The Clash of Connectedness: Infrastructures, Prosperity, and Border Life Volatility in Mekong Towns

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Abstract

In the Mekong borderlands of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, the proliferation of infrastructures, particularly influenced by China's logistical power, might project an aura of stability, security, and forthcoming prosperity. However, this research indicates that these infrastructures have introduced volatility and disruptions for many of the inhabitants of this frontier.

Structured into five chapters, this thesis details how borderland infrastructures, including rivers, land, roads, highways, river ports, cross-border bridges, hydropower dams, and Special Economic Zones, have spurred boom and bust cycles in the area. These infrastructures have ignited political and socio-economic volatility, as well as triggered significant environmental fluctuations that transcend human boundaries. The narrative transitions from historic roads echoing Cold War tensions to contemporary complexities such as land speculation, alternative trade routes, and environmental activism. I present the “infrastructure of prosperity” concept to examine the intertwined relationships between infrastructure, wealth culture, and moral values.

Conducted during both ordinary times and pandemic periods, the fieldwork reveals that rather than outright avoiding volatility, many actively engage with it, charting a course towards a preferred future. This thesis aims to spotlight the connectedness, an assemblage of relationships among diverse groups. Some of these groups either form social networks that serve as parallel, alternative infrastructures to the pre-existing ones or modify incoming ones to align with their moral purpose. Responses to these transformations vary, ranging from navigating uncertainty, negotiating and speculating, to retrofitting infrastructure or even adopting a stance of waiting.

In conclusion, infrastructure acts as a platform where power dynamics manifest, histories resurface, and often, hardships and inequalities are illuminated. This research underscores the significance of recognising the “seamful” moments, the crucial transitional pauses or gaps inherent to the Thai Mekong border towns, urging a deeper look beyond the surface to grasp the intricacies of an ostensibly interconnected world.

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Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
GTSEZ	Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
STS	Science and Technology Studies

Introduction

Figure 1 Photograph of Alleged Naga Retrieved from Mekong River by American Soldiers in Laos, October 22, 2019

As the ferry chugged along the mighty Mekong River, the smell of burning oil filled the air. The loud noise of the engine echoed off the water, adding to the bustle of river traffic on the border between Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. An array of vessels, such as cargo ships, bulk carriers, ferries, tourist ships, and local long-tail boats, moved constantly along the river in front of me. As the ship pulled away from the Chiang Saen dock, I fastened my oversized lifejacket and took in the scene from the front of the open-air Mekong cruise, surrounded by a mixed group of Chinese and Western tourists.

Behind the helmsman's seat, a photograph of over 20 American soldiers holding a massive, shimmering silver ribbon creature caught my eye. It was a picture I had seen countless times before in many places throughout Thailand, including on my grandmother's Buddha altar table. When I was a child, people claimed it was "the photo of Naga," a Buddhist mythical serpent said to have been

retrieved from the Mekong River by American soldiers in Laos. But I later learned that it was actually a giant oarfish found by a group of American soldiers on their early morning jog near San Diego beach in 1996 (Carstens, 1997).

Several Thai boat operators offer a river cruise service at the river trijunction of the Myanmar-Laos-Thailand Border, taking tourists to see the Myanmar and Laos banks. The tour lasts about an hour, with a ride along the Mekong River and a stop at the Don Sao Market on the Laos side of the border. Our ship was slowly approaching the trijunction, a famous viewpoint where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos meet. On the Thai riverbank, a giant statue of a golden Buddha faced the Mekong River. On the right, a yellow tower crane moved on a construction pier with many container ships in the background. In front of me, the Myanmar border was visible, with only a few buildings set against a backdrop of dense bushes.

As the ship approached the iconic convergence point where the local Ruak River joined the international Mekong River, a Thai male tour guide began to immerse us in the well-known Golden Triangle, with its history of heroin production, illicit drugs, and opium trading. As the ship made its way through the Mekong River, the loud engine noise serving as a backdrop, a female tour guide, proficient in both Chinese and English, then took over, using vivid imagery to bring the scene on the Myanmar and Laos riverbanks to life for the guests. When the vessel slowly approached a small riverine island, the guide pointed out the "no-man’s land," where gold had once been used to barter for opium at the midpoint of the Mekong River. She also introduced the guests to two popular destinations for gambling enthusiasts: the Thai casino “Win Win” located on the Myanmar border and the "Chinese Kings Romans Casino" on the Laos border.

Stretching across parts of Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand, the Golden Triangle has historically been a nexus for opium cultivation since the 16th century; the prominence of heroin trade emerged post-World War II, leaving an indelible mark on the region's politics. In addition, this area has long been the place where multiple ethnicities and diverse cultures have encountered, assimilated,

and clashed with each other. Notably, since 1990s, the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland has undergone a significant transformation, as it has become a site of intensive investment and infrastructure upgrades. Much of this development has been driven by Chinese capital sources, both from the state and private sectors. The influx of Chinese capital has had a profound impact on the economies, society, and environments of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland communities. The changes that have already occurred, as well as those that have yet to happen, have had various consequences and their effects are likely to be felt for many years to come.

Furthermore, the rise in river traffic can be visibly attributed to new cargo river ports, improved waterways, and a surge in tourism. The emergence of casino towns like Kings Romans has also gradually transformed the image of this once rural and chaotic border area of Myanmar-Laos-Thailand. The ideology of modernisation and continuous progress has characterised these border towns, paralleling the regionalisation and globalisation of the region. However, this seemingly non-stop growth stumbled to a halt on January 29, 2020, when rumours of a pandemic in China began to spread. The Kings Romans Casino, located in the Chinese Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, quickly took action, locking down its premises and blocking any passengers or tourists from entering its territory. As a privately operated special economic zone (SEZ), the decision could be made immediately. In contrast, the Thai and Lao international cross-border bridge stayed open for an additional month amid rumours and confusion about the pandemic before eventually closing.

During the first week after the Chinese Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone closure, the normally bustling Thai border piers in Chiang Saen were completely empty. Restaurants and supermarkets across from the immigration checkpoint were closed, and only a few taxis were parking. It was no longer possible to cross the border by boat at this location. I saw two Thai men trying to talk to Chinese customers who needed to cross the border into Laos. They offered to take them to Chiang Khong town, where the international Thai-Laos bridge was still open.

An owner of a bird's-nest shop told me that the Chiang Saen border had been closed for several days. Given the recent incident, coupled with rumours of a new airport being built at the Laos border, she was seriously thinking about closing her shop, due to potential drop in Chinese customers. This week, many Chinese who work in the Kings Romans casino were unable to return due to the border closure and had to sleep in local hotels at the Thai border.

No one could have imagined that the pandemic situation would escalate, as we all witnessed from 2020 to 2022. The bustling Mekong River quickly became silent. Like many others, I witnessed this severe disruption without knowing what the future would hold, when the border would reopen and how lives would carry on. Would we all survive this crisis? I left the town without realising that it would take a lot of effort to return. Spanning the pre-pandemic and pandemic period, from 2019 to 2020, my fieldwork provides insights into the interplay of human, non-human, and material elements that have driven the transformation of infrastructure in this border area.

Standing at the forefront of volatility, this thesis spotlights the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong border towns in northern Thailand, affected by China’s infrastructure development in the Mekong region. A common theme that particularly captures my interest is the coexistence of volatility and the enticing promise of prosperity that these changes herald. Infrastructure developments in the borderlands often offer bright economic prospects and future opportunities, which in turn give rise to various forms of speculation. However, this yet-to-materialise prosperity also brings uncertainty, prompting individuals to seek their own ways of coping.

Therefore, this thesis focuses on the following question: in what ways does the borderland infrastructure, particularly in the context of Chinese infrastructure development, generate volatility for people in these Thai border towns? How do individuals respond to the resulting volatility? What role do cultural values play in shaping residents' perceptions and actions in response to the future-oriented aspects of infrastructure transformation?

