Resisting with the State:
The Authoritarian Governance of Land in Laos

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A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the government of Laos has granted extensive tracts of land to plantation, mining, and hydropower investors across the country, constituting five percent of the national territory. Such projects have transformed rural livelihoods and environments, particularly via the dispossession of the lands, fields, and forests that Lao peasants rely upon for daily subsistence and cash income. While large-scale land acquisitions, or land grabs, across the Global South have been countered by social protest and movements in many countries, organized and vocal social mobilization is largely absent in Laos due to authoritarian state repression of dissident activity perceived to be anti-government. Lao peasants, however, have increasingly crafted politically creative methods of resistance that have enabled some communities and households to maintain access to land that had been allocated to investors. In this dissertation, I examine how effective resistance materializes within the Lao political landscape, by resisting *with* the state, shaping how industrial tree plantations are governed and their geographies of agrarian-environmental transformation.

The overarching argument of the dissertation is that in authoritarian contexts, like Laos, peasants are able to maintain access to land by taking advantage of political relations among state, corporate, and community actors that provide politically feasible means of refusal. Peasants find ways to resist that tread a middle path, that do not challenge state hegemonic power nor engage in under-the-radar acts of everyday resistance. Instead, they exploit and refashion established lines and relations of power among communities, state agencies, and plantation managers. They resist within the bounds of state power. Political relations between resource companies and the state vary, affecting how state sovereignty is mobilized to dispossess peasants of their land. Communities targeted by companies with weak relations with the state are afforded greater opportunities to contest such projects as they are not developed with the heavy coercion afforded to companies with better state relations. Communities that have powerful political connections with the state are also in a better position to resist. They are able to more effectively lodge their claims with the state when they have the political links to do so, particularly ethnic and kinship ties developed during the Second Indochina War. Communities more effectively resist the acquisition of lands that are afforded greater value by the state, particularly lowland paddy rice fields and state conservation areas. Finally, internal community relations, particularly democratic decision-making and solidarity, shape how effectively they mobilize against unjust land dispossession.

These arguments draw upon 20 months of in-country, ethnographic fieldwork during which I studied the operations of two plantation companies in 10 villages of Phin and Xepon districts, eastern Savannakhet province, southern Laos. One company is a state-owned Vietnamese rubber enterprise while the other is a private Chinese paper and pulp company planting eucalyptus and acacia trees. The bulk of the data comes from semi-structured one-on-one and focus group interviews with government officials at all

administrative levels, civil society organizations, plantation company managers, village leaders, village households, and village women. The study is also deeply informed by participant observation – particularly with Lao government officials, civil society organizations, and rural communities – and by participatory mapping exercises and collected investment project documents.

The dissertation makes novel contributions to the discipline of geography. First, I demonstrate the importance of contested political ethnography, a methodological approach through which immersion in uncomfortable and oppositional political situations provides insights that would otherwise go unnoticed. Second, I contribute to understandings of how nature-society transformations occur in under-studied, authoritarian political contexts where neoliberal reforms are integrated with a heavy-handed role of the state in the economy. Third, I theorize how resistance can materialize and be effective in such contexts, despite its heavy repression. Fourth, I contribute to understandings of how dispossession actually occurs in practice and is governed by varying political relationships, leading to geographically variegated agrarian-environmental transformations.

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For Lamphay and Gabriel

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEPF	Asia-Europe People's Forum
AEPF-IOC	International Organising Committee of the Asia-Europe People's Forum
AFD	Agence Française de Développement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting of Heads of State and Government
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CDE	Centre for Development and Environment
DAFO	District Office of Agriculture and Forestry
DESIA	Department of Environmental and Social Impact Assessment
DLMA	District Land Management Authority
DONRE	District Office of Natural Resources and Environment
DSA	daily stipend allowance
EIA	Environmental Investigation Agency
ESIA	Environmental and Social Impact Assessment
EU	European Union
FORUM-ASIA	Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
GDP	gross domestic product
GIZ	Deutsche Gesselschaft für Internationale Zussamenarbeit (German Society for International Cooperation
GOL	Government of Laos
ha	hectare
IEE	Initial Environmental Evaluation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LFA	Land and Forest Allocation
LIWG	Land Issues Working Group
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LTR	Lao Thai Hua Rubber Company Limited

LWU	Lao Women's Union
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MEM	Ministry of Energy and Mines
MICs	Middle Income Countries
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
MONRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MND	Ministry of National Defense
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NA	National Assembly
NEM	New Economic Mechanism
NLMA	National Land Management Authority
NPA	Non-Profit Association
PAA	Provincial Army Authority
PAFO	Provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry
PM	Prime Minister
PONRE	Provincial Department of Natural Resources and Environment
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SLLCI	State Land Leases and Concessions Inventory
SOE	state-owned enterprise
TERRA	Toward Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance
VLRC	Viet-Lao Rubber Company
VRG	Vietnam Rubber Group
VT	Vientiane Times
WREA	Water Resources and Environment Administration

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian Politics of Development in Laos

In November 2012, the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter, Lao PDR or Laos) hosted the 9th Asia-Europe Meeting Summit of Heads of State and Government (ASEM), a yearly meeting to enhance relations and cooperation between members of the EU and ASEAN member countries. The Lao government took great pride in hosting the meeting, which they framed as a major diplomatic accomplishment. New infrastructure was built, including a National Convention Center and villas to host diplomatic ministers and other high-level guests, and a fleet of Mercedes were purchased to shuttle around guests. As a prerequisite, however, the Lao government was required to host the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF). The intention of the People's Forum was to provide an "open, dynamic and inclusive" space for "meaningful and practical discussion for change" and ultimately to prepare a "strong, unified, representative and inclusive statement to ASEM from the people". The People's forum was the first of its kind for the state socialist Lao PDR, a potentially open space allowing civil society groups in Laos to discuss human rights and development issues with civil society groups from other Asian and European countries.

The people's forum, however, put the Lao government in an uncomfortable position, as they sought to fulfill their ASEM hosting duties, but also worried that the forum could become a space for anti-government dissent. Government staff and

spokespeople were planted throughout the meeting venues. At the end of presentations, government spokespeople stood up and delivered rosy speeches about national development and progress. Many Lao presenters, villagers, and non-profit association (NPA)[1] members canceled their presentations upon learning how intimidating the meeting environment had become.[2]

These tensions came to a head during a session on land issues, particularly after a presentation was made by Ounkeo Souksavanh, the former host of a popular radio show on which Lao villagers were invited to call in and discuss critical land, forestry, and development issues they face, until it was shut down by the government in January 2012. He provided a critical evaluation of land investment and dispossession in the country, but immediately after he finished a man in the front row, likely a government spokesperson, stood up and called him a liar, suggesting that he made up the evidence in his presentation. The man went on to talk about how great rubber plantations have been for the country, arguing that in his home province of Xayaboury "When rubber plantations are established this sometimes means that people have to relocate to new villages. Until now I have never met anyone in my province who has not received compensation, and I do not see that they are any poorer after relocating" (Latsaphao 2012).

[1] In Laos, NPAs are domestically registered organizations with all Lao staff while international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are foreign-registered with a mix of foreign and Lao staff.
[2] Personal communication with a foreign NGO director who attended the meeting, August 2013.

The tense environment in the session did not deter a young, ethnic Brou woman from standing up and expressing her thoughts on rubber plantations. She started her talk from the strength of her identity as an ethnic minority woman, apologizing for any errors that might arise from speaking in Lao, her second language. From the standpoint of her personal experiences working with villagers in her home province, she explained how a rubber company had acquired villagers' lands and forests without compensating them and that villagers were upset that they could no longer farm the land and forage the forest, becoming reliant upon wage labor for their income. Her speech received an enthusiastic round of applause, but immediately afterwards another likely government official stood up and made comments similar to the first official, and received a small number of dispersed claps from other government officials.[3]

Harassment of the Brou woman began immediately after the session. One man was heard telling her that she must be rich from all the bribes that she receives from foreigners and suggested taking her as his wife so that he could be rich as well. Then, a high-level government authority from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) (part of the organizing committee of the forum) and a woman from the Lao Women's Union (LWU) told her that she must have made up her comments, otherwise the villagers themselves would have come to present. The following day, the English language, state-censored Vientiane Times reported the story, but altered the woman's words, writing that

[3] Information in this session comes from personal communication from a foreign NGO director who attended the meeting, August 2013, and also with the Brou woman who spoke at the forum, February 2014.

"She said she agreed with the government's policies to promote rubber plantations, as local villagers could earn money by working as laborers on the plantations. In the past, she said, many families in Seikeu village had no cash income because their village was located in a remote area. But after a company came to plant rubber trees around their village, they didn't go hungry because they had money to buy food after working as laborers" (Latsaphao 2012). The day after the forum, the Brou woman received a number of threatening text messages on her phone, including "Lao people who commit treason do not deserve to live in this country. Because of bribes you can betray your own country. Bribes cannot support you for your whole life. Don't your relatives need help from the Lao government?" and "your boss said: don't worry, just earn money. This means that you were tricked with cheap pay. Whenever you go to the district, the information recorded will be immediately published."[4]

The next week, government officials began visiting the provincial office of the INGO where she worked, questioning her participation in the meeting. There were officials from the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry (PAFO), the provincial LWU, and the provincial labor union – they brought photos of her taken at the event and then took another photo of her at that moment. Two weeks after the forum, officials from the local focal zone (a sub-district administrative level) visited the Brou

[4] Personal communication with foreign NGO director with whom the Brou woman shared the text messages, August 2013.

woman's parents in their village and asked them questions about where their daughter lived and worked.

INGOs and European donors supporting the AEPF were alarmed. Anne-Sophie Gindroz, the country director of the Swiss NGO Helvetas, sent a letter to development donors raising concerns about the limited and repressed space for civil society and democratic debate in Laos, particularly concerning controversial land and forestry issues. She writes "We are working in a challenging environment: this is a country governed by a single Party regime, where there is little space for meaningful debate, and when taking advantage of that limited space, repercussions often follow. Although allowable under the Constitution, real freedom of expression and assembly are not afforded, and those who wish to exercise their constitutional rights and dare to try, often do so at their own peril faced with intimidation, false accusations and increasingly unlawful arrest." The letter was leaked to the Lao government, which subsequently issued a letter to Helvetas headquarters in Switzerland reprimanding Anne-Sophie's "explicit rejection of the Lao PDR's Constitution and Law, particularly its political system. Moreover, she called on Development Partners and others not to side with the Government of the Lao PDR". They concluded that "the foregoing facts have warranted the Lao Government to announce that there is no more legitimate ground for Ms Anne-Sophie Gindroz to continue her presence in the territory of the Lao PDR. Accordingly, she is required by law to leave the country within 48 hours from the date of this official notification".

The Brou woman also brought her concerns to one of the main organizers and keynote speaker of the AEPF, Sombath Somphone, a prominent community development practitioner in Laos who founded the Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC), developed a unique philosophy of Buddhist-inspired sustainable development, and was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2005, known as the "Asian Nobel Prize". Concerned about the harassment, Sombath met with MOFA to discuss this case as well as harassment of villagers in Bokeo province, northern Laos who had spoken at the forum and were being questioned by local police concerning their statements "against the government". A few weeks later, in mid-December 2012, as Sombath was driving home from work, he was pulled over for a routine police check of driver's documents. As shown on CCTV footage filmed by his wife on her mobile phone at a police station afterward, a man drove off with Sombath's jeep and Sombath was escorted into another truck, not to be seen since.

The events of late 2012 have had a chilling effect upon the nascent, but flowering civil society that operates outside of the umbrella of the state and the Party, and that was becoming increasingly, but only mildly critical of government development, land, and forestry policies. The enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone sent a message to other civil society leaders. Sombath was by no means a radical, anti-government activist; he led a peaceful, non-formal educational institute that worked with young people to learn about holistic, sustainable development. Thus, the disappearance of a development practitioner with a different, although not necessarily antagonistic, philosophy of

development meant that the same could happen for a number of other Lao practitioners practicing alternative development and mild criticism, a message that was communicated to them quite clearly. A Lao director of an environmental NPA was told by a senior official of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) that if he tried to organize a civil society meeting in advance of the 2013 ASEAN Social Forestry Network meeting held in the northern city of Luang Prabang, he would "go the way of Sombath" (FORUM-ASIA and AEPF-ICO 2014).

In addition to a renewed environment of fear, the events of late 2012 were followed by a new wave of bureaucratic obstacles for both NPAs and INGOs operating in Laos. NPAs were required to seek permission from authorities to undertake basic project activities or were unable to obtain the paperwork necessary to officially establish their organization. INGOs working on land and forestry issues from a rights perspective were suddenly required to submit monthly and weekly work plans to their local coordinating government office, provide detailed monthly reports of activities conducted, and request permission for most project activities. Other INGOs had to wait several years before new memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with their government partners were approved; their projects hung in limbo in the meantime. In a party magazine article published in early 2013, the former president and prime minister of Laos, Khamtai Siphandone, asked that government ministries control the actions of non-government organizations, social organizations, and charitable foundations (FORUM-ASIA and AEPF-IOC 2014). One foreign development practitioner, who has been working on land and forestry issues in

Laos since the 1990s, articulated a common sentiment within the foreign development community that "Laos was becoming more open every year since I've been here, until the end of 2012 when it began to move back in the opposite direction".[5]

An Emerging Resource Regime and its Resistance

> *The intellectual history of Dissent is made up of collisions, schisms, mutations; and one feels often that the dormant seeds of political Radicalism lie within it, ready to germinate whenever planted in a beneficent and hopeful social context*
>
> (Thompson 1963: 36)

These tensions are a product of the recent and rapid transformations of environments and livelihoods in rural areas across the country, due to a combination of agricultural marketization and modernization, widespread logging, and foreign resource investment. Subsequent to the end of the Second Indochina War[6] and the Lao communist revolution which led to the establishment of the Lao PDR, the Lao economy was isolated from global trade and private business was prohibited. The economy was centrally organized and supported by aid from the Soviet Union and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The dismal economic results of communist policies in Laos and the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and early 1980s pushed the Lao government to begin opening the

[5] Personal communication with foreign development practitioner, August 2013.

[6] It is known as the Vietnam War in the US, but it also took place across the territories of Cambodia and Laos. Laos was the site of a conflict between the US-backed Royalist army and the CIA-trained Hmong guerilla fighters, on one side, and the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese communist armies on the other. The US secretly flew bombing missions for nine years over Laos in an attempt to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail in eastern Laos and to push back the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in Xieng Khouang province of northeastern Laos. Laos is the most heavily bombed country per capita in history.

economy to market forces, initiated by the policy of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM or *konkai xetthakit mai*)[7] in 1986. Foreign direct investment (FDI) was allowed with the passage of the first law on foreign investment in 1988 and foreign investors were subsequently allowed to lease state land with the passage of the 1992 Prime Ministerial Decree on Land. The number of domestic and foreign investment projects in land began to rapidly accelerate by 2000, and were heavily promoted by the government with the formulation of the 2006 Turning Land into Capital policy (*nayobay han din pen theun*), which endorsed a wide range of projects that generate revenues for the government from the development and extraction of value from land. By 2010, the Lao government had allocated 1.1 million hectares (ha) of land via leases and concessions (five percent of the national land area) to more than 2,500 domestic and foreign investors for agriculture, forestry, mining, infrastructure, and tourism projects (see a map of project point locations in Figure 1 below) (Schönweger *et al.* 2012).

The destructive social and environmental impacts of such projects is now well-documented (Dwyer 2007, Baird 2010, Barney 2011, Kenney-Lazar 2012, Suhardiman *et al.* 2015). Focusing largely on the plantation sector, researchers have shown how agricultural and industrial tree plantations have dispossessed rural Laotians of the agricultural, forest, and grazing lands that they customarily accessed. The damage inflicted upon rural environments is also significant – dense secondary and primary

[7] Italicized test in parentheses throughout the dissertation indicates terms in Lao language.

forests have been cleared, streams have been blocked with debris from clearing lands in preparation for planting, and high levels of fertilizer and herbicide use has run off into streams and water sources.

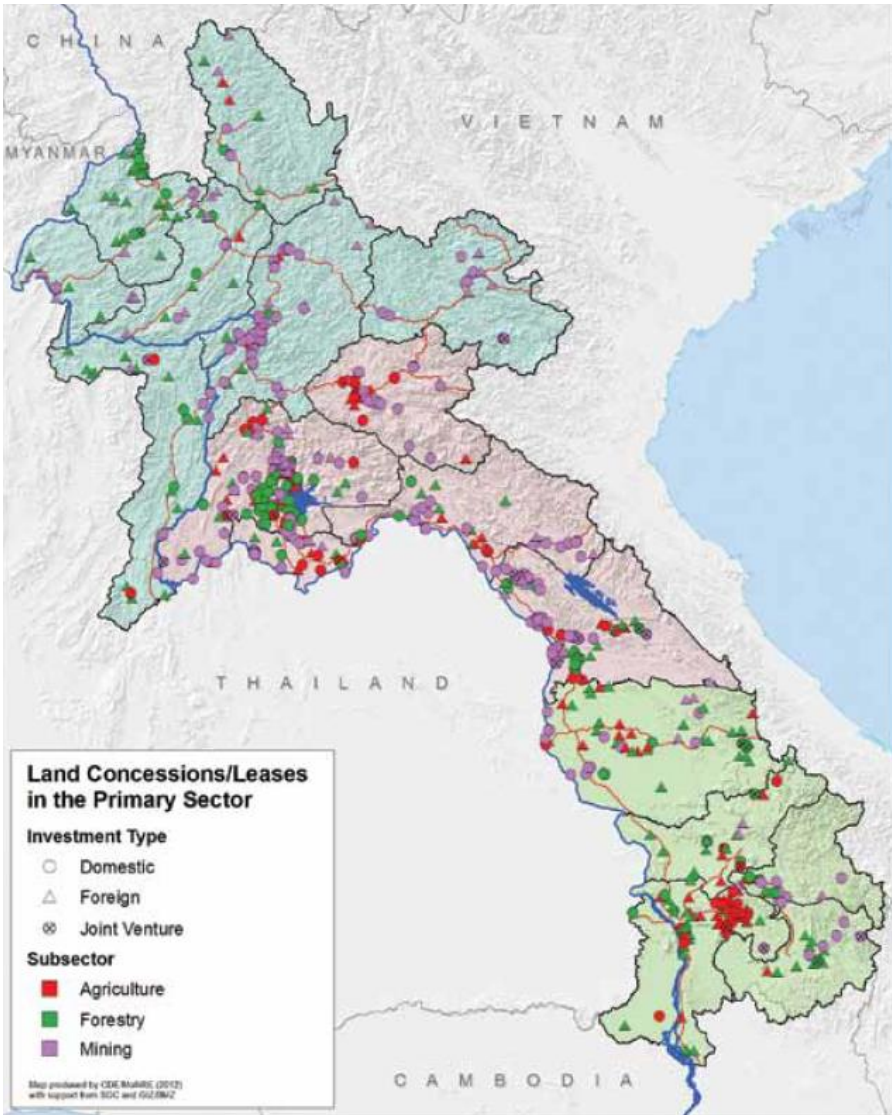

Figure 1: Point locations of domestic and foreign land leases and concessions in Laos
Source: Schönweger *et al.* 2012

Some compensation has been provided by the companies to communities and households. Some households have received electric lines, water hand pump wells, and school and office buildings. Some cash compensation has been provided to households, but only for private lands and compensation rates differed depending upon the perceived productivity of the land and whether villagers held formal land documents.

There is also often some form of wage labor opportunity available on the plantations, for tasks such as clearing debris, digging holes and planting trees, spraying fertilizer and herbicide, and harvesting. However, there is not enough work available for all affected households in the village; the available work is infrequent and inconsistent, and the wages tend to be low. Villagers also report a number of labor abuses, such as verbal abuse by plantation overseers, docking pay for minor errors, lack of safety equipment and training for using chemicals, and limited rest or break time. As a result of such abuses, in combination with long work hours, low pay, and a more rigid work schedule than accustomed to, villagers often only work for the plantation when they are strapped for cash. In sum, villagers frequently report that the losses resulting from plantation development (land, forest, and rural environment) far outweigh the benefits (infrastructure, compensation, and wages).

The destructive social and environmental impacts of land concession investments in Laos has generated a great deal of anger and resentment throughout the country. When the National Assembly (NA) is in session, free hotline numbers are opened, which members of the public are encouraged to call and express issues of concern, one of the

few democratic avenues through which public concerns can directly reach the government. Land issues, especially regarding concessions and compensation, have often been the top concern of callers in recent years (Vientiane Times 2012). The cancelled radio talk show mentioned above received complaints from the public concerning land grabbing, corruption, and social justice, with a particular focus on land expropriation cases in Vientiane, such as the dispossession of veterans' land to make way for a Vietnamese golf course and the expropriation of organic farming land on Don Chan Island to make way for the above-mentioned villas built for the ASEM conference (Smith 2012a). Many of the issues called in come from citizens in and around Vientiane; Laotians in rural and remote areas are frustrated as well, but their complaints often do not reach the central government. Their anger and disillusionment is often only apparent as a result of investigative journalism and research. A number of research projects have recorded the ways in which communities are upset – they were either against plantation development from the beginning and did not have any input in the decision-making process or they agreed to it based upon the supposed benefits, but were upset when those benefits did not materialize, while a number of other socio-environmental impacts did transpire (Baird 2010, Kenney-Lazar 2010, Barney 2011, McCallister 2015). Almost every village visited in this dissertation research that lost land to the companies was angry about what had happened, even those that had initially agreed to the project.

Despite growing resentment and anger over land issues throughout the country, direct resistance and open protest is rarely, if ever, seen. Unlike many other developing

countries where land grabs are taking place, there is hardly any semblance of social mobilization or the development of an organized movement. While there are a number of reasons for this, the most glaring is the political ramifications for openly opposing government policy, as evidenced by the events that transpired at the AEPF. Resistance, however, is far from absent. McCallister (2015) has documented the ways in which a Khmu village in Luang Prabang, northern Laos, has used everyday acts of resistance to sabotage the development of a Chinese rubber plantation and retain access to village lands. In prior work (Kenney-Lazar 2010, 2012), I have shown an example of armed village police threatening Vietnamese bulldozers out of their village territory. A number of villages have pursued conflict resolution bureaucratically, by bringing their cases to the NA, the most well-known case being villages from Paksong district, Champasak province, southern Laos, whose lands were expropriated by a subsidiary of the Singaporean multinational agribusiness corporation Olam International, and eventually part, but not all, of the lands were returned to the village (Smith 2012b). A number of INGOs working on land rights have described cases from their target villages where villagers quietly resisted part or all of the concession of village lands to companies, particularly when they had received some legal education from the organizations.[8]

These examples of the types of resistance and action that are occurring in Laos demonstrate how they occur without involving open and direct protest and in ways that

[8] Interviews with staff of two INGOs working on land rights. March and June, 2015.

avoid challenging government policy and the hegemonic power of the state. Thus, in many ways, the types of resistance that occur in the repressive political environment Laos are reminiscent of Scott's work on everyday resistance (1985) in that they fly under the radar. However, they are also not completely hidden, and are directed against government-sponsored projects, if not framed as such. Thus, the main research objective of this dissertation is to investigate how resistance to and refusal of resource investments take root and are effective within authoritarian political environments in ways that tread the middle ground between everyday resistance and organized social mobilization.

In addressing these questions, I argue in this dissertation that peasant resistance occurs and is effective at protecting access to lands and resources in authoritarian Laos by navigating and refashioning established lines and relations of power between communities, state agencies, and plantation managers. I refer to this as "resisting with the state", whereby effective resistance relies upon or exploits state power. The strength of political-economic relations between plantation companies and the government affects the overarching dynamics and possibilities for resistance. Companies with weaker relationships are unable to use state force and violence to dispossess peasants of their lands. Political relationships between peasant community leaders and the government are as important: village leaders with strong political ties to state authorities, often developed during the second Indochina war and subsequent communist revolution, are able to enact and legitimize village grievances. Finally, mobilized communities tend to have greater social solidarity and take positions against the plantation based upon democratic

community consensus building including strong participation by women. These arguments build upon a theoretical framework that links concepts of dispossession, environmental governance, territorial sovereignty, and resistance.

Theoretical Framework

The overall theoretical question underpinning this dissertation is how the political-economic imperatives of resource capital to access land via dispossession is contested by a politically repressed peasantry within a neoliberalizing yet still authoritarian political context. Furthermore, I seek to understand how such resistance fits into the governance of the development of resource investments and their resulting socio-environmental geographies. The arguments of this dissertation build upon a conceptual framework linking a number of bodies of literature, as illustrated in Figure 2 below. The framework is based upon the argument that a major dimension of the geographies of plantation development and socio-environmental change is the dispossession of peasant agricultural and forest lands or its opposite, the effective resistance of such dispossession. Such dispossession or resistance is politically contingent and dependent upon the ways in which plantation investments are governed. A relational environmental governance lens emphasizes the various types of socio-political relationships that shape how dispossession and resistance occurs. The concept of embedded sovereignty captures the ways in which control over territory is shaped by the political relations between the state and resource capitalists, which can both open and close opportunities for resistance. The concept of

authoritarian spaces of resistances captures a number of other relations that shape the democratic inputs that peasant communities have over their rural territories: the ways in which certain types of targeted lands are politicized, the political connections that communities maintain with the state, and the internal community dynamics of democratic decision-making and solidarity. In the sub-sections below I further explain how the key concepts of dispossession, environmental governance, sovereignty, and resistance are employed to support this overarching framework.

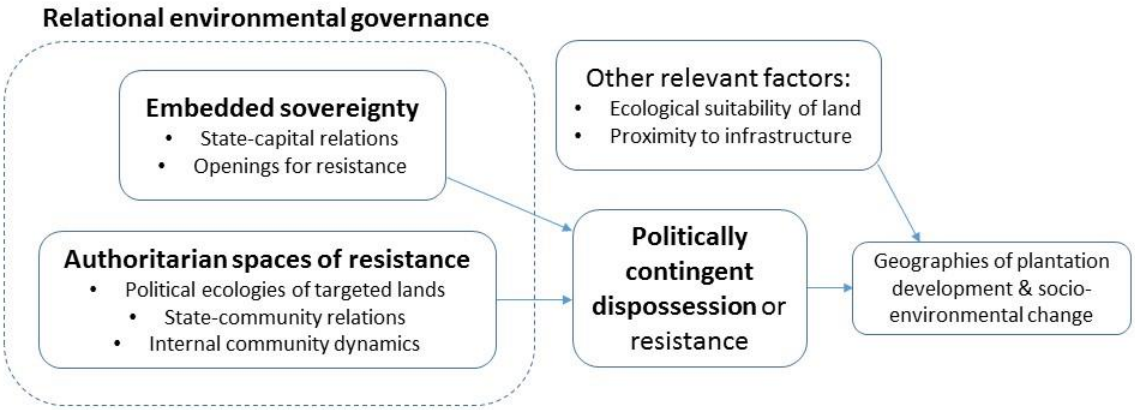

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of the dissertation

The Political Contingency of Dispossession

Dispossession, along with related concepts of enclosure (Neumann 2004, Heynen and Robbins 2005, Blomley 2008, Vasudevan *et al.* 2008) and exclusion (Hall *et al.* 2011), has become a prominent theme within geography, especially in the nature-society tradition. Scholarship on dispossession largely derives from Marx's (1976 [1867]) theory

of primitive accumulation (PA). It owes its popularity in geography, however, to the re-working of PA by David Harvey (2003) into accumulation by dispossession (ABD), which addresses how dispossession is alive and well in neoliberal capitalism and can be applied to a whole host of contemporary issues, including the privatization of public services and urban public spaces. Harvey further argues that ABD, in contrast to accumulation by exploitation (extraction of surplus value from labor), occurs as a result of the overaccumulation of capital, whereby dispossession releases assets to capital for free or at low costs, thus re-invigorating capitalist investment cycles and restoring the falling rate of profit.

However, Harvey's argument that dispossession results from the pressures of capital overaccumulation is not suitable for many cases of dispossession and thus I follow Massimo De Angelis' (2004) argument that PA occurs in instances when "regular" capital accumulation, Harvey's accumulation by exploitation, meets its limits in political-economic contexts where the conditions necessary for capital accumulation are not already established. These processes are evident in the contemporary version of global land grabbing, mirroring historical rounds of land dispossession (Alden Wily 2012), as transnational investors have forcibly acquired large plots of land from rural land users for agricultural and tree plantations, mining, hydropower, or land speculation (Zoomers 2010). The concept of land grabbing does not capture a unitary set of investment activities, political-economic drivers, and geographical contexts, but it does point to a

common method of investment – unjust and coercive dispossession of the land and livelihoods of the marginalized and rural poor (Borras and Franco 2013).

I build upon the scholarship on dispossession by examining PA and ABD as contingent processes – while there are political-economic drivers of dispossession, they may not manifest and certainly not in geographically even ways. As research on global land grabbing in a number of contexts has shown, despite the hype of major land investments, the reality on the ground in many cases is that they are limited by legal regulations and local claims to land (Pedersen 2016). The key to moving in this direction of theorizing dispossession is in Glassman's (2006) reference to the "extra-economic" processes that are so critically important in these forms of capital accumulation – coercion, the law, violence – in which he shows that PA or ABD is a political process, and thus it is one that can also be contested in the political sphere. The extra-economic dimensions of dispossession, however, are best discussed via other theoretical lenses, particularly that of environmental governance.

Relational environmental governance

The lens of environmental governance is useful for thinking through the political contingencies of dispossession. Governance is a term employed by geographers that means many things, such as the political processes that stabilize and guide economic action, based upon the arguments of regulation theory (Bridge and Perreault 2009). The concept of governance has been used by geographers, among other social theorists, to

describe a transition away from state-centric govern*ment* to multi-scalar and multi-actor *governance* (Painter 2000). Governance is used to move away from inherited analytical categories of private, public, state, or government, and to show the important role of non-traditional actors (Bridge and Perreault 2009). Environmental governance, more specifically, is concerned with investigating the institutional, regulatory, and political processes and dynamics that influence and impact nature-society relationships (Bridge and Perreault 2009).

The value that the environmental governance framework brings to analyzing the politically contingent nature of dispossession is to employ a relational perspective: an examination of the roles of multiple actors in shaping socio-ecological outcomes. For Lemos and Agrawal (2006), governance should be focused on hybrid relations and arrangements among state, market, and community actors. Dispossession depends upon the alignment of social forces and relations within a hegemonic bloc, or a historical unity of social forces (Jessop 1997). It depends upon state power that is based upon social relations between the state and civil society, especially the communities to be dispossessed, and how the state uses a combination of coercion-backed consent to separate them from their lands, opening up such lands for investment. And thus it also depends upon the ability of investors to influence the state to use and enforce such power. It also has to do with finding ways to ensure that the disruption of links between people and land, resources, and ecologies does not create social crises that threaten the resource

extraction project. Opportunities for resistance emerge when these links break down, even in authoritarian political contexts like Laos.

Embedded Sovereignty

If dispossession is an "extra-economic" process, then states, as the predominant land owner and manager in many societies, play the most important role of separating rural peoples from their lands, a point that is well made in the land grabbing literature (Wolford *et al.* 2013). Thus, in order to understand how investors access land and what implications these formations of land access hold for rural land users it is critically important to analyze the role of the state in processes of land grabbing.

State sovereignty is a powerful theoretical concept for doing so, particularly the state understood as an "under-theorized political membrane in the ecological metabolism of capitalism" (Parenti 2015, 829). State territorial sovereignty stands between resource capitalists and the earth. While sovereignty is conventionally understood as unlimited and indivisible rule by a state over a territory and the people within it, political geographers critique this definition as reflective of ideal rather than effective sovereignty, which matters most (Agnew 2005). Furthermore, such a view of sovereignty falls into the "territorial trap", the assumption that sovereignty is circumscribed by the territorial boundaries of the nation-state (Agnew 1994). Instead, systems of rule can be expressed in myriad geographical formations. Additionally, political authority within state boundaries can be highly variegated, expressed in scales of graduated sovereignty (Ong 2006) or it

may be highly fragmented due to the competition among various institutions within the same space (Lund 2011). Sovereignty can be stretched beyond its formal borders, or internationalized (Glassman 1999) and it should never be taken as given or stable, but always changing and produced.

For political geographers, sovereignty is always produced, especially the relationships between authority and space, or territorial sovereignty (Emel *et al.* 2011, Lund 2011). Building upon this conception, resource geographers like Emel *et al.* (2011) have shown how territorial sovereignty is in many cases not produced *against* global resource capital but *for* resource extraction projects, providing the sovereignty necessary to implement them, such as in the form of conducive legal property regimes.

I build upon these perspectives to develop a concept of embedded sovereignty, viewed as a form of power over space that is produced via embedded relationships with societal actors vis-à-vis land and nature. I conceptualize sovereignty as embedded in two ways. First, sovereignty over resource production is embedded in the socio-ecological relationships of particular places. Here, I build upon the conceptions of embeddedness from the economic geography literature on Global Production Networks (GPNs) (Bridge 2008, Coe *et al.* 2008, Henderson *et al.* 2002). GPN scholarship shows how global commodity chains are "deeply influenced by the concrete socio-political, institutional and cultural 'places' within which they are embedded, produced and reproduced" (Coe et al., 2008: 9). For biophysical resources, in particular, they are always territorially embedded, in local socio-ecological systems and in the property systems and governance structures

of the nation-state (Bridge, 2008). As sovereignty is embedded with land and space, it is also embedded with the people that use such space – controlling space entails negotiation with them.

Second, the capacity for capitalists to produce and employ territorial sovereignty to access land in particular places is based upon the degree to which they embed themselves within local political structures, particularly the state and local land-using communities. Here, I use Evans' (1995) notion of embedded autonomy, in which states are most effective at facilitating economic development when they have close ties to non-government actors, particularly firms (embeddedness) but can act independently of such private interests (autonomy), preventing state capture. When embedded within state structures, plantation companies can take advantage of state powers of dispossession, but are also able to carve out spaces of autonomy to maneuver independently when necessary. Effective integration with the state enables resource capitalists to co-produce state-capital sovereignty over land and to extract and produce resource commodities.

Authoritarian Spaces of Resistance

If state sovereignty is a major force shaping how land investments are implemented and the political contingent nature of land dispossession manifests, another is social resistance, contestation, or mobilization. In response to land and resource commodification, as a double movement (Polanyi 1944), resistance or social movement is an important vehicle for advancing the claims of marginalized resource users to lands

and forests that are being expropriated from them through processes of land grabbing for large-scale extractive investments (Perreault 2006, Himley 2013). Not only do such movements sustain rural peoples' access to land and resources, they expand spaces of democratic resource governance to include the voices of everyday resource users and civil society and they shape the geographies of how resource investment projects are developed (Bebbington *et al.* 2008). Social movements can be seen as a type of "contentious politics" that include interactions with systems of power that are episodic, public, and collective (McAdam *et al.* 2001). Furthermore, they are often broad-based and organized, building upon the interests and claims of a large group of people around common, generalized issues, rather than specific concerns of particular communities (Tilly 2004, della Porta and Tarrow 2005).

While social movements and direct resistance can improve resource access and governance, there are many contexts "where there is no movement" (Malseed 2008) or where open and confrontational protest is repressed are often ignored. How resistance operates in such contexts has largely been addressed using James Scott's (1985) framework of everyday forms of peasant resistance. Scott's work has been groundbreaking for demonstrating how oppressed subaltern groups do not consent to their dominance, even if they appear to do so publicly, and that they are often engaged in a critique of power via a "hidden transcript" that occurs offstage (Scott 1990), or what Last (1970) referred to as "dissent from within". In everyday forms of resistance, subaltern groups engage in "normal" acts that go against the grains of power, producing small and incremental gains

that also act as forms of subversion, but which do not challenge hegemonic power structures.

In the cases reviewed in this dissertation, peasants often make their claims or refuse to concede land in open ways, but without challenging the hegemonic socio-political order that is dominated by the state, thus navigating a middle ground between everyday resistance and broad-based social movement. This is best captured in the current theoretical vocabulary as "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006), whereby the aim of resistance is to demand rights that were promised but never provided by the state. Referencing the context of rural China, O'Brien and Li show how peasants work through the institutional and legal framework of the state while also noisily seeking the attention of ruling elites to have these claims heard.

I build upon the rightful resistance framework by placing a greater emphasis on the role of politics and power and how they are mediated by and work through space and place. Rights, not to be viewed in a strictly legal sense, are a type of state power that peasants can buy into in order to legitimate their land claims when it suits their circumstances. Additionally, rights on their own are not sufficient to enable peasants to make claims and engage in various forms of resistance effectively – there must be some political way in which they enact such rights, such as through different forms of political connections with the state. As a result, this form of resistance is not available to all whose rights have been violated, but only certain groups of peasants that are in the right position, politically.

Additionally, the power relations and politics that shape how resistance can take hold in authoritarian contexts are always geographically or spatially mediated. Social resistance is spatial in nature (Martin and Miller 2003, Leitner *et al.* 2008), launched from socially significant places, moving through space in symbolic and strategic ways, and contesting the use of and access to territory. Thus, it is important to examine the spatial dimensions of resistance in authoritarian contexts, or authoritarian spaces of resistance. Specifically, it is necessary to pay attention to the ways in which authoritarian political structures and forms of repression limit the spatial manifestation of resistance. Spaces of resistance are where people's capacity to resist is emboldened by the social and power relations that congeal in that particular place, giving peasants a right or legitimacy to sustain access to and control over it. They are also the spaces that peasants can physically and symbolically defend, sites that they visibly claim as their own without facing repression. These spaces have such power because they are inscribed with some degree of legitimacy as spaces of peasant ownership or national conservation by the state.

Research Design and Methodology

The arguments of this dissertation are based upon 20 months of in-country fieldwork, focused on the governance of two plantation companies operating in Phin and Xepon districts of eastern Savannakhet province, southern Laos. Below, I discuss the research design and methodology underpinning the dissertation. I first reflect upon the strategy of research used in the field, that of politically immersed and conflicted

ethnography. I then discuss the logic behind the selection of cases at multiple scales: Laos, the plantation companies, villages, and households. I then discuss the particular methods of data collection used.

In the "Development Soup": Politically Immersed and Conflicted Ethnography

I returned to Laos for my field research only six months after the events of late 2012 and began researching one of the most controversial topics in the country at one of the worst possible times. Throughout my fieldwork, I had to move through a thick institutional context that governs how research projects are carried out, putting a number of limits and restrictions on what types of research can be done and how. The situation, however, can be illuminating if the researcher directly engages with and becomes embedded in the political context being studied. This context can be framed as what a long-term researcher in the country referred to as the "development soup": the complex and contradictory assemblage of actors operating in the field of development in Laos, who are all mixed up in the same mess, whether they like it or not. An important methodological claim of my dissertation is that operating in the development soup, a type of immersed and politically conflicted ethnography, is a formative and productive form of research that generates insights into a political and social setting that would otherwise pass by the researcher.

A vignette from my field experience will illustrate the value of this methodology. I arrived in Laos without an institutional host; the INGO that had initially offered to

support me had not received an extension on their MOU with the government and thus could not help me gain approval to do my field research. Fortunately, I had developed a collegial relationship with a government official in the Lao Government's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) who invited me to become a research affiliate at MONRE. Unfortunately, though, working from within the government meant that I had to go through a painstaking bureaucratic process of research approval. It was only by February 2014, six months after arriving in Laos, that I had received research approval. In the meantime, however, I was able to make a few trips to my field sites in Savannakhet province using creative means. In late October 2013, I joined a field trip with a team of surveyors from MONRE, its local line agencies, and INGO staff to conduct a pilot survey of the "quality of investment" of large-scale land deals along the lines of legal compliance and economic, social, and environmental impacts. Fortunately, we were investigating one of the companies that I had selected for my dissertation research.

The regulatory dimension of the project I had joined meant that it could be threatening to plantation companies. When the company finally agreed to the meeting, government and company teams sat on separate sides of a long meeting table, as if to engage in a diplomatic meeting. Unsurprisingly, the interview was tense, and as soon as we sat down the company manager began a long monologue detailing all of the economic support that the company had provided villages in the vicinity of the plantation. Every question about the process of acquiring land or labor practices received highly defensive

responses. Upon trudging through a long questionnaire, the company director walked around the table to shake our hands and give each of us a company "gift", an envelope with the company's name, logo, and 200,000 kip ($25) inside. They then took us out for lunch at the only decent restaurant in town, did their best to get us drunk on Vietnamese beer, and gave us a tour of their plantation demonstration plots and their latex harvesting training facility.

The experience was mildly traumatic, considering that I had taken a soft bribe from a company that was to be the focus of my dissertation research. On the way to our next interview, I commiserated with my government colleagues, one of whom confidently responded "It's nothing, I get money from companies all the time" (he had also recommended scheduling the interview with the company in the morning so that they would be inclined to treat us for lunch afterward). Upon returning to Vientiane, my government colleague tried to reassure me: "You can't refuse their gift, otherwise they will get suspicious and create problems for you".

I learned firsthand how corruption occurs in Laos, a topic which would be difficult to understand any other way. How corruption actually happens – the social and material practices and lived experiences – is often unknown because of its secretive nature, leading to stereotypical imaginaries. Stacks of cash are not handed under the table at the moment before a contract is signed, contrary to assumptions of many, including a central-level government official who explained that land concessions are approved because of UTM or "under the table money". Instead, "gifts" are given in advance – and

in relatively open ways – to build relationships and future goodwill. Corruption smooths over the frictions of developing a plantation project by building relationships.

The padded envelopes and the meal were not intended to incite particular types of action, but to bring us into the company fold, the weight of which became more apparent as we began thinking through what we could do with the data. The gifts afforded the company a bit more time and space to lobby us. At lunch they continued to paint their project in a positive light (although government staff appeared more focused on drinking than listening). During the tour of the plantation demonstration plot, they showed us environmental sustainability features of their plantation, such as pits where organic waste was deposited as a form of compost to return nutrients to the soil naturally. At the training site, they emphasized how they were providing new skills to villagers – how to tap rubber, which they practiced on old rubber trees imported from Vietnam.[9]

In the development soup, you cannot stay neatly on one side, apart from the messy practice of development politics. You are inevitably mixed in with other, sometimes oppositional, actors if you want to achieve your project and research goals and be involved, rather than sidelined. While the researcher is never in an objective position of outside observer, this is even less the case in Laos, where you need to be involved with the government and the work of development projects in some way or another in order to get anything done. Immersed, but also politically conflicted, research is productive for

[9] I later learned from interviewed villagers that many trainees had not been paid for their training time.

understanding the politics and power relations in particular places and sites of research. While it has its perils and unique ethical considerations, such an approach leads to a greater understanding of the complex politics and underlying processes driving socioenvironmental change, particularly concerning land deals in the Global South.

By the end of my fieldwork I had fully embraced the development soup. I sat in a regulatory-minded new ministry seeking to make its mark in the government, I worked with INGOs to collect data on land concessions and advocate for strengthened household and community land rights, my local level fieldwork was facilitated by district officials who corruptly secured land for plantation investors while simultaneously worrying about the socio-environmental impacts, I worked with dissident ethnic minority translators, and I communicated communities' grievances directly to the plantation companies.

Case Selection

Despite bureaucratic limits, I was mostly free to choose my research cases and design the study as I pleased. I will first briefly reflect upon the selection of Laos as a national case and the decision to focus on the industrial tree plantation sector. Then I will discuss the selection of companies, districts, villages, and households.

Laos was selected as a national case study for investigating the governance and resistance to dispossession from land investment projects because it is a hotspot for land grabbing in the Mekong region, along with Myanmar and Cambodia. It is a telling case because of its unique political context as an authoritarian, socialist state that has opened

up to foreign capital and markets, while the state continues to play a dominant role in managing various aspects of investment, land, and markets. More importantly, the state controls and represses political expression throughout the country, limiting the activities of rural peoples. As a result, Laos presents a fascinating case of land and resource governance in a mixed political economy of state and private actors, especially when examining the role that peasants play in shaping how land investments are governed.

I selected the industrial tree plantation sector rather than other types of land intensive resource investment projects like mining and hydropower, because of how it affects the spatial dynamics of resistance. Mining and hydropower projects are based upon point resources (Auty 2000) and thus are located in a particular place based upon biophysical properties, whether mineral deposits or hydrological flow. They cannot be easily moved once decisions are made about their location, and as a result there must be powerful forces of resistance to change their location. In contrast, plantations are dependent upon distributed resources (ibid.) and thus can be located in a number of different places and the geography of plantations can be shaped and changed by resistance without requiring complete relocation of the project. Although plantations are also located in suitable areas with high soil quality and close to infrastructure such as roads and electricity, there is a wider availability of locational choice and thus it is more likely for resistance to crop up and be effective in changing the shape of such plantations.

I selected two companies for comparison in order to examine the importance of different company strategies and relationships with the state for their governance and

generation of resistance. I selected one company that developed its plantations smoothly to the full extent of its land concession quota and one that experienced a number of problems acquiring land. I hypothesized that these differences were due to varying political relationships with the Lao government. I chose one Chinese and one Vietnamese company in order to investigate the importance of different national background, especially from two of the most powerful countries operating in Laos. The companies I chose fit these characteristics: Quasa-Geruco Joint Stock Company (hereafter referred to as Quasa-Geruco), a subsidiary of the state-owned Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), and Shandong Sun Paper Industry Joint Stock Company (hereafter referred to as Sun Paper), the largest private paper and pulp company in China. Additionally, they both were operating in Phin and Xepon districts, thus ensuring that I could examine how they were interacting with the same district agencies and officials.

I selected five villages for each company that exhibited varying degrees of resistance, to examine the factors that accounted for such differences. Considering the limited amount of information available beforehand concerning which villages had resisted and how (district government officials had some tips, but not enough to make case selections), I first conducted focus group interviews in 23 villages targeted by both companies (12 for Sun Paper, 12 for Quasa-Geruco, one in which both companies operated). I also selected villages for a range of types of resistance, such as when villages resisted using political connections or if they resisted solely through consensus building,

solidarity, and preparation, as these were the facets of resistance that I wanted to study in more depth.

Most of the village-level research was conducted in three types of focus groups, with leaders, households, and women.[10] Village leadership groups included the chief and deputy, the party secretary and deputy, the elders, village police, village land and forestry officials, and the village representative of the Lao Women's Union (LWU). Focus groups included villagers affected by the plantation, villagers that resisted the acquisition of their land, villagers that did not lose any land, and villagers that worked with the plantation company. I also conducted four to five individual interviews with households in each village in order to get a sense of some of the household level impacts of the project. I sought to select a few different types of households, with varying degrees of impact upon their livelihoods, varying degrees of wealth, and other factors of interest for particular villages, such as those that had resisted land acquisition or worked with the company.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was a major element of my immersed and politically conflicted research approach and played an important role at every stage of the project. Participant observation accompanied my time spent working with the Lao government,

[10] The household focus groups were intended to include both men and women from the household, but they ended up being comprised of all men. This is partly because Brou culture is patriarchal and thus households are headed by men. It is also because upon hearing that we would hold a women's focus group, villagers assumed that the household group was a men's focus group.

when joining meetings concerning land and development and forestry issues with NGOs and government officials, when interacting and traveling with government officials in the field, when interviewing government, company, and village actors, when staying in rural communities, and when visiting plantation sites and exploring other rural territories. In each of these situations, participant observation offered something more than what could be learned from interviews, informal discussions, or project documents alone.

