

Moderator's introduction to the workshop

Myanmar saw a coup on February 1, 2021, with lots of people taking to the streets to protest “peacefully.” Since then, Myanmar has been caught in multiple dilemmas of social unrest, epidemic spread, economic recession and external sanctions. The process during which Myanmar's military relaxed its grip on power and started an in-depth political transformation was temporarily terminated, with the military government coming back to power.

The special status of Myanmar's military can be traced back to the dynastic period, and was strengthened in the struggle for national independence and the integrity of the Union. The political succession and transformation in different periods after Myanmar's independence have been all related to the military and its actions. The military government logic involves the subjective will and interest requirements of military groups, national interest requirements, people's emotions and interest requirements as well as international cognition. The political turmoil in Myanmar has its structural roots in political power, economic interests, concepts and culture, among which the structural tearing of grassroots society is the deep cause of the game between military and government powers.

Regarding the impact of military politics on Myanmar's future, there are opinions that Myanmar's military lacks the trust of the people and is unable to hold power firmly. The military

government logic of Myanmar's political development is likely to be completely broken by the chaos caused by military rule. The path of reform will not work in Myanmar, and there may be a revolution in the future. There are also views that Myanmar may fall into the next round of political disorder, and the country still has a long way to go before it is able to transform itself. In the context of the game between the major powers of China and the US, this sudden political change will inevitably have an impact on Myanmar's foreign policy, and the military government may adopt passive neutralism in principle in the future. China will continue to respond cautiously based on its previous experience, but the prospects for China-Myanmar economic and trade cooperation are not optimistic.

Experts at the meeting also analyzed and discussed aspects closely related to Myanmar's military politics, such as the re-election, armed revolution by the National League for Democracy, the role of the countryside in the political turmoil, and the role of NGOs of China, the US and the other Western countries. The experts presented important ideas on the issues that Myanmar is facing from the perspective of their disciplines, with the hope that they could further utilize the advantages of interdisciplinary exchanges to advance the study of Myanmar issues and provide valuable policy suggestions for China.

Zhai Kun

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In early February this year, Myanmar saw its political situation undergoing a sudden change. The military detained senior government officials, took over the country and declared a state of emergency. Since then, a lot of people had taken to the streets to “peacefully” protest, triggering social unrest in Myanmar. Since World War II, Myanmar has become the country with the longest military rule, amounting to more than half a century. Military politics occupies an important position in the country’s economic development, social structure, political culture and political participation. How to understand the roots of long-time military politics in Myanmar? What impact will military politics have on the future development of Myanmar? Participants in this workshop exchanged ideas and discussed the above-mentioned issues.

Prof. Fan Hongwei, from the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Xiamen University, gave a presentation titled “The Dilemma of Myanmar’s Military Coup and China’s Policy Choice.” He pointed out that Myanmar’s democratization process had gone through ten years since 2011, but was interrupted by a military coup in the early 2021. Although Myanmar’s military repeatedly declared that they would hold a general election and return power after the emergency was over,

parties at home and abroad did not buy it and instead demanded that the military return power to Aung San Suu Kyi and National League for Democracy (NLD).

After Myanmar's national independence in 1948, the role of the military in Myanmar's politics was continuously strengthened and institutionalized, and finally it was clearly defined and guaranteed by the Constitution. There have been four military coups in Myanmar's history (in 1958, 1962, 1988 and 2021). The coup in 1962 was well-known in that it began a new era of long-term military rule. On the early morning of March 2, 1962, the military staged a coup and seized state power. On the same day, the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar reported the news of the coup d'état back to Beijing and made a judgement on the situation in the report: Myanmar's military launched an Egyptian-style coup like Nasser did in 1952, which completely took over the state power. Since the new military government had controlled the national situation, it was recommended that Beijing quickly recognize the new government after receiving notification from Myanmar. However, Beijing did not agree with the judgment. The Chinese Embassy in Myanmar was instructed to pay close attention to the reactions and practices of other countries to the coup, and to contact officials above the ministerial level in the new government. Congratulations could be sent in the personal name of the envoy, but envoys were not to rush to declare it publicly.

Coups are sudden and unexpected. In situations when the basic information is not clear enough, it is convention in China's diplomacy not to be seen as taking a side. However, the new Myanmar government expressed dissatisfaction with the "wait-and-see" attitude of the Chinese embassy. On March 6, 1962, the new government took the initiative to inform the Chinese side that the Indian ambassador to Myanmar had recognized the new government and had been received by Myanmar's new Minister of Foreign Affairs. At that time, the situation on the China-India border was tense, so Beijing considered it would not be advisable to postpone its recognition of the new government. Therefore, before 24:00 that day, the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar submitted to the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs a note of recognition from the Chinese government and a congratulatory message sent by Premier Zhou Enlai to Ne Win. China thus became the fourth country to recognize the new government.

After the unrest in Myanmar in August 1988, China did not publicly state its position, and was more cautious in conferring diplomatic recognition. It was not until September 8 when the situation deteriorated, that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a moderate statement expressing its hope that the Myanmar issue could be properly addressed. At that time, Western countries required China to cooperate with them and put pressure on the Myanmar authorities, but this was rejected

on the grounds of possible interference in another country's internal affairs. Later, China gave sports equipment that was originally to be donated to the former regime to the new military government, and planted the national flags of the two countries at the donation ceremony, implying China's recognition. Afterwards, China continued to interact with the Myanmar authorities in less sensitive areas, such as sports and humanitarian assistance, to promote bilateral relations.

Prof. Fan Hongwei noted that the situation in Myanmar this year was more complicated than before. China's Myanmar policy must consider the attitudes and pressures of all parties involved. However, based on historical experience, China will remain cautious in its policy choices.

Zhou Fangye, an associate research fellow from National Institute of International Strategy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), gave a presentation titled "Structural Roots of Political Turmoil in Myanmar." He created an analysis model which he called "Economic Interest Structure – Political Power Structure – Conceptual and Cultural Structure" to explain the causes of political turmoil in Myanmar.

In his explanation, "economic interest structure" refers to the distribution of productive resources and economic interests of a country; "political power structure" refers to the relative position and interrelationship of power groups in the political system in national power competition and distribution; and

“conceptual and culture structure” involves the shaping of political authority by official ideology and traditional social culture. For a given country, its economic interest structure is the foundation and determines the operation of the political power structure; at the same time, the operation of its political power structure will be affected by the conceptual and cultural structure and external factors. Only when the economic interest structure, conceptual and cultural structure, external factors and political power structure are coordinated with each other, can the political situation remain stable; otherwise, political turmoil — even political transformation — will occur. For Myanmar, problems have emerged in the three structures, and there is no stable fulcrum for adjusting the three. The “fulcrum” generally refers to a political power group, which is composed of public groups with similar multiple identities. Such groups are social aggregations with political consciousness that can participate in the political power game in a sustainable and organized way to realize their interests. The political power groups in Myanmar mainly include military groups, middle class and intellectual elites, minority groups, sangha groups and emerging business groups.

The problem with the structure of Myanmar’s economic interests is that, so far, the country has not been able to extricate itself from the self-seclusion economic development model. During the British colonial period, Myanmar was one of the

richest regions in Southeast Asia. However, after Ne Win's military government came to power, it began to engage in a closed, centrally planned economy, which led to a deteriorating economic situation. After the new military government took charge in 1988, it gradually opened up to the outside world and returned to a market-oriented path due to economic pressure. However, Myanmar remains exclusionary in its economy, and, even now, the degree of opening-up is not high. After Aung San Suu Kyi came to power, she became more sensitive to foreign investment, resulting in a slow progress in many economic cooperation projects between China and Myanmar. After 2018, Myanmar's economy continued to deteriorate. The military reckoned that Aung San Suu Kyi's ability in developing the economy would not be good enough to win her the hearts of the people. However, the 2020 general election still witnessed the success of the NLD. Therefore, the military insisted that the NLD had conducted electoral fraud.

The problem with Myanmar's political power structure is that it has not properly handled the relationship between emerging power groups and vested interest groups. The NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi entered the inner circle of Myanmar politics as an emerging power group. It did not liquidate the military's vested interests but reached a compromise with it, and the military forces remained in the inner circle while sangha groups and emerging business groups were left outside. In

addition, Aung San Suu Kyi pursued Burmese chauvinism, keeping minority groups out of the inner circle. Precisely because there were only two groups in the inner circle, the military and the NLD, the military had no concerns about staging a coup.

The problem with Myanmar's conceptual and cultural structure is that a unified official ideology has not been established. After democratization, the authority of the military began to collapse, but its foundation remained; ethnic minorities wanted federalism, but were suppressed by Aung San Suu Kyi's Burmese chauvinism; emerging business groups wanted globalization to develop economy, but common people opposed globalization and supported populism. Multiple ideas coexisted in Myanmar, leading to a fragmented ideology, which failed to provide enough support for the NLD to consolidate power.

Zhou Fangye pointed out that when there are problems with the three structures, Myanmar may only be able to get out of the predicament under the leadership of a strong political man by seizing the historical opportunity. Otherwise, it will fall into a new cycle of political turmoil.

Peng Hongwei, a research fellow from the Research Department of the China-Myanmar Friendship Association, gave a presentation titled "Conjectures Regarding Political Trends in Myanmar." He mentioned that among East Asian countries, Myanmar's military rule has been the longest and the most

stable one. The legitimacy of military rule stems from its contribution to the founding of Myanmar and its role in the country's struggle against disintegration. There are mainly two types of military rule: direct and indirect. After the coup in 1962, the revolutionary committee founded by Ne Win was an example of direct rule. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) created in 2010 and controlled by the military was indirect rule.

After the turmoil in Myanmar in 1988, the new military government carried out democratic constitutional reform to a certain degree, gradually shifting from direct rule to indirect rule. With Myanmar's democratization and transformation, the military and Aung San Suu Kyi reached a compromise. The military agreed to make concessions, considering Aung San Suu Kyi was a pacifist who chose to follow the path of Nelson Mandela; she would not engage in transformationalism, and would not deprive the military of its vested interests. However, in 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi went to the International Court of Justice in The Hague to respond to the Rohingya genocide case, which threatened the military. Although Aung San Suu Kyi went to defend the military, the Court passed a resolution of appointing a third-party investigation committee to investigate the Rohingya issue. The military was afraid that they would fall into the same trap as Slobodan Milošević did and be tried; therefore, they were very dissatisfied with Aung San Suu Kyi's

response to the lawsuit, believing that she harmed the military's interests.

Another problem with Aung San Suu Kyi is that she took democracy too simplistically and insisted on majority rule. Though she did not directly suppress ethnic minorities, her adherence to the majority principle resulted in many actions that hurt the emotions of ethnic minorities. In this sense, ethnic minorities in Myanmar were also dissatisfied with her, worrying that her democratic principles would result in the tyranny of the majority. For the military, they wanted to establish a proportional representation system in Myanmar, through which the ethnic minorities could be divided and ruled, and prevent the NLD's one-party dominance from harming the military's interests once again.

Peng Hongwei expressed his belief that, judging from the current situation, reform was not feasible in Myanmar, and there could be a revolution in the future. In addition, the military couldn't hold power as firmly as before, because the people no longer had trust in them due to their poor governance.

Prof. Zhong Zhixiang from the Information Engineering University gave a presentation titled "Status and Role of the Armed Forces in Myanmar's Political Life." According to him, Myanmar's armed forces were an important political force that had long dominated the country's political life since its independence. At present, they are composed of the Army, the

Navy and the Air Force, with a total of 570,000 troops under the command of Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the Defense Services.

The Defense Services were set up amid the country's national liberation. In 1940, Aung San, general secretary of the We Burmans Association, was invited to Tokyo by the Japanese and cooperated with Japan to struggle for national independence against the UK. In December 1941, with the support of Japan, the Burma Independence Army (BIA) was founded and attacked British Burma together with the Japanese. In March 1945, the army held an anti-Japanese uprising, coordinated with the allied forces to launch an all-out attack on the Japanese troops stationed in Myanmar, and played an important role in the subsequent struggle for national independence. The political status of the military is decided by history and reality, and it was also written down in the Myanmar's Constitution of 2008. According to Article 6 (f), the Union's consistent objectives are "enabling the Defense Services to be able to participate in the National political leadership role of the State." In addition, the Constitution also stipulates that the Defense Services are mainly responsible for "safeguarding the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of national solidarity and the perpetuation of sovereignty" as well as "safeguarding the Constitution." In short, Myanmar's Constitution of 2008 legally and institutionally guaranteed the supreme political power of the

Defense Services.

Since independence in 1948, Myanmar's politics have undergone four phases: the parliamentary democracy period from 1948 to 1962; the military government period from 1962 to 1988; the new military government period from 1988 to 2010; and the democratic transition period since 2010. In each period, the succession and transformation were all related to the military and its actions. Specifically, in 1948, politicians headed by General Aung San participated in and led the Myanmar independence movement and established the Union of Myanmar. In 1962, General Ne Win, then Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, launched a coup d'état, bringing Myanmar into a new era of military government and instituting Burmese-style socialism. In 1988, the armed forces led by General Saw Maung, launched another coup and established a new military government with a market economy system. Afterwards, Saw Maung's successor, General Than Shwe, developed the military's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, to implement disciplined democracy under the proxy system. In 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of Defense Services, launched a third coup to safeguard disciplined democracy, as claimed by the military.

Firmly believing that it is the founder of the country, the defender of national interests, the guardian of domestic peace, and takes the responsibility of safeguarding national sovereignty

and security and the country's core interests as its own, the military has been sensitive to issues such as Myanmar's political transformation, constitutional amendment, and the federalism demanded by the local armed forces of ethnic minorities since 2010. With the NLD taking power in 2015, there have been dual political centers: the NLD and the military, which has hindered the normal development of Myanmar politics. On February 1, 2021, the armed forces once again took over the regime, indicating that it is still the master of Myanmar politics. After the dual-center period from the beginning of 2016 to the beginning of 2021, Myanmar politics has now reverted to a single track led by the military. However, democratization has already begun, and it will not be possible to go back to the old path of military dictatorship. The establishment of a political structure led by the Myanmar army, involving multiple parties (if the NLD does not make major concessions, it will be excluded) and harmonizing interests will be the direction of Myanmar's development in the next few years.

Yang Guoying, associate professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Peking University, gave a presentation titled "Historical Origins of the Special Status of the Myanmar Military." He expressed his belief that the special status of the Myanmar military is related to its historical origin. During the dynastic period in Burmese history, military and politics were closely linked. As the Burmese royal family did not establish a

clear succession system to the throne, the struggle within the ruling group was fierce. The royal family members stationed in various regions had the authority to bear arms and extract taxes in the local areas, so it was easy for them to develop into separatist princes. When they were strong enough, they challenged the authority of the central government. The conquered minorities also usually set off struggles against the Burmese rule. In addition, the Burmese dynasty often launched foreign wars, fighting with the neighboring Qing Dynasty, the Ayutthaya dynasty of Thailand, and the state of Assam in India. The long-term foreign wars and internal division struggles have not only made Burmese people martial and skillful in battle but also created the tradition of integrating military with government.

During the dynastic period, civilians in Myanmar were divided into two categories: *athi* and *ahmudan*. *Athi* were farmers who cultivated the land, which accounted for most of the labor force. They only needed to cultivate the land, pay taxes to the king, and, barring special circumstances, were not required to serve in the military. *Ahmudan* means “servant,” someone who provided labor or military service for the royal family. There were three *ahmudan* categories: one was the farmers cultivating land for the king; another was those who undertook all kinds of miscellaneous duties for the king; and the category with the largest number of *ahmudan* were those

specialized in military service. The military *ahmudan* enjoyed a high status, and according to the king's edict, *athi* were not as high as the military *ahmudan* in status. With a war ended, the king would grant the military *ahmudan* ranks and titles based on their military exploits to further improve their social status. Military *ahmudan* also owned a lot of land. The land owned by an average soldier was even five times more than that of an ordinary *athi*. Generally, the military *ahmudan* were the Bamar group. Later, to meet the greater need for soldiers, a small number of soldiers from other ethnic groups were absorbed into the military *ahmudan*. Having existed in Burmese society for thousands of years, the military *ahmudan* system was the historical origin of modern Myanmar military politics.

In the modern history of Myanmar, the role the military played in the struggle for national independence and the integrity of the Union has further strengthened its political and social status. General Aung San is regarded as father of Myanmar and the founder of the Burmese army, enjoying high prestige in Myanmar. However, the military's historical status and contributions do not mean that its leaders can always enjoy the historical dividend. The ideas of Myanmar's military leaders are obviously out of touch with the course of modernization. They overemphasize historical traditions, believe in powerful leaders, and underestimate the construction of laws and systems. In today's Myanmar, historical origins are no longer enough to

legitimize military rule.