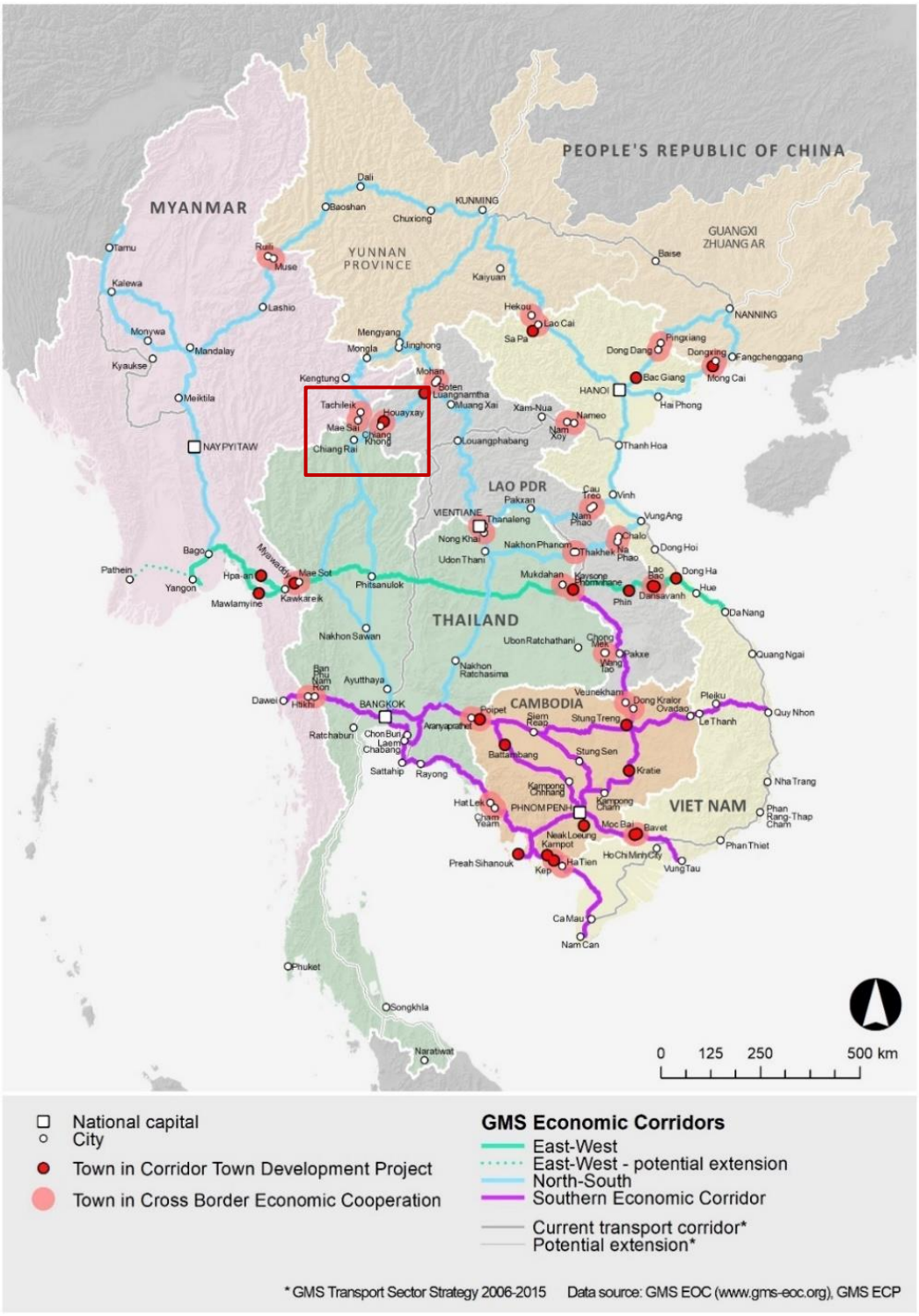

Figure 2 Map of Important Corridor Towns Development in GMS

Note. Adapted from "GMS Economic Corridors - Towns in Corridor Town Development Project (CTDP) and Towns in Cross Border Economic Cooperation (CBT)" [Map], (September 30, 2020), Greater Mekong. Retrieved September 12, 2023, (https://greatermekong.org/g/gms-economic-corridors-towns-corridor-town-development-project-ctdp-and-towns-cross-border-economic).

Bricks and Borders: A Glimpse into My Infrastructure Field Site

Figure 3. Chiang Rai Special Economic Zone map

Note. Reprinted from "A Guide to Investment in the Special Economic Development Zones (SEZ)", by Office of the Board of Investment, 2018, p. 23 (https://www.boi.go.th/upload/content/BOI-book%202015_20150818_95385.pdf).

Chiang Rai, the northernmost province of Thailand, positioned at the forefront of Chinese significant investment along the borders of Myanmar and Laos. Three pivotal border towns define this nexus: Chiang Khong, which faces Laos's Huay Xai[1]; Chiang Saen, opposite Laos's Tonpheung; and Mae Sai, which looks out to Myanmar's Tachilek. These towns have been meticulously chosen by the Thai government for its economic development agenda in the Upper North since the 1990s. This strategy aligns with a broader ambition to foster economic ties with the Mekong's neighbouring countries and

[1] Huay Xai (Lao: ຫ້ວຍຊາຍ, pronounced [hŭa̰j sáːj]), also known as Huoeisay, Houei Sai, or Houayxay

southwestern China. The initiative, rolled out by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992, emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War in Southeast Asia (Yong, 2020, pp. 205–206). The subregion, a conglomerate of Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam, has since the 1990s benefited from the support of Japan, working in collaboration with ADB under the banner of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

Figure 4. Thai-Lao Friendship bridge No.4. Photographed in Chiang Khong, November 1,2019

Since 1990s, infrastructural development has become the highest priority of the ambitious plan known as GMS' North-South Economic Corridor (Chapman & Hinton, 1993, pp. 12–16). Many cross-border transportation projects have been proposed – for example, highway links between China and Thailand via Laos and Burma (R3A and R3B), a rail link between Thailand and Yunnan, regional airports and air-service development and the project to improve the upper-Mekong navigation channel (Walker, 1999, p. 65). Notably, the Kunming–Bangkok Highway begins in Yunnan, cuts through the hills of Laos, and arrives at Chiang Khong, Thailand via the Thai-Lao Friendship

Bridge no.4. This extensive highway stretches a total of 1,900 km, making Bangkok reachable within 40 hours by road. Moreover, an anticipated railway project connecting Bangkok to the Den Chai-Chiang Khong route is expected to be completed in 2028. While the dry port station was finished in 2021, it awaits the final railway connection.

Following its economic rise, China has significantly expanded its political and economic sway in the Mekong subregion. It is now the primary trading partner for all five Mekong countries, channelling substantial investments into their infrastructure and development projects. Chiang Saen town, for instance, features two river ports funded by the Thai government to enhance commercial navigation and bolster Thai-Yunnan trade (Masviriyakul, 2004). Meanwhile, the three northern Thai border towns of Chiang Khong, Chiang Saen, and Mae Sai were designated as part of the Chiang Rai special economic zone in 2014. Located within 300 kilometres of China's border, these towns are envisioned by the Thai government as key economic gateways, ideally positioned to synchronise with China's thriving economy.

In particular, Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen on the Thai frontier stand out as crucial intersections. Their border location casts them as threshold areas, bridging the expanding Chinese influence within Laos' designated economic zones. Directly across from Chiang Saen lies the Chinese Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ); established in 2007, the zone spans 3,000 hectares, governed by a 99-year land lease agreement. The Dok Ngiew Kham Group, under the leadership of the renowned Chinese casino magnate Zhao Wei, oversees its development. Similarly, Laos' Huay Xai border area, located opposite the Thai-Lao Friendship bridge no.4 in Chiang Khong and once the domain of Thai real estate visionaries, it has transitioned under the aegis of China's Yunnan Haicheng Holding real estate company to reimagine and reshape it into a vibrant commercial area on the Laos's riverbank.

While the Mekong River stands as a beacon for projected regional economic growth, life alongside the riverbanks has changed due to China's dams since the 1990s. China has played a significant role in manipulating the Mekong waters and determining the fate of downstream nations

with its extensive dams on the Lancang[2] River in China. Nearly 65 million people rely on the mighty Lancang-Mekong River for their livelihoods, and it serve as home of diverse range of aquatic species. Local communities voice concerns that these dams, by withholding or manipulating water flows, disrupt the balance of this shared river. Smaller Mekong dams also pose ecological and livelihood challenges for the lower Mekong regions.

Another narrative thread in this dynamic is a project looking to "tame" the Mekong for better navigation – a project of enhanced commercial connectivity between Yunnan and Thailand. However, this hasn't been universally welcomed, particularly in Chiang Khong, where local activists have raised concerns. Their voices have been consistent, with opposition surfacing every time the project returns to the table, a trend seen from the 1990s to the 2020s.

Beyond infrastructure development, the Thai Mekong border towns have evolved to attract a diverse range of visitors, from those drawn to the rich Buddhist temples and vibrant ethnic cultures to those intrigued by the history of the opium trade in the Golden Triangle area. Moreover, just across the Mekong in Laos, the allure of the Chinese-owned Kings Romans Casino beckons, while another popular Thai casino awaits in Myanmar. They cater to diverse stakeholders ranging from religious pilgrims and Naga devotees to those seeking recreational avenues like gambling. This convergence of faith, historical narratives, and commerce vividly illustrates the multilayered interactions and interests, both human and non-human, in this Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland.

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[2] The Mekong River, Known as the Lancang in China (瀾沧江)

ນາງ ພະຍານາກ *"Queen of Nagas",*

> *"Queen of Nagas seized by American Army at Mekong River, Laos Military Base on June 27, 1973, measuring 7.80 meters in length."*

Drawing our attention back to the Nagas photograph, which we first encountered at the onset of this chapter, the image of the US army holding the "*Naga*" can still be found all over Thailand, in restaurants, guest houses, temples, and even as postcards and keychains for souvenirs. The photograph was labelled at the bottom in Lao as the "Queen of Nagas". At the top, a caption printed in a smaller font in both Thai and English identified the Naga's gender; the length of the Naga was given in the international unit of measurement, metres. The event reportedly took place in 1973 as per the Gregorian calendar and was marked as the year 2516 in the Buddhist calendar. The location of the event was the Mekong River, at an American military base in Laos.

Tyson Robert (2002, p. 223) interprets the photograph, which has been disseminated in Laos and Thailand, as a piece of anti-American propaganda with the "*Payanak"* or *"Naga*" symbolising a national guardian to Laotians. Nonetheless, as time progresses, the interpretation of the photograph varies, shifting according to differing contexts. Although the original intentions of the individual who falsely labelled the photograph of the oarfish as a Naga remain unknown, I find its symbolism profound. Given the US military presence in Thailand and Laos during the 1990s, this photograph perfectly captures a clash of traditional spiritual belief and modernisation. The *Naga*, a local spiritual symbol of prosperity for Mekong communities in Laos, was caught by the US army, a symbol of US political power in the Mekong region during the Cold War.

The image of a Naga being captured by the US military, serving as a compelling encapsulation of my work's recurring themes, illustrating the intriguing coexistence and mutual complementarity of seemingly dichotomous elements. The paradoxical photo caption gives a sense of collision between

modernisation and the spiritual beliefs about Nagas in the Mekong area. Simultaneously, it opens a channel, allowing me to tune in to the fusion of these distinct realms. The narrative intertwines tales of the sacred serpent from an imagined world with the presence of the US military in the tangible world, all set against the backdrop of the iconic Mekong River – a place that serves as a nexus between these two realms. This tale serves as a prime example of the many worlds converging through the perspective of the locals (Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 4).