Information from interviews is relatively one-dimensional without linking it to the experience of being there. Perhaps the best example of this was the experience of being within the tense political context of authoritarian Laos. I personally experienced the bureaucratic blockage that Lao peasants face when making cases about their unfair expropriation of land. Not only was my project delayed at the national level, almost every field trip had to be approved by central, provincial, and district agencies. The Phin district government never officially approved my project and I was only allowed to go to the field based upon a close collegial relationship I had developed with a senior DONRE official. My experience, however, is minor in comparison to what villagers faced, particularly when their complaints about land dispossession are ignored by the district government.

More revealing was the experience of conducting fieldwork while being escorted by government officials. They were actually quite helpful when we visited local government offices as they could navigate the local government culture and norms. In the village, though, their presence created discomfort, primarily because we were discussing

conflict and resistance in the presence of those who had been involved in facilitating the expropriation of villagers' land. I partly bypassed this problem by employing ethnic minority translators who I trained to conduct the interviews in Brou language, which government officials could not easily understand. While villagers were more comfortable speaking up, they also realized how speaking in another language might make it look they have something to hide. Additionally, one of the translators that I employed was the woman who spoke up and was harassed at the AEPF meeting discussed above. Fortunately, government officials tended to lose interest and disappear shortly after "opening" the meeting. The experience, however, was informative, demonstrating the tension that peasants and Lao organizations face when speaking up about controversial issues.

An ethnographic approach also enabled me to observe behavior and interactions in ways that produced another level of insight. In one village, I interviewed the only household to refuse conceding his land to the plantation. He was taken by the police the district capital, a step prior to arrest, where he was intimidated and pressured. District officials told him he would have to compensate the company for the cost of clearing and developing the land if he wanted it back. Claiming his inability to afford such compensation, he continued to refuse and eventually the government gave in and gave him his plot of land back. As the only resister in the village, I expected him to be an outspoken and vocal person, but instead he was quite a meek man with a submissive personality. In responding to our question, he spoke little, deferred to us to lead the

conversation, kept his head slightly bowed down, and always responded with the polite language that a young person uses with their elders in Laos. I was amazed that someone so deferential could cling to their land so stubbornly and prevent it from being acquired when no one else in the village was able to do so. It showed me that in the Lao context, there is a power in stubbornly, but politely refusing to give up while simultaneously following the formal procedures of doing so.

Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and informal discussion

The majority of the data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and informal discussions. A total of 150 individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 114 different people or groups (a number of people or groups were interviewed twice) and countless informal discussions with various informants were held. I interviewed a wide range of actors: 1) government officials at the central, provincial, and district levels within line agencies of MONRE, the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), MAF, the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) and the provincial and district level administration offices, including the governor of Phin district, 2) company managers and staff managing the plantation investment at the district level, 3) the village leadership – including the village chief and deputies (*nai ban* and *hong nai ban*), village party secretary and deputies[11], village elders, village-level

[11] In many villages the village chief and village party secretary is the same person, which is also often the case for the deputy village chief and deputy village party secretary.

representatives of the LWU, village police or security, and village foresters and land officers, 4) village-level households as a focus group and on an individual basis, 5) village-level women focus groups, and 6) staff of Lao non-profit associations and international non-governmental organizations and academic researchers. Interviews with government officials were conducted in Lao while most interviews in the villages (*ban*) were conducted in the ethnic minority language of Brou (Makong and Katang sub-groups) with translation to Lao, and company interviews were conducted in Lao and Chinese or Vietnamese, translated by company staff.

Focus groups were often used instead of individual interviews in order to understand the collective narrative concerning how the plantation project was negotiated in that village. I held focus groups separately with households and with women in order to give them a space to speak separately from the village leadership. This was challenging, however, as the village leaders organized the groups, selecting participants and hovering in the background. The focus groups also often met the common pitfall that there were a few outspoken individuals who would dominate the conversation while others kept quiet.

While interviews and focus groups generated the greatest amount of data, some of the most informative data came from informal discussions, especially with government officials. When driving to village sites, eating lunch, or chatting outside of my guest house, government officials would often express themselves in ways that would be uncomfortable in an office setting. They showed their frustration with the power of

Vietnamese investors to violate land and forestry laws with impunity, they talked critically of corruption at the highest levels of government, and they expressed disappointment with how plantation projects had destroyed local landscapes and created conflicts with communities. I learned how extensively Quasa-Geruco had corrupted the district government, establishing a rubber plantation for the former district governor and providing salaried positions in the company to government officials' family members.

Document Collection and Mapping

A number of different documents and spatial data were collected from government agencies, companies, and villages, such as land concession agreements, land survey maps and reports, concession area shapefiles, and proposals, requests, complaints, and other forms of official communication between the companies, government offices, and villages. Such documents provide a useful official account of the project and its legal requirements as well as its allocated land area. They can also usefully be compared with data collected in interviews. For example, a comparison of the land concession maps provided and aerial imagery showed that Quasa-Geruco cleared a large amount of land outside of the official boundary of the project.

I also engaged in participatory mapping exercises with communities. I printed out maps with aerial imagery of the village, superimposed with shapefiles showing village boundaries, roads, areas allocated for the concession, and protected areas. At the end of focus groups and household interviews, villagers showed me on the maps where the

events that they described in the interview had occurred, where the land that they lost was located, and the geographies of village land use, before and after the plantation.

Summary of Dissertation Articles

The three articles included in this dissertation address the question of how the uneven geographies of plantation development in southern Laos are governed by the dialectical relationship between resistance and dispossession in an authoritarian political environment. The first article, *Governing Dispossession: Relational Land Grabbing in Laos*, provides an overarching analysis of how dispossession versus resistance, and the associated uneven geographies of plantation development, result from a wide variety of relationships between the state, capital, resource using communities, and nature. The article takes a relational approach to environmental governance to argue that the capacity for rural communities to resist and mitigate the socio-environmental impacts of plantation development versus their acquiescence to such transformations is a result of varying combinations of power relationships between and among key power players in that particular political and social configuration. The article uses cases from both companies investigated and various villages that show how these different relations operate in practice and affect resistance. Four types of relations are examined: state-capital, political ecological, state-society, and internal village relations. Each of these relations are only touched on briefly in this article and are expanded upon in the second and third articles.

The second article, *Embedded Sovereignty and the Uneven Production of Plantation Territories in Southern Laos*, concerns the first of these relations and demonstrates how the types of relationships that develop between resource investors and the state have important implications for the ways in which such projects are developed and the capacity for targeted communities to resist them. I examine these connections between investors and the state through the concept of embedded sovereignty that I develop, building upon the political geography literature on sovereignty as a produced and relational phenomenon. Ultimately, companies like Quasa-Geruco that are able to become closely integrated with the state, especially at the local level where the action and messiness of dispossession actually occurs, are able to acquire land more easily. As a result, peasants facing this project have a much more difficult time resisting.

The third article, *Beyond the Everyday: State Spaces of Resistance to Industrial Plantation Development in Laos*, was co-written with two other researchers working in Laos and includes an additional case study from one of their projects. We focus on the three other relations important for understanding how resistance effectively protects access to land in an authoritarian context. While resistance appears to be nonexistent in Laos at first glance, this paper shows how it is occurring under the radar in ways that do not link up with transnational networks of activism and media exposure, but move beyond forms of everyday resistance and rightful resistance by working with the power structures and ideologies of the state. We show that rural communities are able to resist dispossession when it concerns rural spaces that are viewed as legitimate within national

ideologies of development, particularly lowland paddy rice and national parks. In order to be protected, however, such spaces must be enacted with various forms of political connection and action across multiple scales. This includes scale jumping to overcome bureaucratic limits at lower levels of government. Connections based upon political connections with high-level officials established during the Second Indochina War are used to lodge claims. Resistance is also enacted via occupation of land at sites of investment to demonstrate and make visible peasant claims to such land.

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CHAPTER 2 – GOVERNING DISPOSSESSION: RELATIONAL LAND GRABBING IN LAOS

Abstract: The government of post-socialist Laos has conceded over one million hectares of land – five percent of the national territory – to resource investors, dispossessing rural communities of their customary lands. Dispossession, however, has been geographically uneven, in part due to local resistance. In this paper, I investigate how dispossession actually plays out on the ground and is governed. I build upon relational dimensions of the environmental governance framework to emphasize how resource access is shaped by conflicting and interactive political and social relations among key state, capital, and civil society actors. To demonstrate the relevance of this approach, I argue that dispossession in the industrial tree plantation sector of southern Laos is governed by four sets of socio-political relations: 1) corporate-state relations that affect investors' ability to mobilize state power for land expropriation, 2) social-ecological relations between communities and their rural environments, the discursive framing of which influences how amenable village territories are to acquisition, 3) community-government relations built upon kinship or historical links which temper state powers of dispossession, and 4) coherent and democratic internal village relations that strengthen community solidarity against plantation development. These arguments are based upon 20 months of dissertation fieldwork, during which I compared 10 villages targeted by two Vietnamese and Chinese rubber and eucalyptus tree plantation projects in eastern Savannakhet province, southern Laos.

Key words: dispossession, environmental governance, land grabbing, Laos

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Quasa-Geruco Joint Stock Company (hereafter referred to as Quasa-Geruco), a subsidiary of the state-owned Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), and Shandong Sun Paper Industry Joint Stock Company (hereafter referred to as Sun Paper), the largest private paper and pulp company in China, have developed almost 10,000 hectares (ha) of industrial tree plantations in southern Laos along the foothills of the Annamite mountain chain that straddles the border between Laos and Vietnam. Their plantations have dispossessed large numbers of indigenous peasants of their customary agricultural lands, fallows and forests, and rural resources, transforming their relationships with nature. These changes have had dramatic effects upon rural livelihood strategies as access to land and resources has been restricted and peasants have become increasingly reliant upon wage labor to provide a cash income in compensation for lost subsistence livelihood.

Such transformations and impacts initiated by land dispossession, however, are geographically differentiated and mark an important dimension of the geographies of development (Bebbington 2003). Some villages have lost significant portions of their productive agricultural and forestry areas, while others have been able to effectively resist and prevent the incursion of plantation development, apart from small areas on the edges of their territories. As a result, the industrial tree plantation landscape of eastern Savannakhet, where Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper operate, is highly variegated and patch-worked and so are the dynamics of dispossession. Land allocation to corporate

investors and related dispossession is often assumed to operate in a "management vacuum" (World Bank 2010, 1) or is represented as a "chaotic and opaque 'free-for-all'" (Global Witness 2013, 13), In this paper, however, I argue that there is a logic governing dispossession, one defined by relations among state, capital, and peasant actors.

The geographic differentiation of dispossession extends across much of Laos, where 1.1 million hectares (ha), or five percent of the national land area, have been granted to investors for agriculture, forestry, mining, and infrastructure projects (Schönweger *et al.* 2012). The different forms and spatial unevenness of dispossession in Laos demonstrates the importance of examining its governance and politics, with the perspective that processes of land grabbing are contingent and malleable, limited by land reforms and the actions of local resource users (Pedersen 2016). Theories of primitive accumulation (Marx 1976 [1867]) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) explain the driving political-economic dynamics behind processes of dispossession, but do not go far enough in explaining how dispossession plays out in unexpected and unique ways on the ground. In other words, the theories fall short in explaining the differential dynamics of *actually existing* dispossession. Such issues are not merely theoretical debates, but hold dramatic implications for how and to what extent resource investments uproot and transform rural livelihoods. For these reasons, it is imperative to not only understand the forces that create the drive towards dispossession, but how such dispossession actually plays out empirically.

To do so, I argue that it is critically important to examine how dispossession is *governed*, examined via the theoretical framing of environmental governance. While environmental governance is a broad and descriptive theoretical umbrella, covering disparate theories (Bridge and Perreault 2009), it is a useful conceptual lens because it allows a relational approach towards understanding environmental transformation. In particular, it encourages viewing the processes that govern nature-society relations as a result of relations among state, market, and civil society actors, without privileging one over the other in the analysis and while also seeing each actor as internally differentiated and contradictory. In the case of industrial tree plantation development and related dispossession in Laos, the differential transformations that have occurred can be best understood as governed through varying types of relationships among state, corporate, and peasant groups. Dispossession in the Lao context relies upon particular alignments among all three actors and when such relations are not aligned its opposite – resistance – occurs.

I make these arguments in the following sections. In section two, I outline the theoretical contribution of a relational understanding of dispossession via the lens of environmental governance. In section three, I review the dynamics of neoliberalizing authoritarian relations of accumulation and dispossession in Laos. In section four, I demonstrate the dialectical processes of dispossession and resistance that have played out in relation to Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper's projects in southern Laos, showing the

various types of relations among communities, corporations, and the state that affect the dynamics of dispossession versus resistance.

These arguments are based upon 20 months of dissertation field research in Laos. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, field site visits, ethnographic participant observation, participatory mapping, and the collection of government and investor documents, maps, and GIS shapefiles. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with government officials in relevant sectors at all levels of government (central, provincial, and district), company managers and staff at the district level, village committees, village households, village women focus groups, and staff of domestic and foreign civil society organizations. Interviews with government officials were conducted in Lao language while most interviews in the villages were conducted in the ethnic minority language of Brou with translation to Lao, and company interviews were conducted in Lao and Chinese or Vietnamese, with translation provided by company staff. A number of different key documents and spatial data were collected from government agencies, companies, and villages, such as land concession agreements, land survey maps and reports, concession area shapefiles, and proposals, requests, complaints, and other forms of official communication between the companies, government offices, and villages.

The Relational Governance of Dispossession

In this section I develop a theoretical approach for analyzing how the geographies of dispossession are governed. I argue that current conceptual frameworks of dispossession – primitive accumulation (PA) and accumulation by dispossession (ABD) – do not sufficiently address the "extra-economic" dimensions of dispossession. Although PA and ABD identify the broad political-economic drivers of dispossession, especially the expansion of capitalist social relations and capital overaccumulation, they do not conceptualize the *politics* of how and why geographically differentiated dispossession occurs. In other words, there lacks a theoretical analysis of the *governance* of dispossession, particularly the political and social relations among actors that influence socio-environmental decision-making and outcomes. The theoretical literature on environmental governance provides an opening for addressing these questions. While the concept of governance has been critiqued as vague, uncritical, and apolitical, it remains useful as a relational framework for understanding how change occurs, resulting from the contentious and interacting relationships among powerful social actors and the environment.

Theoretical and empirical work on dispossession is an indispensable theme within nature-society geography for studying the social-environmental transformations of resource extraction projects such as mining (Bebbington et al. 2008), hydropower (Sneddon 2007), and agro-industrial plantations (Kenney-Lazar 2012). Geographical work on dispossession has been largely prompted by David Harvey's (2003) theoretical

re-working of primitive accumulation as accumulation by dispossession, a contemporary and relational dynamic of neoliberal capitalism. Similarly, Massimo De Angelis (2004) has usefully conceptualized how primitive accumulation occurs in instances when "regular" capital accumulation, or Harvey's accumulation by exploitation, meets its limits: political-economic contexts or domains of society where the conditions necessary for capital accumulation are not already established. Such a process is evident in the contemporary global land rush or "land grab" of the past decade, as global and regional investors have forcibly acquired large plots of land for the extraction of value from land via agricultural and tree plantations, mining, or land speculation, among other economic activities (Zoomers 2010). The global land grab is characterized by a diverse set of investment activities, drivers of investment, and geographical contexts of land acquisition. Thus, the concept of "land grabbing" is most coherent when understood conceptually rather than thematically, as an unjust and coercive dispossession of the land and livelihoods of the marginalized and rural poor (Borras and Franco 2013).

Theories of dispossession are effective at providing a broad and structural political-economic explanation for why dispossession takes place. Marx's PA places dispossession as an integral element of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The dispossession of common and household lands in the 15th to 18th centuries in England freed up land for agrarian capitalism and people as labor in burgeoning manufacturing industries, creating the class divisions essential for capital accumulation. For Harvey (2003), ABD occurs today as a strategy for addressing crises of capital overaccumulation.

It depends upon the use of what Glassman (2006) refers to as "extra-economic" processes such as coercion, the law, and violence to release assets cheaply or for free, thus opening up new opportunities for capital investment and accumulation.

Levien (2012) critiques Harvey's conceptualization of ABD for not distinguishing accumulation by dispossession from other dimensions of "regular" capitalist expansion, such as spatio-temporal fixes. He proposes a more precise definition of ABD as "the use of extra-economic coercion to expropriate the means of production, subsistence or common social wealth for capital accumulation […] a political process in which states – or other coercion wielding entities – use extra-economic force to help capitalists overcome barriers to accumulation" (Levien 2012, 940). This definition focuses attention on the extra-economic processes at work and how they are accomplished by entities that have the capacity to coerce and expropriate, powers often practiced by the state. It exposes a major gap in the work on ABD: while we have a strong understanding of the structural political-economic drivers underlying the push towards dispossession, such drivers do not on their own explain the socio-spatial differentiation of dispossession or its geographies, why it occurs in some places and not others. Just because dispossession *should* occur to facilitate capitalist accumulation does not mean that it *will*. Dispossession is politically contingent rather than economically determined, depending upon the existence and capacity of the state, or other politically coercive entities, to separate people from their lands and resources. The literature on land grabbing has evolved to recognize this, reflecting upon how many planned projects fail to materialize because of

various forms of power that local actors wield to prevent external corporate access to their land (Pedersen 2016). There is a need to further theorize and empirically study the meso-level *political* processes that shape how dispossession actually takes place.

Environmental governance is a theoretical framework that can point us in the right direction for studying the "extra-economic" and political dynamics underpinning social-environmental transformations and dispossession due to its focus on explaining how decisions concerning the environment and resources are made by competing and interacting social and political actors. Since the mid-1990s, social scientists have increasingly used the concept of governance, often to describe a transition away from state-centric govern*ment* to multi-scalar and multi-actor gover*nance* (Painter 2000). An aim of this work is to move beyond inherited analytical categories of private, public, state, or government, and to show the important role of non-traditional actors (NGOs, social movements, private certification bodies) (Bridge and Perreault 2009).

The concept of governance has also become an important analytical concept for studies of environmental change, resource extraction, and nature-society relations. Environmental governance is concerned with investigating the institutional, regulatory, and political processes and dynamics that influence and impact nature-society relationships (Bridge and Perreault 2009). Himley (2008, 435) defines environmental governance as "organizational, institutional, and epistemological systems through which access to natural resources is now structured/negotiated and decisions regarding resource use and environment management are now taken". Bridge and Perreault (2009) argue that

environmental governance has merit in focusing on the problem of *coherence*, or how human and non-human worlds are brought into alignment with one another, despite their seeming incommensurability. The concept of environmental governance imparts analytical value by prompting geographers to think critically beyond the realm of government and through the political, economic, and social relations among actors and institutions that constitute governance arrangements, to explain how socio-ecological configurations are produced, organized, and transformed (Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Liverman 2004, Robertson 2015). Scholars analyze how such arrangements ultimately structure and sustain access to and control over vital resources.

The environmental governance lens is powerful in part due to its relational dimension. Moving beyond a focus on state-led government to a multi-actor governance coalition offers a way of thinking through how socio-ecological outcomes result from relational configurations among multiple actors and spheres of our world. Lemos and Agrawal (2006) usefully propose that governance approaches should be focused on the roles of multiple, rather than single, actors, focusing on hybrid forms of governance among state, market, and community actors. These include co-management of resources by state and community actors (e.g. community-based natural resource management arrangements), public-private partnerships between state and market actors (e.g. concessions and leases for resource extraction), and private-social partnerships between community and market actors (e.g. payments for ecosystem services or ecotourism).

Geographers contribute to environmental governance theory by thinking through how these relations play out vis-à-vis space. Contemporary geographical imaginations of space are inherently relational as space is viewed as produced (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]), a result of materially mediated social interrelations and interactions (Massey 2005). A relational environmental governance approach also fits well with the discipline's history of emphasizing the relationality of socio-spatial processes (Massey and Collective 1999, Bathelt and Glückler 2003, Yeung 2005). Yeung (2005: 38) effectively captures a relational approach through the term "relational geometries", referring to the "spatial configurations of heterogeneous relations among actors and structures […] These relational geometries are neither actors (e.g. individuals and firms) nor structures (e.g. class, patriarchy and the state), but configurations of relations between and among them". Also, there is "inherent heterogeneity and unevenness in the constitution and configuration of relational geometries that in turn *produce* concrete outcomes. There are thus different *forms of power* embedded in different configurations of relational geometries" (Yeung 2005: 44, original emphasis).

A relational approach in geography is incredibly broad and includes an immense number of relations that shape the production of space and nature or the creation of variegated socioenvironmental geographies. In this paper, however, I focus specifically on sociopolitical relationships among the state, capital, and peasant actors, for which I aim informed by a Gramscian relational perspective, well captured by Gillian Hart (2004, 98): "A processual and relational understanding refuses to take as given discrete objects,

identities, places and events; instead it attends to *how* they are produced and changed in practice in relation to one another". In Gramsci's own words, "It is not enough to know the *ensemble* of relations as they exist at any given time as a given system. They must be known genetically, in the movement of their formation. For each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations" (Gramsci 1971: 353 original emphasis).

Ekers and Loftus (2013) contend that Gramsci has a relational approach to Marxism that refuses to address social processes in isolation from a broader suite of relations, a concept of "immanence". Thomas (2009, 449 original emphasis) argues that Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* are aimed at understanding "*relations of force*, that is, a study of the differential intensity, efficacy and specificity of social practices in their historical becoming". When dissecting a particular political moment, Gramsci was concerned with not only understanding the role of the "economic" sphere, or the "cultural" or "political" spheres, but how they were related and intertwined (Ekers *et al.* 2009). Similarly, Gramsci understood hegemony to be constructed across these various spheres, including coercive force, economic incentives, and appeals to morality, among other strategies. This was achieved not only by the state, but as if not more importantly, in the realm of civil society where cultural ideas are discussed and struggled over.

Such a relational approach to environmental governance enables a pathway for analyzing how dispossession actually occurs on the ground, and how to go about dissecting the socio-political and spatial dynamics that underpin the geographies of

dispossession. It is not just a functional result of the "needs" of capital accumulation, but the relationships between capital accumulation and state power, especially the way in which such state power extends to and relates to civil society, rural communities, and access to land. Dispossession depends upon the alignment of social forces and relations within a hegemonic bloc, or a historical unity of social forces (Jessop 1997). It depends upon state power that is based upon social relations between the state and civil society, especially the communities to be dispossessed, and how the state uses a combination of coercion-backed consent to separate them from their lands, opening up such lands for investment. And thus it also depends upon the ability of investors to compel the state to use and enforce such power. It also concerns ensuring that the disruption of links between people and land, resources, and ecologies does not create social crises that threaten resource extraction projects. I argue that opportunities for resistance emerge when these links break down, even in authoritarian political contexts like Laos.

The Authoritarian Relations of Accumulation and Dispossession in Laos

A critical and relational theory of the governance of dispossession is relevant across a broad spectrum of political-economic contexts, including authoritarian political environments like Laos. Despite the disproportional role and power of the state in Laos, state power is relational to other actors like resource investors, rural communities, and civil society. The state may be the dominant player, but it is the interactions among the state and these other three actors that drive environmental outcomes. In this section I

discuss the emergence of a regime of dispossession in Laos and the relations among state, corporate, and community actors that governs land and resource expropriation and capital accumulation.

The Lao regime of dispossession has emerged largely as a tool to facilitate resource investment projects as part of the country's economic transition away from centralized state planning towards a mixed state-market economy – what Lao leaders might refer to as a "Lao path to socialism" – and high levels of GDP growth. Since the mid-1980s, the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) initiated a number of reforms that introduced market elements into the economy, including the opening of the economy to foreign investment with the passage of the first law on foreign direct investment (FDI) in 1988. Foreign investors were first allowed to access land for projects through the lease or concession of state land, as authorized in the 1992 Prime Ministerial Decree on land. Land concessions, however, only began to accelerate since 2000 and received further promotion with the creation of the 2006 Turning Land into Capital (TLIC) policy, which endorses projects that generate revenues for the state from developing and extracting value from land. By 2010, the Lao government had allocated 1.1 million hectares (ha) of land through leases and concessions (comprising five percent of the national land area) to more than 2,500 domestic and foreign investors for agriculture, forestry, mining, infrastructure, and tourism investment project (Schönweger et al. 2012). The significant social and environmental implications of these projects have been well documented over the past

decade, demonstrating how they dispossess people of their customary lands and resources, pollute surrounding environments, and provide little economic opportunity in the forms of wage labor (Obein 2007, NLMA *et al.* 2009, Baird 2010, Barney 2011, Dwyer 2011, Kenney-Lazar 2012, Suhardiman *et al.* 2015).

While land concessions represent a liberalization of the economy that puts greater economic control in the hands of private investors – foreign and domestic – the state continues to play an outsized role in their management. As such investments are essentially long-term leases of state land,[12] the state plays an important role in deciding upon the location of lands to allocate to investors. These decisions are highly political. Despite that the lands being allocated are framed as property of the "state", they are commonly used by local farming communities for farming, foraging, raising livestock, or other ecosystem services. Such lands are managed with customary land tenure systems and in some cases peasants have formal, statutory tenure to the lands via land titles or temporary land use certificates (a preliminary, partial form of title intended to be an initial step towards receiving a title). Thus, the concession of land to investors, apart from conservation areas that are off-limits to investors, inevitably involves the dispossession of lands from current occupants. The process of locating land for a resource investment thus involves matching investors' demands with state calculations concerning the availability of suitable land and the feasibility of separating people from those lands.

[12] Investors also have the option of renting land on private land markets or engaging in a production contract with private landholders, both of which are becoming increasingly common, as exemplified by the rapid development of banana farming by Chinese investors in northern Laos based upon land rental contracts with local landholders (Friis 2015).

Not surprisingly, the separation of peasants from their ancestral, customarily used lands is a contentious process that causes much angst and frustration. However, there has been little to no open and direct resistance and protest or broad-based social movement as has been seen in other countries across the Global South (Hall *et al.* 2015). The most obvious reason for the lack of direct protest is fear of repression, especially the consequences that demonstrators and their families may face. In the few cases of open resistance and protest that have occurred, villagers have been swiftly arrested, as occurred when villagers protested expropriation for a Vietnamese golf course in Vientiane (Asia Times Online 2010), a road connected to the World Bank sponsored Nam Theun 2 hydropower project (Radio Free Asia 2012b), and a Vietnamese rubber plantation in Xekong (Radio Free Asia 2012a).

There have, however, been a number of cases of resistance throughout the country that have not led to arrests and detention, despite threats, and actually have led to positive gain for the communities involved in such actions – in rare cases they have led to the return of confiscated land to communities, but more commonly they result in monetary or in-kind compensation. One well-known case was the acquisition of land from a village on the Bolaven plateau in Paksong district, Champassak province for a coffee plantation by the Singaporean multinational agribusiness, Olam International (Smith 2012). With support from NGOs working on the issue and a spotlight in the international media, villagers brought their case to the NA as a public grievance, setting in motion a process

of conflict mediation. Ultimately, 281 ha of the approximately 800 ha acquired being returned to the village (interview with NGO staff, 9 February 2015).

Despite a few high profile cases of successful resistance, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there are many cases that go unnoticed because they do not lead to protracted conflict and generate media attention. In interviews that I conducted with international NGOs and Lao Non-Profit Associations that educate communities about their legal land and forestry rights, they have noticed an increase in the number of cases of resistance against land expropriation, partly due to the organizations' engagement programs but also because villagers are increasingly knowledgeable of how land investments may impact their livelihoods and have become savvy in refusing them. This has also been reflected in my interviews with central-level government officials who note that resistance to concession projects is cropping up all over the country, making it much more difficult to implement land investment projects without consideration of village interests.

I view this muted resistance as a hidden explanation for how dispossession is governed in Laos. While land concessions are superficially a contract between investors and the state, they deeply involve local communities at sites of investment, as much as investors and the state might wish this was not the case. Although villages are not formally involved in the political decision-making process concerning the location of resource investment projects, particularly which village lands are conceded and on what terms, they always have the potential to disrupt the land acquisition process by refusing

to concede their lands, despite the consequences they may face. More commonly, however, they take advantage of any political opportunities that might be available to refuse certain aspects of projects and mitigate negative externalities. Ultimately, what transpires is that dispossession is subject to conflict and negotiation among investors, the state, and communities, the political dynamics of these triadic relations influencing how dispossession is governed and the geographies of the socio-natural transformations in the landscape that occur. These relational dynamics of governing dispossession are examined in detail in the next section for the cases of two industrial tree plantation investors.

Relations of Expropriation and Resistance in Eastern Savannakhet

In this section I review four key relations that are an important part of governing dispossession, in particular whether effective resistance develops. These are the dynamics that play one part in shaping the geographies of plantation development and rural livelihood change. The four relations include: capital-state, political ecological, community-state, and internal community relations. While these four types of relations are covered in separate sub-sections below, they interact and relate to one another, as the cases provided below demonstrate. The evidence provided comes from a number of cases across both companies and eight of the ten focus villages studied in the research project. Each sub-section is relatively brief for the purposes of showcasing the various relations at work rather than focusing in depth on any one of them. Table 1 below summarizes the

type of resistance or dispossession and the dynamics of the four governing relations for each of the villages[13] reference in the paper.

Village	Types of resistance or dispossession	State-capital relations	Political ecological relations	Community-state relations	Internal community relations
Nammak	Significant loss of land, no resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for QSG	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal divisions concerning expropriation
Xaylom	Significant loss of land, failed resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression supporting SP (at initial phase of project)	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Saphang	Land losses partially limited by resistance	Limited state coercion and repression for SP	Lowland paddy lands, reserved by the state for village use	War-time links to provincial and national government	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Phouliao	Significant loss of land, no resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for QSG	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal divisions concerning expropriation
Phoulao	Land losses partially limited by resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for QSG	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Kaengvang	Significant loss of land, no resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression supporting SP (at initial phase of project)	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal divisions concerning expropriation

[13] Village names are pseudonyms, used for purposes of protecting villagers' identity and protecting them against the political consequences of their responses.

Phailom	No loss of land due to refusal	Limited state coercion and repression for SP	Lowland paddy lands, reserved by the state for village use	Ethnic links to local government	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Thatham	Significant loss of land, no resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for QSG	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation

Table 1: Matrix of village resistance and governing relations

Capital-State Relations

An important governing relation is the political relationship between plantation investors and the state. When plantation companies have close relationships with the government they are more capable of mobilizing state powers to expropriate land for their project. This relation is critically important for dynamics of dispossession because of the significant role that the state plays in separating peasants from their lands. This is particularly important in authoritarian Laos where the state has a legal mandate to manage all lands throughout the country.

Quasa-Geruco began to develop its plantations in 2008 after signing a contract for 8,650 ha in 2006. Their project has been implemented swiftly – by 2012 they had cleared and planted rubber trees on all of the land granted to them and by 2015 were set to tap latex from trees on 300 ha of their plantation. Their project was developed efficiently due to strong support from the district government in expropriating people from their lands and quashing most of the resistance that cropped up in response. In all of the villages visited, leaders and households reported the coercive pressures placed upon communities

to concede land. Village leaders in Nammak village painted a picture of the heavy coercion and force placed upon them by government officials:

> At first, *Ai* [older brother] Somvang came from the ministry [central level government] to measure land. He came and asked for our daughters [referring to land]. The village refused. He said again that if you don't give [the land] we'll still take it, we'll arrest you and take you away (Nammak village leaders, personal communication, 28 February 2014).

Sun Paper was much slower to develop the 7,324 ha granted to them in their contract, only clearing 3,228 ha five years after signing the contract in 2010. This was largely because they continued to experience resistance to their project by villagers and the district government was hesitant to address this via coercion and repression. However, this was not always the case. Toward the beginning of the project, the district put an immense amount of political weight behind it, likely due to the initial pressure they received from higher levels of government to ensure that Sun Paper was able to develop their project. In Xaylom village, for example, villagers refused to concede land for the Sun Paper plantation multiple times and when villagers stood in their fields to prevent the company from clearing their lands, the district escorted the company with police and soldiers to clear the land to prevent any resistance from occurring. Not surprisingly, villagers were afraid and did not try to block the company any further.

In the following years, however, district officials became increasingly frustrated with Sun Paper for taking too long to clear the land that had been allocated to them and for not "taking care of them" the way that Quasa-Geruco does (Phin district official, personal communication, 21 November 2013), giving them gifts and favors to grease the

wheels of dispossession. They also tended to operate at a distance from district officials, expecting the district to provide them with land rather than working closely together to target particular areas and develop the plantation quickly. Eventually the district encouraged Sun Paper to make deals with villages on their own to lease land from the community or households or engage in contract farming with them, dividing the profits with villagers. These efforts met mixed success – some village chiefs or households agreed to such arrangements to make money from the company, but most refused the company's offers as they did not feel the financial benefits to be worth the loss of land and they were not under any coercive pressure to make a decision.

In a telling example of how the tide of government support had changed for Sun Paper, villagers of Saphang village in Phin district refused to allow Sun Paper to clear their land. The district allowed Sun Paper to move forward anyways but they were met in the fields by villagers who refused to allow them to clear their lands. Villagers camped out in their fields, day and night, sometimes taking turns to guard them from being cleared, and eventually Sun Paper gave up without providing any additional political pressure to move villagers off such lands and provide them to Sun Paper. Although Sun Paper had been granted 400 ha in Saphang's village territory they were only able to clear half of it due to village resistance.

Political Ecological Relations

The political and social relations among and within plantation companies, government agencies, and communities also play out in relation to the lands, territories, resources, and ecologies of the targeted area for investment. What matters most is the ways in which nature-society relationships between communities and their lands are politicized and inserted into the broader political-economic relations of plantation development. While all of the relations discussed in this section of the paper have a political ecological dimension, in this sub-section I specifically focus on how the politicization of human-environment relations shape the dynamics of dispossession versus resistance.

Many of Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper's plantations were allocated and developed in midland or upland areas where farmers mostly practice swidden agriculture, pejoratively referred to as “slash and burn”. Villages that lost the largest amounts of land to both companies, such as Nammak, Phouliao, Phoulao, Kaengvang, Xaylom, are mostly comprised of upland areas. The relationship between villagers and their environment in such mixed swidden-fallow-forest landscapes is politicized by the state as areas that are unproductive, ecologically destructive, and available for investment. Thus, it is challenging for communities to protect access to such areas in comparison to lowland areas that have potential for other forms of agriculture that the state views as more productive, primarily wet-rice paddy agriculture.

District officials often starkly represented upland areas as in need of investment. A Xepon district official captured this sentiment clearly, when discussing why the government allowed Sun Paper to clear land in Xaylom village despite villagers' refusal and complaints:

> Villagers want to cut deep forest for swidden so that there won't be many weeds when they plant rice. We want to prevent them from cutting the forest and we want to make their lives more comfortable […] The government policy is that the purpose of investments is to reduce poverty by creating jobs for the people. Villagers don't know or are not interested in developing their land, they just want to continue their lives like before. They want to clear the forest that has big trees […] We don't want investment on all of their land, only land that is empty, not used in any way (Xepon district official, personal communication, 18 February 2015).

Some villages whose lands mostly comprise paddy rice were targeted and they were able to resist the projects based upon the argument that they were using the land productively. These arguments were even more effective if the village had little other land to use – it is common for lowland, paddy villages in Xepon and Phin district to have a smaller land area than the upland villages, especially in relation to population size, and thus they were able to effectively claim that this land should not be appropriated. These claims are lent weight by the legal framework and by government discourse, which places a premium value on paddy rice land and efforts to prevent it from being converted to other land uses. Paddy land is given high political value because of its rarity in the mountainous country as well as lowland Lao prejudices against upland minority agricultural practices.

Another strategy effective for resistance was claiming certain types of forest or fallow lands as reserved land *(din chap chong)* for cultivation by future generations. This was particularly effective if claims were made that the land were to be converted to paddy rice land as it is a major goal of the province and district to get villagers to expand the amount of paddy land in their village. Saphang village was particularly effective at using this tactic – they claimed that practically all of the land allocated to Sun Paper for their plantation was reserved land that had already been divided and allocated among households for future production. These claims were convincing because the village historically converted swidden fields and fallows to paddy land using money from development projects and logging to pay bulldozer operators to clear their land.[14]

Community-State Relations

The hegemonic alignment of social forces that enables dispossession is limited when villages have some means of power to leverage in their engagements with government officials. In the Lao context, having informal connections to government is critically important for ensuring that complaints and grievances make it past bureaucratic roadblocks. There were two types of connections that were most effective at enabling communities to lodge complaints with the government: kinship or ethnic links and

[14] Without technology and capital, the creation and expansion of paddy rice fields is a major investment of labor time.

political connections forged through the Second Indochina War and subsequent communist revolution.

In the most extreme example of a kinship-related connection to politically powerful officials, a woman who had lost paddy land to the Quasa-Geruco plantation was connected through family to the then vice president of Laos, Bounnhang Vorachit, who is also an ethnic Brou person and is now the president of the country. When she first asked for his help he was hesitant because of the potential for perceived nepotism, but he recommended that she and other villagers make a collective petition and then he was able to intervene in their official request and some of their paddy rice land was returned.

Ethnicity is also an important dimension of resistance strategies. Most villages targeted by the plantation were inhabited by ethnic Brou people. Although they are a major ethnic group in Phin and Xepon districts, they make up a minor percentage of local government staff. Interviews with focus groups in the 10 target villages of the study showed that for the most part villagers had little to no personal, kinship, and political links to government officials in the district government, or at the provincial and national level. One village that was easily capable of refusing to concede land to the plantation project was Phailom village, mostly inhabited by Phou Thai people, an ethnic group closely related to the lowland Lao and who hold the majority of district government positions. They had a number of close links with the district government – the deputy village headman had even previously worked in the government.

In other cases, villagers had war-time connections with government officials that they could use to their advantage. Saphang village, discussed above, was ultimately able to limit Sun Paper's because they made it difficult for the company to clear land by occupying the targeted area. They were also able to bring pressure to their case through their governmental connections. Village leaders had fought in the Second Indochina War alongside a close friend who then became placed within the Savannakhet branch of the National Assembly (NA). They made an appeal to their contact who helped organized a trip by the NA to the village. While the NA did not directly stop the company from clearing the villagers' land, and even nominally provided their support for the company, it elevated the pressure of the case, eventually influencing Sun Paper and the district government to give up on securing the additional 200 ha.

Revolutionary histories do not automatically lead to politically useful connections if these links are not maintained over time. This was the case in Thatham village that lost large amounts of land to the Quasa-Geruco rubber plantation and was unable to put up much resistance. While waiting for an interview, I met a village elder who mentioned his friendship with leaders of the Lao revolution, such as Kaisone Phomvihane and Souphanouvong, and had fought with them during the war in the North before moving to the South. I found it hard to believe and brought it up with my government escorts; they thought it was likely true, but he had fallen into poverty and alcoholism, and had not kept up any sort of political connection over time. The reality is that most people in Laos have

some sort of connection to the revolution – what is more important is whether such connections are politically useful in the contemporary era.

Internal Community Relations

Decisions at the village level to resist part or all of plantation development, and the degree to which such an attempt is effective, is partly based upon internal village relations. Villages that resisted were more likely to hold a unified oppositional position while villages that did not resist had internal tensions and conflicts. One of the most important factors was whether there was a unified relationship among village authorities, other village elites and elders, and households. It made a particularly significant difference whether decisions were made with democratic input from villagers or if village leaders made decisions on their own, especially if village leaders accepted pay-outs.

A number of villages targeted by Quasa-Geruco bravely expressed their refusal to concede land and rights to manage and protect access to land, despite the repression and coercion faced. Phoulao was unified in their opposition to the project since it was first proposed to them. They were able to prevent acquisition of part of their lands, and more importantly, stand up against government coercion. The district and Quasa-Geruco visited the village six times before they were able to pressure the village to concede land for the project. At first, government officials from the district, province, and central level, told villagers that they had the right to decide whether or not to concede land – villagers took this offer literally and refused. The company and government returned, making

stronger demands and declaring that the company would develop the plantation project regardless of the villagers' decision, but Phoulao villagers continued to refuse, confidently asserting their rights to use and manage land within their village territory. District officials began to threaten those who refused to give up land, demanding that they write down their names; in response, every villager wrote their name down. An agreement was only reached when the company met the villagers' demands to pay for the extension of power lines to the village and to fix and maintain the dirt road to the village each year. Quasa-Geruco failed to deliver on these promises, even after land had been cleared and trees planted. So, when Quasa-Geruco requested another plot of land to expand the plantation, the village immediately refused without conditions.

Saphang village's success in limiting the extent of Sun Paper's plantation, as discussed above, was based upon their ability to make their case heard and taken seriously by the government. They were only able to achieve this, however, by rejecting the plantation project in solidarity and working together to prevent it as soon as they learned about it. Whenever the company and government approached the village to try to acquire land, the village held a communal meeting and consistently decided as a village to refuse the project due to the lack of perceived benefits. When they decided to make an appeal to the NA and needed to travel to Vientiane, every household chipped in money to pay for the trip. When they were protesting the clearance of their lands, they organized collective strategies to make sure that someone from the community was in the fields at all times to protect the company from clearing their lands. Later on, another plantation

company made an offer to lease village land, offering to pay $350 per ha for a 30-year concession. Although the village chief was impressed by the offer, he repeatedly emphasized that he had no authority to make a decision independently of the rest of the village.

On the other side of the spectrum, villages lacking in solidarity and democratic consensus or rife with internal conflicts were unable to prevent the acquisition of their lands. When Nammak village was approached to concede land, they were unable to resist in part because there were two opposing groups within the village, one that was in favor of the plantation because of the supposed employment and monetary benefits that it would bring and another that was in opposition because of the likely losses of land and livelihoods. The tension was heightened by the significant amount of debt that the village had racked up – 73 million kip (approximately $9,125) – with the state electric company when power lines were extended to their village. Quasa-Geruco offered to pay off their debt in return for the acquisition of their land, a deal that was too attractive for villagers to refuse.

In direct contrast to Phoulao's bold resistance in the face of intimidation and threats from the district, neighboring Phouliao villagers were afraid to stand up as a community to protect their land. When asked if they willingly gave up their lands to the company, they replied "Who would be? It's the land next to our paddy fields, but if we didn't [concede land] they said they would put us in jail, so we were scared. The district said that whoever doesn't give [land] has to sign their name on the document. Who would

be brave enough to sign?" (Phouliao village leaders, personal communication, 1 March 2014). Villagers were scared, in part, because the former village chief who was in power when the project was being developed had been paid off by the company. Additionally, he, along with other village elites, received coveted permanent jobs as plantation guards.

Conclusion

What the above cases show are the various ways in which different types of social relations shaped the way dispossession played out in practice, particularly concerning whether resistance materialized and effectively protected against the expropriation of communal and household agricultural lands, fallows, and forests. They demonstrate the relational nature of dispossession, resistance, and the uneven development of industrial tree plantations. In each case, relations among and within communities, the state, and plantation companies interacted in ways that either facilitated or hindered the hegemonic power relations of plantation production. Such hegemonic relations are those in which 1) there is a strong political relationship between plantation companies and the state, at multiple scales, 2) the targeted land fits within state ideologies that characterize it as being empty, barren, unproductive, or linked with poverty and thus in need of replacement, 3) communities have weak or absent political linkages with the state and thus are unable to link their land claims to political power, and 4) communities have internal divisions that can be exploited to push through concession of community land,

particularly willingness of village leaders to accept bribes or favors from the community and in return make decisions on behalf of the village without consulting villagers.

Clearly these various relations combine in a number of different ways that either enhance such an alignment of socio-ecological forces of dispossession, or diminish them. Villages targeted by Quasa-Geruco that were unified in their resistance or had political connections with the government still faced an uphill battle due to the strong state support that Quasa-Geruco receives. Despite Phoulao's unified resistance and constant refusal to concede land, they eventually gave up a major portion of their land before being able to successfully refuse the concession of a second plot. The villages that had a kinship connection with the former vice president (now current president) of Laos were only able to have a small portion of the land they lost returned to them, and only paddy land, not any of the swidden fields and fallows lost. In contrast, Phailom village was able to refuse any loss of their land based upon their political connections with the district government and because Sun Paper was hesitant and lacked the political relationship to use district powers of coercion and force. Saphang village is the best example of how these various relations come together to enable resistance to dispossession. They were unified in their resistance to the project, they had a war-time political connection that enabled them to get the NA to investigate their case thus drawing attention to it despite the NA's lack of official support, they were seeking to protect paddy land and reserved land that they had a history of converting into paddy, and they were resisting against a company, Sun Paper,

that was unable to use district forces of repression to push through the project development.

What the cases also show is the variable and contingent nature of dispossession and how such variation is relationally governed. Both Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper required extensive plots of land for the development of their plantations, and as such areas of land were in use by rural communities they had to engage in some sort of dispossession. Despite the willingness of the state to dispossess for the purposes of foreign resource investment, in general, the specifics of how such dispossession occurs is much more complicated and politically contested, even within the authoritarian environment of Laos. Because dispossession is a political process produced by the state, in relation with capital and rural communities, it is inevitably one that can be contested and shaped in various ways. This is what I refer to here as processes that *govern* dispossession, the social-political forces that shape how dispossession versus resistance actually manifests on the ground.

I show in this paper that such forces of governing dispossession are productively seen as relational, meaning that they are less based upon abstract rules and institutions or other formal governing processes, and more so upon socio-political relations among state, corporate, and community actors, operating with relation to the biophysical environment. Thus, even when Lao laws are not applied to investment processes or are not enforced it does not mean that land concessions are not governed, but that they are governed according to other, relational logics. Such governing relations are highly uneven and thus

the development of plantations is highly geographically uneven. Understanding how such relations operate and both open and close opportunities for resistance to dispossession, tell an important part of the story concerning where and why plantations are developed, peasants are dispossessed of land and resources, and rural livelihoods and human-environment relationships are transformed.

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CHAPTER 3 – EMBEDDED SOVEREIGNTY AND THE UNEVEN PRODUCTION OF PLANTATION TERRITORIES IN SOUTHERN LAOS

Abstract: The emergence of contemporary global land grabbing – the coercive appropriation of land for resource extraction and commodity production – has prompted re-examination of the role that state territorial sovereignty plays in resource-based capital accumulation. While nature-society geographers show how the state mediates capital's access to biophysical resources via the use of extra-economic force to dispossess peasants from their customary lands, there is less attention to the contingent and produced nature of sovereignty by capital, the state, and rural claimants. I argue for a conception of embedded sovereignty, whereby embeddedness takes on a double meaning. First, sovereign control over resources is embedded in the social relationships between people and the environment at sites of extraction. Second, resource capitalists embed themselves within state structures in order to co-produce the sovereignty necessary to forcibly separate rural populations from their lands. Employing two cases of industrial tree plantation projects in southern Laos, I show how such embeddedness and resultant dispossession depends upon geopolitical histories and investor strategies for engaging with the multi-scalar state and rural communities of Laos.

