It was early December, seven months after Cyclone Nargis made landfall in the Ayeyarwady Delta on May 2, 2008, killing up to 150,000 people in the span of a few hours. I was sitting cross-legged on the roughly hewn wood floor of a village elder’s newly reconstructed house. We would have met in the village meeting hall, but it was destroyed by the storm like most of the other structures in the village. Although I looked ethnically like him, the elder knew I was not from Myanmar and asked me to indicate on a map where I was from: Guangdong, China, and New York City. Despite the recent devastation, the impact of which was still visible all around us, the elder welcomed me with the graciousness reserved for special guests. He was dressed formally in a starched and pressed white shirt and a checkered sarong with a pattern typical of this region.

As we settled down with a pot of tea and a plate of tea-leaf salad, I asked him to recount his life as a farmer. He took a sip of tea and launched into his story. He said that most years, paddy plants fed by rain from May until November would be harvested in December, but the storm had brought in vast amounts of salty seawater, which destroyed most of the crop. The farmers had managed to salvage some of it, but it was not enough, and he and nearly all the villagers were now eating rice donated by the World Food Program. He worried that unless the assistance from aid agencies was sufficient, many farmers would likely become more indebted and lose part of their farm plots to the informal moneylenders from whom they routinely borrowed. He added that in past decades, the plots of the farmers in his village became smaller and smaller, mainly because they were unable to sell the mandatory quotas of rice to the military government, which punished them by reallocating part of their land to other cultivators who were able to do so. He feared that the landless farmers would not be able to make ends meet with earnings of approximately two US dollars a day. At the end of our conversation, he expressed his hope that I would be able to help them.

I lived in Myanmar for a decade from 2008 to early 2019, first arriving there to manage a livelihoods recovery program in the Ayeyarwady Delta, known as the country’s “rice bowl” for its high paddy yields. Throughout this period, I was
a close observer of its politics, particularly those related to land. When I first arrived, I experienced the country as a place where time seemed to languish. I had to wait three months for approval from the military government to make my first trip to support farmers affected by Cyclone Nargis in the Ayeyarwady Delta. Upon arrival at my destination, I was asked to report to ten different officers and provide the name of my father. These obsolete methods of control revealed the type of world I had stepped into: one that had been largely isolated from the world and slow to relinquish archaic practices.

After the 2010 election, which marked the beginning of Myanmar’s transition to democracy, the new political environment allowed me to delve into the country’s land politics, a topic that was considered taboo by the government until then. I carried out research from 2012 until my departure from the country in 2019, after which I continued to closely monitor the developments in this area. My stay in the country spanned the term of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government (March 2011 to March 2016) and the first three years of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government (starting in March 2016).

The process of writing this book has also been a personal journey for me, as the questions I sought to examine in this book allowed me to reflect on my own family’s agrarian past. For the first three decades of their lives, my parents struggled to survive under the repressive regime of China’s Chairman Mao. After the victory of Mao’s People’s Liberation Army in 1949, all land owned by landlords and better-off peasants was nationalized and redistributed to small peasants and landless laborers. In 1958, as part of what Mao called the Great Leap Forward, all land was collectivized into communes. “He used to say ‘the entire nation is part of one checkers set,’” my father recalled. In the first four years of this movement, thirty-six million people are estimated to have died during what is now known as the Great Famine, according to the historian Yang Jisheng. My father recounted, “I can say that all we knew was starvation from childhood until adulthood. We got drained after working in the fields. Every night, our bellies knotted up in hunger.” By 1978, soon after I was born, China started a gradual process of redistributing land and agriculture implements to households. All collectivized production teams ended by 1984, when the country started to adopt a market economy.

Next door in Myanmar, after the military coup in 1962, the Union Revolutionary Council, the supreme ruling body headed by General Ne Win, observed China while designing its own policies. In April 1962, the government adopted as a blueprint the treatise “Burmese Way to Socialism,” distancing itself from the communist system espoused by Mao and embracing a plan for economic development built on the principles of socialism, nationalization, Buddhism, and a
strong military state. The land tenure reform the government promoted transformed smallholders into tenants on state-owned land. Under a procurement policy that lasted from 1974 to 2003, farmers were forced to sell paddy to the government at reduced prices to feed civil servants and soldiers, and to gain export earnings. Further exacerbating extreme levels of rural poverty, the military promoted a market economy centered on plantation farms and extractive industries from 1988 to 2010, which led to extensive land confiscations throughout the country.

In recent years, Myanmar has caught the attention of the world: in 2010, as the hopeful new democracy led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi; in 2017, as the perpetrator of ethnic cleansing towards the Rohingya, a Muslim minority that mainly resided in Rakhine State, bordering Bangladesh; and most recently in 2021, for the military coup that caused the country to descend into chaos and bloodshed. The most recent developments have led people to cast the country aside as a “failed transition.” However, this conclusion dismisses a larger process of political change from 2011 to 2020 that was neither unidirectional nor predictable but that significantly changed the lives of millions. In this book, through examining the land politics that played out in the past decade, I set out to tell the story of how a country that emerged out of five decades of repressive military rule, since its first coup d’état in 1962, attempted to build a new multi-ethnic democracy. The Ayeyarwady village head whom I met in 2008 would likely not have expected the reforms that followed the 2010 election, many of which would profoundly affect him and his fellow villagers.

Reflecting on the transition in this book made it clear to me that, whether in Myanmar or China and regardless of the past, historic openings can serve as critical junctures for people to overcome dystopic pasts and to work towards brighter futures. However, on February 1, 2021, Myanmar was thrown yet again into a state of crisis by a military coup, the third in the turbulent history of the country. Military rule was reimposed, abruptly halting the country’s march towards democracy. The junta quickly imprisoned the political opposition and resorted to lethal force to quell public dissent, thinking that the people would meekly obey as before. Instead, a civil disobedience movement was mobilized and hundreds of thousands of people went on strike to prevent the junta from exerting its control over the country. Soon afterward, urban youth disillusioned with nonviolent means fled to the jungle and took up arms to fight the junta alongside ethnic armed organizations.

It is evident that the military underestimated the extent to which the past decade had forever changed people’s thinking about the type of country and future they deserve to have. The stories and the lives depicted in this book, in the context
of the land struggles that unfolded throughout the country, allow us to see how people's thinking towards the government and their view of themselves as subjects with certain basic rights evolved over time. As the book goes to press at the end of 2022, these changes continue to fuel peoples' courage and resilience in fighting to steer the country back on course, all while making enormous sacrifices.