The narrative elements hold historical, political, symbolic and cultural significance, offering a degree of rationality in the context of local folklore accuracy, especially given the notably strong belief in the Mekong's Naga. In a similar vein, this thesis offers various accounts that, although seemingly contradictory, can coexist and even complement each other in certain ways. A prime example is the nuanced relationship between nature and infrastructure, where the lines often blur, showcasing the intricate melding of natural landscapes with human interventions.

Thus, the Naga photograph provided a unique vantage point from which to examine the intricate, multi-layered relationships at this Thai-Lao Mekong borderland. As part of my fieldwork, I aim to explore the role of both tangible and intangible infrastructure, as well as the environment, spirits, and nature, in shaping the relationships among individuals involved in the development of the Mekong border region, in particular the Thai Mekong border towns. In short, I seek to investigate how these key elements interact with and influence one another within this dynamic area.

Incorporating residents' accounts, responses, actions, religious practice, and spiritual beliefs, as well as considering local and regional political and historical contexts alongside my own experiences and interpretations as primary sources, this grounded research offers insights into how people in the border towns navigate and strategically leverage volatility amidst the turbulence of infrastructure development. The concept of volatility, as outlined by Franz Krause & Hylland Eriksen (2023), denotes a continuous state of flux and uncertainty that occupies a position between flexibility and a chaotic period akin to a crisis; it's not merely a transient phase but a persistent condition influenced by and influencing human actions. Similarly, here the term *volatility* refers to the instability and uncertainty

characterising the variability and fluctuations in political, economic, environmental, social, and cultural aspects of life over a specific period in relation to Chinese intensive investment in infrastructure within the Mekong region.

Specifically, in this thesis, the term *volatility* encompasses a variety of dimensions, including diplomatic tensions between neighbouring countries, shifts in border-control policies, ambiguous land compensation, fluctuations in cross-border trade and tourism, degradation of ecology, changes in landscape, evolving wealth-cultural values and the dissemination of Buddhist and Naga spiritual practices. I argue that these various dimensions of volatility are intertwined and create complex challenges and opportunities that the residents navigate and optimise amidst the waves of uncertainty accompanying ongoing infrastructure transformations.

In the subsequent sections, I offer a concise background of Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland infrastructure development and a literature review of concepts related to the anthropology of infrastructure studies and the volatility concept that shape my research questions. I selectively introduce key theories, and concepts pertinent to my research problems, while identifying gaps and areas where my research can contribute to the field of infrastructure studies from an anthropological standpoint.

China's Mekong Makeover: Borderland Infrastructures and Influences

The infrastructure investment intensively shifted from Western countries to Asia, with the goal of modernising and attracting foreign investment to promote domestic politics and boost the economy. Over the last few decades, many Asian borderland areas have undergone accelerated economic liberalisation and global market integration through advanced infrastructure that has shortened time and distance (Saxer & Zhang, 2017). The perception of the borderland is gradually shifting from that of a remote and backward area to a new space of high potential for economic growth. The establishment of “exception zones” in terms of economy and politics is seen in the form of special economic zones, where domestic and foreign capital, national and international laws, modernist ideals,

and infrastructure aspirations all converge within a confined space in many parts of Asian borderland (Chettri & Eilenberg, 2021). The borderlands have been transformed into “enclave development zones” (Nyíri, 2012), where capital accumulation, experimentation with productive spaces, exportism, and dispossession are all taking place.

One of the key themes in borderland infrastructure studies (Rippa, 2020) is the relationship between infrastructure and state power. Infrastructure projects have been particularly important in large parts of Asia as a means for state authorities to integrate borderland regions into the national economy by transforming frontiers into a neoliberal gateway and asserting their territorial sovereignty and control over these areas (Campbell, 2018; Horstmann et al., 2018; Laungaramsri, 2015; Ong, 2006; Woods, 2011).

Specifically, states wield power in manipulating and transforming the circulation of people, goods, objects, and information within society and across borders. This control is implemented in various ways, ranging from bureaucratic processes and documentation to cross-border regulations that either facilitate or obstruct transportation infrastructure. Moreover, non-state actors are also significantly contributing to the transformation of borderlands into areas of development in the last decade. Several studies have examined the role of transnational enterprises, private sectors, and military entrepreneurs in initiating and cooperating with states to aid in infrastructure construction and promote planned development which exacerbates pre-existing inequality and uneven development in the region (Meehan et al., 2021; Nyíri, 2012; Rippa, 2019).

Anthropological works have also shed light on the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of borderland infrastructure, examining how it shapes and is shaped by the various forces and illustrating dynamics at work in those sites. Therefore, infrastructures are not just as technical objects to be optimised but also as a means of understanding the social relations in specific locations (Kanoi et al., 2022). A collection of grounded research, *Development Zones in Asian Borderland*, offers a conceptual framework, “development zones”, that contributes to the analysis of the complexity of relationships

between people, institutions, and resources in a fluid landscape, examining the flows, frictions, interests, and imaginations that accumulate in specific locations during moments of transformation (Chettri & Eilenberg, 2021).

In addition, the pace of infrastructure development in China accelerated rapidly in the late 1990s; the Chinese government launched a series of initiatives aimed at promoting development in China's Western region. One of the well-known policies was "Going West", which resulted in the promotion of infrastructure construction such as railways, dams, highways and more (Glassman, 2010b; Tian, 2004; Yeh & Wharton, 2016). Nevertheless, scholars contend that the types of infrastructure projects emphasised mainly extracted resources from western provinces to feed the industrialised eastern region and are strongly linked to the exercise of state power and the process of reconsolidation (Goodman, 2004; Oakes, 2004; Yeh, 2018). Following the "Going Out" that intensively encouraged China's state-owned enterprises to invest in foreign countries, China-backed infrastructure rapidly expanded and gradually became the foundation for the circulation of things, human and non-human, across the globe.

Emily Yeh (2018) argues that an examination of both policies together can offer a more comprehensive understanding of China's development approach and its increasing role in the global development landscape. Many of China's going-out projects draw on their "Going West" experience and share the common characteristic of manifesting advanced technology as a solution to development challenges (Yeh, 2018, p. 17). Consequently, the number of China-backed infrastructure projects has dramatically increased in its neighbouring countries over the past two decades.

Throughout the 1990s, numerous infrastructure development projects have been implemented in the Mekong region under the umbrella of neoliberal policies supported by international financial institutions such as ADB, the World Bank and other sources of funding. The economic cooperation program known as the GMS was heavily promoted throughout the region. One of the key investors is China, resulting in many China-backed infrastructure projects flooding into many

countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand. The area has been extensively transformed into an exceptional zone with trade agreements, customs regimes, and security regulations that facilitate the circulation of labour and goods (Chapman & Hinton, 1993; England, 2006; Glassman, 2010a; Laungaramsri, 2015; Lin & Grundy-Warr, 2012; Murray, 1994).

Zooming in on residents' experiences during the implementation of GMS in this border area, Andrew Walker's (1999) ethnographic research provides a comprehensive depiction of local dynamics of cross-border trading in the upper-Mekong region during the early stages of the liberal, market-oriented Economic Quadrangle concept. With a shared research area, Walker's work offers valuable insights into the roles of local trading networks and microsystems in negotiating power dynamics amid the state's efforts to integrate the borderland into the global market in the 2000s.

While financial incentives play a role in changing perceptions of borderlands, the historical significance and varying aspirations and desires of residents must also be considered. The relevant works have provided the historical context of how inhabitants, pioneers, traders and refugees have interacted with state power in the area from the colonial period to the early modern era (Hill, 1982; J. C. Scott, 2009; Sen, 1991; Soonthornpasuch, 1977; L. Wang, 2006). During the Cold War period, many parts of the region became US military basements and communist alliance camps. Many war infrastructures, such as roads and airfields, were rapidly constructed in strategic borderland locations and other areas with US funding under the guise of aid. The construction of these infrastructures was often justified by an ideology of modernisation, using the premise of improving living conditions as a convenient rationale to garner allies (Gibson & Chen, 2011) .

In the 21st century, infrastructure investment in China has experienced rapid growth, surpassing the levels of investment found in many Western countries (Hirsh & Mostowlansky, 2022, p. 1). Scholars have referred to China as an infrastructural state; the large-scale infrastructure has become inseparable from the state's legitimacy and a mean for political leaders to secure promotions (Oakes, 2019, p. 68; Zhang, 2019, p. 100). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further solidified its role in the

Mekong region in the 2000s. These initiatives have also transformed the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland into a potentially prosperous landscape by locating infrastructures such as transnational highways, cross-border bridges, railways, hydropower dams and electric grids in the experimental zone (Dwyer, 2020; Gong, 2019).

Although framed as promoting regional cooperation and a civilisational mission, numerous China-backed projects have been criticised for increasing debt burdens on recipient countries, causing ecological harm and displacement due to large-scale projects such as dams and mining operations. (Baird, 2011; Chen, 2020; Lazarus, 2006; Liao, 2019; Santasombat, 2011; Soukhaphon et al., 2021; P. Wang et al., 2014). In the context of promoting the BRI, aside from research related to geopolitics, environmental consequences, socioeconomic changes, displacement, debt, and sovereignty issues, there is also a growing concern about "greenwashing" in the BRI (Harlan, 2020; Nakano, 2019). Recently, scholars have called for more grounded approaches to studying the BRI and the social life of Chinese infrastructure (Klinger & Muldavin, 2019; Lu, 2021; Oakes, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2020; Sidaway & Woon, 2017). These approaches focus on examining the dynamics of interaction between infrastructure and various actors at specific sites, analysing how they shape each other during the implementation process, rather than solely viewing it as a top-down-driven strategy on the part of China.

Amidst the development of infrastructure in borderland regions, various actors and agencies actively respond to the uncertain consequences of infrastructure, engaging in different forms to create, navigate and shape these developments. These responses highlight that actors ranging from states and local governments to NGOs and individuals in these areas should not be perceived as passive victims but rather as active participants capable of adapting to and influencing this transformation (Rowedder, 2022; Walker, 1999). Building on previous grounded research, I discovered similar findings, where these actors utilise various strategies, such as leveraging local knowledge, forming networks and alliances, and engaging with state and non-state entities to tackle challenges presented by infrastructure projects. Their improvisational response aims to maximise the opportunities presented

by these projects. By emphasising the agency of these actors, we can better understand the complex dynamics at play in the development of borderland infrastructures.

Anthropologies of Infrastructure and Development Studies

The term "infrastructure", which has been widely adopted since the post-war era, has evolved to encompass complex and interconnected systems supporting modern societies and economies (Carse, 2017, p. 31). Its usage has expanded over time, revealing connections and clashes among various fields, which traverses geography, science and technology studies (STS), political sciences, history, sociology, urban studies, engineering, military coordination, economics and logistics. In anthropology, an extensive body of literature explores the infrastructures of modern societies, highlighting the significance of examining not only their abstract and material components but also the complexities and hierarchies inherent in their design, management, and maintenance. This analysis encompasses issues of inclusion, exclusion, and the power dynamics embedded within infrastructures (Anand, 2017; C. Howe et al., 2016; Reeves, 2017; Star, 1999; Star & Ruhleder, 1996).

Infrastructure might be understood as “things and also relation between things as infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter”, laying the foundation for the functioning of other objects, facilitating them to operate as integrated systems (Larkin, 2013, p. 329). In addition, well-grounded research has illustrated the complex social relationships, material assemblages, aesthetic considerations, and political formations that are associated with infrastructure, in order to expand and pluralise our understanding of the term (Anand et al., 2018; Carse, 2012; Elyachar, 2010; Harvey et al., 2017; Simone, 2004). These works pay attention to examining the assumptions that shape what is classified as infrastructure, and reveal the social dynamics and power relations at play in those sites (Bowker, 1994). For instance, Ashley Carse (2012) proposed a conceptual framework that considers “nature as infrastructure” to examine the social and political aspects of water provision and the relationships among those involved in managing the watershed of the Panama Canal.

Infrastructure studies offer researchers a variety of analytical pathways. By expanding the variety of frameworks with which to explore social relationships within the context of infrastructure, scholars demonstrate that infrastructure can be understood as both a social and philosophical construct. Numerous studies have broadened their scope to explore various facets of infrastructure, including aspects such as physical design, financing mechanisms, governance frameworks, and technological elements. Moreover, various works have delved into the philosophical aspect of infrastructure, which encompasses ideas, theories, and innovative ways of thinking that guide the planning and management processes, ultimately shaping the development of infrastructure systems (Elyachar, 2010; C. Howe et al., 2016, p. 549; Humphrey, 2005; Schwenkel, 2015). By examining infrastructure from these multiple perspectives, we can better appreciate the clashes and mismatches between the realities projected by organisers and the social worlds in which these systems are embedded, ultimately providing a more nuanced understanding of infrastructure's role in shaping social complexity (Carse,2017).

Building on the discussion of infrastructure, it is essential to explore another closely related concept: “development”, which also plays a significant role in shaping modern societies and economies. The concept of development has undergone significant changes in recent decades, particularly in the context of the Global South. The term “development” has had various definitions over time, ranging from generating wealth to cultural and moral meanings. Infrastructure development in the 19th and early 20th centuries was closely linked to the concept of a European civilising mission in Africa, a justification for colonialism and the exploitation of local resources and labour (Tilley, 2011, p. 73). Cupers and Meier (2020) observed that infrastructures, such as the trans-African highway network, are not simply functional tools for achieving Pan-African freedom; they also embody the attitudes of colonial powers and play a significant role in shaping post-independence selfhood in Kenya.

Shifting our focus to Asia, during the 20th century, European powers and Japan intensively implemented infrastructure development projects in East and Southeast Asia, promoting modernisation in transportation, water management, and resource extraction through aid and

technical assistance programs under the guise of "co-prosperity" (Hirsh & Mostowlansky, 2022, p. 4). After World War II, infrastructures became a significant marker in defining economic and technological development, dividing the Global North and the Global South (Carse, 2017; Escobar, 2012). Large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, rails, airports, canals, dams, ports, bridges, electric wires, pipelines, sewage, telecommunications, water supply and power stations have become the lynchpins of development policies.

While infrastructure is typically defined as physical material that provide a foundation for other objects to operate and circulate, anthropologists have sought to expand a greater understanding of infrastructure and state power through ethnographic studies. Over the past century, the term "infrastructure" has expanded to encompass not only tangible projects but also intangible support systems and a myriad of social relations, such as education, social welfare, bureaucracy, standards, regulations, law, governance, and citizenship (Anand, 2017; Bear, 2007; P. Harvey & Knox, 2015; Mitchell, 2002; Simone, 2004). Across various forms of infrastructure, whether tangible or intangible, spectacular or hidden, everyday or monumental, most of these infrastructures promise to bring prosperity and modernity that will raise living standards in the places where they are located.

Additionally, by focusing on the relationship between infrastructure, space, and time, anthropological studies offer a reflexive critique of how time is constructed and valued. The grandiose display of infrastructure megaprojects, characterised by prominent concrete and steel structures, often signifies progress and modernity (Anand et al., 2018). Appadurai (2013) asserts that infrastructure serves as a concrete manifestation of the envisioned future society we aspire to create. Through the execution of infrastructure projects, societies can shape their current environment to mirror their desired future, thereby actualising their aspirations and enabling the present to extract wealth from the future (Knox & Gambino, 2023; Mitchell, 2020).

However, infrastructure does not always materialise as intended, frequently generating unforeseen, unintended consequences and uncertainty for various groups of people. Numerous cases

illustrate that infrastructure can also be examined through the lens of continuous processes, encompassing both planned and unplanned outcomes, fulfilled and unfulfilled promises, elements of uncertainty, and futuristic aspirations, as well as spectacular achievements and ruins (Carse & Kneas, 2019; Gupta, 2018; Kanoi et al., 2022; Niewöhner, 2015; Schwenkel, 2015).

In the existing literature, within the context of modern society and the ideology of linear progress, infrastructure is perceived as a catalyst for initiating and accelerating social, economic, and political changes. Although anthropologists and scholars from various fields have contributed to understanding the dynamics of human agency at different scales and the relationships that transform something into an infrastructure, along with the social, political, and economic implications associated with infrastructure, much of the literature still predominantly maintains an anthropocentric approach. The extensive literature on infrastructure offers limited insight into the relationships between non-human life and infrastructure, particularly regarding the role of the non-human lifeworld in responding to the newly built environment amid uncertainty.

In the following section, I present a literature review that informs the direction of this thesis, extending the analysis of infrastructure beyond human-centric perspectives to encompass non-human relationships with the infrastructure.

Ecologising and Moralising Infrastructure

Recently, a group of scholars has initially offered a broader infrastructure ontology in which non-human life has become the foreground of study. This ontology seeks to reveal who or what composes and reshapes things and how relationships between them are formed and reconfigured. This perspective has contributed to a growing recognition of the agency and influence of non-human actors and the interaction with infrastructure in contexts of uncertainty, shifting the focus from the effects of infrastructure to the role of infrastructure as a medium of life and how non-human life is integrated into infrastructure itself (Barua, 2021, p. 1469).

There is a growing trend focusing on studying the diverse agents involved in the “infrastructuring” of non-human worlds that sustain human life. In her book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Tsing, 2015), Anna Tsing explores a multispecies and multisite perspective, illustrating the story of global capitalism through matsutake, a highly valued delicacy in Japan. Tsing examines the intricate relationships among various elements, such as gift-cultural practices, labour systems, and the agency of objects. She highlights how these assemblages contribute to both the construction and destruction of the world.

Continuing with the theme of non-human involvement, exploring the role of animals in supporting infrastructure, for instance, there have been studies of how beaver dams function as sustainable irrigation systems (Goldfarb, 2018), how oysters act as indicators of the impact of storm surges (Wakefield & Braun, 2019), and how pigs unofficially contributed to the waste-processing infrastructure in Cairo city (Manaugh, 2015). Barua (2020) contends that investigating the treatment of nonhuman life as infrastructure allows for a deeper understanding of the economisation of nature and its extension to human governance.

Accordingly, various terms and concepts have been proposed to explore the relationships among humans, non-humans, and their “complex surrounds” (Simone, 2015). For instance, the notions of “infrastructure as habitus” and “reconciliation infrastructure” address the integration of ecological considerations into architectural design, aiming to establish living environments that accommodate the diverse needs of various species (Barua, 2021, p. 1476). The essay collection "Ecologising Infrastructure: Infrastructural Ecologies" offers interdisciplinary dialogues that delve into the role of non-humans as infrastructure actors; these discussions bring to light unconventional ideas about infrastructure by incorporating the influence and contributions of non-human elements (Krieg et al., 2020).

