



'Forgotten' democracy, student activism, and higher education in Myanmar: past, present, and future

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Abstract

This paper is a historical examination of higher education in contemporary Myanmar, and its relationship to the students, the most important and visible actor in higher education. Reflecting upon dramatic socio-political transitions from the five decades of military rule to partly constitutional democracy that led to major reform and liberation in education, this paper traces the development and destruction of generations of student activists in major Higher Education Institutions since 1962, as well as the emergence of a new generation of youth who are deeply disconnected with their history since 2010. By examining major literature combined with direct observations and in-depth interviews in Myanmar, the authors argue that celebrating heroic student activists is perhaps essential in order to mobilize the public to remember the historical importance of democratization in Myanmar, but it is, at the same time, dangerous to only emphasize the stories of 'student heroes and martyrs' without deeply questioning the vulnerabilities of education philosophy, policy, and the very meaning of higher education institutions against regime changes. By examining the *exogenous* relations with democracy in the wider society of Myanmar, it argues that the future of democracy can only be nurtured, debated, and learned when the *endogenous* relations to democracy of Myanmar in higher education institutions within are valued.

Keywords Myanmar (Burma) · Higher education · Education reform · Transitional democracy · Student activism

Abbreviations

AAPP	The Assistance Association of Political Prisoners
ABFSU	All Burma Federation of Student Unions
BWPP	Burmese Way to Socialism Party
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CESR	Comprehensive Education Sector Review
EPIC	Education Promotion Implementation Committee
HE	Higher education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HREIB	Human Rights Education Institute of Burma
NESP	National Education Strategic Plan 2016–2021
NNER	National Network for Education Reform
NLD	National League for Democracy

MoE	Ministry of Education
SLORC	The State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	Sector State Peace & Development Council
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
YTU	Yangon University of Technology
YU	Yangon University

Introduction

Historical narratives of Burmese student activists¹ for democracy have been widespread in both academic and popular literature. While scholarly debates on Myanmar's student activism are mainly explored in comparative politics and sociology, the 'real' stories of student activists have

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¹ Naming debates on the Republic of the Union of Myanmar as Myanmar or Burma have been heated political disputes. In this research, both Burma and Myanmar can be found in the text. Burma is used when describing the country prior to 1989 when the name of the country was officially changed. The detailed historical and political debates between the country's name in the political, diplomatic, and socio-cultural arena can be found in Michael Aung-Twin's (2008) article, "Mranma Pran: When Context Encounters Notions."

been actively recorded and archived by civil society groups. The construed narratives of student leaders in Burma have strongly influenced the formation of transnational and trans-local civil society movements against the military regime of Myanmar. Surprisingly, in the highly politicized narratives of elite student activists and democratic movements, the issues of ‘education’ have often been missing. This is ironic given the fact that the locus of student activism in both the Global North and the Global South, regardless of its orientation, has been in higher education institutions. Indeed, while political science and civil society literature have paid close attention to students as *political challengers* to the regime, they have not captured the peculiar educational and socio-cultural nuances of higher education. Many of the fundamental drivers of student activism apart from political motivations were often been due to lack of government funding to universities, unstable and unpredictable provisions of government vouchers for youth, poor quality of learning and academic freedom as well as a frequent lack of democratic higher education governance.

After the ‘peak’ of student activism in the 1960s and the 1970s in the Global North, the role of higher education in democracy did not receive renewed interest and critical comment again until the 2000s (McGinn and Epstein 1999; Englund 2002; Kelly 2003; Nussbaum 2002; Boland 2005). Indeed, while few dispute the role of compulsory education in the preparation of citizens who can effectively participate in a democratic society, the role and responsibility of higher education in this regard is not accorded the same degree of consensus (Boland 2005). The diverse strategic objectives which characterize higher education today—advancing the frontiers of knowledge and serving the needs of the economy, while contributing to the achievement of social goals such as equity, inclusion, and democracy—may partly account for this. Such competing strategic imperatives are acutely felt within higher education not only in the North, but also in developing countries in Southeast Asia. As globalization has intensified and had a major impact on higher education from the early 2000s, scholars have argued that higher education institutions (HEIs) in the North are now controlled by Neo-liberal discourse (Giroux 2002) which has led to their losing much of the intrinsic value of higher education (HE) in wider society. The civic roles of HEIs in many developing countries in both Southeast Asia and Africa alike face dual challenges. They not only have exposed encroaching neo-liberalism in higher education at a transnational level but they have also been severely and continually oppressed at a national level. As various demands for higher education such as providing up-to-date training and giving career ladder opportunities for higher education have recently increased in many parts of Asia, HEIs in the South still have difficulties in configuring and asserting civic

roles and responsibilities between diverse, conflicting, and often competing agendas.

In consideration of the renewed civic roles of higher education in the South, this research explores the histories of Myanmar’s political and social changes from an educational perspective, in order to reveal the shifting civic roles of student movements within HEIs as well as in a broader society. This paper is primarily a historical examination of contemporary higher education and its relationship to the most important and visible actor—students. Reflecting upon dramatic socio-political transitions from five decades of military rule to a partly constitutional democracy which led to major reform and liberation in education, this paper traces the development and destruction of generations of student activists, who studied, networked, and demonstrated in major HEIs until 1998 as well as the emergence of a new generation of youth deeply disconnected with their histories. In this particular context, this research provides a country case study that examines the historical, socio-political, and educational importance of national and public universities in order to re-examine and re-value the public higher education in transitional democracies in Asia and beyond.

Methodology

The following analysis is based on the first authors’ historical research with one of the most politicized, but not well-known histories of higher education and elite university students in their complex relations with democracy in Myanmar. Drawing largely on international and national literature review, direct observations as well as in-depth interviews with various education stakeholders, the authors focus on the relationship between political changes and university policies, and the ways student activism was organized and realized within a university. Examining higher education² in Myanmar has both international and national implications for critically evaluating relations between regime changes and old and new student movements and the possibilities of seeking active roles of HE. At an international level, the social roles of HE and HEIs—especially national and public universities—have been largely understudied. Since a country like Myanmar, where HEIs were ‘nationalized’ under decades of military control, universities and a very few colleges are often nationally owned and strictly managed in ‘top-down’ manners without affording academic

² The terms, higher education and higher education institutions are understood and applied differently in various countries. Also, the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions varies based on the academic, social, and industrial demands as well as the visions foundations and types of institutions.

freedom or effective institutional management. At a national level, examining the links between the changes of political regimes, vulnerability of HE, and student activism offers an opportunity to locate the issues of education in the analysis of the highly politicized narratives of elite student activists and democratic movements in Myanmar. Despite the international and national significance, it is still important to note that Myanmar, like its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, is a society with marked regional, ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences. The significance of student activism such as the 8888 generation is well acknowledged in this article. However, further studies will be required to better understand the essential nature of the geographically peripheral, but politically and educationally critical, formal and non-formal education.