Song Qingrun, associate professor at School of Asian Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, gave a presentation on “The Military Government Logic and Military Governance in Myanmar’s Political Development.” He expressed his belief that the military government logic in Myanmar’s political development could be analyzed on multiple levels -- the subjective will and interests of military groups; national interests; the people’s emotions and interests; and international understanding. Among them, from the perspective of national interests, Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country. To ensure political stability, prevent national disintegration and achieve substantive unity, it requires strong armed forces to be the backbone. But this military government logic does not mean that the military group can rule for a long time.

Moreover, will the military government logic be broken by the chaos of the military’s governance this time? Judging from the four times of military governances in the past, the current turmoil may be a turning point in Myanmar’s military politics. Since the 1948 independence, there have been 56 years when the military directly held power or its puppet political party took the reins. It can be divided into four periods: the period of the military caretaker government led by Ne Win (October 1958 to February 1960); Ne Win Military Government Period (March 1962-September 1988); New Military Government Period

(September 1988-March 2011); The USDP Government Period (March 2011-March 2016).

In October 1958, Prime Minister U Nu entrusted General Ne Win to lead a caretaker government to stabilize the situation. This first period of rule by the military complied with procedures and was considered legitimate. Moreover, the military surrendered power in February 1960 on their own initiative. In March 1962, when Myanmar fell into turmoil due to sharpened political, ethnic and religious conflicts, General Ne Win, who had come to know the benefits of being in power, launched a coup d'état to overthrow the U Nu government and abolished the 1947 Constitution on the grounds of "controlling chaos in the nick of time." He did succeed in bringing the situation under control. The coup prevented Myanmar from splitting up from its ethnic minorities' demands to secede from the Union, so it can be considered reasonable. At the international level, the US and other Western countries did not intervene in the military's rule to avoid pushing Myanmar to the Soviet Union's side. However, the 26-year rule of the Ne Win military government reduced Myanmar from being one of the richer countries in Asia when it was independent to becoming one of the poorest countries in the world. With seething popular dissent, the turmoil of 1988 erupted. In September 1988, General Saw Maung launched a coup d'état, abolished the 1974 Constitution and established a new military rule on the grounds

of “ending the worsening situation.” After the new military government came to power, it began to develop a market economy and promised to hold multi-party elections. However, when the military suffered a crushing defeat in the 1990 general election, it refused to hand over power and began to directly govern. In 2010, the military-led USDP won the election without the NLD as an opponent, and continued to rule until March 2016.

In the 2016 general election, USDP was overwhelmed by the NLD, and the military government logic failed. Under the influence of the third wave of democratization, the brutal military rule caused widespread dissatisfaction among the people, who emotionally rejected it. From an international perspective, since the Cold War ended, Western countries have imposed even more severe sanctions on the Myanmar military government.

At that time, Myanmar’s economy was highly dependent on foreign countries, so Western sanctions hindered the economic development of the military government and further weakened its ruling legitimacy. Although Myanmar’s economy has not improved since the NLD came to power, the people did not want soldiers to return. Meanwhile, the international community also exerted great pressure on the Myanmar military to make military rule increasingly out of step with the times. Therefore, the military government logic is likely to be

completely broken by this current chaos caused by military rule.

The topic of the presentation by Zhong Xiaoxin, an associate research fellow at the Myanmar Research Institute of Yunnan University, was “Myanmar’s Grassroots Social Structure and Military Politics.” He pointed out that after the 2021 coup, the street protests in Myanmar’s cities were very fierce, but the villages remained calm. Why was there a differentiation between urban and rural areas? What is the social base for Myanmar’s military politics considering its frequent resurgence and long-term survival?

Zhong Xiaoxin began his analysis of this issue from the perspective of the grassroots social structure of Myanmar. The structure has dual characteristics: one is the civil rights hierarchy; the other is the monk-secular community. The civil rights hierarchy in Myanmar is an inverted pyramid, with ethnic Bamar Buddhists accounting for 2/3 of the total population at the top, followed by the other 1/3: non-ethnic Bamar Buddhists, non-ethnic Bamar non-Buddhists, and non-indigenous people. The monk-secular community refers to the phenomenon in Myanmar that each village community usually corresponds to one Buddhist temple, which organizes the public life of Myanmar’s grassroots society. As Melford Spiro wrote in his book *Buddhism and Society*, “The existence of Burmese villages is to maintain and support monks and Buddhist temples ... It is this paramount goal that makes the

village a cohesive community full of cooperative spirit.” In Myanmar’s political life, whether it is the military government, the USDP, or the NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi, Buddhism is always used as a tool of political rhetoric and political mobilization.

There are structural contradictions within the political demands of the Bamar majority group. Domestically, they emphasize national integration, oppose ethnic separatism and hope to end the movement toward separatism in the country; internationally, they have geopolitical fear and worry about the threat from neighboring populous countries, such as China, India, and Bangladesh. To unify the country and resist invaders, the Bamar need a strong country and army. As for ethnic minorities, the Bamar hope to maintain the existing hierarchy of civil rights and maintain their own dominant position. At the same time, the Bamar have generalized the ideals of monk-secular community, hoping to extend it to the whole country, which has resulted in their rejection of pluralist democracy. Therefore, Myanmar has fallen into the curse of democracy: on the one hand, the Bamar hope that a powerful country and army will maintain the system and defend against invaders; on the other, they are deeply dissatisfied with the military’s authority and tyranny. On the one hand, the Bamar are yearning for democracy. On the other hand, they oppose equal rights and pluralist democracy, worrying that ethnic minorities

will be equal to themselves, and, after democratization, their dominant position will be gone. The grassroots society in Myanmar does not like authoritarian rule, but the Bamar's understanding of ethnic politics and geopolitics will objectively call for authoritarian rule.

In addition, there is a “weak state and weak society” structure in Myanmar. Weak state means that the common collusive relationship (bribe-taking and bribery) between local government and grassroots people, to a large extent, has eliminated the state's control over grassroots society. The backwardness in economy and technology, as well as the long-term separatism of ethnic and local armed forces, demonstrate Myanmar's governance dilemma as a weak country. Weak society means that it is difficult for civil society to exert substantial influence on state behavior. Rural society is even weaker. The most common question for farmers is how as much as possible to obtain better living conditions and more space under the rule of the military government, rather than how to overthrow it. The structure of a weak country and a weak society has propped up the involution of Myanmar's political transformation, allowing the military regime to survive for a long time.

Finally, Zhong Xiaoxin emphasized that Myanmar's public opinion is multifaceted. The democratic resurgence in Myanmar is not just a power game between the military and the

government; rather, the structural tearing of the grassroots society is a deeper cause.

Cai Yanjun, an associate research fellow at the School of International Relations, Sun Yat-sen University, gave a presentation titled “Myanmar Military Politics from the Perspective of Non-governmental Governance.” According to her, the Myanmar military political group with the ethnic Bamar group as the main body has not yet demonstrated the ability to unite multi-ethnic states and practice modern governance. The industries in the military-commercial complex dominated by Myanmar military group are mainly jade, beer, energy, golf and mineral exploitation, which cannot provide support for Myanmar’s infrastructure construction and industrial development, and lacks the ability to provide necessary social services. The gap in Myanmar’s social service field is mainly filled by a complex consisting of government agencies, multinational enterprises and non-governmental organizations from the US, Europe, Japan and Australia. In this complex, government agencies contribute to guiding international discourse related to Myanmar and integrating various resources; multinational enterprises are responsible for investment and product export, and for cultivating relevant professional and technical talent to exert policy influence; universities and think tanks are also responsible for cultivating talent and providing international exchanges and policy guidance; media and Internet

platforms play the role of guiding public opinion; and NGOs connect Myanmar's local stakeholders, such as Myanmar's military, local ethnic armed forces, democrats, local NGOs, universities, enterprises, media and the public, and exert influence on them, establishing a multi-dimensional contact network and acting as an adhesive. Presenting three cases, Cai Yanjun analyzed how multinational NGOs penetrate Myanmar society and contest with local NGOs and social enterprises in Myanmar.

The first case was that of the Myanmar Women's Equal Rights, an NGO founded by a young non-Bamar woman with overseas education experience and funded by FRIDA (The Young Feminist Fund). The organization is committed to translating and promoting feminist literature, popularizing sex education for teenagers, promoting women's empowerment and building the capacity of young leaders in Myanmar. It has established a network of organizations in the community of foreigners and young people in Yangon as well as in northern Myanmar, and it has close ties with relevant international organizations, and has a great influence among young people in Myanmar. The second case is that of a social enterprise on the outskirts of Yangon founded by a middle-aged non-Bamar Christian woman with funding from agencies for cooperation and development from European Union and Italy. This social enterprise pays attention to livelihood building, sustainable

development, women's empowerment, community emergency management, cultural conservation and other issues in Myanmar, and its main revenue area is to make handicrafts with traditional Myanmar characteristics and develop eco-tourism. The social enterprise has established an organizational network in the communities of Yangon and the mountainous areas of northern Myanmar, and enjoys a high reputation in the fields of environmental governance and sustainable development. The third case is that of the Myanmar branch of Asia Foundation, an international NGO with cross-border operations but strong localization consciousness, which is headed by Mark McDowell, a senior Canadian diplomat. The organization is committed to promoting democratic governance, peace process, inclusive economic development, women's empowerment and citizen participation in Myanmar. The organization has established contacts with Myanmar's native communities, social enterprises, government agencies, religious organizations and local ethnic armed forces, and, internationally, it has contacts with government departments of multiple countries, international organizations, transnational enterprises, universities and think tanks.

The NGOs represented in the above cases have great influence in Myanmar society. Countries such as the US, Europe, Japan and Australia also spread their values and political ideas of democracy and freedom to the people of Myanmar through

these NGO networks, thus deeply intervening in Myanmar society. The operational modes of these NGOs (funds, people and networks) are worth learning by China, Cai Yanjun said.

Zhang Tian, a PhD candidate from the Institute of International Relations, Yunnan University, gave a presentation titled “Analysis of the Diplomatic Neutrality Policy of the Myanmar Military Regime.”

Why has Myanmar military regime stuck to a neutral foreign policy after the coup in 2021? Is the political survival problem faced by the Myanmar military related to its neutral foreign policy? To answer the questions, Zhang Tian used political survival theory to construct his theoretical structure. First, the essence of neutrality is the distribution of benefits, and only through equalization of benefits can there be the greatest independence. Second, distribution is always uneven, but people have got used to the word equality, because equal distribution of benefits is often regarded as a public good. The greatest contribution of the theory of political survival is it linking the structure of political power at home and abroad with foreign policies. According to the different degrees of neutrality, Zhang Tian divided neutralism into extreme neutrality, negative neutrality, positive neutrality, passive neutrality, false neutrality and ceased neutrality. Among them, positive neutrality emphasizes balance of power, while negative neutrality is more impartial. Under the changing pressure of political survival,

there will be different categories of neutralism.

In the 1990s, Myanmar's then military government once pursued false neutrality while relying on China. However, after the democratic transformation process started, the pressure of internal and external political survival faced by the military government increased sharply, and its neutralism policy changed from false neutrality to positive neutrality. The Min Aung Hlaing regime, which came to power through the coup of 2021, faces four major political pressures in Myanmar: political forces that explicitly support the universal suffrage system and the NLD, political forces that do not explicitly support the NLD but explicitly oppose the military; political forces that clearly oppose foreign power (mainly China), and political forces of local ethnic armed forces in northern Myanmar. In addition, the Min Aung Hlaing regime also faces religious pressure and economic pressure. On February 18, 2021, Min Aung Hlaing delivered a presentation as the chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee, stressing that Myanmar is bordered by China and India, and must take prudent measures, implement an independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy, and will not choose sides between China and India. Therefore, the Min Aung Hlaing regime is likely to pursue negative neutrality in principle and keep a certain distance from China, India and the West; however, on some specific issues, it will adopt appropriate policies to deviate from neutrality and maintain certain

flexibility to pursue the maximization of its interests, Zhang Tian said.

Zhang Yunfei, a senior translator from Xinhua News Agency's Center for World Studies, gave a presentation titled "Unpredictable Military Government and Civil Government." Combining his work experience in Myanmar and personal feelings, he shared the following views.

First, the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021 caused many experts and scholars to think about and express their views on the military government and democratically elected government in Myanmar. But which is more suitable for Myanmar, a military government or an elected government? Only the Burmese people have the right to speak. They have comparisons and answers in their minds, and can make their own choices according to the history.

Second, the military government and military administration are not unique to Myanmar, but a common phenomenon in East Asia after World War II. The historical background of Myanmar's national independence and the historical mission of national rejuvenation provide conditions and rationale for the existence of this phenomenon. At the same time, armed ethnic groups in Myanmar and serious disputes among the political parties also provide political soil and social foundation for the long-term existence of this phenomenon.

Third, the military government's rule in Myanmar, with

both merits and demerits, has received mixed notices. Objectively speaking, Myanmar military can be praised for fighting for national independence, and their ambition to safeguard territorial integrity and protect the country is admirable. However, the military has seized power four times, which undoubtedly has damaged their own image, and their achievements in governing the country have got both praise and blame. The national economy during the military government period has been the sore point for Myanmar people. In 1950s, Myanmar was once the richest country in Southeast Asia, but under the rule of the military government, Myanmar has become one of the least developed countries certified by the UN. In addition, the ethnic policy implemented by the military government to maintain national stability has been denounced by Myanmar's ethnic minorities.

Fourth, Myanmar's special national conditions determine the special status of the military, which in turn determines the special interests of the military. But there are divides within the military, and upper-level officers and middle- and lower-level soldiers are in two rigidly stratified worlds. The Myanmar populace have no idea of the complicated intra-military relations, and ordinary Bamar have special feelings for soldiers.

Fifth, Myanmar's democratic transformation is not a color revolution. Although many external forces intervened in the situation in Myanmar to profit from the chaos, the route of

democratic transformation in Myanmar was originally designed by the Than Shwe military government, and conformed to the public opinion and was accepted by the NLD. During the ten years of democratic transformation in Myanmar, its society made progress and the people gradually awakened, but there were also hidden games being played among various political forces. In the first five years, the USDP was in power, and the USDP government was closely linked with the military, which could be regarded as half a military government. In the latter five years, the NLD was in power, and the NLD government was the first truly elected government in Myanmar since 1962. However, from a certain point of view, both the USDP government and the NLD government were the choices of the Myanmar people. They believe that in the decade of democratic transition, the public was happier than in the authoritarian era, because they had gained freedom and security. Although the goals expected by the NLD and the people have not been fully realized in the ten years of democratic transformation, after experiencing the happiness of democratic transformation, few people are willing to return to the authoritarian era, which is why the people resisted so fiercely after the military took power.

Sixth, the military coup in February 2021 has led to the complicated current situation in Myanmar. The military has put the brakes on the democratic transformation process in Myanmar, and it remains to be seen whether that process will be

reversed in the future. However, no matter what reasons the military has for launching a coup or what goals it wants to achieve, the current chaos has had a serious impact on Myanmar's social stability and economic development, as well as the daily life of Myanmar people, and it has also affected the hard-won good situation of China-Myanmar relations.

Zhang Yunfei expressed his belief that, whether the military government or the democratically elected government is in power, it is the choice of the history and the people of Myanmar. People of all countries have the right to choose their own way of life and development path and will make their own judgments. For Myanmar, whether its future is continued military government or a return to civil government, both are bleak, and the road to national transformation is long.

Zhong Feiteng, a research fellow at the National Institute of International Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, gave a presentation titled "Sino-US Strategic Competition and Myanmar's Choice of Development Strategy." According to him, we must understand the impact of the development of Myanmar situation on Myanmar and on China-Myanmar relations from the perspective of their respective national interests.

Since the 1940s, Myanmar has had mainly three roles regarding China. First, its geopolitical role (during World War II, the Chinese Expeditionary Force entered Myanmar to fight against the Japanese invaders and defended its border security).

Second, Myanmar once played a unique role in China's diplomacy with Western countries. Third, Myanmar is a showcase model for China to improve its relations with Southeast Asian countries.

At present, China mainly has four kinds of interests in Myanmar. First, to ensure the security of the China-Myanmar border and prevent non-traditional security threats, such as the spread of pornography, gambling and drugs, and transnational fraud. Second, ASEAN is a priority area of China's diplomacy with countries along its border, and handling the relationship with Myanmar is conducive to strengthening the cooperation between China and ASEAN. Third, Myanmar is an important resource import market for China. Fourth, Myanmar is an important geo-passage for China to enter and exit the Indian Ocean.

Seen from its economic growth data, since the beginning of the 21st century, Myanmar has shared the dividend of China's economic development, achieved rapid economic development, and, around 2015, completed the leap from being a low-income country to becoming a low- and middle-income country. At present, China is entering a new stage of development. If Myanmar can take economic development as the core of its national strategy and handle its relations with China well, Myanmar could continue to share China's dividends. China should also take advantage of the Myanmar crisis to

communicate with Myanmar's authorities regarding its policies, and promote China's development philosophy and experience. China could also help Myanmar solve the problem of infrastructure construction and overcome the obstacles to economic development which were brought about by its geographical environment.