In addition, there are recent studies demonstrating the intricate ways in which infrastructure and nature are entwined with social, ethical, and cultural aspects of human society. Scaramelli (2019)

explored “moral ecologies infrastructure” to reveal the multifaceted relationships among technical, social, and ethical elements in Türkiye’s Gediz Delta, emphasising diverse stakeholder strategies to transform the delta ranging from wetland preservation to real estate development. In a similar vein, Gurchiani (2022) examines the interplay between infrastructure and the river Vere in Tbilisi, a modernist city in Georgia, highlighting their hybrid assemblage and interconnectedness during crises. By engaging with contemporary religious discourse, the study underscores that infrastructure is more than just a technological construct—it embodies elements of nature, spirituality, morality, and humanity, reflecting the intricate relationships within urban environments (Gurchiani, 2022, p. 3).

By examining the various stakeholder strategies in the Gediz Delta and the Vere River's role in Tbilisi's urban landscape, these works highlight the importance of considering multiple dimensions when analysing infrastructure and its relationship with the environment. These studies contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamic interplay between human societies, non-human entities, their built environments, and the spiritual world, shedding light on the nuanced connections that shape our modern landscapes. These works have deeply inspired me to investigate the influence of cultural and spiritual practices on infrastructure development in the Thai-Lao Mekong borderlands.

Infrastructures and Volatility

Infrastructure is often perceived as an intervention designed to control fluctuations in socio-ecological systems, creating an illusion of political stability and prosperity consistent with modern ideology. However, in many places, infrastructural breakdowns are commonly encountered, and the non-fulfilment of hopes and the deferment of material benefits are hardly surprising. Many studies have spotlighted the collapse and deterioration of infrastructure in various locations, particularly in the Global South (Anand, 2017; Schwenkel, 2015). These disruptions raise questions about inequalities and the people that have been marginalised due to infrastructural deficiencies or poorly designed infrastructure (Graham, 2010, pp. 9–10; McFarlane, 2010, pp. 139–141).

Furthermore, Akhil Gupta (2018) argues that investing in infrastructure inherently involves uncertainty; these “lumpy” investments often demand significant capital, land, and labour resources. They generate long-term returns based on future forecasts, but the unpredictability of numerous factors often makes these calculations uncertain (Gupta, 2018, pp. 62–63). In addition, AbdouMaliq Simone (2018) delves into the paradox inherent in infrastructure development, emphasising its apparent temporal “doubleness”: while infrastructure may appear to offer short-term growth by stabilising present volatility, it can also trigger disruptions and long-term volatility (Venkatesan et al., 2018, p. 21).

This effectively elucidates the phenomena in the Mekong region where projects like hydropower plants, highways, bridges often promise to enhance the quality of life, yet their future impacts can be unpredictable. Factors such as poor planning, political instability, disruption, or inadequate maintenance further complicate these effects. For instance, the failure of the Myitsone Dam in Myanmar, one of China's largest overseas hydropower projects, exemplifies these complications (Kiik, 2016).

Despite such disruptions and uncertainty, in many places, individuals find themselves navigating, improvising, and waiting to obtain necessary or desired services. The studies of disrupted cities have revealed that the connections between nodes don't self-sustain; for infrastructure to achieve efficient circulation, continuous maintenance supported by unseen roles and actors is required (Graham, 2010, p. 10; McFarlane, 2010, p. 136). In the same vein, the concept of “people as infrastructure”, as developed by AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) highlights the critical role of human interactions, practices and social bonds in the operation of a city. These seemingly messy exchanges generate value from everyday activities, people’s tolerance for diverse scenarios, fostering resilience, small innovation, and a sense of agency among individuals; everyday activities such as arguing, buying, selling, gossiping, exchanging, and observing form a “social infrastructure” (Simone, 2021, p. 1342).

In addition, Krause and Eriksen (2023) offer a nuanced conceptualisation of “volatility” as a continuous state of change, which is more than just a mere backdrop – it defines a distinct way of life, particularly in our increasingly “overheated world” (Eriksen, 2016). This volatile way of life is characterised by possibilities and fluidity, emphasising not only individual agency but also collective actions and interconnectedness between humans and non-humans. Such a perspective doesn't just recognise the challenges and hardships inherent in life but also embraces its inherent hopes and potentials. This reframing invites us to see individuals in volatile contexts not as passive entities but as proactive and creative agents adeptly navigating an unpredictable world (Krause & Eriksen, 2023, p. 7).

For instance, there are recent works that propose a paradigm shift towards recognising volatilities as inherent and normal characteristics of the world, rather than problems to be solved (Krause, 2020; "DELTA Workshops", 2021). In the ethnographic study of the Mackenzie Delta in Canada, demonstrating an example of how inhabitants find value in volatility, like gambling, as a mean of income distribution, the author suggests a reframing of volatility, embracing the evolving uncertainty instead of enforcing rigid control (Krause, 2023, p. 14,17). In a similar vein, the Lågen Delta study introduces the “clashing scales” concept, highlighting the diminishing moral accountability and marginalisation of individual tragedies as scale increases, revealing how the expanding robust infrastructure such as highways paradoxically stirs up long-term volatility (Hylland Eriksen, 2023).

In essence, volatility refers to the swift fluctuations that are unstable, severe, and can have impacts that reach far beyond human scope. Applying the concept of volatility to understand the complexities of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland can provide valuable insights into the stability and prosperous future that, it is claimed, will result from infrastructures supported by state entities, private investors, and international development institutions. This perspective challenges the preconceived notions and assumptions of volatility, enabling me to critically reassess the liminal state of infrastructure and the transformation of the border towns.

As I have drawn upon the theories and concepts reviewed above, they have shaped and framed my research questions. Moving forward, I develop a theoretical framework by combining relevant infrastructure concepts that have significantly deepened my understanding of social changes in the riverine border town in northern Thailand. In the following section, I demonstrate how the concept of infrastructure aligns with my field site.

Theoretical Framing

To address my research questions, I have divided the thesis into five chapters, each focusing on a different issue but all interrelated by theme within the field of anthropology of infrastructure, including studies of politics, space and time, and moral ecology. Throughout the thesis, I aim to demonstrate that the volatility and uncertainty generated by infrastructure lead to a range of messy responses on the ground, including speculating, navigating, retrofitting, and waiting.

When I was conducting my fieldwork in the Thai border towns, I initially became interested in how local NGOs responded to China-backed infrastructure projects, and the context in which the conflict took shape. During my fieldwork experience, I encountered various groups of people, such as a group of environmental activists, cross-border traders and networks, boat operators, small tourist business owners, local administrative offices, migrant workers, and spiritual tourists. I observe that they have their own agendas and strategies for navigating infrastructure transformations to optimise their objectives. I then realised that there was a dynamic relationship here that my original perception of infrastructure had failed to capture: the complex relationships among diverse groups in light of Chinese influence.

Drawing upon anthropological works on infrastructure that have extensively examined the complex relationships between humans and infrastructure (Carse, 2012; Larkin, 2013; Simone, 2004), expanding into the non-human world, such as animals and plants (Knox & Gambino, 2023), I thus perceive infrastructure as a fluid concept encompassing both tangible and intangible entities, and

adopt a broader ontology of infrastructure that incorporates non-human entities, spirituality, and religious beliefs into my analysis (Barua, 2021; Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Gurchiani, 2022).

In investigating the first theme, infrastructure and politics, I began with large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, river ports, the dry port, highways, and the railway, which are often tied to states through planning, funding, legal regulations, and political decisions. Generally, large-scale public works projects convey a sense of certainty and a reliable future. However, in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland context, people long have been facing volatility and uncertainty, from the state project's inception until its operation. Building on the studies of the role of modern nation-states and their political institutions, this first thematic examination reveals how these projects serve as a means of state intervention and assertion of state power over territories and people under the spectacle and aesthetic of infrastructure (chapter 1) (P. Harvey & Knox, 2015; Knox & Gambino, 2023, p. 6; Larkin, 2013).

Furthermore, in the context of the Mekong region, where select areas of land and sovereignty have been commodified as a special economic zone, entrusted to private corporations in pursuit of national prosperity (Laungaramsri, 2015, p. 118; Nyíri, 2012, p. 535), I adopt this approach to explore both the state's and various actors' practices at multiple scales, wrestling for power over infrastructure development. This approach enables me to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of infrastructure in shaping power dynamics among diverse groups of people in the borderland. Furthermore, drawing inspiration from other ethnographies in this area, Simon Rowedder (2022) argues that rather than drawing a sharp line between state and non-state actors, we should look beyond counter-political infrastructure. This approach allows me to explore how various groups of people co-create and co-shape different forms of infrastructure through their interactions in the Mekong border towns in Thailand.

The second theme focuses on infrastructure, future, and volatility. This provides an effective lens to scrutinise the desired future that materialises through existing megaprojects or plans for

megaprojects in the process of compressed space/time to strengthen connectivity in the Mekong region with southern China. Rather than merely viewing infrastructure as a hope-making machine that generates aspired-to futures (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2013; Appadurai, 2013), I also take local perception of unsuccessful or significant delayed projects seriously and explore how residents respond to the "the slowness of the process of speeding up" (Anand et al., 2018, p. 15) and temporality of ruins (Gupta, 2018; C. Howe et al., 2016).

I employ the concept of "seams", as introduced by Vertesi (2014), signifying points where multiple infrastructures overlap. While these "seams" symbolise points of connection, they often require individuals to navigate and operate creatively within spaces filled with diverse infrastructures. Essentially, while seams signify junctures of union, they can also underscore differences and inconsistencies between the interconnected elements. This approach assists me in producing thick descriptions of the river pathway that facilitate the regional flow of goods and people and in understanding how people navigate through complex situations amidst the logistical power (Xiang, 2022) and disruptions in connectivity during the pandemic (chapter 3).

The third theme is infrastructure and moral ecology. Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder (1996, pp. 112–113) notably suggested that the focus should be on "when" an infrastructure occurs, rather than "what" it is. This relational perspective has prompted further exploration into how infrastructure is formed and its roles in specific contexts. Building on the reviewed literature, the term "non-human" in this thesis encompasses various entities that exist beyond the human realm, including river, plant, animal, and virus. Furthermore, I include aspects of spirits, deities, religious beliefs, and other forms of agency in my analysis. Based on my experiences attending several cultural rituals and engaging with residents daily, incorporating nonhuman elements and spirituality in framing my analysis has enlightened me with regard to how people deal with such uncertainty.

Gradually, I shifted my focus from treating "infrastructure" as something predefined to examining when and how something functions as a platform that enables circulation. In this process, I

examined the relationships among various groups of people and analysed how this connectedness is woven through different arenas, regardless of their form, while paying attention to the moments in which they operate. Drawing upon contemporary religious practices and spiritual notions in Thailand and the Mekong river (Jackson, 2022; Rennesson, 2021; R. M. Scott, 2009), I view infrastructure as a source of wealth that extends beyond tangible projects in this world to include imaginative projects of prosperity in the enchanted world. I argue that this prosperity requires legitimisation through the approval of residents, as it possesses power to generate friction or harmony within the networks of wealth. Thus, viewing infrastructure from the relational approach, I further explore how merit-making communities and their networks become infrastructure, and investigate their functional roles in the context of legitimising prosperity (Chapter 2 and Chapter 5).

Viewing the situation through the lens of spiritual worldviews has deconstructed the lineage concept of time that is often used to view infrastructure as a means of progress toward the future. It unfolds how local belief in religious and spiritual practices could result in the creation of innovative ways to deal with such an unknown future generated by infrastructure development. Thus, I believe that this serves as an intriguing vantage point from which to explore how volatility has been taken in and transformed into ultimate possibilities, including wealth and merit in the past life, this life and the next life.

Finally, my theoretical framing has been deeply shaped by Scaramelli's (2019) concept of "moral ecologies of infrastructure". This approach creates a broader space for recognising the various actors at multiple scales that go beyond a human-centric focus. By examining the practices and interactions among environmental activists, Chinese state-owned enterprises, and other actors (Chapter 4), we can see that they are all striving to shape infrastructure to achieve their moral goals. The wider ontology of infrastructure enables me to recognise both visible and invisible, form and formless, and tangible and intangible aspects of infrastructure. It also guides me in identifying gaps where alternative forms of infrastructure might penetrate within the disrupted ones. These entangled

relationships between things, humans, the non-human, and spirituality weave together to create connectedness that can result in both clashes and harmony.

In short, this thesis argues that during the moment of volatility, by examining the clash of connectedness, we can uncover cracks where alternative infrastructures have been operating or where new ones are infrastructuring themselves within the existing, broken ones.

Methodology: Fieldwork between method and matter

An increasing number of studies are expanding their focus beyond small-scale settings to investigate infrastructure's extensive connections with broader issues, such as globalisation and regionalisation (Anand, 2011; Anand et al., 2018; Eriksen, 2018). In the study of large-scale infrastructure, research sites extend beyond mere geographical locations and can be examined ethnographically not only within specific locations but also across and beyond spatial boundaries (P. Harvey et al., 2017). Furthermore, in relation to the concept of multi-sited ethnography proposed by Marcus (1995), the field site is more than just a single place. Therefore, adopting this approach contributes to re-envisioning ethnography as a versatile strategy for examining phenomena across multiple sites. By "tracking" individuals, objects, metaphors, stories, and conflicts, the circulation of cultural meanings, things, and other elements can be examined across time-space (Marcus, 1995, p. 96).

My fieldwork likewise moves across time and space; I conducted fieldwork in the Thai Mekong border towns between October 2019 and December 2021. My interests focus on how the various group in these border towns have shaped and been shaped by infrastructures influenced by China's presence in the Mekong region. The approach of studying Infrastructuring ethnographically (Karasti & Blomberg, 2017; Star, 1999) mainly guided me in conducting fieldwork in Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen, the Mekong border towns in northern Thailand. During my fieldwork, I avoid constraining the scope to a single location, remaining open to serendipity, and allowing the field to enrich my research. I treat the towns as a starting point for conducting ethnographic studies of infrastructures.

Table 1. Key Data: Population, Subdistricts, and Villages in the Thai Border Towns

Name	Subdistricts	Villages	Population
Chiang Khong	7	102	62,942
Chiang Saen	6	70	55,364

Note. Adapted from "Number of Population and Housing from Registration by Region, Province, District, and Area: 2019-2022" by National Statistical Office (NSO), Demography Population and Housing Branch, 2022. Retrieved from (http://statbbi.nso.go.th/staticreport/page/sector/en/01.aspx).

Jensen and Winthereik (2013) suggest the term “fractal landscapes” to describe the study of technology infrastructure, where complexity is reproduced, and stable connectivity is difficult to estimate. Consequently, the researcher requires a sensitive and open approach that allows the field boundaries to emerge from the research process (Hine, 2009, p. 4; Jensen & Winthereik, 2013, p. 12; Marcus, 1995). Adopting this approach, my understanding of infrastructure emerged through my interactions with various phenomena. I accepted my limitations in presenting a comprehensive picture of infrastructure. This approach allowed me to adjust my research questions based on empirical context and to primarily follow conflicts, which led me to uncover numerous layers of the infrastructure.

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, my fieldwork in the Thai-Lao Mekong border towns was divided into three periods. My first round took place from October 2019 to February 2020, followed by a second round from June to August 2020 and a third visit in December 2021. Although I stayed in Thailand for more than 10 months, the travel restrictions and severe pandemic situation significantly obstructed and delayed my fieldwork plans.

To gain a sense of the broader institutional context, I visited various local government offices, customs and port offices, and non-government organisations involved in Mekong River issues. As a participant observer, I attended activities and events arranged by local NGOs, university, and other cultural events organised in and outside the border towns. I also conducted semi-structured interviews

with a district head, Chiang Rai SEZ officers, Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen River port officers, museum officers, NGO staffs, shop owners, village chiefs, and chamber of commerce representatives in the border towns.

Additionally, I engaged in conversations and encounters with numerous individuals in the town, such as boat operators, Myanmar workers, community cultural committee members, and residents. As a native Thai speaker, I conducted all interviews without an interpreter. I also developed a foundation in the Northern Thai dialect and became quickly fluent in Lao, as my Northeastern dialect is similar to the Lao language. Furthermore, I am fluent in speaking and reading Chinese. However, I have no knowledge of Burmese, so when conversing with some Burmese workers, I asked one of my interlocutors to translate for me.

I began my fieldwork by contacting a group of NGOs working actively on Mekong-related issues, with whom I had previously collaborated in my earlier research. As these NGOs are well-acquainted with academics and researchers, their staff were extremely helpful in providing general information, which allowed me to gain an overview of the environmental issues and identify potential activist contacts for empirical study.

In order to find suitable long-term accommodation in the field, I utilised the mobile application *Booking* as a main tool to search for locations that would maximise my daily observations. During my first two weeks, I stayed at various guesthouses located in different parts of Chiang Khong's downtown area. I used a car to explore the town and its outskirts, while riding a bicycle allowed me to survey the inner areas of downtown and along the Mekong River. I observed activities at morning and evening markets, as well as attended various flea markets that occurred throughout the week and on weekends. Additionally, I visited old river ports, bridges, dry ports, railway planning areas, and both old and new commercial areas. To familiarise myself with the town, I created my own map to keep track of key locations and observations on Google Maps.

Based on a helpful review on Booking.com, I discovered PK guesthouse, situated in Ban Don Mahawan village in Chiang Khong, as an intriguing option for long-term accommodation. The resort's location was particularly appealing due to its proximity to the bridge. To reach this guesthouse, one must pass through a vast rice field and a rubber plantation. This small guest house is located within sight of the bridge. From there, I could see lorries crossing towards Laos from dawn until dusk. I remained at this location from October 2019 – February 2020.

As an anthropology student, I was trained to immerse myself in communities, actively participate in activities, attend cultural events, converse with people, and conduct interviews. Practically, events did not occur daily, and there were many days when I found myself simply hanging around the town. During this time, I visited local cafes, small shops, and flea markets, sat at river piers, chatted with NGO staff at their homes, paid visits to interlocutors, assisted with minor tasks at guest houses, and visited temples recommended by locals or found through Google Maps.

Initially, I naively planned to spend most of my time at the NGO offices, but I soon realised that this was difficult because their activities and events occurred only occasionally. Most of the time, the staff focused on their individual interests, such as reading, translating books, selecting coffee beans, or making plum wine. The staff members were always welcoming and patiently answered my questions. During my first months, I often needed to find a reason to visit the NGO offices and would schedule appointments in advance. I also offered free Chinese classes to the NGO staff. This initiative provided me with more opportunities to engage with them and spend time in their offices, allowing for a deeper understanding of their work and generally exchange our ideas on several issues not limited to the Mekong environment.

I occasionally travelled across the border to visit Huay Xai, the Lao provincial capital of Bokeo, located just across from Chiang Khong town. To gain an overview of the area, I also traversed the Mekong River to visit the Chinese Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Laos and crossed the border to briefly visit Tachileik town in Myanmar. I shuttled between Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen,

as it helped me grasp the connection between transborder infrastructure such as bridges and river ports. In doing so, I realised that to understand the transformation of these towns I could not limit my focus to a single tangible infrastructure project. Instead, I should view it as an extensive network that weaves through numerous lives and multiple layers. I maintained daily field notes to document my observations, conversations, and impressions. With the participants' permission, I used a mobile phone to record interviews as well as capture photos and videos. I sometimes used my phone as a voice-note-taking tool when there was no time for jotting.