Key words: Land grabbing, sovereignty, territory, resource extraction, dispossession, Laos

Introduction

Since the 2007-08 globalized food and financial crises, there has been a resurgence of land, water, and resource grabs by governments and transnational capitalists across the Global South, capitalizing on an era of high commodity prices (McMichael 2012). The Land Matrix project estimates that almost 48 million hectares (ha) of land deals (defined as purchases, leases, or concessions that are at least 200 ha in size) have been concluded since 2000.[15] These projects have prompted concern from development organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists, and academics concerning their impacts upon rural communities and environments (Cotula 2014, Daniel and Mittal 2009, GRAIN 2008, White *et al.* 2012). They have also led to fears that Third World states are ceding national sovereignty to foreign corporations and governments, especially considering that deals can be made for hundreds of thousands of hectares and periods of up to 99 years (Ferrando 2013, Rice, 2009). The former head of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Jacques Diouf, notably framed land grabbing as a form of neo-colonialism, in which poor states would produce food for rich ones at the expense of their own people (Borger 2008). Meanwhile, the sociologist Saskia Sassen (2013: 26) has spectacularly claimed that the global land grab is producing "massive structural holes in the tissue of national sovereign territory".

The issue of national sovereignty has driven debates concerning the rise of land and resource concessions in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter Lao PDR or

[15] www.landmatrix.org/en/. Accessed on 4 September 2016.

Laos), a hot spot for land-based investments in Southeast Asia. Investors have acquired 1.1 million ha for mining and agricultural and industrial tree plantations between 2000 and 2010, equivalent to five percent of the national territory (Schönweger *et al.* 2012). These projects have cleared forested areas and displaced subsistence farmers from their lands, leading to devastating ecological and social impacts (Baird 2010, Barney 2011, Kenney-Lazar 2012, NLMA *et al.* 2009). Observers often link these problems to a lack of state governance, regulation, or sovereignty. The World Bank (2010: 1) claims that "many land areas under concession are operated in a management vacuum" while Global Witness (2013: 13) writes that "The reality on the ground, however, is a chaotic and opaque 'free-for-all' due to lack of political will and weak rule of law, legal ambiguity and little clarity of responsibilities between varying levels of government administration".

While the land rush in Laos is often painted by the government, development organizations, and investors as occurring within a wild west type frontier (Barney 2009), I show in this paper that there are powerful governing logics at work whereby access to land is shaped by power relations among resource capital, elements of the state, and rural communities. Land is not conceded in a vacuum of sovereignty, but is produced through a thick governing context. I begin with the understanding that resource capital is often reliant upon, rather than impeded by state sovereignty to gain access to land and resources (Emel *et al.* 2011) and that land investments across the Global South commonly deal with state sovereignty or other local power actors and "coercion wielding

entities" (Levien, 2012: 940) to access land. In other words, land grabbing works in relation with rather than against or in the absence of state sovereignty.

More specifically, I argue for a conception of embedded sovereignty, whereby sovereignty is understood as a produced relationship among state, capital, and peasant actors vis-à-vis targeted lands and biophysical resources. Sovereignty is embedded in two ways. First, control and authority over resources is embedded within particular territories of social relationships between society and nature. While the state may claim sovereignty over rural spaces, reserved for resource capital, it must negotiate with local claims and control over resources – state power does not stand outside of its relationships with society. Second, resource capitalists must embed themselves within state structures in order to co-produce and mobilize sovereignty over resource spaces vis-à-vis rural claimants, providing the state with the political and financial support necessary to exert control over particular areas via dispossession of peasant lands. The embeddedness of resource capitalists within state structures and institutions results from variegated political-economic processes, including geopolitical histories, bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, and corporate strategies of engagement and integration with state structures and networks.

I support these arguments by examining cases of large-scale industrial tree plantations in Laos by companies with different backgrounds, histories, and strategies of engagement. The first is a state-owned Vietnamese rubber enterprise, the Quasa-Geruco Joint Stock Company (hereafter referred to as Quasa-Geruco), a subsidiary of the

Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG). The second is Shandong Sun Paper Industry Joint Stock Company (hereafter referred to as Sun Paper), the largest private paper and pulp company in China. I show how their differential engagements with the state, at multiple scales, has enormous implications for their ability to access land. The arguments of the paper are established in four sections. In the first, I outline the links among theories of territorial sovereignty and resource capital accumulation to argue that dispossession is shaped by embedded relationships of sovereignty among the state, capital, and the peasantry. In the second section, I explain the importance of political relationships between investors and the state in the Lao context, with a specific focus on the geopolitical underpinnings of Chinese and Vietnamese investments. In the third section, I describe each company's differing experiences of acquiring land in southern Laos, showing the various strategies employed by each, especially in relation to state agencies. I conclude the paper by analyzing how each company's capacity to acquire land is dependent upon the strategies and historical networks through which they are able to mobilize state sovereignty to separate peasants from their customarily held lands.

The empirical data employed in this paper comes from 20 months of primary field research in Laos. Research was conducted in Phin and Xepon districts of eastern Savannakhet province, southern Laos, where the vast majority of the companies' plantations are located (see Figure 4). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with government officials in the investment, environment, agriculture, and forestry sectors at all administrative levels and with representatives of the

companies; semi-structured focus groups were held with village-level authorities and households. A wide range of project documents were collected and analyzed, including concession contracts, project reports, and environmental and social impact assessments. Finally, insights were gained via long-term ethnographic participant observation with government officials, built upon my affiliation with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE). I conducted interviews in Lao – translation from Chinese and Vietnamese to Lao was used for interviews with the companies and from Brou language to Lao when interviewing indigenous communities.

Embedded Sovereignty: State, Capital, and Land

The rise of global land grabbing over the past decade has called significant attention to the role of the state as driver, facilitator, and host of land deals. The first wave of media reports and scholarship on land grabs that emerged after the 2007-08 food and financial crises showed that "finance-rich, resource poor" countries (Borras and Franco 2012), such as Arab, Gulf, and East Asian states, were a major driver of land investments, seeking to acquire land and produce food to export home via investments by state-owned enterprises, sovereign wealth funds, or private companies aligned with state objectives (McMichael 2013). Additionally, governments of targeted countries were willing to host foreign land investments to generate government revenue, increase domestic agricultural production, and create rural employment (Wolford *et al.* 2013). Thus scholars of global land grabbing have called for a more sophisticated understanding

of the complex and contradictory role of the state in relation to land grabbing, especially how the internal fragmentation of the state affects how state actors engage with external land investment (ibid.).

Political ecologists and resource geographers have long recognized the state as a dominant actor in processes of primitive accumulation (Marx 1976 [1867]) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), a "political process in which states – or other coercion wielding entities – use extra-economic force to help capitalists overcome barriers to accumulation" (Levien 2012: 940). However, they have only recently sought to theorize the relationship between the state and nature more directly (cf. Meehan and Molden 2015, Robbins 2008, Robertson 2015, Whitehead *et al.* 2007). This is a necessary avenue of research as the state is an "under-theorized political membrane in the ecological metabolism of capitalism and the value form" (Parenti 2015: 829) due to its territorial sovereignty that places it in between capitalist resource firms and the earth, where the utilities of non-human nature are found. Yet despite nature-society geographers' newfound interest in the state, there has been little formal and sustained engagement with political geographical scholarship of what the state is and how it operates (Bridge 2014, Robertson 2015).

In taking the state seriously, political ecology has much to benefit from engaging with the political geography literature on territorial sovereignty. Studying the state as a whole is a daunting task and thus concepts of sovereignty and territory are windows that political geographers can use to study state spatiality (Mountz 2013). Geographers,

among other social scientists, are highly critical of a conventional approach to sovereignty, viewed as unlimited and indivisible rule by a state over a territory and the people within it. Much of the problem is that sovereignty has historically been framed in its ideal, de jure form, rather than as de facto or *effective* sovereignty, which is what matters most (Agnew 2005). Here, I follow Agnew's (2005) definition of sovereignty as "the *legitimate* exercise of power (as authority)" (2005, p. 443, original emphasis), whereby legitimate means that authority is accepted by societal actors, domestically and transnationally. Such legitimacy is conferred in ways that reflect Gramsci's conception of state power, which has been described by Jessop (1997, p. 51) as "hegemony armored by coercion". In Gramsci's own words, "Coercion has […] to be ingeniously combined with persuasion and consent" (1971, p. 310).

Sovereignty always operates in relation to space and thus includes authority over space and the governing decisions that are made in such space. Political geographers, however, are critical of simplistic assumptions about the relationships between sovereignty and space, in particular the assumption that sovereignty is circumscribed by the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, known as the "territorial trap" (Agnew 1994). Instead, systems of rule do not necessarily need to be defined by geographical boundaries, such as in kinship or clan systems that are defined by membership within a group rather than residence within a territory (ibid.). Furthermore, political authority within the boundaries of a territorially circumscribed space is highly variegated, demonstrated in Aihwa Ong's (2006) work on graduated sovereignty. Sovereignty can

also be highly fragmented, in which there are a range of competing institutions exerting authority over the same space (Lund 2011). Thus, the state and territorial sovereignty should never be taken as given – monolithic, coherent, or temporally and spatially stable – but should be viewed as contested and unevenly developed (Sidaway 2003). Similarly, Glassman (1999: 673) shows how state sovereignty is internationalized, extending beyond its boundaries as "the state apparatus becomes increasingly oriented towards facilitating capital accumulation for the most internationalized investors, regardless of their nationality".

Such critiques, however, do not lead to an aspatial perspective, but rather a more complicated picture of the relationship between authority and space. For geographers, sovereignty concerns the authority, power, or control that a political group, typically a state, has in relationship to some sort of space, whether or not a bounded territory, and the people, goods, resources, and nature that are related to said space (Elden 2009). Thus, geographers are focused on *power and authority in relation to space,* power which is "never deterritorialized; it is always specific to particular places" (Smith 2005: 51). Agnew (2005) uses the concept of "sovereignty regimes" as a way to frame how there are variegated ways in which state authority and political territoriality are combined across the globe.

Building upon a critical understanding of the various ways in which authority and space are linked, the relationships between sovereignty and territory can be viewed as historically produced: "institutional control over land and political subjects does not

reflect or *represent* pre-existing sovereignty. It *produces* it" (Lund 2011: 889). For resource geographers, in particular, this means that the relationships between state sovereignty and resource extraction must be re-conceptualized. Emel *et al.* (2011) argue that territorial sovereignty is in many cases not produced in opposition to global resource capital but emerges historically in relationship to colonial resource extraction and global capitalism to provide the sovereignty necessary for attracting global flows of mining capital, such as in the form of conducive legal property regimes. Coronil (1997) shows how state authority in Venezuela was produced in relation to the exploitation of petroleum which gave the state the political capacity and financial resources to impose its control over a fragmented national territory and appear as the dominant authority within society.

I build upon these perspectives to argue for a conceptualization of embedded sovereignty, whereby sovereignty is not taken as a given, but is viewed as a form of power over space that is produced via embedded relationships with societal actors as well as land and nature. I conceptualize sovereignty as embedded in two ways. First, sovereignty over resource production is embedded in the socio-ecological relationships of particular places. Here, I build upon the conceptions of embeddedness from the economic geography literature on Global Production Networks (GPNs) (Bridge 2008, Coe *et al.* 2008, Henderson *et al.* 2002). GPN scholarship shows how global commodity chains are "deeply influenced by the concrete socio-political, institutional and cultural 'places' within which they are embedded, produced and reproduced" (Coe *et al.* 2008: 9). For

biophysical resources, in particular, they are always territorially embedded, in local socio-ecological systems and in the property systems and governance structures of the nation-state (Bridge 2008). As sovereignty is embedded with land and space, it is also embedded with the people that use such space – controlling space entails negotiation with them.

Second, the capacity for capitalists to produce and employ territorial sovereignty to access land in particular places is based upon the degree to which they embed themselves within local political structures, particularly the state and local land-using communities. Here, I use Evans' (1995) notion of embedded autonomy, in which states are most effective at facilitating economic development when they have close ties to non-government actors, particularly firms (embeddedness) but can act independently of such private interests (autonomy), preventing state capture. When embedded within state structures, plantation companies can take advantage of state powers of dispossession, but are also able to carve out spaces of autonomy to maneuver independently when necessary. Effective integration with the state enables resource capitalists to co-produce state-capital sovereignty over land and to extract and produce resource commodities.

Governing Sino-Vietnamese Resource Capital

The contemporary path of economic development in Laos is based upon resource commodity production that integrates international flows of capital with state territorial sovereignty. As the Lao PDR has opened up to international capital, particularly from the

economically larger neighboring countries of Thailand, China, and Vietnam, it has used authoritarian state power to secure access to land for foreign investors. Control over land, however, must be produced in relationship to the interests of its rural citizenry that have longstanding customary claims to such land. Thus, the challenge for international resource investors is to integrate with the state to produce state sovereignty and land control via the displacement of rural land users, freeing up land and space for their projects. Their capacity to do so is dependent upon the various modes through which investors engage, integrate, and embed themselves with the state.

Engaging with the state is important for working in a countryside that is full of varying forms of property relations and claims to land by rural resource users. Rural people of Laos have been using the lands and forests for generations and thus land investments inevitably impact them in one way or another (Baird 2010, Barney 2007, Kenney-Lazar 2012). More importantly, these relations to land have been fought for and historically produced through three decades of conflict during the Indochina Wars (1945-1975) and are enmeshed with the Lao state's claims to provide and manage land for the productive use of Lao people. Thus, access to land is historically constructed and governed by social relationships among the state and rural peoples in relationship to space and territory. Despite the way in which rural space is promoted to international investors, it is not awaiting capital, but must be "rendered investible" (Li 2014: 569) – work must be done to exclude land users.

Assumptions that international investors can take advantage of an open resource frontier, abetted by a lack of state sovereignty or a weakness and absence of governance, are applied in particular to Chinese and Vietnamese investors (EIA 2011a, Global Witness 2013, Luangaramsri 2012, Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011). China and Vietnam are two of the largest sources of foreign direct investment in Laos (Vientiane Times 2013). They are also two of the biggest trading partners and providers of development aid. Of the land granted to domestic and foreign investors in the form of state land leases and concessions, Chinese and Vietnamese investors have the largest share out of all foreign investors, comprising 11 and 7 percent of all projects, respectively, and 18 and 28 percent of the area (Schönweger *et al.* 2012).

China's actions, as a major economic donor and patron to the Lao government, have been viewed as a strategic effort to access Lao sovereignty. Lyttleton and Nyíri (2011) have referred to Chinese concessions, particularly for casino and entertainment center special economic zones (SEZs) on the Lao-Chinese border as a form of "soft extraterritoriality", whereby such zones are subjected to Chinese rather than Lao laws. Luangaramsri (2012) argues that in such cases, sovereignty has been commodified as sovereign rights are commercialized to attract foreign investment.

Vietnamese investors have been described as having captured the state, enabling them to flagrantly violate Lao laws without repercussions, violations which are even sanctioned by government officials (Global Witness 2013). The massive illegal trade of timber from Laos to Vietnam led by Vietnamese companies has similarly been

characterized as being completely controlled by the Vietnamese, who have corrupted Lao politicians, and prevented lower-level officials from enforcing the law due to fear of repercussions from their superiors (EIA 2011b). Summarizing these perspectives of the erosion of Lao sovereignty by the Chinese and Vietnamese, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) argues: "As a largely rural-dwelling country with a low population density, coupled with weak governance and high levels of corruption, Laos is preyed upon by its more economically advanced neighbours" (EIA 2011a: 5).

The capacity for Chinese and Vietnamese governments and investors to erode Lao sovereignty, however, is often exaggerated. Using the case of a Lao village targeted for rubber plantations, Dwyer (2011) has shown how the Lao government has strategically used Chinese investment projects to strengthen their own effective sovereignty over internal frontiers and mobile populations. Along similar lines, Lu and Schönweger (2016) have complicated the picture of Chinese investors as predatory land grabbers, and host states as passive victims or corrupt rent-seekers, by demonstrating the disconnect between land granted to investors on paper at the central level and land actually allocated in practice at the local level, a discrepancy which partly results from the fragmented nature of state land governance. Similarly, Schönweger and Messerli (2015) show that Vietnamese concessions for coffee plantations in the Bolaven plateau of southern Laos often fail to plant coffee on all of the land they have been allocated due to village resistance, allocation of unsuitable or contested land by district officials, and corporate financial constraints. Rather than meeting an open expanse of land for investment and a

willing government and population to facilitate their projects, Chinese and Vietnamese investors have experienced what Tsing (2005) refers to as “friction”, the “zones of awkward engagement” and difference that characterize the messy and conflicting social relations that make up globalized resource investments.

Commentators also claim that Vietnamese investors can capture national sovereignty and develop their projects with more ease than Chinese investors. Baird and Le Billon (2012) argue that land concessions to Vietnamese investors are a type of war reparation, compensation for Vietnam's sacrifices during the Indochina Wars that enabled the establishment of the Lao PDR regime. Similarly, Zurflueh (2013) argues that there is a “Vietnamese pattern” of rubber plantation investment, built upon the political friendship between Vietnam and Laos and comprising close relations among investors and the government at all administrative levels, whereby Vietnamese projects are facilitated more smoothly than others. These perceptions are not only held among foreign commentators, but also among Lao people, including government officials. Government officials who accompanied me during fieldwork expressed, off the record, that the Lao government is unable to manage Vietnamese companies.

The way in which geopolitical histories matter, however, is more complicated. Both Vietnam and China have developed close relations with the Lao government, but with differences that matter. Vietnam and Laos have maintained a tight political relationship since the Second Indochinese War when they were allied against rightist, royalist, and American forces. The communist *Pathet Lao* army owed their success to

support from the Northern Vietnamese army. Since coming to power the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has maintained a close relationship with the Vietnamese Communist Party and Vietnamese advisors played an active role in party administration and government functioning after the war (Stuart-Fox 2009). In 1977 a "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" was signed, providing the legal basis to station Vietnamese troops in Laos (Stuart-Fox 1997). An important part of the special relationship between Laos and Vietnam has been to provide generous resource concessions to Vietnamese investors, particularly state-owned and military-run enterprises, especially for logging (Baird and Shoemaker 2008: 308). This support has continued since 2000 in the granting of land concessions to Vietnamese investors for rubber plantations, mining, and hydropower projects, especially in the southern and eastern parts of Laos.

The relationship between China and Laos, on the other hand, has been much more difficult. Despite initial solidarity between the two communist countries after the LPRP came to power, relations deteriorated in 1979 when Vietnam invaded Cambodia to overthrow the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge and a subsequent Sino-Vietnamese conflict ensued, with Laos supporting Vietnam and denouncing the Chinese. China even supported insurgencies by anti-communist groups in Laos during the 1980s (High 2014). In 1987, however, normal relations between the two countries were restored and China began providing significant development aid to Laos in 1999 when it provided a large loan to help Laos get through the Asian financial crisis. Since then, China has provided significant aid to Laos in the form of infrastructure projects, cash grants, and low- or no-

interest loans. In return, Laos has increasingly approved large Chinese investment projects, particularly land concessions for hydropower, mining, and plantation projects (Stuart-Fox 2009).

These two histories of political and economic relationships of China and Vietnam with Laos have structured the context of their investments. Their engagements are characterized by differing goals and strategies. According to Stuart-Fox (2009), Vietnam has developed and cultivated its relationships with Laos primarily for political goals, such as protecting its long Western border. It has done so with a considerably smaller budget than China, achieved this mostly through maintaining a close relationship between the LPRP and Vietnamese Communist Party. The economic benefits that result are secondary to the political relationship. China, on the other hand, has sought to develop a political relationship with Laos that primarily supports its economic goals of increasing investment and trade while secondarily providing political benefits. As a result of this goal, and also because of the lack of a strong historical political relationship between the two countries, it has had to pursue this through economic aid. The benefit of this approach is that it has enabled China to gain significant land concessions, but the disadvantage is that they do not maintain the deep political connections that Vietnam has to ensure that Chinese projects receive political support at all governmental levels.

Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper's Uneven Access to Land

Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper's development of plantation territories have followed drastically different paths. Quasa-Geruco cleared and planted rubber trees all of the land granted to them six years after signing their contract; by early 2015 they were ready to tap latex on 300 ha of their plantations. Sun Paper, in comparison, had only cleared less than half of the land granted to them in the five years since their contract was signed in 2010, putting their plans to build a paper and pulp processing factory in limbo due to a lack of guaranteed raw material. In this section I show how these different experiences result, in large part, from the ways in which each company was or was not able to mobilize embedded state sovereignty for purposes of dispossession. Through geopolitical histories, state-to-state networks, and strategies of close engagement with state agencies and officials in key positions relative to plantation development, Quasa-Geruco was able to effectively employ state power to expropriate land from Lao peasant households and communities, repressing most forms of resistance. Sun Paper, on the other hand, failed to understand and engage with an embedded sovereignty, assuming that state control over land was a given and that their contract guaranteed access to land. As a result, their attempts to acquire land were often blocked by peasant resistance, which the district government was hesitant to repress.

Quasa-Geruco's "Sea of Rubber"

In a promotional speech to village leaders who congregated at the district government compound for a "training", the district governor described the planned development of Quasa-Geruco's plantations as a "sea of rubber" *(thale yangphala),* alluding to the large expanses of contiguous, uniform mono-cropped trees, the tops of which sway in the breeze like waves (see image in Figure 4 below). This unnatural sea is produced by way of extensive and coercive land expropriation. In 2006, Quasa-Geruco was granted a state land concession of 8,650 ha across Phin, Xepon, and Nong districts of eastern Savannakhet province, which led to the expropriation of land from more than 40 villages (see map in Figure 4 below). Quasa-Geruco, a subsidiary of the state-owned Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), was established as part of the VRG's efforts to expand its plantations into Cambodia and Laos, beginning 2005. Prior to the expansion, companies under the umbrella of the VRG had already planted 220,000 ha in Vietnam and the VRG sought to develop another 100,000 ha in Cambodia and Laos. The expansion was carried out by a number of other VRG subsidiaries, such as the Viet-Lao Rubber Company (VLRC), whose 10,000 ha concession contract in Champasak province was signed at the same time as Quasa-Geruco's. The political support and weight of the state-owned VRG was critical in facilitating the implementation of these projects, which resulted from a number of agreements and high-level meetings between VRG representatives and senior Lao government officials that began in 2004 (Obein 2007).

Figure 3: Quasa-Geruco's "sea of rubber" in Phin district, Savannakhet province
Source: Author's photograph.

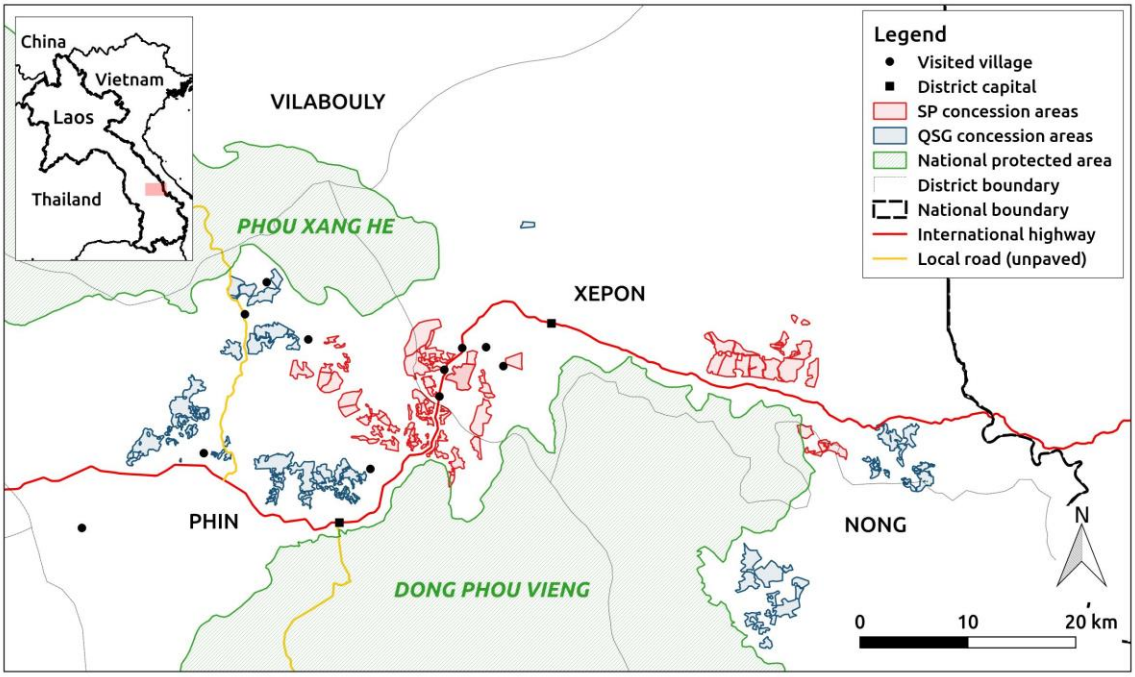

Figure 4: Map of Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper allocated concession areas
Source: PONRE land concession data, author's drawing.

Quasa-Geruco was established by a consortium of VRG subsidiaries specifically for the purposes for developing plantations, reflected in its portmanteau name: Quasa is a combination of **Qu**ang Tri province, across the border in Vietnam, opposite to **Sa**vannakhet province (Geruco stands for **Ge**neral **Ru**bber **Co**rporation). Quasa-Geruco rapidly cleared and planted all of the land they had been granted by 2012, and possibly more as district officials noted that they could not evaluate how much land their plantations actually covered. Officials were suspicious of the figures provided by Quasa-Geruco because they had cleared beyond the boundaries of the land allocated to them a number of times.

Quasa-Geruco established their plantations quickly in large part because of their flagrant abuse of the law, to which district officials were hesitant to hold them accountable. Quasa-Geruco's bulldozers cleared land up to the edges of paddy rice fields and streams, instead of leaving a 50-meter buffer as required by law, dumping soil and debris into fields and streams, damaging land and clogging waterways. The company admitted in an interview to illegally clearing 380 ha of production forest, a zone reserved by the government for timber harvesting, claiming they were unaware of its boundaries. Perhaps most frustratingly for district officials, the company cleared more land than was allocated to them. A district environment official lamented that

> they have agreements and notifications and the relevant offices from the provincial and district level came with them to inspect and survey the area, they have everything […] so why do they make mistakes by clearing swidden and paddy rice lands? […] When we're with them they do everything correctly but when we come back, as we're not with them all the time, at nighttime they start clearing […] they completely flatten the land.

The same official noted that his office wanted to fine Quasa-Geruco for clearing land outside of the border of their concession but felt that they were unable to because Vietnam and Laos are “like brothers”, further adding that “the friendship between Laos and Vietnam can be difficult”. A central level government official in Vientiane re-iterated this position claiming that “It's mostly the Vietnamese companies that have problems and don't follow the rules, regulations, and laws. Before, Vietnamese people were very good, but not anymore”. However, he placed responsibility for fining the companies at the local level: “For the most part, companies are not fined, this has to do with the village and district; it's in their area, they are the ones who find out about the problems and therefore it's up to them to report and fine them, it's their responsibility”.

While the district government sought to present Quasa-Geruco's activities as illegal transgressions, there is evidence showing that the district enabled them to occur. For example, the district often allowed Quasa-Geruco to clear land based upon a rough estimation of the land that would be allocated to them, drawn out on a topographic map, prior to conducting a detailed survey of the area. The land surveys were then conducted after the land had already been cleared and trees were in the ground – I witnessed provincial teams surveying and mapping out plantations that were established several years earlier. As a result, the latest provincial survey data only accounts for 6,665 ha, thus showing that 1,985 ha of plantations had yet to be mapped.

The district also played a critical role in coercing villagers to concede their land for the project and repressing any resistance. Residents of villages targeted for the Quasa-

Geruco project told a similar story – district officials initially sought consent from villagers to develop unused village land, but when villagers refused to concede land officials became increasingly aggressive, claiming that the villages had no choice but to agree to the project as it had been approved by higher levels of government and the land belonged to the state. Senior level district officials, including the governor, intimidated villagers by threatening to take them to the district for questioning and education, an ominous reminder of the re-education camps that members of the opposing regime were taken to after the *Pathet Lao* took power in 1975 (Stuart-Fox 1997), including one located in the nearby town of Xethamouak (Pholsena 2013). Leaders of one village aptly summarized the situation, “At first our village wasn't willing to give land to them, but they came to notify us that they're going to take it, they threatened us and took it […] The district said that whoever doesn't want to give land write their name down”. Some villagers who had resisted giving up their land had actually been taken to the district for questioning by the police and one villager was briefly jailed. Villagers' discussions of such repercussions showed the fear that state repression could generate.

Quasa-Geruco was capable of both employing state powers of exclusion to force the separation of peasants from their land while also opening up spaces for them to illegally clear land without political repercussions. They were able to achieve this by engaging intensively with the local government, facilitated by extensive bribery. For example, they planted 14 ha of rubber on the land of the former district governor, who was in office when the project began. They have also paid for the relatives of senior

district officials to study in Vietnam so that they can later work for the company's rubber processing factory. The company openly admitted in interviews that they paid MONRE officials to write their Environmental and Social Impact Assessment report. When I joined a team from MONRE on a research survey trip to do a post-facto evaluation of the project's social and environmental impacts they openly gave everyone envelopes stamped with the company's logo containing 200,000 kip ($25). They subsequently treated us to lunch, during which they talked up the positive impacts of their work. Such “gifts” are used to buy goodwill and future favors of government staff and offices in power.

Quasa-Geruco simultaneously developed close, personal relationships with government officials and always maintained a tight line of communication. The Quasa-Geruco office is located in an old government building and their staff live in the old cabinet office of the district, which during political events they decorate with the same colorful flags and congratulatory signs that adorn the district government compound. More importantly, though, Quasa-Geruco is in close contact with district officials – our main government counterpart was friends with a number of Quasa-Geruco staff. Whenever I sought to set up interviews with Quasa-Geruco they repeatedly called our district contact, suspiciously and aggressively questioning our motives, often trying to delay the interview or arrange to answer questions by email. District officials relayed that whenever Quasa-Geruco ran into land conflicts they would call their district contacts to address them. What Quasa-Geruco's engagement with the district shows, including both

the corruption and the close working and personal relationships, is that they understand the importance of the district for permanently divorcing peasants from their land.

Quasa-Geruco's actions show how they produce embedded sovereignty in relationship with the Lao government, especially at the district level, by creating a situation in which they are able to manipulate state powers when necessary and open up space to circumvent state regulations when they present obstacles. Quasa-Geruco used the district for purposes of intimidation, legitimacy, and repression to dispossess peasants of their land and address conflicts that arose as a result. Yet, once they had access to an area of land they would clear it at will, often beyond the mapped boundaries. District officials also noted that Quasa-Geruco paid off villagers when convenient to expand their plantation area or prevent conflicts.

Sun Paper's Land Problem

Sun Paper's plantation project significantly differed from that of Quasa-Geruco – their lack of experience developing plantations and engaging with the Lao government presented insurmountable challenges. Despite being the largest privately-owned paper and pulp company in China, they had no prior experience investing internationally or actually planting trees. The manager of another eucalyptus plantation company operating in the same area of southern Laos was appalled to see Sun Paper planting their trees down, rather than across the slopes of hills, inviting erosion; he said his boss would “kill him” if he were to make the same error. Tree planting, though, was part of Sun Paper's

ambitious international expansion to build a paper and pulp processing factor and a port across the border in Dong Ha, Vietnam for shipping processed goods to China. Although the Vietnamese government ultimately rejected the port project, Sun Paper continued to pursue its plantations and factory in Laos.

The scale of Sun Paper's project was progressively diminished over time. Initially, they planned to establish 100,000 ha of plantations to supply sufficient raw material for their factory, 30,000 of which would be in the form of estate plantations and another 70,000 as contract farming with smallholders. In 2008 they signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Lao government that would allow them to acquire up to 39,000 ha of land, but after the government conducted an initial survey of available land in Savannakhet they determined that only a small percentage of this area was actually available. Thus, the contract that they eventually signed in 2010 was for 7,324 ha. Yet by early 2015 they had only cleared and planted 3,228 ha of land, largely because a number of communities and farming households had refused to concede their community lands. Sun Paper representatives noted that by this time they should have already completed construction of their factory and be ready to process raw material, but instead the factory machinery lay in the district government compound, covered in overgrown grass. Expressing their frustration, Sun Paper exclaimed that the central government officials

> really know how to speak well, they said all of the land was high quality. We really thought so, it was a big leader who said this. But now we find all the land is in the hands of villagers! The government has divided it up for us, but there's nothing we can do (Juliet Lu, personal communication).

Central level government officials noted that it was a common problem for companies to be granted far more land in their contracts than was available on the ground.

Sun Paper repeatedly claimed in interviews that their biggest challenge was that "there isn't land, there isn't satisfactory area". In one telling example, the company spent $16,000 surveying land in Nong district, adjacent to the Vietnamese border, but ultimately were not able to use any of the land allocated to them. There were a number of explanations offered as to why, all of which point to the government's reluctance to hand over land to the company in the face of competing land uses. Company representatives claimed that it was because the district planned to build a new district government compound in that area. A provincial official who had surveyed land for Sun Paper in that area said that the company had failed to use the land immediately and thus villagers occupied the land. He also said that part of the land was re-allocated to a different plantation company. Other provincial officials relayed the rumor that the Vietnamese government lobbied the Lao government to prevent a Chinese company from acquiring land close to the Vietnamese border.

The claim that there is not enough land, made by Sun Paper and district officials alike, is politically loaded. For the government, it means that there is not enough land that can be easily claimed as state property without village resistance. District land is already in use in some form or another, whether by villagers for agricultural production or as conservation areas, and thus requires significant political force to separate people from their land and will likely create numerous land conflicts. For the company it means that

the government is not doing enough to fulfill their end of the contract. As the manager of another eucalyptus company put it, “There isn't a lack of land in Laos, there's actually an abundance of underused land. The issue is whether or not farmers want to work with companies and allow them to use that land”. The land that remains is thick with villagers' social claims and only state force can break these links between peasant and land. It is in this political sense that there is a lack of land in Xepon rather than a lack of ecologically suitable land.

The political nature of land availability is exhibited by the district's declining support for Sun Paper's project over time. At first, the district government put significant pressure on villagers to give up land, in some cases providing police and military escorts for the company's bulldozer operators to prevent protest and conflict in villages viewed as troublesome. This support, however, quickly dwindled once the immediacy of the project and the orders to secure land from upper levels of government wore off. Sun Paper continued to survey land with the district government, and even with village leaders, but when they began to clear land the villagers blocked their efforts. Sun Paper claimed that all 7,324 ha granted to them had been surveyed and mapped, but they had not been able to clear much of it due to counter-claims from peasants. As Sun Paper claimed, when they try follow the map to clear land “the villagers say it's their land and don't allow us to clear it, this is a difficulty we experience all the time”. Oftentimes villagers would begin using land that had been allocated to Sun Paper, thus making it difficult to kick them off

the land. While Xepon district officials attributed this to Sun Paper's slow development of the allocated areas, the district was reluctant to do much when such conflicts arose.

Eventually, Sun Paper's land problem became serious enough that they turned to alternative models. This even appeared to be encouraged by the government, as Xepon district officials explained that

> After the central level and provincial level authorized [the project], the company went to clear the land, but too slowly, allowing the people to produce in that area, making that area […] insufficient. As a result, the province created a policy that allowed them [Sun Paper] to search for land.

Sun Paper was allowed to find their own land, either as a lease of village or household land or through contract farming models. As a district official summarized,

> At first, it was that the district and province authorized land in zones, but now they look for land on their own in each village, whichever village has an empty area and wants to have a joint investment or wants to do two-plus-three or one-plus-four [types of contract farming].

Sun Paper began approaching villages on their own, hiring indigenous Brou people to culturally facilitate the deals, but their success was limited. Some villages were completely uninterested and turned Sun Paper away immediately. At the same time, the company has begun to engage in 'contract farming' with individual farmers, which they are currently piloting in at least one village. Different from most contract farming arrangements in Laos where both parties are involved in the production and sale of the crop, Sun Paper developed a leasing model, renting farmers' household plots of land and providing a cut of the revenue at harvest time.

In some ways, Sun Paper's failures were overdetermined. It was their first foreign investment project, first time planting trees, and they were operating in an area of the country with a heavy Vietnamese presence. Additionally, they began their project a few years later than Quasa-Geruco, at a time when less land was available and district officials were becoming savvier at managing land concession projects. Phin district officials noted that villages have gained experience in dealing with concession projects over time – not only do they understand the negative impacts, they have learned how to refuse to concede land. There is a great deal of evidence, however, to show that Sun Paper's misfortunes are greatly compounded by the ways in which they interacted with state structures to pursue land.

Many of the problems that Sun Paper experienced resulted from its misguided and minimal engagement with the district government. They often assumed that their contract with the central government guaranteed the cooperation of local level government officials. As another eucalyptus company manager framed it,

> The problem that companies like Sun Paper have faced is that they use a top-down concession model. They may be able to force the government to give them some land, but eventually the model is ineffective because of the strength of Lao farmers. The farmers are tired of concessions, the district is tired of them, so is the National Assembly, a lot of parts of the government are. While the district can force villages to give up land, this approach only works for a while […] their long-term security is at risk and there are many cases where villages cut down the trees or burn them.

He added that Sun Paper mostly pays off high level government officials, which is ineffective in Laos as political power is effectively decentralized, despite being formally centralized in government structures and decision-making power (Stuart-Fox, 1997).

Although provincial and district level officials are not in the position to refuse concession projects handed down by the central government, they control how such projects are implemented, including whether to use their powers of exclusion. While the district has to deal with the dirty work of dispossession, including the resulting conflicts and negative social and environmental change, they receive little financial benefit from the project, apart from a per diem paid when officials travel to the field. Thus, the way in which the companies engage with them becomes incredibly important. The inability to locate land for the company may reflect the district dragging their feet, using their own weapons of a weak institution.

Sun Paper's lack of engagement with the district is partly evident in their hesitancy to be involved with local-level corruption. District officials framed this as Sun Paper's lack of concern with the local government, that "they don't take care of us like Quasa [Quasa-Geruco] does", which in the Lao cultural context means that they are not providing the same personal benefits that Quasa-Geruco does, whether in the form of padded envelopes, cushy positions, or meals. The official noted that Sun Paper is only interested in government officials at the central level, not the lower levels. In a later discussion, the same official noted that Sun Paper's lack of "care" was also problematic for gaining the support of villagers. He complained that Sun Paper

> is stingy, they don't give anything to villagers or to district officials, beyond what is required by the regulations. They don't buy anything for the *nai ban* [village head] or other important village officials. For example, if the nai ban asks the company for a mobile phone to take pictures with they wouldn't buy it, even if it was only 100,000 kip [$12.5], but the Vietnamese would. When Quasa treats villagers or government officials to a meal, afterwards they give money to

> everyone [he makes the motion of someone handing out envelopes like a card dealer].

Sun Paper was frank in their recognition that “the people aren't supportive because they didn't receive any benefits”.

Sun Paper also operates at a distance from the district, which causes resentment among district officials. This distance is partly geographical – unlike Quasa-Geruco, their office is far off the main road, nine kilometers away from the district center, at the location of the planned factory site where they have constructed offices and dormitories for staff. More importantly, though, they seem reluctant to work with the district whatsoever in the development of their project. Rather than leading the charge in the search for land they rely upon and wait for the district to find land for them and make deals with villages. Additionally, Sun Paper often seems quite meek, quiet, apologetic, and cautious in the way they engage with the government. This was apparent in my own interactions with them – they were available to interview immediately, unlike Quasa-Geruco, and in the interview they were very melancholic and almost embarrassed about their inability to acquire land. With government officials present during the interview, they politely brought up the challenges they have had in finding land. Instead of making these complaints directly to the government, calling by phone like Quasa-Geruco, they wrote an official letter to MONRE at the central level. MONRE then relayed the complaint to the province who called district officials to a meeting to scold them for not securing land for Sun Paper as seriously as they had for other companies. Thus, even

when problems cropped up with the local government Sun Paper sought to address them from the top down.

Conclusion

In this paper I argue that the sovereignty necessary for dispossession and establishing plantation territories is produced via embedded relationships. Territorial sovereignty enables the separation of peasants from their land to free up space for industrial tree plantations, but state land and territorial sovereignty must be produced in relation to peasant claims and attachments to land. In Tania Li's words, land must be made "investible" (Li 2014). For resource capital, this means developing the capacity to mobilize state powers of dispossession when necessary, but also creating space to operate independently, and extra-legally with impunity. Investors develop such capacity by embedding themselves within the state at multiple scales, especially at localized sites of resource commodity production where the messiness of dispossession takes place.

Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper vastly differed in their ability to engage with the state in the production of embedded sovereignty, leading to dramatic differences in the development of their plantations and peasant resistance to them. Quasa-Geruco in many ways was able to capture state sovereignty over land, using district power to force communities to concede their land and to intimidate villagers that sought to resist, but also operating independently to clear land illegally without negative repercussions when they saw fit. As a result, they cleared and planted 8,650 ha of plantations within six years

of signing their contract. Sun Paper, on the other hand, maintained an awkward engagement with the state, unsure of the operation of political power in the Lao government, where to use and develop political capital, and how state sovereignty over land operates, particularly the need for it to be produced rather than available for the taking. They ran into numerous problems when acquiring and developing land, in particular resistance from Lao communities who purposefully used and occupied of lands in areas that had been mapped out for Sun Paper. Five years after signing their contract they had only cleared and planted 3,228 ha, a far cry from the estimated 100,000 ha they initially sought to run their factory at full capacity, the 39,000 ha their MOU allowed them to search for, and the 7,324 ha they were granted in their contract.

The differences in the production of embedded sovereignty between Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper are shaped by geographical and historical relations. The contemporary remnants of relations developed via geopolitical historical connections between Vietnam, China, and Laos play an important role in shaping the relations that companies can employ in the development of their projects. Caution should be made against assuming that the success of their project is determined by their country of origin as many Vietnamese investments have failed and Chinese projects have succeeded. Furthermore, the relationships that Vietnam and China have with Laos are not static and unconditional – Laos has defied Vietnamese interests by building dams on the mainstream Mekong river (Hirsch 2010) and has granted special economic zones for

casinos near the border with China that do operate like an extension of Chinese territory (Lyttleton and Nyíri, 2011).

Yet geopolitical relations cannot be ignored. Quasa-Geruco has significantly benefited from the high-level relationships set up by the state-owned VRG and also the political discourse, repeated by government officials, company representatives, and villagers alike, that their project is a manifestation of the Lao-Vietnamese friendship, building solidarity between the two countries. Sun Paper, in contrast, as a private Chinese company, does not have the same sorts of relationships to call upon or guide its project. Unlike Quasa-Geruco, they are also not familiar with the Lao governmental structure, which is structurally similar to the Vietnamese government. Finally, they are operating in an area of Laos that is culturally and politically dominated by Vietnam, an area crisscrossed by the historic Ho Chi Minh trail that Vietnamese troops used to transport goods and weapons during the Indochina Wars.

The ways in which Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper strategically engaged with the state were as important as geopolitical relations. Quasa-Geruco established close relations with all levels of government, especially the district, understanding the important role they play in acquiring land as well as securing control over it. They established these relations with open-ended and extensive corruption and close working and personal relations with government officials. They set up a cooperative relationship in which the development of the project was in the material and financial interest of both the company and government. Unlike Sun Paper, they understood that their concession contract,

survey maps, or even concession plot certificates do not guarantee access and control over land, but that such control had to be produced through coercion and repression. Once these relations were established, Quasa-Geruco frequently operated independently and without regard to legal limits on their project, assured that they would not be penalized because of the favors that the district owed them and the political cover that the Lao-Vietnamese friendship provided for them.

Sun Paper, in contrast, assumed that state land and sovereignty was a given, that the land they were awarded in their contract and survey maps was their property that they had the right to use when and how they pleased. They failed to realize that villagers held claims to such land. They also failed to realize how important it was to have the district on their side in these conflicts with villages to force the separation of peasants from their land and that their concession contract did not guarantee their control over land. While their support from the central government afforded them strong district level support at first, following orders passed down to them from above, district efforts to acquire land for them tapered off in the face of village resistance and the company's inability to develop their plantations immediately after land was allocated to them. This was compounded by the company's reluctance to “take care” of district officials and village leaders and the distance that they kept in communications with the district and villages.

While this paper focuses on how Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper's differential production of embedded state sovereignty has affected their ability to acquire land for their projects, this is largely important because of how it affects the capacity for rural

peasants to resist the dispossession of their agricultural and forest lands. There is a dialectic relationship between state-corporate powers of dispossession and those of peasant resistance. Both Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper face peasant resistance to the expropriation of their lands for the development of tree plantations, but such resistance has played out differentially for each company. Quasa-Geruco's ability to embed itself with state structures and produce corporate-state sovereignty has enabled it to coercively expropriate land and repress most forms of resistance. Sun Paper, on the other hand, has been unable to co-produce such sovereignty with the state and thus peasant resistance has been much more effective in limiting their plantation expansion. Inversely, peasant communities targeted by the Sun Paper plantations have greater opportunities to resist than those targeted by Quasa-Geruco. Thus, understanding the differential character of embedded sovereignties of dispossession for resource extraction and commodity production projects has enormous implications for the possibility of peasant resistance and autonomous community control over land.

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CHAPTER 4 – BEYOND THE EVERYDAY: STATE SPACES OF RESISTANCE TO INDUSTRIAL PLANTATION DEVELOPMENT IN LAOS

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Abstract: As large-scale land investments have transformed rural environments across the Global South, varying forms of resistance or political reactions "from below" have cropped up. In authoritarian countries like Laos, resistance appears absent at first glance, but is in actually occurring under the radar of transnational activist networks. In this paper, we examine how resistance can effectively protect access to rural lands in authoritarian contexts where it is heavily repressed. We argue that resistance here occurs with, rather than against the state – the site of hegemonic power – and often occurs in ways that diverge from a strict understanding of "rightful resistance". Additionally, authoritarian resource politics manifest spatially, the forms of which include: resisting the acquisition of spaces that are imbued with power, working within the scaler politics of the state based upon place-based political connections, and physically struggling at local sites of contestation. Such opportunities of resistance lead to uneven geographies of dispossession and socio-environmental change.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, resource governance, land grabbing, plantations, resistance, Laos

Introduction

Over the past decade, new forms of land and resource grabbing across the Global South have caught the interest of journalists, activists, and academics, prompting widespread condemnation of their devastating impacts upon rural livelihoods and ecosystems (Borras *et al.* 2011, De Schutter 2011, La Via Campesina 2012, Carrington 2014). In acquiring massive tracts of land, transnational capitalists and governments have built upon and even replicated earlier transnational rushes for land (Alden Wily 2012), dispossessing large numbers of peasants, forest dwellers, and pastoralists of the lands and resources that support their livelihoods. Often pursued without their consent, and drawing on a variety of coercive and violent tactics, the undemocratic nature of large-scale resource investments has been widely labeled a new global land grab (White *et al*. 2012, La Via Campesina 2013). Communities in targeted areas are often unable to negotiate or shape the terms and conditions of the interventions, with devastating socio-environmental results (Borras and Franco 2013, Hall *et al.* 2015).

When communities are not consulted and their consent is not sought, their voices are only heard by way of social resistance or mobilization. Academics have noted the increasing cases of resistance to land grabs occurring around the world by communities facing the threat of dispossession (Potter 2009, Martiniello 2015, Rocheleau 2015, Sampat 2015). Hall *et al.* (2015), however, have critiqued dominant assumptions that either frame peasant resistance as a rare exception to the rule or, in contrast, as a foregone conclusion. They argue that these representations miss the variegated political reactions "from below", which involve a range of acts of resistance, acquiescence, and incorporation – both adverse

and otherwise – in response to land-based investments. They note that resistance commonly includes conflicts among peasant groups, between those in favor of the project and those against, sometimes divided by class or potential to benefit from the project. In this vein, researchers have also examined why peasants *do not* resist (Moreda 2015) or why they react in other ways, such as participation and negotiation, that fall outside the traditionally understood scope of resistance (Gingembre 2015, Mamonova 2015).