Judging from the macro world pattern, the power game between China and the US will be unavoidable for a long time to come, and Myanmar, as a small country, will inevitably be impacted by the world situation under the Sino-US game. Myanmar's economic development depends heavily on the external environment. If Myanmar's authorities aim at economic growth, their dependence on China will increase. But it is impossible for the US to ignore Myanmar. If the US wants to make use of China's neighbors to disrupt China's rise, Myanmar, which is located at the border between Southeast Asia and South Asia, is an ideal geostrategic fulcrum. Therefore, when considering the Myanmar issue, China should consider Myanmar's South Asian neighbor Bangladesh in the light of the regional background, and even take the lead in holding a tripartite meeting between China, Myanmar and Bangladesh to discuss regional issues together and break the traditional regional division between Southeast Asia and South Asia. In the process of China's rise, China can change some traditional geopolitical concepts according to its own geopolitical needs,

Zhong Feiteng said.

Fan Yiyi, an associate research fellow of the Research Institute of the Ministry of Commerce, delivered a presentation titled “China-Myanmar Economic Relations under the Military Government — 1988-2010 V.S. 2021-?” How will China’s economic interests in Myanmar be affected after the coup in Myanmar in 2021? What are the prospects for a China-Myanmar economic corridor? Many people have expressed the following viewpoints, “During the NLD administration, China-Myanmar relations were politically hot and economically cold, and big projects could not be pushed forward. During the Thein Sein administration, Myanmar’s economic policy was clearer, and the military group understood the economy better. If the military government were to return to power, Chinese enterprises would have their opportunities. The good times for economic development experienced by China and Myanmar from 1988 to 2010 would then return.” Fan Yiyi questioned the above viewpoints and further asked: how should we judge the three periods (1988-2010, 2011-2015, and the NLD government period) in terms of the economic relations between China and Myanmar?

According to trade data, the scale of goods trade between China and Myanmar expanded from USD \$256 million in 1988 to USD \$4.4 billion in 2010, an increase of 17 times. From 2009 to 2010, the growth rate of China’s imports from and exports to

Myanmar was as high as 50 percent, which was the fastest growth year of bilateral trade volume between the two countries in the past 22 years. Bilateral trade between China and Myanmar reached USD \$6.5 billion in 2011, and China surpassed Thailand (USD \$6.1 billion) to become Myanmar's largest trading partner. These 22 years saw eight periods of negative growth and five periods of high-speed growth with an annual growth rate exceeding 40 percent in Myanmar's exports to China. The same period saw five periods of negative growth and four periods of high-speed growth, with an annual growth rate exceeding 40 percent in China's exports to Myanmar. According to the investment data, due to the approval of several large-scale Chinese-funded projects, China's direct investment flows to Myanmar surged in fiscal year 2008-2009, accounting for 86 percent of the total foreign investment received by Myanmar in that fiscal year. After March 2010, China's investment in Myanmar declined.

Judging from those data, the economic relations between China and Myanmar from 1988 to 2010 were improving. However, the amount of trade and investment was only one aspect of China-Myanmar economic relations. From the perspective of trade structure, China's trade surplus with Myanmar during this period continued to expand, leading to a trade imbalance in the eyes of Myanmar scholars. Although illegal trade or informal economic activities such as the arms

trade, border trade, smuggling, drug trafficking and illegal labor were not included in the data, these economic activities had an important impact on bilateral economic relations. From the perspective of investment structure, after 2010, China's capital gradually flowed from early resource-intensive projects to labor-intensive projects. However, based on the above data, it is impossible to judge whether the return on investment has been converted into secondary investment to stay in the local area or has left Myanmar. From the perspective of the business environment, it is impossible to judge whether the economic activities between China and Myanmar have had positive or negative effects on the improvement of the business environment in Myanmar. In a word, it is impossible to judge which party has been the ultimate beneficiary in China-Myanmar economic relations.

What are the factors affecting China-Myanmar economic relations? What are the decisive factors? Fan Yiyi expressed her belief that according to the comparative advantage theory, the objective situation of the economic development between China and Myanmar from 1988 to 2010 has determined the fundamentals of economic and trade relations between the two countries. From the perspective of economic policy, Myanmar implemented market-oriented reforms after 1988, relaxed foreign trade restrictions and allowed foreign investment; China also intensified its reform and opening-up in the late 1980s. In

1994, China and Myanmar reached a memorandum of understanding on border trade, and, in 1997, the two sides signed a trade agreement and established a trade mechanism between them. China joined the WTO in 2001 and started negotiations with ASEAN regarding a Free Trade Area in the same year. Under this background, China-Myanmar economic relations developed rapidly. Therefore, the good development of China-Myanmar economic relations from 1988 to 2010 was not due to the rule of the Myanmar military government, but because, during this period, both China and Myanmar chose the economic development strategy of market-oriented reform and opening to the outside world, and “hit it off” in their development of bilateral economic relations. From the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, Myanmar during the military government “hitched a ride” on China’s development and shared the dividends of China’s development.

During the NLD administration, the large-scale projects of Chinese enterprises in Myanmar encountered obstacles, but the trade between China and Myanmar continued to expand, and the trade structure improved. China’s trade surplus with Myanmar has shrunk, and the framework for a China-Myanmar economic corridor has been basically constructed. In 2021, the military government came to power by illegal means, which has seriously affected Myanmar’s economic development and Chinese enterprises. It is difficult for current internal and

external conditions to replicate the good times experienced by the China-Myanmar economic development from 1988 to 2010.

During the discussion session, the experts and scholars at the meeting conducted in-depth discussions on issues related to military politics in Myanmar.