My initial study of infrastructure was primarily focused on tangible, large-scale projects such as cross-border bridges, river ports, and dry ports in border towns. However, as I attempted to tune into the concerns and perspectives of the people I engaged with and to understand the dynamics of these tangible projects, I found myself encountering many other worlds coexisting within this realm, including the practices of the spiritual world, Naga beliefs, and the practice of accumulating merits for one's next life.

Expanding beyond a human-centric perspective, Natasha Myers (2018, pp. 76–77) suggests that the practice of "recursive attunement" is essential for ethnographers to craft a field of study that is not yet known; it is an effective tool that enables us to become sensors attuned to this changing world. This approach has helped to broaden my perspective, looking beyond material boundaries. By tracing stories, conflicts, expectations, and relationships, I have unveiled multiple layers of infrastructure. Throughout this process, my field boundaries have gradually become more defined as I explore connections and disconnections, helping me piece together the intricate puzzle of infrastructure. These complex relationships have ultimately formed my field of study.

In addition, I adopted the revised "study up" method developed by Hugh Gusterson (1997) and "studying through" (Reinhold, 1994, pp. 477–479; Shore, 2005, p. 11) to examine powerful institutions, bureaucratic organisations, and their networks, emphasising their pervasive influence on both present conditions and the future infrastructure plans that shape the human condition. For

instance, important elements to consider include the master plan of the Chiang Rai Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the policies and management of power structures, as well as promotional materials and brochures designed for investors. Tracing the sources of policies and mapping the connections among actors can shed light on the dynamics of power and resource allocation across time and space (Wedel et al., 2005, p. 40).

These approaches also suggest a range of methodologies for data collection from varied sources. This was especially beneficial during the pandemic when in-person interactions were challenging, and participant observation was nearly impossible. I utilised a variety of sources, including local newspapers, official documents, web material, online photographs, videos, posters, letters, artefacts, comments on Facebook, YouTube videos, and Twitter messages. Particularly through scrutinising the official master plan of SEZ, the state's border policies and associated materials, I investigate the ideologies and discourses that underlie policy (chapter 2). This analysis reveals state-local relations and local interpretations of state policies. In short, this approach guides my exploration of policy production and the role of local mediation during policy implementation.

Furthermore, as China-backed infrastructure spread and connected throughout the Mekong region, virtual spaces increasingly became critical platforms for roughly gauging public opinion toward these projects. For instance, in Chapter 4, I reveal the escalation of tension surrounding the Mekong dams on a global social-media platform by tracking the hashtags "#StopMekongDam" and "#MilkTeaAlliance" on Twitter. These hashtags gained significant traction, with millions of retweets in April 2020, sparking a virtual conflict among Thai, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong netizens.

I also discovered that Facebook groups used by the residents of the border towns as platforms for selling items, announcing local events, and updating general news provided valuable insights into local rumours and gossip. Additionally, comments beneath news articles on Facebook provided a snapshot of the general feedback and perceptions held by various groups of people concerning Chinese investment in Thailand and casino investment in Southeast Asia (Chapter 5). By drawing from

various sources, this work comprehends the multilayered issues and situations of conflict, especially those complex discussions which might be more challenging to address in face-to-face settings.

Fieldwork during the pandemic and Ethical Considerations

Unfortunately, normal life was disrupted due to the pandemic in February 2020, making the traditional fieldwork approach of casually engaging with others no longer viable in Thailand. The borders, which once facilitated seamless connections, were closed. I left the town without realising the significant effort required to return due to the Thai government's prohibition of transportation across countries. When I managed to return to the towns in June 2020, I struggled to continue with the usual fieldwork methods, particularly during the time when vaccinations were not yet widely distributed in Thailand. Given the possibility that my mere presence could harm others, my second round of fieldwork focused primarily on non-intrusive methods. I relied on observation and engaged in open-air conversations. With permission, I conducted semi-structured interviews while wearing a mask and maintaining proper distance. At times, I also conducted interviews via mobile phone, messenger applications, and Line application to ensure the safety of all involved.

During my second round of fieldwork from June to August 2020, I chose to stay in the Chiang Saen border town, as it allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of river trade and the connections between river and land transportation. Unlike Chiang Khong, cross-border trading between Thailand and Laos continued in Chiang Saen, providing me with the opportunity to explore trading life during the crisis. Nevertheless, I still occasionally drove to Chiang Khong for interviews or to visit acquaintances in the town. Due to the unexpected disruption of the fieldwork plan, conducting research during the pandemic while the town was essentially shut down proved to be challenging, given the absence of events or group activities. During this quiet period, I primarily employed observation and semi-structured interviews as my main research methods.

I attempted to return to the town again in April 2021, but due to the escalating pandemic situation in Thailand, I had no choice but to postpone my visit and wait patiently. During this time, I

maintained contact with my interlocutors and occasionally chatted on Facebook Messenger and Line. I also followed local Facebook pages and news and joined the Chiang Khong town Facebook group to stay updated on general information. I eventually managed to return to the town in December 2021, by which time vaccinations had been widely distributed, and some social activities had gradually resumed. However, border trading remained closed. During this last visit, I focused on validating my data and solidifying my understanding of the town.

Positionality, Analysis, and the Writing Process

I grew up in a semi-urban town in northeastern Thailand, where vast rice fields marked the agrarian landscape. Though my hometown was several hours away from the Thai-Laos border, I wasn't familiar with river life, being more attuned to land-based travel. For me, the Mekong River was synonymous with family holidays. My most vivid memory is the awe I felt seeing the first Thai-Lao cross-river bridge in 1994, a sentiment shared by many locals witnessing that monumental connection between the two nations. After years in China and witnessing advanced infrastructure abroad, the initial thrill of impressive structures faded. Yet witnessing infrastructural transformations in Thailand and the Mekong region reignites my optimism for better lives. Growing up in a country with unstable politics, where military coups occur almost every ten years and corruption is rampant, politicians often present large-scale infrastructure projects as symbols of modernisation and progress. Seeing these spectacular projects temporarily makes me feel that our lives are being taken care of, despite the suffering from other unpleasant issues related to the government in the present.

As a student of anthropology, my pursuit of a holistic perspective has guided me to explore the complex relationship between infrastructures and the diversity of lives intertwined with them. I attempt to delve deeper into the complexities of these relationships, striving to understand the experiences of those who interact with the infrastructure and their responses to these changes. During my journey to the north of Thailand and the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong border towns, the transborder transportation systems like highways, bridges, and river ports first caught my attention. As

I explored further, the complexity of the linkages between these tangible infrastructures and intangible factors such as policies, regulations, and laws became apparent. In particular, the responses and reactions of various actors involved in shaping and being shaped by infrastructure in the border towns were intriguing, each shedding light on its own narrative.

As with all ethnographic work, my affiliation with Chiang Mai University in Thailand facilitated access to local government officers and organisations and allowed for smoother introductions to interviewees. My previous experiences interacting with environmental activists and local NGOs led to familiarity with some staff members actively working in the town. Initially, I had only known a few people in the town, but I developed connections with the people I encountered there, particularly the owner of a guesthouse in Chiang Khong. Over time, we became close. We genuinely shared personal stories, and of course, I was her customer as well.

I developed rapport within the town spontaneously, often meeting people through casual conversations on the street, some of whom later turned out to be working on community committees. One person, in particular, became an important interlocutor, generously introducing me to others in her network. I also built connections in the town by finding common ground, listening attentively to their stories, sharing jokes, and recounting my personal experiences. Although these interactions were partly driven by research needs, they rarely felt inauthentic. I was sometimes surprised by people's openness to sharing personal information, rumours, family dramas, and gossip about corruption. Viewing my role from the perspective of being either an outsider or an insider, my temporary status in the town might have made individuals more comfortable sharing insights about their workplaces and neighbourhoods with me. However, it could also be simply because I was there, ready to listen when people needed to talk.

As a woman, I recognise that my gender and age have played a significant role in shaping my research experience and perspective. I found it easier to spend time and develop relationships with other women. In an NGO, it was more comfortable for me to hang around with a female staff member

who worked there with her children, finding her accounts and perspectives distinct from those of male staff. In the process of searching for long-term accommodation, I rented a private space with easy access to the owner's home, where her kitchen always served as a space for us to exchange our daily conversations.

During my fieldwork experience, I sometimes found myself in uncomfortable situations, such as being teased by men. For instance, during my Chinese class with NGO staff, the session was interrupted by a male guest who initiated an awkward conversation about my appearance. In another instance, while visiting a casino in Laos, I was mistakenly identified as a cross-border sex worker and had to navigate the awkward situation. Despite my aim to conduct a comprehensive study that captures the diverse experiences of all genders, I acknowledge that there were limitations and challenges during my fieldwork.

As a native Thai speaker fluent in the local dialect and possessing a general understanding of the cultural context regarding spiritual beliefs and Buddhist practices and ceremonies, I considered these factors to be advantageous in conducting this study. However, I was aware that my background and beliefs might influence my observation. In the process of analysis, I reviewed my field notes, my thoughts, and my journal of impressions and emotions that emerged during conducting fieldwork and carefully read through transcriptions, and other collected materials, which allowed me to reflect on instances when I may have taken certain occurrences for granted due to my familiarity with the culture. Thus, re-engaging with these materials enabled me to identify emerging themes, refine my research questions, and adjust my focus accordingly.

Utilising a grounded theory approach, I coded and grouped my notes with the assistance of the ATLAS.ti software, a qualitative data-analysis program. The software facilitates the process of categorising and organising data, helping me identify emerging themes. I began by organising field notes, interview transcripts, and other relevant documents into a broader theme. Once I had imported

all materials into the software, I coded the data based on the content and grouped them into specific themes.