In this paper, we investigate the politics of how resistance occurs in places where it appears to be absent, where it is hidden or invisible at first glance. While much of the scholarship that takes up this question uses James Scott's (1985) framework of everyday resistance – subversive action that is practiced under the radar of political hegemonic relations – we seek to move beyond this framing to conceptualize how resistance occurs not against or in avoidance of, but *with* hegemonic state power. Such resistance is direct, open, and can protect access to land, but is a far cry from broad-based social movements or the contentious politics of protest and demonstration that disrupt social order and are often pitted against the state. We are interested in understanding how resistance takes hold and operates in spaces where it is typically repressed and where the capacity for global activist networks to engage with local resistance efforts is limited. This type of resistance, that treads a middle ground between everyday acts and broad-based movements, can generate important victories behind the scenes for the most marginalized of political actors. Building upon the concept of "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006), where citizens demand promised but undelivered legal rights, we argue that in closed, repressed, or authoritarian political spaces, resistance occurs in close collaboration with rather than

against state power. Unlike rightful resistance, however, we depart from a narrow focus on legal rights and highlight how rights are meaningful when linked with political power.

Laos provides a useful case precisely because it does not land on the map of transnational activism, resistance, protest, and social movements around land grabbing. There appears to be little to no resistance occurring, due in part to an authoritarian state that tends to repress dissent (FORUM-ASIA and AEPF-ICO 2014), but there is an increasing awareness, especially among civil society organizations, that some form of resistance is occurring in the countryside in response to land expropriation (interviews with NGO staff members, February 2015). Such resistance is often hidden due to its localized nature, lack of media coverage, or absence of linkages with transnational advocacy. Thus, investigating such cases speaks to the question of how resistance is occurring in the very place where it is actively repressed and appears to be absent.

More specifically, we argue in this paper that resistance in authoritarian contexts like Laos manifests in relation to the ways in which power flows through particular sites, spaces, and places. Peasants resist with state power that is embedded in socio-spatial relations. We contribute to an understanding of such authoritarian state spaces of resistance by considering what such spaces are and how their powers are enacted. Peasants are capable of refusing the concession of rural spaces that are empowered by the state to be protected, particularly paddy rice fields and national parks. These are the spaces that tap into national ideologies of development, which prize paddy rice land and conservation areas as pillars of modern development in Laos (Vandergeest 2003, Rigg 2005). Wet-rice

paddy is viewed as a permanent and productive land use, in contrast to shifting cultivation in the uplands. Conservation, instead, is viewed as the best use of upland areas.

The power of such spaces alone, however, is not sufficient for them to be protected and must be enacted through different types of scaled political connections and action. One is working within the scalar politics of the state to overcome local obstacles and reach sympathetic government officials at higher levels. Villagers are often only able to engage in such scale jumping as a result of historical, place-based connections with high-level officials, particularly those forged during the Second Indochina War. Another way to enact such powerful spaces is to take action at the community scale, at sites of contested ownership, to make peasant claims to such land visible, for example by camping out in lands that have been reserved for conversion to paddy land. These various forms of effective resistance in Laos, however, are constrained to certain spaces and groups of people with the right connections, meaning that resistance is only unevenly available.

These arguments are supported throughout the paper as follows. In the second section we examine the literature on resistance, social movements, and political reactions "from below", particularly in relation to authoritarian political environments. In the third section we review how literature on Laos, especially on the politics of land concessions, has treated the agency of peasant farming communities, showing the inadequate understanding of how and why resistance materializes and effectively protects access to land. The fourth section of the paper utilizes two cases of resistance to show how politics from below operates in Laos, and examine how and why it is effective. The paper concludes

with an analysis of what these cases mean for understanding resistance in Laos and other similarly authoritarian political contexts.

This paper is based upon data collected under different research projects by the first and second author, but with similar questions in mind and methodological approaches employed. The data collected largely comes from semi-structured interviews with government officials at multiple administrative levels, company representatives, village leaders, and farming households, as well as informal meetings with key informants. Researchers also collected relevant investment project documents and maps. The two land investments examined include 1) Shandong Sun Paper Joint Industry's eucalyptus and acacia plantations in southern Laos (first author) and 2) Lao Thai Hua Rubber's plantations in central Laos (second author). The third author, who has extensive experience researching the uneven geography of land deals in Laos and the role that the Lao state plays in governing them, assisted with analysis and writing.

State Spaces of Resistance

Social movements are often highlighted as important vehicles for contesting and moving beyond the development agendas of states, global development agencies, and corporations (Escobar 1995, 2008). They can advance the claims of marginalized resource users to lands, forests, and fisheries that they have been denied access to as a result of unequal power relationships that manifest in land grabs and large-scale extractive investments (Perreault 2006, Himley 2013), but also historical land inequality and exclusion (Wolford 2010) and various forms of rapid land use changes (Rocheleau and

Ross 1995). Not only do such movements sustain access of small-scale and marginalized peasants, forest dwellers, and pastoralists to land and resources, they also expand spaces of democratic resource governance to include the voices of everyday resource users and civil society (Bebbington *et al.* 2008). Furthermore, social movements and resistance can be seen as an important social force in shaping the uneven geographies of development related to resource extraction projects (ibid.). For example, reports of land grabbing in developing countries are often exaggerated because they do not take into account how projects are highly constrained by local actors that refuse to concede customarily accessed lands (Pedersen 2016).

Social movements and resistance are often viewed as a type of "contentious politics" – when political reaction, resistance, or movement create interactions with systems of power that are episodic, public, and collective, and involve claims directed towards or mediated by governments (McAdam *et al.* 2001). They are also often broad-based and well-organized, building upon the interests and claims of a large group of people around common, generalized issues, rather than specific concerns of particular communities (Tilly 2004, della Porta and Tarrow 2005). This rich body of work on social movements and direct resistance, while expanding understandings of how movements improve resource access and governance processes, has largely focused on contexts and cases in which popular movements can and do occur in open, direct, and confrontational ways. In this paper we address how resistance emerges and operates in situations "where there is no movement" (Malseed 2008), or where social movements, and forms of open and confrontational protest, are highly repressed. In authoritarian regimes, where resources

and rural communities' territories are governed in a top-down anti-democratic fashion, involving little participation by small-scale resource users and civil society, how can resistance emerge and make successful claims to land and resources? And in such contexts, how and why are some resistance efforts more effective than others?

These questions have been principally answered along the lines of James Scott's (1985) theorization of everyday forms of peasant resistance. Scott's groundbreaking work demonstrated how oppressed subaltern groups do not consent to their dominance, even if they appear to do so publicly, and that engage in a critique of power via a "hidden transcript" that occurs offstage (Scott 1990), or what Last (1970) refers to as "dissent from within". In everyday resistance, subaltern groups engage in "normal" acts that go against the grains of power, producing small and incremental gains that also act as forms of subversion, but which do not challenge hegemonic power structures. Peasants engage in a variety of different strategies, ranging from foot dragging to evasive protest, which can act as precursors to major riots or rebellions (Adas 1986, Walker 2008). As theorized by Gramsci (1971), when subaltern groups resist they are struggling against specific material and political conditions, grappled with in the moment, through local and place-based experiences of domination. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, subaltern groups engage in resistance under the radar of the power players in their social world because they view it as one of their few options for action.

In this paper, however, we seek to move beyond the framework of everyday resistance to understand forms of resistance that do make overt claims of access to land in the face of threats of expropriation, but without contesting hegemonic modes of

development and state power. We seek to understand forms of resistance that tread a middle ground between everyday resistance and broad-based social movement. In literature on resistance in contemporary Southeast Asia it has been recognized that there is much more to resistance than a dichotomy between covert, everyday resistance on one side and open, confrontational collective action, or contentious politics on the other (Caouette and Turner 2009). There are diverse forms of resistance that fall somewhere along the spectrum between these extremes. Furthermore, these different forms of resistance can occur simultaneously and interact or catalyze one another. Scott (1990) and Amoore (2005) have argued that everyday resistance can set the stage for the development of more overt struggles such as by developing the necessary counter-hegemonic consciousness.

"Rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006) is one conceptual approach that examines middle-ground forms of resistance, based upon observations from rural China, where villagers resist within the boundaries of their legal rights. O'Brien and Li define rightful resistance as "a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy disloyal political and economic elites; it is a kind of partially sanctioned protest that uses influential allies and recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to a professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure" (2006: 2-3). Rightful resistance is "rightful" in two ways: it is based upon certain ideals or discourse

of what is "right" and also upon protections or rights found in the laws or implied in ideologies promoted by policy makers. Most simply, the authors argue that rightful resistance can emerge wherever there is a gap between rights promised and rights delivered.

We build upon the theory of rightful resistance by paying closer attention to the role of politics and power, particularly how they are mediated by and work through space and place. While rightful resistance usefully captures how efforts at resistance in authoritarian political contexts makes appeals to the state, we find that it does not sufficiently address rights in relationship to *power* and *politics*. First, the rights that peasants are calling upon to legitimate their resistance are politically based. Instead of being conceptualized as broad-based rights for Lao citizens, they are more aptly viewed as forms of discursive and political power as they fit into state-led conceptualizations of what is "right" – albeit for the particular group in question, if not necessarily for everyone. Second, not all peasants are able to exploit the political system to their advantage, they almost always have some sort of political connection that enables them to engage with the state, and thus resistance is only unevenly available to those who already are in a position of political power. This perspective shows how examples of "rightful resistance" may be more based upon dimensions of politics and power relations among resisters, authorities, and other key actors, mediated by law, institutions, discourse, and ideology, rather than rights on their own.

Additionally, the power relations and politics that shape how resistance can take hold in authoritarian contexts are spatially mediated. Indeed social resistance, more

broadly, is spatial in nature (Martin and Miller 2003). Social movements are always imbued with spatial relations (Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto 2008) as they are launched from socially significant places, move through space in symbolic and strategic ways, and contest the use of and access to territory, such as agrarian movements that seek equal access to spaces of agricultural production (Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008). Routledge (1993) uses the term "terrains of resistance" to refer to places where struggle is actively articulated by the oppressed, a site of contestation among differing beliefs, values and goals that are place-specific, and a place where the dialectic between domination and resistance plays out. They are the places where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic relations, forces, and powers interact. Staeheli (1994) emphasizes how spaces of resistance are often those where dominant power relations are the weakest or most ambiguous, where the nature of such spaces can be redefined or reconstructed, reflecting the consensus among human geographers that space is socially constructed. Areas targeted for concessions and cash crop production in Laos are such terrains or spaces of resistance, places in which there are conflicting values and politics over how land should be used, where localized village land uses are valued by dominant ideologies, or where the legal or governing context prevents the development of plantations.

Resisting in an authoritarian context requires a number of spatial strategies, one of which is to negotiate the scaled dynamics of state power. Scale, which can be defined as "the temporary fixing of the territorial scope of particular modalities of power" (Newstead, Reid and Sparke 2003:486), is well-argued by geographers to be socially constructed and contested by various actors, including the state, capital, labor, social and environmental

movements, and consumers (Marston 2000, McCarthy 2005). Resource geographers have also argued that struggles over natural resource development are necessarily struggles over scale – despite that resources are locally fixed in certain cites, struggles concern the scale of ownership and of distribution of benefits and costs of extraction (Huber and Emel 2009). Scale has also been understood as an important dimension of the political opportunity structure available for political agents and social groups to resist (Staeheli 1994). The ability for social actors to navigate or jump across scales enables them to achieve their goals more effectively (Smith 1993, Staeheli 1994), as McCarthy (2005) has shown with environmental organizations in North America that contest environmentally harmful aspects of free trade agreements by targeting political power at different scales simultaneously. Much of the geographical focus has been on how forces of globalization have changed the scales at which different forms of political action take place, particularly the changing role of the nation state (Steinberg 1994, Brenner 1997). In authoritarian contexts, however, political power is highly concentrated in the state, but operates at different state scales, and thus political actors must learn how to navigate and exploit these scales. In particular, they find ways to jump and move between different scales of action within state structures in order to get around obstacles to their demands to protect access to land. Following Marston (2000) and McCarthy (2005), it is important to broaden the construction of scale to new arenas and actors, in this case marginalized peasants who must work within, not against or outside, of scales constructed by authoritarian states.

The Hidden Politics of Lao Resistance

Since the early 2000s, the government of Laos has leased more than one million hectares (ha) of state land – equivalent to five percent of the national territory – to domestic and foreign investors for a wide range of resource investment projects: mining, hydropower, and agricultural and forestry plantations (Schönweger *et al.* 2012). The social and environmental implications of these projects have been well documented over the past decade, demonstrating how they dispossess people of their customary lands and resources, pollute surrounding environments, and provide little economic opportunity in the form of wage labor (Obein 2007, NLMA *et al.* 2009, Baird 2010, Barney 2011, Dwyer 2011, Kenney-Lazar 2012, Suhardiman *et al.* 2015). Despite the massive transfer of lands from peasants to resource capitalists, there *appears* to be little to no resistance from peasants to such processes, and certainly no movement or broad-based social mobilization, unlike the types of more direct and open protests and reactions to land grabs that have been seen in other countries targeted for land investments (Hall *et al.* 2015). However, resistance to land concessions is occurring in Laos, although in ways that are invisible or hidden at first glance, and in certain cases can be effective at protecting peasant access to land.

State land concessions emerged out of government policies to transition the country's centralized, state-socialist economy towards a more outwardly oriented, market-based model. After a decade of failed state socialist policies – such as agricultural collectivization – and dwindling aid from the Soviet Union, the government of the Lao PDR initiated a number of reforms in the mid-1980s that introduced market elements into

the economy, such as opening to foreign investment with the passage of the first law on foreign direct investment (FDI) in 1988. Foreign investors were first allowed to access land through the lease or concession of state land, as authorized in the 1992 Prime Ministerial Decree on land. Few land concessions were granted before the early 2000s, but concessions proliferated shortly after due to high resource commodity prices in the 2000s and the development of the government's Turning Land into Capital (TLIC) policy, which endorsed projects that generate revenues and profits from developing and extracting the value of land (Dwyer 2007).

While the economic growth that followed the Lao PDR's economic reforms lent greater popular legitimacy to the state, rapid economic expansion has been largely based upon resource extraction, which can produce as much poverty as it erases through dispossession and degradation of lands and resources at sites of resource extraction. Frustrations with land expropriation have also begun to take on an increasingly public dimension as people vent their grievances through the few outlets available. Land expropriation featured centrally in the National Assembly's (NA) telephone hotline open during legislative sessions (VT 2012), and in the popular call-in radio show, Talk of the News *(Wao Khao)*, which dealt with such controversial issues (and was cancelled as a result in 2012) (Smith 2012b).

Aside from increasingly public outpouring of discontent, however, there has been little social action to protest the loss of lands. This is largely due to the culture of fear concerning the ramifications towards oneself, family, and community if involved in any activities that can be perceived as anti-government. Incidents of villagers being sent to

jail for speaking out against land concessions as well as threats of being sent to jail have powerful disciplinary effects. Threats of jail time for villagers refusing concessions have been noted in a number of other cases of land concessions throughout the country, such as for community members who refused to leave their paddy rice lands to make way for a Vietnamese golf course on the outskirts of the national capital, Vientiane (ATO 2010) or for another group of villagers in Vientiane who refused low compensation for land to be developed by the mayor's son and daughter-in-law (RFA 2015). Actual jail time has occurred for others, such as a group of villagers who spent nine days in jail because some of them refused to concede land for a road expansion project near the Nam Theun 2 dam in Khammouane province, central Laos due to the poor compensation offered (RFA 2012b) and seven villagers in Xekong province, southern Laos who went to the district government office demanding greater compensation for their land that was expropriated for a Vietnamese rubber company (RFA 2012a).

There have, however, been a number of cases of resistance throughout the country that have not led to arrests and detention, despite threats occurring, and actually have led to some sort of positive gain for the communities involved in such actions – in some rare cases leading to the return of confiscated land, but more commonly leading to the provision of compensation or other benefits. One well-known case concerns land that was acquired from a village on the Bolaven plateau in Paksong district, Champasak province, Laos for a coffee plantation by the Singaporean multinational agribusiness, Olam International (Smith 2012a). With support from NGOs working on the issue and a spotlight in the international media, the villagers brought their case to the NA as a public

grievance, setting in motion a process of mediation that ultimately lead to the return of 250 ha to the village out of the 800 ha that had been expropriated (interview with NGO staff, February 2015).

Most cases, though, are lower profile because they do not lead to protracted conflict or generate media attention. NGOs and Lao Non-Profit Associations working on rural land and forestry rights have noted an increase in the number of cases of resistance to attempts to expropriate their land, partly resulting from the organizations' engagement programs but also because villagers are increasingly aware of the impacts of land concession projects and are learning how to contest or negotiate with them (interviews with NGO and NPA staff, March and June 2015). This has also been reflected in Vientiane Times opinion pieces commenting on the increase in land disputes (Vaenkeo 2012) and in interviews by the first author with central-level government officials who note that resistance to concession projects is cropping up in ways that were never seen before (interview with MoNRE official, December 2014).

The key question is how and why some forms of resistance are effective at leading to the restitution of land or increased financial benefits, why other types lead to arrest, and why some communities hesitate to resist whatsoever. Karen McCallister (2015) shows how one effective strategy is for villagers to combine everyday *and* rightful resistance – the former stalls the development of the project, giving villagers time to pursue the latter by lodging claims with the local government. She shows how a Khmu village in northern Laos used these strategies to limit the expansion of a large Chinese rubber plantation onto their lands by making appeals to the government, claiming that the

village had followed all government directives while the company had violated its contract.

Ian Baird (see Baird and Le Billon 2012, Baird 2014) has pointed to the importance of political memories of wartime affiliations as a source of political capital and legitimacy that affects the dynamics of negotiations between government officials and villagers over land concessions. Political memories of involvement in the revolutionary struggle against the Lao Royalists and the Americans that led to the establishment of the Lao PDR is a tool that villagers can use to resist land concessions, as has occurred in villages where a revolutionary hero was born or spent a significant amount of time. Similarly, Dwyer (2014) has shown how the geopolitical histories of war in the uplands of Laos shapes the conditions under which villages are resettled and targeted by industrial tree plantation schemes, whereby more advantageous arrangements are provided for those who supported the current regime.

In this paper, we build upon these contributions to develop an understanding of how resistance to land investments takes shapes and actually becomes effective at resisting access to land within an authoritarian context. What unites these various cases of resistance is that they occur with rather than against the power relations that are available to work with, particularly those of the state. These manifest and are employed by rural people in various ways, whether it is an appeal to state ideologies of development, the law and rights, or historical connections that empower otherwise powerless people within the contemporary regime.

Furthermore, we show how resisting with, rather than against state power is spatially embedded and mediated. Certain spaces are sites of state power, such the birthplaces of revolutionary heroes or sites of land use viewed by the state as legitimate. Furthermore, effective resistance occurs in such sites of power when communities show them to be their own or work within their own community territories to undermine the expansion of plantations. Finally, the scales and spaces within which resistance occurs are limited to sites of state power, at the local level and at other scales of government, whether provincial, or in some cases national.

Resisting Plantation Expansion: Two Cases

As rural Lao citizens increasingly resist, contest, and negotiate with land concession plantations that threaten to dispossess them of their agricultural and forest lands, it is important to study detailed cases of how such resistance actually occurs, especially how it overcomes obstacles of intimidation and repression. Towards that end, in this section we review two cases that exhibit the nature of contemporary rural resistance to plantation concessions in Laos. In the first case, a village in southern Laos's Savannakhet province struggled against the clearance of their lands for the establishment of a eucalyptus and acacia tree plantation by a Chinese paper and pulp company, cutting the plantation size in half. In the second, a village in central Laos's Vientiane province was able to successfully facilitate the cancellation of a large-scale concession by a Thai rubber company, a large chunk of which overlapped with village farming lands and a

national protected area, using their military connections to contest the legality of the project.

Sun Paper and Overdetermined Resistance

Saphang village is a case study of how resistance can be effective in Laos when a multiplicity of strategies is employed, a form of overdetermined resistance. Each strategy exploits some dimension of power that a community has in an otherwise powerless situation. Located in eastern Savannakhet province, southern Laos, Saphang is a low-lying, rice-farming village whose ethnic Brou villagers employ a mix of sedentary, paddy and rotational, swidden cultivation across a landscape of dry dipterocarp forest. Importantly, though, lowland, wet-rice paddy land makes up a significant portion of village land and the village has a history of converting dry dipterocarp forest areas into paddy land, expanding the area of agricultural production in the village.

In 2012, the district government allocated 423 ha of village land to Shandong Sun Paper Industry Joint Stock Company (hereafter referred to as Sun Paper), China's largest private paper and pulp company that had begun to internationalize with its first greenfield foreign investment in Laos. They were acquiring land to establish eucalyptus and acacia tree plantations to provide the raw material for a planned paper and pulp factory in the neighboring district. Yet when they began clearing land and planting trees, they quickly met resistance from Saphang villagers who physically prevented their lands from being cleared. Sun Paper eventually curtailed their efforts after planting trees on approximately half of the land that they were allocated, slightly more than 200 ha. Saphang's successful,

albeit partial, protection of village agricultural and forest lands can be attributed to a convergence of strategies they used to access and employ state power to their advantage.

Sun Paper began clearing land for their plantation in Saphang despite villagers knowing nothing about the project. The establishment of their plantations was full of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Company representatives believed that villagers had agreed to the establishment of the plantation, as proven by their participation in the survey of land for the plantation. Villagers, for their part, claimed they were unaware of the purpose of such surveys, which were not explained to them by district officials. They joined the survey and pointed out which lands belonged to villagers as current or future, reserved land. Not long after Sun Paper began clearing land for the project, villagers were alarmed and told the company employees to stop. The conflict led district officials and the company to meet with the village, explaining to them that any land that was not under use or reserved, which the government referred to as “empty” land, was state land and would be included in the project. When village leaders expressed their disagreement, “The district responded, 'That’s fine if you disagree, but this land is part of a state target already, it's going to be taken already. Whatever happens, so be it, villagers disagree but I'm still going to take it'” (village committee focus group interview, March 2014).

Villagers were intimidated and felt that they had little choice but to give up their land, but as they continued to discuss the case there was enough collective frustration that they decided to find other ways to contest the project. First, they made official complaints to the district and provincial governments, but after getting shuffled back and forth between provincial and district levels they eventually decided to take their complaint to the NA. All

of the villagers chipped in to collect four million kip ($500) for representatives of the village to make the trip on their own. They had no idea what they were doing – they did not even know where to find the NA building in Vientiane and they did not follow the correct procedures for submitting their complaint. The NA did eventually visit the village to inspect the conflict, but largely because they had appealed to a close friend working in the Savannakhet branch, a "comrade" from the war. This shows how political connections to state power are an important part of even getting claims recognized.

Villagers killed a cow so that NA officials could eat well during their trip to the village, but the NA team was not particularly helpful. They said that villagers should fence off any paddy land that had not yet been cleared, but that they had to start farming that land immediately or turn any land they would want to keep into paddy. Other than that, they only suggested that the villagers could earn money and develop the village by working with the company as wage laborers. The villagers were at a loss for what to say, they only hoped that the NA might provide some support through back channels once returning to Vientiane.

