' such as coffee, cacao, rubber and palm oil (Mertz et al., 2009; Thongmanivong et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2011; Hall, 2011a; De Koninck, 2006; Fold and Hirsch, 2009; Li, 2014). The importance accorded to boom crops in these studies is justified because of the argument that they have a vanguard role in bringing into play a conjuncture of allied effects which fundamentally reshape upland social and economic geographies, including increased capitalist market integration, influxes of lowland economic migrants, changing land tenure relations and property rights, land grabbing, commodification of agricultural production and hence livelihoods, and the increasing social and economic differentiation of upland populations (Cramb et al., 2009; Fox et al., 2009).

In this article, we build on the more diverse treatments of upland livelihood transition to problematize the dynamics of economic and social change in the little-studied upland areas of Chin State, Myanmar (Fig. 1). Our argument is also framed against the dominant mainstream rural development policy narrative in Myanmar and more broadly that unproblematically frames agricultural commercialisation as the primary mechanism of rural development (Raitzer et al., 2015; World Bank, 2007). On the basis of multi-method fieldwork in two

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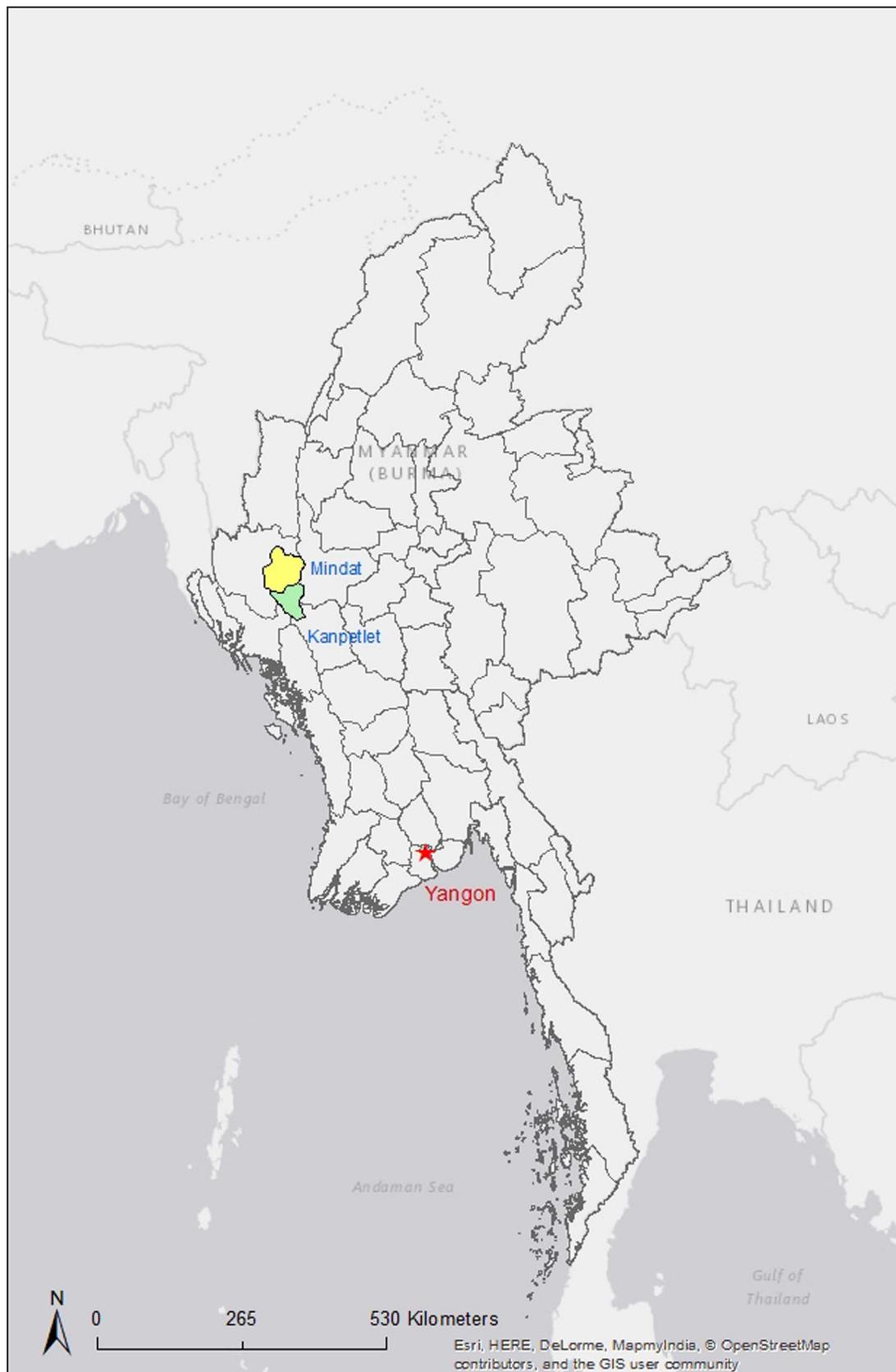


Fig. 1. Map of study sites in southern Chin State.

administrative areas in the southern part of Chin State, we argue that in Chin, at least to date, it is misplaced to privilege commercial agriculture when addressing livelihood transitions. We contend that such a focus

significantly over-emphasizes the potential of commercial agriculture in household livelihoods in this region. Rather, livelihood trajectories in Chin are intimately connected to the complex and relational

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