

Authors

Dr. Jayde Lin Roberts is a spatial ethnographer of the built environment who focuses on Asian Urbanism, Critical Heritage Studies, Myanmar, Southeast Asia, and the Chinese diaspora. Based at UNSW Sydney, she combines historical and ethnographic research to better understand Asian cities in the Global South.

Jae-Young Lee is an architect and researcher at the CRC 1265 and the Leibniz-Institute for Research on Society and Space. Her work explores grassroots dynamics of platform ruralization and practices of insurgency between Chile, South Korea and the Thai-Myanmar border.

The SPACE TALKS ZINE is based on a digital lecture series at the CRC 1265 "Re-Figuration of Spaces" during the winter semester of 2024/25.

Layout: Santiago Orrego PhD

Photos: Dr. Jayde Lin Roberts

Editors & Lecture Organisation: Lucie Bernroider, Francesca Ceola, Sung Un Gang, Jae-Young Lee, Indrawan Prababharyaka, Margherita Tess.

Funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) – CRC 1265 Re-Figuration of Spaces (project number 290045248).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15782897

SPACE TALKS

URBAN INFORMALITY: A PERSISTENT MATTER OF CONCERN

By Dr. Jayde Lin Roberts and
Jae-Young Lee

for the full version, please see
QR Code in the back

Looking across the theoretical margins, the Chinese concept of *guanxi* – a more extensively studied form of informal social order – offers a helpful comparative lens (*see also the back page*). Such heuristics are part of a wider landscape of culturally embedded relational epistemologies and practices across the Global South, often overlooked or flattened by stagnant concepts of informality. To recognise the significance of such practices, these theoretically marginalised concepts must be studied in greater contextual depth and compared, despite the difficulty of discerning universal categories.

In this light, what is often dismissed as informal may in fact reflect a deeper heuristic and epistemological blind spot within dominant systems of knowledge and global standardisation. As such, we argue that informality should not be treated as a residual category but rather reclaimed as a *collective matter of concern* – one that demands critical attention, theoretical openness, and a commitment to epistemic plurality.

The logic of *nalehmu* in Yangon's street vending represents long-standing, culturally specific, and historically grown practices of an intimate economy (Wilson, 2004). These practices superimpose, contest, complement and therefore affect the implementation of formal regulations. Yet, they also persist beyond formal and often externally imposed systems of objectification in Myanmar's postcolonial urban landscape.

Call to Concern: Figuring out Informalities

Informality has become a loose and dismissive catch-all term for diverse, non-formal practices and social dynamics unfolding in urban frontiers (Bunnell et al., 2012). Unearthing new heuristics – particularly in postcolonial settings across the Global South, where concepts from the Global North are far too often uncritically transferred – is therefore crucial if we are to aspire to a more pluralistic understanding of space.



From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern

In academic discourses, the concept of informality is increasingly discarded: Caught up in a static formal-informal dichotomy, it is widely critiqued for its ahistoricity, lack of precision in describing new phenomena, and limitations in diag-

In Myanmar, formal institutionalisation does not necessarily correlate with justice, transparency, efficiency or societal benefit. On the streets of Yangon, vendors and customers alike navigate the intricate web of pricing, territories and services through local and relational networks. Known as *nalehmu* (the notion of understanding in Burmese), this relational logic knits together mutual obligations and trust established through long-term interactions.

This issue of SPACE TALKS critically explores how the neglect of informality as a concept can obscure complex mechanisms of urban life at the theoretical margins in the Global South.

nosing complex power dynamics between various actors that defy universalised theorisation.

Latour's ruminations on scientific critique (2004), however, encourage us to examine the apparent inadequacies of informality as *matters of fact* that need to be transformed into *matters of concern*. Analyses of informality are easily dismissed as regional anecdotes of urban poverty or weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985), when they might, in fact, disguise long-standing, complex and non-hegemonic spatial heuristics hiding in plain sight. In our case, this concerns the postcolonial and complex urban logic of Yangon, Myanmar.