The period of this research is from October 2016 to January 2019. First, the study started developing a historical overview of Myanmar's higher education and student activism based on the collection and analysis of documents and literature in Myanmar and English. The collection, translation, and analysis of documents were conducted by the authors while comparing the differences and commonalities of 'historical facts' between popular literature and academic literature. When necessary, translation validation was conducted by a third-party expert. The various types of first-hand interviews were conducted with Myanmar intellectuals, professors, university students, and civil society activists throughout the whole period of research. Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) with professors and university students at Yangon University (YU) and Yangon Technological University (YTU) provided old and new visions and roles of the elite students in changing Myanmar society. Another very different set of FGIs were conducted with the AAPP (Assistance Association of Political Prisoners) and ABFSU (All Burma Federation of Student Unions). Among interviews with respected intellectuals of Myanmar society, in-depth interviews with writer and a former political prisoner, Ma Thida; former student activist and current education leader, U Min Ko Naing; as well as an anthropologist, U Than Tun Sein provided critical insights about the shifting roles and responsibilities of 'the educated man' in transitional Myanmar.

The most critical field observations for this research happened during the visits to the 30th anniversary ceremony of the 8888 uprising at YU, which presented political, social, and educational changes in Myanmar society. This field visit to YU in 2018 provided significant moments—both symbolically and practically—for this research. Other observations, informational interviews, and conversations were held between 2011 and 2016, while one of the authors served as a visiting professor at Yangon University in 2016. Although those pilot interviews were not formally quoted in this research, the author's understanding of the historical context could not be developed without this background. While

focusing on historical relations between regime change, student activism, and major HEIs in this article, most of the data sources for this research are narrowed in the areas of Yangon and surrounding. Further studies are needed to consider the shifting dynamics of youth activism and education in northern regions and border areas of Myanmar.

Higher education and students activism for change: the literature³

Numerous lines of research have been conducted in the North regarding the development of student activism based on various definitions, types, groups, process, and results. Many renowned sociologists such as McAdams, Tarrow, and Tilly have comparatively examined the political and social meaning of contentious politics in many countries and societies. Past research studies in political science and sociology highlighted the student activism in the North as *political challengers*, often based on class-based conflicts and constant negotiations by social contracts. Going beyond the Marxist and Post-Marxist perspectives in analyzing student activism in HE, the recent studies on contentious politics of student activism have developed in various ways. We summarize these types mainly in three aspects: *first*, focusing on identity politics and movements such as various types and forms of African American student movements, feminist movements, and more recently Latino and Latina student movements; *second*, seeking potentials in mass communication, social media, and network activism; the *third*, challenging the higher education reform agenda in everyday higher education governance and practice.

Historical particularities in student activism in Asia go back to decolonization, independence movements, and nationalism. Throughout most of the world, and especially in the so-called Global South, university students have been a major political force. Strikes, boycotts, riots, and picketing by students are almost commonplace and have been influential in toppling governments, forcing changes in public policy, and making or breaking political careers, as colorfully

³ This article focused on the case of Myanmar and the historical context of higher education and democratization in Asia. For sub-Saharan African cases, different examinations and considerations are needed. Among numerous literature, Harber, C ('Education, Democracy, and Political Development in Africa' and 'Education, Democracy and Development: does education contribute to democratisation in developing countries?'), Amonoo-Neizer, ('Universities in Africa—The Need for Adaptation, Transformation, Reformation and Revitalization'), Walker, M., and Mkwanzani, F. ('Challenges in accessing higher education: A case study of marginalised young people in one South African informal settlement') provide critical perspectives and cases in examining the relationship between higher education and democratization in various parts of Africa.

examined in earlier studies such as Altbach (1970), Bakke (1967), Feuer (1969), Lipset (1964). In an earlier work, Lipset (1964, pp. 15–26) found that, in developing countries, university students tend to be more radical than the general political propensity of their ‘class’ during the process of decolonization and independence; they tend to challenge existing authorities and have been influenced by European intellectual traditions such as liberalism, rationalism, and nationalism. In addition, traditions of university autonomy strengthened the radical nationalist tendency of students in the prestigious universities of Asia and Africa. He argued that they are critical of the existing order because they evaluate the deficiencies of their society based on the standards of Western society. However, demonstrations against universities do not necessarily lead to demands for political change. Also, he noted that the entire student population showed a wide political spectrum, including conservatives, moderates, with progressives who were engaged in political activities.

Among education theorists, Altbach pioneered the international and comparative scholarly works on historical, socio-political, and educational aspects of student activism in higher education in Asia and beyond. In one of his earlier works, the *Student Movements in Historical Perspective: The Asian Case* (1970), he argued that Asia constitutes a fruitful field for examining the role of students in Asian politics, not only because the historical aspects of student activism there have been given only slight attention by scholars, but also because Asia was one of the first foci of modern nationalism in developing countries (1967). He illustrated how universities as an institution as well as students as the key actors—as a source of bringing ‘new’ ideas—played critical roles in wider society, after and in the process of decolonization and independence in various parts of Asia. In the same manner, Burmese nationalism played a critical role in student activism before 1962. In Myanmar, in particular, as defined by sociologists, Eisinger (1973), Tilly (1978), Tarrow (2011), and MacAdams, student acted as *political challengers* to the military regime of the Junta. However, we would argue under the military regime that between the 1960s and 2000s, the uniqueness of Burmese university elites’ activism was ‘symbolic’ and ‘communal,’ rather than resembling western class-based struggles.

More recent studies of Slater and Koon-Hong (2014) in the 2000s examined how the historical development of student politics and student involvement in independence struggles in Southeast Asia, the role of students as incipient elites, and the fragility of the political structures of many newly forming nations all contribute to the efficacy of student politics. Slater (2009) supported the importance of nationalist approaches of students activism in Burma and other Asian countries. He conducted a comparative review of authoritarianism and democracy in seven Southeast Asian countries based on the *Contentious Politics* by McAdam, Tarrow,

and Tilly. He argued that class conflicts and interests, often emphasized in Western theories, are not the strongest drivers for democratic forces in SEA. Groups of political challengers in Southeast Asia are built upon nationalism and religion and in this regard, resistant student activists in SEA gained their symbolic power in the course of their political development. Further, he argued that they are a core democratic force in Burmese society that holds national or religious authority. As Slater (2009) argued, Koon-Hong (2014) elaborated on the dynamics of the contention approach focusing on the interplay between the military regime of Myanmar and contentious student activists as political actors in order to elucidate how social movements emerge and develop. Slater (2009) and Koon-Hong (2014) both provided fundamental understandings about the largely symbolic authority of Myanmar’s elite students. They did not necessarily ‘consciously’ act as systematically organized ‘political challengers.’ However, there are scholarly debates on the arguments that Myanmar’s elite student movements did not have ‘western concept of democracy.’ The critical aspect is that Myanmar’s history of HEIs tells us that elite students as ‘communal elites’ of the wider society played a symbolic role as a catalyst of the democratization of Myanmar. Our argument is based on three critical aspects: first, asserting political standpoints as nationalists; second, having socio-cultural elite status in the society; the third, gaining social status as ‘the learned man’ through elite education.

Findings

This section closely examines the recent history of dynamics between political regimes, student activism, and HE since 1962 and further divides it into five stages⁴: (i) Re-emergence of Elites as Political Challengers to the Military Junta (1962–1988), (ii) The Suppression of Democracy Movements and Collapse of Higher Education (1988–2000), (iii) The State-Led Political Reform and Liberalization of University (2000–2013), and (v) Transition to Constitutional Democracy and Emergence of New Generation Students (2014–present). Within each period, the main groups of analysis consist of three components: first, political, social, and educational contexts; second, the main contents and direction of the government’s higher education policy on the political activities of universities and college students in order to analyze the characteristics of Myanmar’s authoritative polity; third, exploration of how the elite student groups

⁴ The main unit of analysis above and time periods are further developed based on the earlier works of Hong (2017, 2018), who reorganized Myanmar’s social transformation in an educational context, divided Myanmar’s modern education history into seven phases.

were formed and developed as a political challenger in the dynamics of structure and individuals as well as society and universities.

Re-emergence of Elites as political challengers to the Military Junta (1962–1988)

Political, social, and educational context

The long-term basis of authoritarian rule in Myanmar was established during General Ne Win's reign from 1962 to 1988. His governance was based on nationalism, socialism, oppression in the name of cultural tradition, and governmental and military control over the economy and maintenance of agricultural structure (Alamgir 1997). Ne Win and the military launched a coup d'état and formed the Revolutionary Council against former prime minister U Nu's attempts to recognize the autonomy of ethnic minority states. His most important policy, "The Burmese Way to Socialism," put the entire economy, except agriculture, under national control. "The Burmese Way" meant an interoperability between socialism and Buddhist values and was a cause that attracted public support for the government along with the maintenance of agricultural structure. Governance was at the hands of a one-party dictatorship of the Burmese Way to Socialism Party (BWPP), including the Revolutionary Committee. The regime established its control throughout the sixties as it had banned international news, disbanded the private press (1963–), ordered news reporting guidelines, and published a government publication, *The Working People's Daily* (1964–). However, it had been challenging to solve all the political problems, economic development, and ethnic conflicts amid a split within the regime that replaced BWPP with the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) to amend the Constitution (1972–1973) and formed the National Assembly by election and was formally appointed to the civilian presidency to seek public support (Charney 2009, pp. 107–136).

According to the education report submitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1971, the Burmese higher education policy between 1965 and 1970 aimed to produce engineers and technicians for economic growth and social development in socialist ways. It is evident that the goal of this education policy is in accordance with the government's national development goal of socialist economics. The report also emphasized scientific procedures for student selection, saying that a minority of excellent students should be given opportunities for HE rather than expansion of accessibility to HE (Ministry of Education of Myanmar 1971, 1977, 1979). Another report highlighted the expansion of accessibility

to HE by providing University Correspondence Education (Ministry of Education of Myanmar 1979). The program under the name of Yangon College of Humanities and Sciences provided an undergraduate degree in technology, science, economics (4 years), and law (5 years). However, it was the first period when academic and educational freedom of university, which played a significant role for independence movements in the decolonization period, were suppressed by the independent government. Ne Win believed that the current political opposition against his socialist regime was due to the influence of foreign ideologies and inclusion of politics in education, which was why the Revolutionary Council dissolved the university councils of Yangon and Mandalay Universities 5 months after the coup. After the YU students protests against the orders, the Army bombarded the YU student council building. Ne Win also abolished the Rangoon University Act which guaranteed academic freedom of the university. The UNESCO report hinted at none of these measures to reign in universities and students (Fink 2009, p. 31).

Student activism in universities

Student movements were not exceptional within the military government repression, but such enforcements caused a great public backlash. The YU student council, once led by General Aung San, was a symbol of student activism and the focal point of Burmese nationalism in the colonial period. Student groups maintained their symbolic role and continued pro-democracy movements through the 1970s and the 1980s (Slater 2009, pp. 239–245). While all elites, except the military elites, were excluded in the mainstream power politics in Burma, this situation unintentionally brought education elites closer with the public, resulting in more popular support of major student demonstrations and spreading the student voices among the general public at a rapid pace. The famous incident of the death and funeral service of the United Nations' President U Thant, who served as the closest secretary of the former prime minister U Nu, and chief of the United Nations in 1974, sparked public discontent. It had culminated at the peak due to soaring rice prices and following labor unrest. University students and monks moved U Thant's coffin to a symbolic site of the former YU student council building in the middle of the funeral procession and began anti-government protests. The government sent the police into the university to forcefully suppress the protesters and closed the university. Students of the Institute of Economics (IE) launched another anti-government protest in 1975. Starting with students besieging the meeting sites of BSPP members and urging strikes and examination boycotts, students from IE, YU, YTU, and the Medical College (MC-2) marched to the state-owned textile factories. Their demands expanded to an abdication of the military regime, the settlement of inflation and unemployment

rates, and the right to organize student councils. The government also suppressed these protests by force, and shut down all universities and colleges in Yangon, thus, maintaining martial law in Yangon until 1976 (Charney 2009, pp. 137–140).

Nevertheless, students were able to maintain their power by adopting the campus as a physical center for secret activities and recruitment of new student members. They gained their political identity by learning about the current social injustice and prior student movements within secret organizations. In addition, the anti-government student movements were further inspired as the government's successive economic failures and deteriorating gross domestic product discouraged students from finding suitable jobs after completing their education (Koon-Hong 2014, pp. 76–80). As such, educated elites, including university students, other than the military forces were alienated from political power and wealth, keeping close relations with the public in the course of the student movement against the government in the 1970s. They actively shared the experience of being excluded from the public and from politics and society (Boudreau 2002, pp. 42–43). The confrontation between the government and students established the political and social importance of intellectual elites in the public, recalling student-led nationalist movements during the British colonial period, and thus strengthened their status as an alternative to the military government.

However, it is not true that all elite university students were politically motivated and politically active. As Silverstein and Wohl (1964) noted, student activism is not always necessarily looking outward for achieving social justice and democracy but rather often paid more attention to educational issues in their campus lives and unjust university controls. In the 1960s and the 1970s, growing dissents of the majority number of students started from their dissatisfaction about unreliable and inconsistent provisions of university students vouchers, newly introduced university exam system, strict dormitory regulations, and limitations of club activities. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, these accumulated dissents from students within university management and academic affairs had led to stronger awareness for students that the state affairs are directly related to changing higher education policy, university management, decision-making within campus as well as day-to-day campus lives and these changes led to an increase in the number of students involved in student activism.

The suppression of democracy movements and collapse of higher education (1988–2000)

Political, social, and educational contexts

The year 1988 was when the 8888 uprising newly wrote the political, social, and educational history of Myanmar. On

March 12th 1988, one YTU student died and several were beaten up by riot police in a quarrel between college students and the children of local party officials. Angered by the excessive crackdown and violence, YU and YTU students started a protest, and the police ordered by General Sein Lwin raided them on the White Bridge in the neighborhood of the Inya Lake on March 16, killing twelve students and cracking down and arresting hundreds of them. The conflicts between the students and the government accelerated and two hundred students died. (Steinberg 2001, p. 100, 2013, p. 79) The public discontent with the government had already grown serious after the unnotified and uncompensated currency invalidation of 25 kyat, 35 kyat, and 75 kyat damaged household savings in 1987. The series of events had provoked the public which was already dissatisfied with the military dictatorship and the violent control in daily life (The Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, AAPP, Figures 1 and 2, interview, August 12, 2018).

The pro-democracy demonstration led by YU and YTU students, beginning in March 1988, culminated in the nationwide 8888 uprising on August 8, 1988. Although the uprising was the largest one by far, it was not successful due to the pro-government coup d'état, which was followed by establishment of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the blood-shed oppression by the army. The SLORC promised to implement reforms by holding new general elections and abolishing socialist policies, but they postponed opening the parliament when the opposition political party, the National League for Democracy outstandingly won the election. The SLORC maintained the political, economic, and social entrenchment of the military into the 2000s (Charney 2009, pp. 160–169). Yet, with the 8888 protests, a new national leader named Aung San Suu Kyi emerged, and the National League for Democracy (NLD), where she assumed the role of General Secretary, succeeded in becoming an officially registered party on September 27, 1988. The 8888 uprising has been recorded in history as the time intellectuals and university students directly influenced Myanmar's political and social changes.

Meanwhile, the enrolment rate of public schools, together with the quality of school education sharply decreased in the 1990s after the 8888 uprising. Government investment in education fell to less than 1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and no budget was allocated to the Ministry of Education (MOE) with the exception of salaries to officials, professors, teachers, and administrative personnel (Fink 2009). The 1992 UNESCO report pointed out a lack of educational facilities and infrastructure as well as educational accessibility. The report also explained that the country's education policy from 1980 to 1992 emphasized Burmese identity and language education as the core element in ethics at the level of basic education, and technical, agricultural, and vocational education at the level of secondary education.

On the other hand, policies for higher education and universities were not visibly mentioned in the report. The hint for the collapse of overall public higher education in Myanmar through the 1990s was an accumulated result from 20 years of oppression. The government intentionally reined in universities and gradually paralyzed institutional function for democracy with the following measures: nationalization of all educational institutions, including private schools (1962), the New University Education prohibiting freedom of association in universities (1964), and prohibition of the use of international textbooks and English language in teaching until 1982 (Lwin 2017). Additionally, the military divided and relocated existing universities and established new universities—without student hostels—in remote locations far away from urban centers (Koon-Hong 2014). Among many universities, Yangon Technological University, the most prestigious engineering university, was shut down in 1998 and replaced by the newly built Pyay Technological University in Bago Region. The University of Yangon, which ceased to admit undergraduates after 1996, was split into Dagon University, University of East Yangon, University of West Yangon, and other institutions.

Student activism in and out of universities

Student leaders such as Min Ko Naing, Moe Thee Zun, and Htay Kywe led a series of students protests including the nationwide mass protests on August 8, 1988. When the campuses reopened in June 1988 after the closure in March to prevent further student protests against the “White Bridge incident,” new demonstrations resumed with around simultaneous ten groups of student participants. On 6th August, Htay Kywe announced the scheduled nationwide protests on 8th August in the BBC Radio Myanmar. On this day, the entire area of Yangon was flooded with demonstrators after the declaration was read at the center hall of Yangon University at 8 p.m. on August 8. YU professors and student leaders then became key players in political and social scenes in the wake of the 8888 protests. The resolute oppression of the 8888 uprising, however, severely weakened student activism in Myanmar. The government tracked down and arrested students who participated in the uprising. The arrest of Min Ko Naing, represents such oppression; he took the lead in the uprising as the leader of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) and was sentenced to 20-year imprisonment (Clymer 2003). Other student leaders were arrested and the ABFSU was eventually dissolved. Those who managed to avoid arrest fled to other areas or neighboring countries to form exile groups such as ABFSU foreign committees.

On campus, the remaining student activists went underground and gradually lost their organizational basis as the government highly intensified surveillance. Student activists

attempted to re-organize networks and have learning sessions for social injustice and movement strategies by using the campus as their focal point. The government, however, hindered them from organizing and mobilizing movements as they deprived the universities of the role of offering political, social, and educational space. First of all, universities in Yangon were shut down after the 8888 uprising and reopened in 1991, and then the repeat of closure and reopening continued during the 1990s. Then, the undergraduate programs in YU, YTU, and Mandalay University entirely ceased to run after 1996. Moreover, the military government split and relocated universities in remote locations so that students could not conveniently gather to plan political activities; YU split into Dagon University, the University of East Yangon, University of West Yangon, and other institutions, for example. Fourth, they instead introduced the University of Distance Education to supplement higher education during the university closures or for students who could not afford to commute to the remote campuses (Koon-Hong 2014).

President Saw Muang and Than Shwe wielded power over the university beyond the authority of the MOE through the medium of SLORC and SPDC (The State Peace & Development Council, reorganized from SLORC in 1997) (Fink 2009). The military government’s oppression of higher education from 1988 into the 2000s can be evaluated as highly effective because universities could not appropriately function neither as an educational nor a democratic base for students. Many students began to seek degree certificates through enrolment in correspondence courses because universities were regularly closed or relocated outside of city center. Returns to higher education also were low due to the deteriorating economic situation, hence the student gatherings on campus for the purpose of political movements did not occur as much as before the 8888 uprising (Kyi 2000, pp. 151–154). Nonetheless, this resulted in the growth of student leaders into new political leaders in the long run as they participated in NLD activities or joined in anti-government ethnic minority groups in border areas or Thailand.

The State-Led Political Reform and Liberalization of University (2000–2013)

Political, social, and educational contexts

In the late 2000s, voices for political democracy, economic development, and social reform grew louder in Myanmar. Although the NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won in the 1990 general elections, the transfer of power from SLORC-SPDC to a democratic government was delayed. Furthermore, the problem of polarization and poverty has increasingly become more serious such as visible issues of a few

military elite family members flaunting their wealth in front of general public. On the other hand, historians have argued that the U.S.-led economic system of Myanmar has left the general public even poorer due to the lack of jobs (Charney 2009). Eventually, in July 2007 protests erupted after a sudden 100 to 500% rise in fuel prices due to the cut in governmental fuel subsidies following IMF recommendations. The protests were suppressed, but in the following month, monks led peaceful demonstrations and called the “Saffron Revolution.” They demonstrated against the economic and social policies of the military regime, and demonstrations expanded nationwide when they were suppressed with violence. The government took steps to quell the demonstrations and send the monks home (Charney 2009).

In 2008, the Thein Sein government established the new constitution to overcome the crisis caused by the Saffron Revolution. It consecutively held general elections based on the new constitution, assuming the handover of the regime to the civilian government in 2010. However, the elections were manipulated by the government with the military-organized Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) taking 883 (76.5%) of the 1154 seats. Then in 2011, after a secret meeting between President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi, the reform began. Some of the background for the reform includes ensuring the safety of General Than Swe, the reform-mindedness of Thein Sein, and the commitment to protect the position of military authorities. Reforms in 2011 freed 2100 political prisoners including Min Ko Naing and the key figures of the 8888 uprising, revised the Political Parties Registration Law, guaranteed political activities of opposition parties, set up negotiations with minority groups, established national human rights commission, and introduced the act for peaceful assembly and demonstrations, bringing a series of political liberalization to the nation. However, the military still maintains a certain amount of political clout and economic interests (Jang 2012a, b). Even after the 2000s, the government maintained the preexisting policy of suppressing higher education and student movements. The split and relocations of universities and the closure of undergraduate programs in the main universities in Yangon continued to hinder the organization and mobilization of student activities. Yet, the government launched higher education reform after 2010. In November 2012, the Yangon University Renovation and Upgrading Committee,⁵ chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi, was formed to set off the reform of YU, which was intended to establish standards for HE institutions across the country. The MOE accordingly decided to provide a budget of 6446.6 million

Kyats (7.2 million dollars) to YU and resolved to renovate and upgrade the infrastructure and educational materials of the university.

Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of centralized bureaucracy and control over higher education and universities have persisted. The university still lacked its autonomy, and the academic staff lacked freedom in daily practices; student admissions, research topics, fieldwork, seminars, and international collaboration required permission from the MOE. Moreover, the practical reform process did not embrace representation and participation of the staff and students, although the special parliamentary committee included academic staff from the YU. For example, the MOE has led the physical reconstruction of the university, but the heads of departments have not been well informed of the detailed plans for it (Esson and Wang 2018, pp. 1184–1185, pp. 1189–1193).

Student activism in universities and beyond

By the beginning of the 2000s, a gap formed and widened between the generation of students who were able to take the lead in student activism and the later generation. The arrests of former student leaders during the 1990s after the 8888 uprising damaged the sustainability of campus student groups as the pass-down of the former legacies ceased while military intelligence officers visited universities to check students as well. In 1992 and 1995, some of the students who were released after the 8888 uprising returned to their colleges and attempted to revive student demonstrations (in 1996 and 1998), but were mostly arrested or deported after 1998. Meanwhile, student activists who had become political leaders in underground groups or ethnic insurgence groups in northern Myanmar or Thai-Burma broader areas joined the NLD as party members and took refugees to Australia, Germany, Thailand, UK, and many other countries.

During the 2007 Saffron Revolution, student activists attempted to actively engage in anti-government protests. They recognized that the organizational base of the student movement had been destroyed in the 1990s and they wished to reactivate the ABFSU through participation in the Saffron protests. However, it was very difficult for the ABFSU to recruit new members on college campuses and organize student campaigns because the government was still heavily monitoring faculty and students. In contrast to the 8888 protests, only about 10% of the demonstrators in the Saffron uprising were students, showing that the student movement had been greatly weakened due to the suppression by the

⁵ It comprised of five parliamentarians, five retired senior academics, two senior officials from the MOE, the Rector of YU, head of Department of International Relations and Industrial Chemistry, respectively.

regime after 1988 (Koon-Hong 2014, pp. 83–84).⁶ The government moved student leaders of 2007 out of campuses after they were released around 2012 so that another connection of old and young student generations could not be formed to organize new student movements. This prevented those who had participated in student movements of the past from passing the values and experiences to the new generation, thus, obstructing other anti-government movements (Koon-Hong 2014, pp. 84–92). By 2012, the ABFSU was re-established and student organizations could collectively act, but with the political liberalization around 2011, the influence of student groups weakened because public support dispersed towards other newly formed political groups such as the NLD.

Transition to constitutional democracy and emergence of new generation students (2014–present)

Political and social context and education reform

The period from 2014 to the present is when the state-led political reform accelerated its pace in continuation of the 2011 reform. The Assembly of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (Myanmar Parliament), which resulted from the 2010 elections, created a more advantageous environment for the NLD than before. Meanwhile, the Thein Sein government approved opening up more political space for non-governmental actors (Esson and Wang 2018, p. 1184). In 2014, the Association Registration Law was drafted to shorten time for registering an association from 60 to 30 days and set a maximum registration fee at 30,000 kyat. This replaced the Law Relating to Forming of Organizations enacted in 1988 that prohibited organizational political activities and required a long waiting time and fee of 500,000 kyat (Koon-Hong, p. 86). In 2016, Myanmar succeeded in a peaceful transition from the military government to the civilian one. NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi won 390 seats out of 481 seats in the Upper House and Lower House in the 2015 parliament election. Htin Kyaw, Aung San Suu Kyi's close ally, elected and appointed the president of Myanmar by the new

parliament. Then, she assumed both the role of State Counselor with power over the cabinet and the role of minister of the presidential office (Jang 2017, pp. 187–188).

In 2012, the Myanmar government conducted the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) of its education policy, system, curriculum, and teacher policy for the first time in 20 years with support from international organizations. In the same year, the government first conducted a comprehensive review of education policy, system, curriculum, and teacher policy. The comprehensive education review committee, chaired by the vice minister of Myanmar's Federal Ministry of Education, is composed of 113 members, including central and regional governments, international organizations, bilateral development assistance agencies, Myanmar's education experts and international education experts, and the joint secretariat home and abroad (Ministry of Education of Myanmar 2013).

As CSER began in July 2012, the first step of the research focused on attributes conducted between August and December. First, policy, law, and higher education governance; second, curriculum, textbooks, admission, and graduation, assuring quality and assessment of education; and third, public–private cooperation, ties with other universities, impacts on economy/labor market/immigration were put at the top of reform agenda (Institute of International Education 2013; Hong 2018). Among numerous issues, reform of the entire higher education system a national priority in consideration with contextual issues such as the lack of social capital; the current lack of capacity to build international ties; the educational context; and the centralization/decentralization of bureaucracy and higher education (Institute of International Education 2013). During the process of CESR, democratization was the 'elephant in the room' in the nation's newly developing vision and strategies as well as day-to-day teaching, learning, and researching in education. The CESR and Education Promotion Implementation Committee (EPIC) promoted goals to 'build a modern developed nation through education' and 'to create an education system that will generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the Knowledge Age' while the CESR stated and emphasized apolitical goals. The goals suggested in the national education reform agenda lacked educational and philosophical underpinnings (Hong 2018) and a lack of ideological and political standpoints during the transition from the official military rule (Metro 2016). Some critical issues were raised by the National Network for Education Reform (NNER)⁷ such as discrimination, a lack of freedom from political and

⁶ Identity of student activists and their learning about politics and student movements had developed within underground networks of activist groups at transnational, national, and regional levels since the 1990s into the 2000s. Some of the former student activists in exile who entered political or civil society organizations evolved to form networks with other activists and to contribute to political changes in Myanmar. They attempted to play a strong role in the Saffron Revolution (2007) and student demonstrations for education reform (2015), but their role as political challengers has weakened because of the official absence of university student council and diverging perspective of different student groups.

⁷ National Network for Education Reform (NEER) is a coalition among non-governmental organizations, which consists of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Education Network, The 88 Generation students, Thinking Classroom, Student unions, Teachers unions, Religious organizations.

religious influences in educational setting, rights to minority languages and culture, administrative decentralization, and academic freedom for teachers as well as revision of curriculum, textbooks, and examinations (NNER 2014; Metro 2016; Lwin 2017). Educators and teachers, in particular, urged consideration of issues related to the quality of teaching and learning and more academic freedom. In particular, the issues of critical and creative thinking have had more subtle punishment during the previous four decades of the military dictatorship.⁸ Zar Ni (1998), for instance, described how students and teachers had been punished for utilizing analytical and creative thinking skills in schools and many pointed out this situation was more severe in the HEIs.