Zhou Fangye: According to Thailand's experience, if the electoral system is well designed, one party may dominate under the proportional representation system. Myanmar's military may want to learn from Thailand's experience, and let ethnic minority parties take away part of the NLD votes under the proportional representation system, so that the USDP can return to being the largest party.

Peng Hongwei: As far as election is concerned, both the Myanmar military and the NLD are wooing ethnic minority political parties, but neither can change the old habits of Burmese chauvinist nationalists.

Question: Given the development trend of street politics in Myanmar and the infiltration of Western politics, would it possible for the NLD to realize its political demands through armed revolution?

Zhong Zhixiang: After the military used soft repression methods, such as cutting off capital chains and social networks, street politics in Myanmar declined. The NLD is not a well-organized political group, but a loose alliance of political interests, so the NLD would be unable to carry out armed

revolution. For Western countries, Myanmar has no substantial interests worthy of their large-scale investment except the geopolitical value of containing China, so political penetration by the West would not trigger armed revolution by the NLD.

Zhou Fangye: Unless there were a split within Myanmar's military or the military voluntarily handed over power, other political forces in Myanmar would have no ability to shake the military's rule. But the Myanmar military is a black box, and there is no way for us to understand its internal situation.

Peng Hongwei: Thein Sein's record of achievements was good, and he also had moral character and prestige. After 2013, the USDP was supported by the US, but why did Thein lose to Aung San Suu Kyi in the 2015 general election? The outside world thought that Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling ability was not that good, so how was she able to still get such a high support rate in the 2020 general election?

Zhang Yunfei: In terms of economic development, Aung San Suu Kyi's achievement records are almost as good as those of Thein Sein's, and the statistics of the NLD government may be more accurate than those of the military government. Why did the military lose both the 2015 and 2020 elections? The Burmese people yearned for democracy, hated authoritarianism and emotionally didn't want the military to return to power, so they supported the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Qian Chengdan: Why did the Myanmar military react so

strongly after the results of the 2020 general election were declared? Was it in the overall interest of the military or in the private interest of individual senior officers? In this chaos, how did the broad masses of farmers in Myanmar react?

Zhang Yunfei: While the current street movements in Myanmar have been mainly taking place in Yangon, Mandalay and other cities, under the suppression of the military, they are moving to the countryside. The participation of Burmese farmers in political activities is influenced by the season, and, during the farming season, they spend most of their time working. Before the election, both the USDP and NLD tried to attract farmers and win their support, but Myanmar politics is still an elite game.

Zhong Xiaoxin: The unrest has had little impact on rural Myanmar, and only a few high school students and college students from rural areas have participated in street politics. But there already may be a consensus in Myanmar's rural society: they prefer democracy and dislike the military government. On the one hand, the Burmese farmers may not understand the specific concept of democracy and authoritarianism, but, subjectively, they do not like the military government. On the other hand, it is precisely because farmers do not understand democracy and ethnic politics that they provide a social foundation for Myanmar's military authoritarianism.

Zhai Kun: China also has some NGOs in Myanmar. What

role can Chinese NGOs play in this chaos in Myanmar?

Cai Yanjun: Chinese NGOs in Myanmar are overly characteristic of government-sponsored organizations, and compared with NGOs in Western countries, they lack variety. At present, Chinese enterprises in Myanmar actively undertake social responsibilities and consciously improve their image in local communities, but their methods are relatively simple. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they only donated materials. In the future, the operational mode of Chinese NGOs in Myanmar should become diversified and more characteristic of community-based organizations.

Peng Hongwei: With which political force in Myanmar might it be easier to predict the neutrality of its foreign policy after it takes office?

Zhang Tian: From the historical experience of China's exchanges with Myanmar, the predictability of the foreign policy of a democratically elected government would be higher than that of the military government. China-Myanmar relations were more stable during both the U Nu and Aung San Suu Kyi periods. A democratically elected government would give notice of their China policy in advance through diplomatic channels, and, unlike the military government, it would not keep it a secret from China before they do something. Moreover, as neutrality is a kind of public product, an elected government would devote itself to providing this public product, and the neutrality would

be stronger.

Song Qingrun: Will the economic and trade cooperation between foreign enterprises and Myanmar encounter continuous resistance from the people? Will it continue to be misunderstood as supporting the rule of the military government? Can Myanmar seize the opportunity of industrialization?

Zhou Fangye: The industrialization of East Asian countries has been basically attained through catching up with and surpassing the usual development stage. A premise of such development is that it is necessary to sacrifice the rights and interests of a generation and complete capital accumulation through the labor of the country's overburdened workers. At present, the first thing NGOs in Western countries do after entering developing countries is to promote labor policies, oppose labor exploitation and protect labor rights and interests, which makes it impossible for these developing countries to realize the capital accumulation needed for industrialization. Unless Myanmar seizes the opportunity of China's "dual circulation," it will be difficult for Myanmar to cross the threshold of industrialization.

Question: How do you view the current information anarchy in Myanmar? Are there conspiracy theories being circulated against China?

Zhang Yunfei: In the era of information explosion, there are all kinds of information, including conspiracy theories that are

not conducive to China. To eliminate the adverse effects of conspiracy theories, China can rely on credible third-party organizations, but third-party organizations would not always follow China's line in all information. However, it would be enough if China can make its own voice heard through these organizations to counterbalance negative public opinions.

Fan Yiyi: China's official information should be disseminated continuously, so that there will be no room for rumors. We should speak realistically and invest enough resources to shape the public opinion environment.

Prof. Zhai Kun, deputy director of the Institute of Area Studies, Peking University, gave his summation that, in the workshop, the speakers expressed important opinions on Myanmar issues from the perspectives of their respective disciplines. He expressed his hope that the participants should give full play to interdisciplinary advantages and do good work in the research of Myanmar issues, thus providing valuable policy suggestions for relevant ministries and departments of China.