Informality as de-centering practices

Since independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Myanmar has experienced on-going political upheaval and state violence. The brief transition to partial civilian rule between 2011 and 2021 saw manifold development initiatives aimed at modernising and formalising Yangon, almost always according to Global North models of good governance. Funded by international donors, for-

During the Covid-19 crisis and following the 2021 coup, *nalehmu* practices have continued through street stalls full of food and donations – becoming the only secure lifeline amid state-imposed shortages. Today, Yangon's inhabitants still rely on *nalehmu* networks in their immediate neighbourhoods to survive under military induced precarity. These relations are embedded in a postcolonial setting of actors, spaces, and goods (see also Cobbinah, 2025), which shape urban life through en-

In 2015, the since toppled civilian-led government attempted to modernise and formalise street vending by establishing a completely new night market along a major arterial road in Yangon. To maintain their place-based relational connections in the face of displacement, some vendors labelled their stalls according to the street or block they were once located, not only to maintain their previous customer base but also to identify themselves as belonging to that specific place.

transparency but failed to consider Myanmar's relational networks of mutuality and reciprocity – *nalehmu*.



Figurations of Informality: From Burmese *nalehmu* to Chinese *guanxi* to Korean *jeong*

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

CRC 1265

Re-Figuration
of Spaces

In some ways, informality as a concept could seem like a debate about semantics. What does informality really mean? How can we better understand its complex relationship to formality beyond a dichotomy? What can it tell us about matters of postcolonial, non-hegemonic, and place-specific modes of operation that constitute space and sustain socio-spatial practices?

To research societal logics across scales and beyond the vagueness of the informality term, it is helpful to approach other relational concepts of spatial logic that are illegible to universalism and are therefore often overlooked as ephemeral, purely personal or other denotations far removed from political relevance.

Burmese *nalehmu*, Chinese *guanxi* and Korean *jeong* all describe concepts of place-specific social mechanisms that share common traits of deepening interpersonal relationships based on trust, reciprocity and prioritising common gain. In their respective contexts, they underpin large parts of everyday life, from the scale of the urban economy down to private life, which contest, superimpose, complement and even shape formalised procedures. What can these concepts tell us, in turn, about our streamlined understandings of space and its legitimate epistemologies and heuristics?

What embodied practices can we find in our immediate surroundings that have evaded our epistemological investigation?

နာလည်မှု

The Burmese concept of *nalehmu* (နာလည်မှု) derives from the notion of understanding (*naleh*) and denotes mutuality and reciprocity between individuals that facilitate social interactions which can promote communal cohesion. It involves recognising and accommodating each other's needs and circumstances based on mutual respect and concern, predicated on the establishment of long-term relationships. Practices of *nalehmu* enable access to goods, services and information, and is negotiated fluidly across intimate and public spheres (Roberts and Rhoads, 2022).

關係

The Chinese concept of *guanxi* (關係) explains a system of strategic relationship-building based on implicit social values such as trustworthiness, mutuality, and proper conduct. While often associated with corruption in state-entanglements, *guanxi* fundamentally underpins long-term relationships, structuring societal interactions through obligation and reciprocity (Yang, 2002).

정

Similarly, in Korean society, the concept of *jeong* (정) describes a culture-specific relational affect that fosters deep, long-term social bonds and feelings of interconnectedness. It is rooted in a Buddhist emphasis on compassion and interconnectedness and Confucian notions of filial piety. *jeong* develops over time through shared experiences and mutual care and encompasses feelings of attachment, empathy, and loyalty among individuals (Chung and Oh, 2025).

Bibliography

- Burnell, T., Goh, D.P.S., Lai, C.-K. and Pow, C.P. (2012) Theory, Practice and Imagination. *Urban Studies*, 49(13), 2785–2793. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26144113>
- Cheesman, N. (2015). *Opposing the rule of law: How Myanmar's courts make law and order*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chung, E.Y.J. and Oh, J.S. (2025) 'Emotions in Korean Philosophy and Religion: Confucian, Comparative, and Contemporary Perspectives', *Institute of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*, 43(special issue), 221–231. <https://doi.org/10.22916/jcpc.2025.43.221>.
- Cobbinah, P. B. (2025). The oddity of desiring informality. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 15(1), 81–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206231191737>
- Latour, B. (2004). Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 225–248.
- Roberts, J.L. and Rhoads, E.L. (2022) 'Myanmar's hidden-in-plain-sight social infrastructure: *nalehmu* through multiple ruptures', *Critical Asian Studies*, 54(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2021.2002703>.
- ..Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak : everyday forms of peasant resistance* (1st ed.). Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300153620>
- Yang, M.M. (2002) 'The Resilience of *Guanxi* and its New Deployments: A Critique of Some New *Guanxi* Scholarship', *The China Quarterly*, 170, 459–476. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000944390200027X>.
- Wilson, A. (2004). *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City*. University of California Press.

For a full version of the
text including citation
data, please visit:

