Towards a Critical Sociology of Myanmar’s Emergent Agritech

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Introduction

The growing social science of digital agriculture primarily addresses the Global North, yet the world’s farmers increasingly live in the Global South. How do new digital technologies impact smallholder farmers outside North America and Europe? This project addresses this question in Myanmar, where recent and rapid digital connection and political reform are remaking agriculture and rural society. I draw on document review, interviews and participatory use to understand how emergent agritech enables new practices that are changing farming socially, economically and ecologically.

Preliminary Findings

My study addresses two main research questions. First: how does historical agricultural development shape current farming practices and technologies?

I find that 20th century socialist and authoritarian policies that promoted rice production, restricted crop choice and centralized state control also severely limited farmers’ access to technology. Reforms since 2011 mean that today mechanization and digitization are occurring simultaneously, resulting in sweeping changes to agricultural production, labor and information.

Second: how are different actors designing digital tools to promote ‘modern’ farming and ‘improve’ agrarian production?

I find a shift away from state-led agriculture as development agencies, social enterprises and agribusinesses embrace agritech. To better understand these actors and their tools, I identified and began analysis of four agricultural cooperative and extension platforms. These including the Green Way app, which provides organic farming, crop price and weather information as well as personalized extension advice.

Next Steps

I will continue data collection and analysis for my four case studies and extend my analysis to grassroots farmers’ Facebook groups. When possible, I will return to my long term field sites to interview farmers of different demographics in order to answer a final research question: How do rural people use these technologies to transform socioecological relations?

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