The NESP and CESR inspired higher education reforms (2013, 2016) also did not pay close attention to the democratic governance political and academic freedom, and autonomy of higher education institutions. In the case of YU, the hierarchical structure and practices in and around the university have persisted while there has been progress in physical renovation and material provision such as upgrading buildings, laboratories, and technical equipment after the beginning of the reform in 2012. As mentioned earlier, the academic staff has to get approval for administrative duties, and academic events, and works from the rector and the MOE {Formatting Citation}. In early 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi announced the New National Education Strategic Plan 2016–2020, including the goal of higher education: “Students have equitable access to a world-class higher education system, leading to better opportunities for employment and significant contributions to a knowledge-based economy.” The discussions on the authority of the Ministry of Education and the universities were partly mentioned in this reform policy, and the decision to establish a mid-term strategy by each university opened the possibility of campus democratization in Myanmar (Hong 2018).

New generation students and new movements in universities

Since 2013, the political control over student groups has largely eased up as they were allowed to exist and openly operate on campuses. In the same and the following year,

Yangon Technological University opened undergraduate courses in 2012, followed by Yangon University in 2013. The Yangon University Student Council reopened and was allowed to elect a president in 2018. The presidential election is upcoming in the next semester in 2019. Student groups that focus on university-based issues diverged from those that emphasize political changes like the ABFSU.⁹ However, the state has instilled a sense of fear among students over the last three decades, which discourages university students’ movements. Furthermore, political parties and CSOs are now taking up their portion of activities for democracy in Myanmar. This reduced the previous political influence and role of students (Koon-Hong 2014, pp. 87–89). Student groups who still actively participate in political and social issues mainly focus on education reform in Myanmar. In 2015, members of the ABFSU and other supporting students started a March from Mandalay to Rangoon but the police arrested them upon their reaching LaPaDan, before entering Yangon. According to the estimates by the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (AAPP), “Nearly 100 students were imprisoned in 2015, and released in 2016.” (AAPP, interview, 12 August 2018).¹⁰ The students upheld the Eleven Demands with the political freedom and participation of teachers and students, education autonomy, ensuring that 20% of national budget is dedicated for education, full use of Burmese as the main teaching language, as well as demands of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). The government has not yet fulfilled the demands, so the ABFSU is still attempting to deliver them (ABFSU, interview, 10 August, 2018).

The problem is that the current National Education Law was drafted before the military government stepped down and it lacks provisions for profound democratization of education. The government promised to discuss the matter with the ABFSU, but it unilaterally broke down the agreement. In interviews with the AAPP, the education activists emphasize with passion that: “The ABFSU discussed the law and determined it was not for the university (students’) life, student rights, and so on. They tried to discuss the law with the government and the parliament, but the government didn’t allow

⁸ See a unique article, *Students and Teachers as Agents of National Reconciliation in Burma* by Rosalie Metro (2016). By conducting semi-structured interviews and collaborative workshops with private school student teachers and students in Yangon as well as in community centers in the Thai-Burma border, she identified ethnic discrimination, language barriers, teaching methods, corruption in schools as possible obstacles to education reform in Myanmar.

⁹ According to the ABFSU, the Unions have tried to change the current structure of parliamentary structures that control education policy and system, so that the civilian groups have more actual influences over the country’s politics than the military (ABFSU, interview, 10 August 2018).

¹⁰ The Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (AAPP) is a civil society organization formed by former political prisoners who participated in the 8888 uprising. They collect information about other political prisoners arrested during and after the 8888 uprising (1988), the Saffron Revolution (2007), the student march (2015), and other political activities, and give trainings and lectures on human rights and democratization.

to do anything (so). The representative committee selected from different universities is trying to discuss the Higher Education Law for democratization of higher education as well, along with the important 11 demands.” (AAPP, interview, 12 August, 2018).

Yet, the student movements do not seem to be as popular as they once were among students themselves in the era of democratization. Some of the civil society activists pointed out “a lack of knowledge” and “a lack of interests in ugly history” among the young generation of university students as one of the reasons. It is due to the fact that political activism since the Aung San Suu Kyi government took the government is shaping in various channels within so-called ‘homeland Myanmar,’ and the room for civil societies in Myanmar are rapidly expanding.¹¹ Also, in education, the history of democratization has significantly been reduced in high school curriculums since 1988. One interviewee even mentioned “The people who was born after 1988, they might know the ‘fake’ history of 1988.” Another said that “Almost all of the students we interviewed didn’t know the U-Thant uprising, and also special commemorate place (for deceased students during the pro-democracy protests)” when they interviewed students at the 30th anniversary event of the 8888 uprising held in YU (AAPP, interview, 12 August, 2018).

U Min Ko Naing, one of the student leaders in the 8888 uprising and currently a prominent and respected leader of the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, also pointed out the same problem at a university level. He said, “In the history program in major universities, there are no students in history major [who] write a dissertation or thesis about contemporary history.” His following comment clearly hints that, along with education on the history of democratization, the universities and the young generation of university students at present should seek new roles and strategies for further democratization of Myanmar. He stated that “Former students know only old ways: fighting, struggle, marching. They [also] forget the history of democratization of Myanmar. Yes, we can demonstrate. Yes, we can march. However, we have different issues now. [We need to build] capacity

to join the state building. Now critical thinking is needed. New philosophy is needed.” (Min Ko Naing, interview, 10 August, 2018).

Student activism, notwithstanding the complexities of the changing student demographics and the multiple foci of activists, has survived the test of time in higher education institutions in Myanmar. The history of elite student activism in major universities in Myanmar such as YU and YTU has provided a perspective on adaptation to change and a testimony to the omnipresence of leadership through activist engagement in the history of Myanmar (Esson and Wang 2018, p. 51). However, the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions remain somewhat unclear. What had happened in the higher education policy making and HEIs governance at the time that the military government had power over all levels of instructions management, teaching and learning process, and day-to-day lives of peoples in universities? Had HEIs provided critical and relatively safe space for students to study, think, and critique the political, social, and education issues of that time? Or were HEIs reluctant to concede government’s controls over students’ activities? On these lines, the next section will examine the relationship between student activism and the higher education institutions for wider political and social change of one society and, in turn, it seeks the potentials of transformative roles of HEIs in ‘teaching and learning’ democracies.

Discussions

Past and now of Myanmar student movements

This article argues that in Myanmar, there had been a past socio-cultural and educational tradition in respecting such leadership of ‘the learned man,’ although this tradition had largely disappeared intentionally during the Burmese Socialism Period under the Ne Win Regime. While the students’ activism grew as active political challengers to the military regime, elite students from major universities had gained public empathy and support as ‘communal elites’ or ‘collective elites’ of the Myanmar society in general. Therefore, politically speaking, although they had not gained the necessary positions in formal government and party politics as much as they expected, they had remained as a powerful democratic symbol in Myanmar society for a few decades. Based on these findings, the research thoroughly examined the period from 1962 to 1988 when a trial of strength continued between the state and student activists under the oppressive military regime. Although the Ne Win government controlled the freedom of universities and implemented a series of restrictions on student movements, students maintained the power of activism by adopting their universities as a

¹¹ Susan Banki (2016)’s recent article, *Transnational Activism as Practised by Activists from Burma: Negotiating Precarity, Mobility and Resistance* highlights recent changes in the nature, practices, and strategies of Burmese transnational activism in the post-2011 period. The article does not particularly focus on student’s activism per se. However, it provides an important insight on the ‘exile activism’ or more accurately activism outside of Burma had been disconnected and collaborated at the same time with ‘homelands’ democratic movements. While it depicts how Burmese transitional activists have shown diverse and often conflicting views of the national reform around 2010, it also provides some critical insights how democratic movements within Myanmar would take diversified and conflicting ways in near future.

movement base. Then, with 1988 as a turning point of student activism in Myanmar, the state thoroughly repressed student activism after its power reached its apex in the 8888 uprising. Students from YU, YTU, and other major universities led the hugest pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988, but the military government strengthened surveillance over these institutions so that they could not function as a base for student activism. The course of the dynamic and bloody histories of Myanmar's higher education between 1962 and 1990 has shown that university students played larger roles as a symbol of democratization of a country, not only having a strong impact on the general public, but also making the military government nervous enough to crush down the core functions of higher education—researching, teaching, and learning.

The critical examinations of the history of higher education institutions in Myanmar also request new scholarly insights to examine the roles and responsibilities of HE and HEIs. Celebrating 'heroic' student activists, and renewed nationalist Aung San is essential to mobilize the public to remember the historical importance of democratization in Myanmar, but it is, at the same time, dangerous to emphasize the 'individual' stories without deeply questioning the vulnerabilities of education philosophy, educational policy, and the very meaning of higher education institutions against changing political and social regimes. In the 2000s, higher education reform began and physical renovation made some progress, while the state control and undemocratic practices in universities had persisted. The disconnection between the previous generations of student activists and the present generation intensified after the long repression over universities and student activists. As discussed in the previous section, the major universities in Yangon and Mandalay were fragmented into smaller campuses, colleges, and departments. More importantly, until 2012 and 2013, YU and YTU could not admit any graduate students for a decade. With the stated reform and the beginning of the NLD government, the state eased control over universities and allowed student groups to operate openly on campuses. However, the study observed that the demands of student groups and individual youth have intensified and become more varied. Some seek more democratic participation of stakeholders in higher education reform while others have urged for stronger academic freedom and capacity building. What is most interesting is that in the emergence of a new generation, students movements are veering in different directions. Many who participated in the research emphasize the disconnection and discontinuity with the history of the 8888 generation and the new generations who entered universities in 2011. The break in the memory of the democratization history and the search for new roles in further democratization among young generation remain to be solved.

Re-valuing historical roots of HE's political-social changes in the south

This article reveals that while numerous historians, sociologists, and political theorists studied student movements, especially their activism in the context of socio-political analysis, student activism and its educational meanings in the context of higher education in the South have not been entirely examined by education theorists. Again, education scholars such as Altbach is one of very few scholars who paid close attention to student politics in the so-called South. Altbach argued in *Students Politics in the Third World* (1984) that universities, as key intellectual institutions in their societies, indeed, have played an important role in developing societies (1984, 1989). Historically speaking in Asia, the university was one of the opening wedges for modern ideological and educational trends. In the late 1800s and until the early 1990s, nationalist ideas were brought from Europe in the wake of successful nationalist struggles in Italy and Germany, such as Mazzini and Garibaldi who had a profound impact on young Asian intellectuals. Later, the Irish nationalist struggle had some influence, particularly in the British colonies. Burmese student leaders, for instance, had witnessed the Irish nationalist struggle and the births of other Asian nation-states. These 'transnational' influences that Burmese student leaders and later political and intellectual leaders such as Aung San, U Nu, and U Thant are well recorded in memories and historical literature (Charney 2009; Thant 2006). The links between political and cultural movements in the developing countries in Asia were often close, and the impact of Western intellectual influences, primarily through the universities, was important in the cultural spheres that created a sort of habitus of the educated in Asia.

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, a dramatic shift between the pre- and post-independence period in student activism is particularly apparent in Asia. Asian university students, perhaps more sensitive than other politically conscious groups, were quick to realize the changes that adult nationalist leaders took in a 'slower' and 'more conservative' manner (Altbach 1979). Some Myanmar literature also explained that seeing injustice remaining in Burmese society after the independence, students demanded radical social change in addition to national independence, and they were impatient at the pace of change instituted by ruling elites. All of this creates political conflicts between the more ideological elite students and pragmatic nationalist adults who have to deal with the day-to-day problems of government. Among student leaders within campuses, having different visions, ideas, and strategies for so-called 'democracy,' in addition to disillusionment and frustration to unjust in society, became more sectarian to respond differently to the birth of their young nation-state. Here, elite universities in many parts of Asia, including the Rangoon Arts and Sciences University

(RASU) (currently Yangon University, YU) and Rangoon Institute of Technology (RTI) (currently, Yangon University of Technology, YTU) in Myanmar provided a space for the ideas of nationalism, democracy, and social justice that were discussed and developed among elite student activists. Once again, highlighting that the locus of student activism, regardless of its orientation, is in the university.

However, this article shows that the institutional and educational environment of how activism was born, debated, nurtured, and grew with crucial importance is often ignored and under-emphasized. Universities in Myanmar became centers of opposition in societies not characterized by a high level of political consciousness, class struggles, or proletariat revolutions, but they have accumulated their respect and general public support as the society of 'the learned man.' It does not mean that the Socialist and Marxist schools of thoughts were not discussed and debated on campus, but it means that the reputation of social and educational elites of student activists in Burmese society is fundamentally based on their socio-cultural respect for 'the educated few' and historical symbol of the pre- and post-independent leaders of student leaders from major universities—often symbolized by the U Aung San, the independent leader and the forefather of the country as well as the father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The potential importance of university centers of opposition can be seen in the number of successful revolutions and coups which have been stimulated by student movements and other university sources all over Asia.¹² In countries like Burma without a strong parliamentary system and strong military tradition, university people or journals have become sources of dissent. In almost all Asian nations, universities are institutions to be contended with in any political equation. It is significant to note that many nations accept the university as a political force in society despite rhetoric to the contrary. Burmese students, because of historical traditions of ideological convictions, felt that the universities should be centers of criticism and action, and should be immune to government interference. These conflicts increased the tense situation in key universities in Burma and put higher education in a difficult political situation.

¹² In post-war Asia, the absence of political infrastructure absorbed students' discontent. In particular, in Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand, students commonly engaged in macro level activism during Suharto's New Order Regime dictatorship in Indonesia (1965–1998), Park Chung Hye and Chun Doo Hawn's military governments in the Republic of Korea (1961–1987), and the military regime of Sarit and Thanom in Thailand (1957–1973) (Koon-Hong 2014). Literature in regard to the dynamics between political and social changes, higher education institutions and student activism are relatively well recorded in various Korean literature.

By placing higher education, in responding to such critical roles of student activism throughout Myanmar's history of democratization, the *exogenous* relations with democracy in the wider society is first examined in the article. What is not examined in detail so far is the *endogenous* relations to democracy of Myanmar in higher education institutions within the country. The former expects the scholars to re-examine the histories and narratives of student activists in the South as heroes, martyrs, and political challengers and shift this dialogue towards the questions of the roles and responsibilities of HE in the South under the various forms and types of governance. The latter challenges the very meaning of higher education and their institutions in regard to the past that had clearly shown such vulnerabilities under shifting political and social upheavals in Myanmar and beyond. In summary, past literature on higher education, democracy, and student activism in the North emphasized that class conflicts and interests are the strongest drivers of the democratization movements while the importance of nationalism is not mentioned. In contrast, research on democracy in Southeast Asia highlights the historical, political, and social symbolism of educated democratic leaders, formulated around nationalism and religion rather than conflicts and solidarity of class interests.

Higher education institution as exogenous and endogenous democratic sphere?

The generation of youth who pay attention to social justice and democracy does not appear by chance. One means of cultivating such youth is to create democratic structures and process by which life in society is carried out. The other is to create a space that will give young people a democratic experience. This study identified and analyzed how Myanmar's elite student activism, especially around 1988 formed and developed. While HEIs lost governance in all levels of activities, the university student activism gained political and social importance in three main ways: historical roots in elite leadership of 'the learned man'; continuous networking, mobilizing, and advocating students' demands and needs against the military regime; and receiving 'symbolic' popularity as 'communal' elites from the general public.

Democratic universities do not happen by chance. One way of creating them is through democratic structures and processes by which life in the university is carried out (Boland 2005). The other is to create a curriculum and contents of teaching and learning that will give young people a democratic school (Apple and Beane 1995). While the work of Apple and Beane (1995) relates to democratic schools or universities, many of their core principles and ideas are readily transferable to the context of higher education. Although this paper has focused primarily on the historical context of dynamics between changing regimes, and the

socio-political and educational importance of student activism as well as the vulnerability of higher education as a sustainable and autonomous institution, the manifestation of democratic values within an institution is a lot more complex and subtle. It may be true that higher education institutions are uniquely poised to give students a democratic learning experience which prepares them for citizenship (Boland 2005). In various parts of the North, as the foci of protests have changed over the decades towards demanding more *endogenous* democratization of HE such as establishing democratic governance of HEIs, so too have institutional and community reactions changed. In *The Changing Role of Students' Unions within Contemporary Higher Education*, Brooks et al. (2015) found that student activism in the North has gradually shifted towards a greater emphasis on representation in the role and function of the students' union; the increasing importance of non-elected officers and groups; and the emergence of more cooperative relationships between the students' union and senior institutional management. McCarthy (2012), in *Occupying Higher Education: The Revival of the Student Movement*, also highlights the changing focuses of student activism and movements towards emphasizing democratizing the HEIs and day-to-day education practices.

However, this democratic potential of higher education institutions in relation to wider society as well as within the university is yet to be directly discussed in many parts of the South. Yet, it is still early to say whether major universities in Myanmar will openly discuss and actively build so-called 'habits of democratic practice' that can be best cultivated within the teaching and learning relationship in the near future. In this regard, academics bear the primary and difficult responsibility of searching for ways of continuing further educational reform and fostering a new generation after the end of the military regime. In this sense, academic democracy in Myanmar should be more directly proposed as an important precondition for the realization of political and educational democracy within higher institutions, highlighting the centrality of academics' personal beliefs and values.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to gloss over the modern history of Myanmar's higher education, this research clearly shows that the historical narratives of higher education itself provide a stark reality for scholars, teachers, students, and university administrators alike regarding the vulnerabilities of higher education policies and institutions under the political hegemony. Still, it cannot be denied that higher education institutions in the South, especially national universities, have provided a rare space for contemplating philosophical and theoretical norms of society as well as serving the public as key

educational institutions for fostering educated leaders of society. Thus, it is still critical to search potentials of HEIs for inspiring, catalyzing, and maturing democratic ideas, concepts, and practices of just societies.

Amidst the rapid political and social changes in Myanmar, perhaps a long history of democratization and the important roles of student activism is in danger of being forgotten. This political history of activists has been widely recorded and debated within the international and national diplomatic and political arenas as explored in this research. As the famous Phyo Min Thein, who actively participated in lower-Burma student activism stated, "Student activism is very deep-rooted in Burma's history." With students pushing for both widened student autonomy and the end of the dictatorship, there is no denial of such historical importance. Rather, this important history at the critical juncture of re-establishing a new constitutional democracy—although 25% of Parliamentarians are from the military—needs further examination, evaluation, and development.

However, from an educational perspective, this critical history of higher education is in danger of being 'forgotten' because of a large disconnect between the past generation and newcomers, who entered into universities since 2012/2013. There is a wide gulf between the 'glorious past' of HEIs in Yangon as one of the most respected academic hubs of Asia in the 1930s and the contemporary status of most HEIs in Myanmar barely recovering from five decades of destruction and oppression. The humble reality is the contemporary history of Myanmar is not well taught either in formal schooling or in universities. At the time of this research, there had not been a single graduate student in history who wrote their dissertation on Myanmar's hard-won, yet fragile history of democracy. If history is not taught, if intrinsic roles of higher learning such as seeking truths, creating knowledge and ideas, questioning and developing fundamentals of democratic societies, and fostering new generations of leaders and thinkers of the country are not pursued by the reformed HEIs, if the new HEIs do not confront the issues of democracy within the HE governance, then how are the ways of the new generation who entered into these historically valued institutions to be re-connected with their histories of democratization?

While it is a welcoming change to host the 30th anniversary event for the 8888 uprising at Yangon University in August 2018, putting a light into the past from the perspective of the student activists as heroes and martyrs, it may lead to a lack of attention to more underlying issues of higher education policy, system, and institutions that were extremely vulnerable under the regime changes. While student movements, rather than activism, have received their own ways again, despite restrictions on a few universities in Yangon and Mandalay, a critical question still remained.

Is the symbolic meaning of students as political challengers still valid among the new generation of university students in marking the 30th anniversary of the 8888 uprising? Myanmar's recent educational discourse which seeks liberalization and globalization should be critically considered in terms of whether it has failed or avoided discussing the new political and social role of higher education. Amid the rapid wave of reform and openness since 2013, there should be more academic and practical discussions about the citizenship of Myanmar's new elites, with the question being whether democratization is in danger of being 'forgotten' for the contemporary students in prestigious universities, who have not learned their own history of democratization.

The study of Myanmar's student activism in the context of higher education may offer an opportunity to re-visit and re-examine student movements in actively developing Asian universities in the South. Student protest is a national or institutional phenomenon for the most part, but there are nonetheless some useful cross-national and local comparisons to be made for understanding various patterns and flows of democratization processes. The history of democratization and the roles of university students in fast-developing Southeast Asian countries may be largely 'forgotten' if the Asian intellectuals in higher education ourselves do not value and nurture our own socio-political and educational contributions in Asia's histories. The roles of HEIs in wider society—described as *endogenous values of higher education*—should go beyond 'corporate social responsibility' type of volunteerism and charity-based activities, but genuinely need to re-think and re-vision the roles of HE in order to inspire and influence more democratic and just societies.

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