Once it had become clear that pursuing their goals through official means produced few results, villagers took matters into their own hands by finding various ways to demonstrate their ownership of land to keep it from being cleared by bulldozers. They began posting signs on land that they had reserved for future use, but the company ignored the signs and kept clearing the land (Chinese employees may not have been able to read the Lao-language signs). So they started protesting directly to the employees driving the bulldozers – although villagers were quick to point out that they were not acting violently

– but the Chinese employees chose to ignore them. The conflict came to a head when one of the villagers placed his hand tractor in front of a bulldozer to protect his paddy land and the bulldozer operator hit the tractor. The importance of the direct action taken by villagers is well captured by individual household experiences. A village police officer – an official government post that is the lowest administrative level of the security ministry – protected his land with the threat of violence: "We've said everything to the company, so much that I can't remember anymore. We protected the land, we said that if you [the company] do that [clear our land] we will shoot you, so they marked off our land where I told them, otherwise they would have cleared everything, I really carried my gun to show them" (interview, October 2014). At the time of the research the company had stopped clearing land, although the villagers were uncertain whether it was only a temporary halt.

Ultimately it was unclear whether one particular action led the company to stop clearing land, and it was likely a combination of all the events that scared Sun Paper off or convinced the government to find other plots of land for them. The NA may have worked some levers behind the scene, but district government informants claimed that the NA officially supported the company and did not prevent them from clearing additional land. Saphang was effective because they were highly organized, collectively disagreed with the development of the project, and pursued multiple avenues of resistance. They first pursued official means of lodging their grievance and only employed direct action to protect their lands from clearance when it was clear that their bureaucratic strategies had been ineffective. Their cause was aided by the social legitimacy of protecting lands that they used for productive agriculture, or had plans to use for agriculture in the future (reserved

land), especially as it was lowland, paddy rice land which the Lao government regards with high priority and is protected legally, unlike swidden lands. NA members even sanctioned the village's efforts to fence off and protect such lands. Finally, their military background was of use, in particular because it linked them with a number of different government officials that they had served with, including someone in the NA. The role of village police offers who were also war veterans was particularly powerful, especially as the institution of village police is meant to protect the village, in this case from a government sponsored threat. A combination of all these factors likely made expanding the plantation in the village area more trouble than it was worth and provided at least a temporary protection of community lands.

Resisting Thai Rubber: Spaces of Conservation and Military Connections

The case study of Nadee village illustrates how farmers and village authorities resisted land dispossession by the Lao Thai Hua Rubber Company (LTR) and the Army Academy (Suhardiman *et al.* 2015). Nadee village is located off Route 13, the main national highway that leads to northern Laos and China, about a one-hour drive from the capital of Laos, Vientiane. Much of their farmland is located 20 km from the village residential area, in the foothills of the mountains that border a newly established national protected area.

In 2006, the district government suddenly halted the implementation of a land zoning program, intended to formally allocate, map out, and register zones of village and household agricultural, forest, and residential lands. This instruction followed an earlier

decision made by the Army Academy, a unit under the Provincial Army Authority (PAA) to expand an army training ground to 11,000 ha which would overlap with village farming land. In line with this expansion, the Army Academy ordered Nadee village authorities to freeze the ongoing land registration process and exempt land tax payment for affected farmers. No resistance occurred at that time as it was not yet clear how much and what types of land farmers would lose – they were fine with halting the land registration process, which they viewed as a tool for collecting land taxes rather than as a means of land protection. In the same year, the government also established a national protected area nearby, adding to the national system of protected areas originally established in 1993. The national park boundaries covered most of the remaining forest land within the village boundaries as well as some agricultural lands, but villagers continued to practice swidden agriculture within the park boundaries.

Although farmers' land was included in the expansion of the army training ground and in the new national park, they did not effectively lose access to land as they could still use such lands in practice. Farmers only lost access when LTR claimed their land as part of its 3,000-ha rubber plantation in 2009, which was included within the expanded area of the Army Academy's training ground. Almost all farmers in Nadee village lost some or all of their land without any compensation. While the company initially provided farmers with wage labor options, most farmers refused to work for a company that had taken their farmland. Disgruntled over the land loss, farmers and village authorities raised their concerns to district and provincial government officials. Some farmers also directly confronted company staff during the land clearing process, by blocking paths for the

company's vehicle from entering the targeted farmland areas. Other farmers sought to protect their land by planting their livestock grazing areas with rubber trees and paying "fees" to the Army Academy that would enable them to retain their land use rights.

In 2010, the villagers' resistance took a more strategic turn when they started to contest the actual land boundaries stated in the land concession agreement. Nadee farmers were convinced that the Army Academy had taken more land than the official 11,000 ha and had encroached on Nadee and other villages' farmland and also the national protected area. Relying on their political affiliation from the war, some farmers from Nadee contacted their old "comrades" in the PAA, which advised them to take the matter to the National Park Council. Although the PAA recognized that what the Army Academy had done was wrong, they felt that it would be a safer political move to refer the matter to higher authorities. Responding to the reported land dispute, and based on farmers' complaints that the land concession agreement had encroached farmers' farmland and the adjacent national park, the PAA urged the Council to measure the land, which showed that the land actually used lay outside the boundary of the Army Academy's training ground and fell within the national park boundary. As a result, the Council suspended the partnership contract between the Army Academy and LTR, leading the company to lose access to 3,000 ha for its rubber plantation, 800 ha of which were returned to the village.

The case of Nadee village reveals how resistance take various forms, ranging from direct confrontations with the company during land clearing, to highly political negotiations involving the PAA and the MND. While farmers undertook different local means to protect their individual farmland, some farmers also used the government's policy

on national parks as an entry point to break the alliance between company and the Army Academy and halt land expropriation. The combination of everyday resistance (open confrontation, covert resistance) with rightful resistance (referring to government's policy on national park) not only halted the speed of land acquisition also resulted in the cancellation of the company's land concession contract.

Conclusion

The two cases of resistance to plantation concessions described above highlight the important links to power that drive the potential for effective resistance and protected access to land in authoritarian Laos. In both cases, villagers based their resistance strategies upon socially and legally recognized rights, but such resistance differed in key ways from that of "rightful resistance". The rights that villagers called upon enabled them to resist, not in a legalistic sense, but because they act as a form of power, one of many that they can and must use in their situation. Furthermore, rights are only effective when combined with other forms of political power such as historical connections with state agents. Resistance was able to occur and protect access to land because it was imbued with power and politics in the authoritarian context of Lao resource governance.

It can also be seen in both cases how power to resist was in part based upon spaces of state power and legitimacy. For Nadee village, they were able to exploit the ways in which the company and the Army Academy had established their plantation in spaces where it was prohibited – in the NPA, beyond the boundaries of the Army Academy's training ground, and on farmers' lands – creating spaces of illegality that

villagers could exploit. Saphang villagers produced a discourse around a different space of power: low-lying land that was under paddy rice production or would be converted to paddy land in the near future. They also framed the project as antagonistic to the will of villagers as they had not officially consented to it (although the government and company were convinced that they had). Both spaces draw their power from national level discourses concerning land use priorities: the importance of conservation in protected areas, the importance of productive, modern agriculture in the form of paddy rice, and the need to develop projects following the law as Laos seeks to become a "rule of law" state.

Such constructions are not sufficient on their own to enable effective resistance. They require political connections in order to be "enacted", otherwise their power lies dormant. In particular, they need to be scaled up – or enacted through scale jumping – via connections that link the contested places to higher scales of power, leaping over contestation and blockage from local government. Such connections are often historic, place-based links. In the Lao case they are war-time or revolutionary connections that link regular villagers to high-level officials who fought as equals during the war. In the case of Nadee, such revolutionary, war-time connections were critically important, enabling villagers to bypass the Army Academy to reach the provincial and then national level, bringing the illegalities that occurred to light and leading to the cancellation of the project. For Saphang, their military connections enabled them to gain the attention of the NA, which was important because their claims were being ignored by the district government. Although it did not lead to a resolution of the case in their favor, it may have indirectly enabled them to cut the size of the plantation in half by creating a contested and

conflicted case for a company that was already embroiled in a number of other cases of communities resisting their lands.

Third, both cases of resistance included various forms of occupation at the sites of plantation investment. This was particularly important for Saphang, whose villagers occupied their fields, and placed tractors in the way of bulldozers to defend their lands. This was the last straw that drove the company and the district to find land elsewhere. Nadee also used such strategies, especially at the beginning to signal their discontent, by blocking the company's access to this targeted land. They also planted their own rubber on lands that they sought to prevent from being cleared to show their ownership. Resistance occurring at sites of plantation development is powerful because they are also sites of village use and ownership. Villagers can use their bodies, crops, and agricultural machinery to show who the land belongs to.

Due to the high bar set for effective resistance in authoritarian Laos, it remains highly constrained, hidden, and uneven. If village resistance must occur within spaces of state power, then resistance is only available to a small subset of Lao villages. The land use of many villages is not that of paddy land or national protected forests, but is that of swidden agroforestry, which is framed within government discourses and policies as empty, unproductive, and environmentally destructive, and therefore ripe for conversion to industrial tree plantations. If village resistance must be enacted through political connections, then this further limits the resistance that can occur. While it may be easy for many villagers to lay some sort of claim to their involvement in the war and revolution, it may not result in a connection to a well-placed government official who is

able to help them out with their case. Finally, not all land uses are easily contested at sites of investment, especially mobile and temporary land uses like swidden agroforestry, that do not stay in one place like paddy land, in which one spot that will be used for many years can be protected. Oftentimes, swidden fallow areas are targeted for investment because they are not visibly under production and therefore not easily guarded against conversion.

Nonetheless, the increasing number of cases of resistance occurring throughout Laos shows hope for a transformation of rural resource politics in the authoritarian country in which peasants have a greater control invoice over how their land is used. This paper shows that, despite heavy-handed government repression, resistance still can flourish and take hold in the most unlikely of places, especially as peasants come to understand the negative impacts of such projects and what is at stake for the future of their rural livelihoods and access to land and natural resources. Furthermore, the actions taken by communities with greater access to power may set examples for other less powerful groups as to what can be done. Rural people throughout Laos are coming to understand the power that they can exert as rural land users and citizens over their territories, as they realize that any rights that they have two land and space are not given but must be taken.

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CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has examined the processes by which regional resource capitalists access land for the development of industrial tree plantations in the authoritarian political context of Laos. Access to land is constructed vis-à-vis state processes of land allocation and rural communities' claims to land and resources. In particular, I addressed the question of how effective resistance to dispossession manifests in a context in which political protest and dissent is swiftly repressed and how such resistance shapes the geographies of tree plantation development. There are three key arguments that I have developed in response to these overarching research questions. The first is that access to land by foreign resource capital is produced by the state, in relation to local claims of land, and thus is governed via a variety of processes, especially relations among state, capital, and community members in relationship to land and nature. The second is that resistance in such a context treads a middle ground between everyday resistance and broad-based social movement, operating *with* rather than *against* hegemonic state power, calling upon various forms of spatially mediated political power to enact their claims to land. The third is that the forms of resistance to dispossession that manifest in Laos are relatively rare and not equally accessible, thus they lead to uneven plantation development, environmental transformation, and livelihood change.

These arguments are demonstrated in the three articles of the dissertation. In the first article (chapter 2), *Governing Dispossession: Relational Land Grabbing in Laos*, I establish a framework for understanding how the political contingencies of dispossession are governed. While there is an apparent absence or failure of governance in regards to

plantation investments in Laos, this is based upon an assumption that governance is a set standard of procedures, rules, and institutions guiding plantation development. Instead, I examine governance relationally, meaning a process driven by socio-political relations among state, corporate, and community actors that shapes the socio-ecological outcomes of land-based investments. Using this framework, I paint a broad picture of four types of relations that shape how dispossession, or resistance to it, is governed. The first is capital-state relations: plantation companies that have weak political relations with the state, especially at the district level, experience challenges mobilizing state power to dispossess peasants of their land and are shaken by community resistance more easily. The second is political ecological relations: villages with land uses viewed as legitimate by the state are more easily able to protect such lands. The third is state-community relations: communities that have close political connections, from the war or through ethnic and kinship links, are able to make their claims to land more effectively heard. The fourth is internal community relations: communities that make decisions democratically are able to resist land dispossession more effectively than those in which the village leadership makes decisions on their own, opening such decisions up to corruption.

In the second article, *Embedded Sovereignty and the Uneven Production of Plantation Territories in Southern Laos*, I examine the relationship between capital and the state more closely, investigating how differential political relations shape the dynamics by which investors access land for projects, and the implications this holds for resistance. I develop the framework of embedded sovereignty to discuss how 1) sovereignty is embedded within local socio-ecological relationships and claims to land

and 2) capital is able to produce sovereignty with the state by becoming embedded in the state. With this framework, I show how the two plantation companies studied, Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper, had vastly different experiences acquiring land for their projects because of their different degrees of political embeddedness. Quasa-Geruco developed close political ties with the district government, through intense diplomatic engagement and corruption, which enabled them to mobilize state powers of expropriation and repression of resistance – they were also able to operate outside the law with impunity when necessary. Sun Paper, in contrast, failed to develop close political relations with the district, ultimately leading the district government to limit the political force they threw behind Sun Paper's operations. This drove Sun Paper to find land independently, creating a number of challenges for them considering their lack of authority to coerce villagers into accepting their project.

In the third article, co-written with colleagues working in Laos, we address the process of resistance in Laos more directly, making a case for how effective resistance occurs in an authoritarian context. We demonstrate how resistance can navigate between everyday forms and broad-based social mobilization, building upon the literature on "rightful resistance", or resistance that works with the state to demand rights that were promised but undelivered by the state. We contribute to this framework by arguing that it is insufficient to talk about rights in the absence of politics and power, and further that there needs to be a discussion of how resistance occurring with the state is spatially mediated. Using two case studies, we argue that villagers are able to resist effectively in protection of spaces that are viewed as legitimate within national ideologies of

development, particularly lowland paddy rice and national parks. Such spaces, on their own, are insufficient for protection and claims to protect them must be enacted. One way of doing so is by using political connections, such as those established during the Second Indochina War, in order to jump scales, over obstinate local interests to catch the attention of higher-level authorities that can intervene. Another way is by making local claims to land more visible through occupation of lands that are targeted for plantation development. Considering that these dimensions of resistance, especially contestation over legitimate land uses and political connections, are not available to many peasant communities, the resistance that can occur effectively in Laos is limited and highly uneven.

Contributions to the Discipline

My work contributes to geography by creating links across political ecology, critical resource geography, political geography, and development geography, by theorizing the governance and resistance to industrial tree plantations in authoritarian Laos. Through long-term fieldwork and theoretical reflection, there are four main contributions to the discipline: immersed and contested political ethnography, neoliberalizing authoritarian resource governance, resistance in authoritarian political contexts, and geographies of dispossession and change.

Immersed and Contested Political Ethnography

Critical human geographers have long emphasized the importance of being directly and intimately involved in research, rejecting the positivist view that scientists can be neutral observers of reality. Donna Haraway's (1988) work on "situated knowledges" has been particularly influential in emphasizing that all knowledge comes from somewhere, is developed through a partial perspective, and that there is much value in combining multiple situated knowledges for scientific understanding. We emphasize the importance of having and recognizing one's own political perspective (Rose 1997).

I contribute to this body of literature in geography by advocating for the importance of immersed and contested political ethnography. Taking a political perspective to one's work can lead researchers to spend much of their time with the people and communities that they politically support, avoiding those that they might disagree with, known as oppositional research (Thiem and Robertson 2015). I contribute to this by not only advocating for conducting research on such oppositional groups, but immersing oneself in uncomfortable political situations with them. This also includes becoming immersed in situations in which there are groups and actors from conflicting political positions interacting with one another, a type of political ethnography (Schatz 2009). While it is challenging to engage in such situations without openly critiquing those you disagree with or siding with one group over another, it can be incredibly illuminating as to the types of politics that are operating in a particular political space. Experiencing what it feels like to be in the midst of such politics teaches the researcher much more than they would learn from only interviewing people about their experiences.

Neoliberalizing Authoritarian Resource Governance

A major concern of political ecology has been the ways in which socio-ecological configurations are governed within neoliberal political-economic contexts (McCarthy and Prudham 2004, Heynen *et al.* 2007). This literature developed out of political-economic contexts where the neoliberal economic revolution primarily manifested, particularly North Atlantic economies of the US and UK, and have then been applied to a number of other contexts across the Global North and South. While it may be relevant to a number of such contexts where major neoliberal reforms have been made that put the market at the center of economic growth, service delivery, and environmental conservation, among other facets of society, it is also often applied awkwardly to contexts where neoliberalism is only a part of the economic picture. In many countries of East and Southeast Asia, in particular, neoliberalism is the exception rather than the rule (Ong 2006). Many countries in the region maintain mixed economies where the state plays a major role in shaping economic development, a legacy of the developmental state that drove the East Asian "miracle" and was copied by a number of Southeast Asian states, and the heavy role of the state in a number of post-socialist countries, like China, Vietnam, and Laos.

Considering the mixed economies of post-socialist countries (Watts 1998) like Laos, it is more appropriate to think through the ways in which the economies are neoliberalizing, rather than neoliberal, and how neoliberal forms interact with the current political structures in place, creating hybrid political-economic configurations. To this end, this dissertation contributes to a conceptualization of neoliberalizing authoritarianism, whereby the state plays a heavy hand in managing certain aspects of the

economy and repressing political expression of its citizenry and civil society, for the purposes of generating rapid economic growth. In particular, I focus on contributions to an understanding of neoliberalizing authoritarian resource governance, the ways in which such hybrid political forms govern the extraction and production of resource commodities.

For thinking through the ways in which neoliberalism and authoritarian states combine into hybrid configurations, I turn to and contribute to the literature that seeks to bridge and link political ecology with political geography (e.g. Le Billon 2001, Robbins 2008). While political ecologists focus on how nature is politicized, and why that matters, they often focus squarely on neoliberal capitalism rather than political structures and governance processes, particularly the state. This, however, is a primary focus of political geography and thus there is much to be learned from the work that political geographers have done on the state, sovereignty, and territoriality. Likewise, political geography would benefit from theorizing the ways in which political structures and processes are embedded within the biophysical material world of political ecology.

In this dissertation I have sought to further cement the links between political geography and political ecology in two ways. The first is by showing the importance of examining the political geography literature on sovereignty for political ecology. In order to understand local dimensions of access, property, and control vis-à-vis nature it is important to understand the role of the state, in connection with other actors, in maintaining sovereign control over such areas. The second is by thinking through relational environmental governance in an authoritarian context. Similar to sovereignty,

governance concerns the political processes by which access to land and resources is politically mediated. While political ecology has embraced the lens of environmental governance, the framework needs further development to conceptualize the political processes and politics that are an inherently important part of governance. If governance concerns multiple actors, including the state and civil society, then these actors need to be accounted for politically, importing insights from political geography.

Resistance in Authoritarian Political Contexts

Geographers, like many other social scientists, have done much research and theorizing on resistance, social mobilization, and social movements (e.g. Routledge 1993, Martin and Miller 2003, Perreault 2006, Bebbington *et al.* 2008, Wolford 2010). Much of this work has either focused on informal, everyday forms of resistance under the radar, or broad-based social movements. This dissertation contributes to such literature by examining forms of resistance that are occurring in authoritarian political contexts and in between these two extreme forms of political reaction. As covered in all three of the articles, but especially articles 1 and 3, these forms of resistance occur *with* rather than *against* the prevailing hegemonic political configuration, particularly state power. Thus, this research breaks out of one-dimensional assumptions of the state-peasant relationship and opens up this relationship and the state to view the ways in which peasants are repressed and intimidated by the state, but can also use their links and connections with the state to turn state power to their advantage, even if in relatively minor ways. I also

contribute to the literature on resistance in geography by thinking through how resistance manifests spatially and is mediated by space in an authoritarian context.

Geographies of Dispossession and Change

A final way in which this dissertation contributes to the discipline is by theorizing and empirically examining the geographies of dispossession and related socio-environmental change. While geographers have written much about the political-economic drivers and impacts of dispossession based upon the work of David Harvey (2003), there has been less investigation into why dispossession manifests in spatially uneven ways and what can explain these uneven spatial patterns. In particular, there is a lack of examination of the politics and governance of dispossession, which affects how it occurs in practice, leading to spatially variegated socio-environmental transformations. Similarly, geographers have written much about the ways in which capitalist accumulation leads to the uneven production of nature and space (Smith 1984), but there has been less investigation into the specific political and governing processes that shape these dynamics of uneven development in particular places (Bebbington 2004 is a notable exception), which I address in this dissertation.

In doing so, I contribute to the field of development geography by thinking through the processes that lead to uneven geographies of development. Bebbington (2004) has usefully framed an analysis of uneven geographies of development as one that combines immanent, "little d" development with deliberative, "Big D" Development. I contribute to this approach of investigation by examining the role of resistance and

resource politics in shaping uneven geographies of plantation development and associated environmental transformation as well as livelihood change. While there are numerous factors that shape the geographies of how plantations develop, the role of political actors (state, corporate, and community) and how they interact and relate to one another is an important part of the story that I demonstrate throughout all three chapters.

Future Research Directions

My future research agenda will build upon themes and topics that have emerged during my doctoral studies and dissertation research. These include: a comparison of authoritarian resource governance in Laos and Burma, financialized land investments across the Global South, and the politics of peri-urban land dispossession in Laos. All three of these projects are related to themes of the political economy and politics of land investment and dispossession.

Comparative Authoritarian Resource Governance in Laos and Myanmar

The project that most closely resembles my dissertation research is a comparative analysis of resource governance regimes and resistance in Laos and Myanmar (Burma). Interest in this work emerged out of discussions with political ecologists working in Myanmar and my involvement in a project by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) to study the governance of rubber production in Laos and Myanmar, through which I have gained a basic level of familiarity with the resource investment context in Myanmar and begun to develop a network of contacts. The focus of this work

is to compare how resource governance occurs across two contexts that are authoritarian, but in different ways and moving along very different paths of political transformation. Unlike Laos, Myanmar has embarked upon a path of political reform and democratization, culminating in the replacement of the military junta with a nominally civilian government in 2010 and the first military-recognized democratic election in 2015, putting Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, into power. As a result, civil society and political expression in response to land dispossession has flourished across the country over the past half-decade, while still facing repression from the authoritarian elements of the political system that remain in place (Zerrouk and Neef 2013). Thus, this is a politically rich moment for comparing and analyzing the emergence of similar, but different resource governance regimes in each country and how effective resistance to land dispossession can occur in both.

Financialized Land Investments Across the Global South

Since the contemporary global land rush began in 2008, a number of scholars have noted the prominent role that financial organizations, such as hedge funds, pension funds, and sovereign wealth funds, have played in acquiring land across the world, in the Global South and North (Fairbairn 2014, Ouma 2016). I have followed these developments on the side during my dissertation research and have also developed a manuscript for journal submission on the role of pension funds and retirement financial services firms like TIAA-CREF in land grab processes (Kenney-Lazar and Emel in preparation). I plan to continue studying this phenomenon by analyzing investment

documents, media reports, and conducting interviews with fund managers. I also aim to visit sites of financialized land investment in sites across the Global North and South, such as in Brazil and the mid-western United States.

The Politics of Peri-Urban Land Dispossession in Laos

A final theme that I plan to pursue in my future research is the politics of dispossession in peri-urban areas of Laos, particularly in the national capital, Vientiane. The Lao Government's Turning Land into Capital (TLIC) policy is not only applied in rural areas but also in urban areas, to facilitate the development of land markets but also to concede land to investors for the development of real estate projects and special economic zones. In a number of other cases the government has conceded land to investors that Lao people were living on and using, particularly more informal settlements on the edges of wetland areas. I have worked with government researchers on these issues and we have submitted a manuscript for publication on the politics of developing a ring road on the edge of the city as part of the TLIC policy (Pathammavong *et al.* in review). My primary interest in this project is to compare the politics of peri-urban and rural dispossession. Despite the strategic advantages of resisting dispossession in urban areas (titled land, greater visibility of expropriation), dispossession continues to take place.

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