In doing so, several major themes emerged, including the historical context of the Cold War, the development of the border zone, potential prosperity and risk of uncertainty resulting in various forms of speculation, and the theme of formal and informal trade. Additional themes included the impact of the pandemic on cross-border trade and transportation, the role of NGOs and Chinese agencies, as well as the cultural and social dynamics of the town. I use OneDrive and iCloud to store my data and photos, which efficiently mitigated the damage when I lost my hard disk during the writing period.

In the field, I disclosed my status as a PhD student to those I expected to interact with frequently. For people I was likely to meet just once, I simply informed them that I was writing a book about the border towns. In all instances, I made sure to explain the purpose of my research to the interviewees. In the dissertation, I decide to use the real name of the towns as it can provide valuable context for readers and researchers. However, I preserved confidentiality by using pseudonyms and only employing real names when participants granted their permission.

In conclusion, my positionality has been multifaceted, navigating roles such as a native Thai speaker, a woman, an anthropology student, a customer, a friend, and a stranger. These diverse aspects of my identity have undeniably shaped the research process and my understanding of the subject matter. By clarifying these various facets, I hope that this dissertation will allow readers to engage with my work and gain insight into my interpretation of the social life in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland infrastructure.

Thesis Argument and Structure

The proliferation of infrastructures under neoliberal development, designed to uphold stability and security in political, social, and environmental realms, along with the promise of prosperity, does not

always accomplish its intended goals. This thesis argues that, in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderlands context, these infrastructures built to accommodate Chinese logistic power can paradoxically breed volatility, triggering various responses from diverse groups of inhabitants. In this liminal state, rather than avoiding volatility, inhabitants harness it to optimise their plans, desires, expectations, and aspirations. Alternative infrastructures are either created or retrofitted to achieve their moral goals.

In this thesis, volatility is not just a negative; it also presents multifaceted challenges and opportunities that are deeply embedded in the lives of all borderland inhabitants. For many, volatility is perceived not merely as a temporary state but as an open gateway to infinite possibilities. Thus, this thesis emphasises the liminal phase of infrastructure, focusing especially on the “seams” to reveal the strategies adopted by inhabitants to embrace volatility amidst infrastructure transformations.

In examining infrastructure, I posit that our analysis should extend beyond simply considering human-made objects that ease or obstruct the movement of various entities. In this thesis, such entities could be as diverse as humans, non-humans, things, information, social relations, beliefs, and merits. The convergence of future-oriented infrastructures, past failures, and current uncertainties many times fosters the emergence of alternative infrastructures that permeate or retrofit the pre-existing ones. Therefore, infrastructure is not a static, fixed technical object; instead, it can evolve or be shaped by various forces.

In response to such volatility, the Thai-Lao Mekong borderland's inhabitants respond by embracing, creating, and navigating paths that are practical to them. I have observed that in the face of volatility, taking calculated risks is often preferred as it offers potential for the future instead of avoiding risks altogether. Within this process, a crucial element is the role of spiritual beliefs and the pursuit of merit accumulation, actions undertaken in the hope of achieving a better life. These elements provide not only solace but also a framework for understanding and embracing an ambiguous future, thereby contributing to their vision of future prosperity. Thus, the role of spirituality

and wealth-cultural practices in this context underscores the complexity and multi-dimensionality of what we understand as “infrastructure”.

Thai Mekong border towns have long embraced modernisation as an ideology yet remain in a state of transition. Although the promise of prosperity has not yet fully materialised, these individuals have been forging their own paths, adjusting to their specific conditions, pursuing their aspirations, and striving to achieve their goals in their own unique ways. Through the interactions among these various actors, connectedness is established in the process of weaving relationships among diverse elements, including human, non-human, spiritual, and material aspects, which sometimes permeate or operate within alternative infrastructures at different scales.

I further propose the concept of "infrastructure of prosperity" to capture the connectedness and the processes contributing to the creation and sustenance of prosperous landscapes. This concept is built on the understanding that prosperity results from the intricate interplay between tangible elements, such as physical infrastructure, and intangible elements, such as social relationships, aspirations, and moral values. Within this framework, the role of “meritisation” is emphasised as a key process that converts capital into abstract forms like merit, which in turn bestows social charisma and political power upon those who possess it. This power can then be utilised to transform the infrastructures and regenerate capital, creating a cyclical movement of moral wealth. These assemblages are constantly shaping infrastructures and social dynamics and fostering the illusion of a prosperity ideology. To support my argument, this thesis will be organised into five chapters.

In the first chapter, the Lancang-Mekong River is a crucial transboundary infrastructure connecting neighbouring countries. Before modern state boundaries were established, the Myanmar-Laos-Thailand Mekong borderland facilitated interaction among diverse groups, including traders, caravans from southern Yunnan, and refugees fleeing political conflicts. From the late 1960s till the 1970s, the Golden Triangle became infamous for being unruly during the Cold War and a site of power contestation between China and the United States. Historical remnants of this period include

Kuo Min Tang villages scattered across the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, where troops evaded southern Yunnan and operated secret missions against communist forces.

This chapter aims to explore the history of war infrastructure, with a focus on roads utilised by the American and Chinese governments for military operations, which have engendered regional tensions. It demonstrates the making of Myanmar-Lao-Thai Mekong border towns, consisting of diverse groups of people, and discusses the borderland infrastructure in the Mekong sub-region as an uncertainty-making engine – a process that has generated insecurity, ambiguity, and instability in the region for decades.

In Chapter 2, I examine the transformation of the Mekong borderland between Thailand and Laos following the reopening of the border and the establishment of a special economic zone influenced by liberal and free market policies in the region. The borderland's development plan aims to create a landscape of prosperity, but land speculation and land grabbing complicate this vision. I explore how people respond to the volatility of land prices and uncertainty of the future amidst failed projects and long waits for success. The concept of "orientation" helps in understanding how individuals cope with challenging moments and shape their current actions according to their future expectations (Bryant & Knight, 2019).

The first part of this chapter approaches the special economic zone development phenomena and scrutinises the planning proposed by states, emphasising the contrast between the intended outcomes and the actual results, which are marked by an extended waiting period for the yet unfulfilled promises of prosperity. In the second part, I adopt the speculation notions proposed by Laura Bear (2020), comparing quantitative a time-based measure to predict potentiality with the influence of magic, revealing how spirituality beliefs influence speculators' actions. The culture and spiritual worship of local Nagas become tools for land speculation among residents, paralleling state planning efforts in establishing Chiang Rai SEZ. The future-oriented infrastructure can make people accept present suffering in anticipation of promised prosperity. Concurrently, spiritual practices and

rituals are burgeoning as tools to harness boundless potentialities, cope with current unpleasant conditions, and navigate an uncertain future.

Chapter 3 focuses on trade activities across the Mekong border towns and Southern China, examining the complexities of global trading routes where formal and informal trade coexist. I demonstrate that the boom and bust of cross-border trading are influenced by the development of transportation infrastructure while the Chinese government continues to maintain considerable control over the flow of goods. Nonetheless, the sudden disruption of trade caused by the pandemic led to a halt in the circulation of goods and people, prompting the state to tighten its control over border-town life. Drawing upon the concept of “Logistical Power” developed by Xiang Biao (2022), investigating how states control and modify the flow of people, non-humans, goods, and information through systematised mobility infrastructure, including paperwork and transportation networks, the concept offers insight into the methods states use to regulate and oversee mobility during both normal and crisis situations.

Additionally, Saxer's (2016) concept of pathways provides a useful framework for exploring the interconnections and exchange systems within the Mekong trading route. The accounts of deviated routes illustrate that while formal trade is vigorously promoted, informal trade routes also play a crucial role in fulfilling needs and coexisting within the cross-border trading landscape.

In Chapter 4, to highlight the diverse responses of various groups, I present an account of an environmental activist group, Rak Chiang Khong, which plays a significant role in opposing China-backed Mekong dams construction and the Mekong navigation improvement project. However, China's recent shift towards environmentally friendly policies has brought a range of actors to the Chiang Khong border town, interacting with local NGOs. This chapter explores the complex outcomes of reshaping the infrastructure on the ground as each group pursues its interests and continuously shapes the town's future. I adopt Scaramelli’s (2019) concept of a moral ecology of infrastructure to explore the complex interplay of various actors, both human and non-human, that blur the distinction

between nature and technology. In this chapter 4, I consider the Mekong River as an infrastructure that has been transformed into a landscape where power struggles occur among multiple actors at different scales.

Chapter 5, the last chapter, focuses on analysing the wealth culture and relationships with infrastructure. I examine the complex interplay of various forms of infrastructure, both tangible and intangible, and the role of religious belief and practice in shaping an ideology of a prosperous landscape. This process leads to the accumulation of capital by multiple groups in the Thai-Lao Mekong border towns. I argue that the commodification of resources and meritisation are central to this transformation. To further explore this phenomenon, I draw on several concepts of Buddhism and wealth, highlighting how capital is legitimised and sustained through its conversion to an abstract form, such as merit. The increasing trend of temple construction and the expansion of merit networks serve as valuable examples for understanding the intricate relationship between infrastructure and prosperity.

In conclusion, I summarise that the infrastructures built to bolster China's logistical power have sparked volatility in the Mekong border towns. Nonetheless, during this transitional phase, residents are embracing this volatility and strategically navigating through the volatility of border life. They perceive it as a catalyst that could unlock prosperous potential for their future. This state of in-betweenness underscores the intricate dynamics these changes introduced, thereby painting a complex portrait of life on the frontier of a (as not yet) desired future.

Chapter 1

The Making of The Mekong Borderland

"Is that China's island?"

Figure 5. Chinese Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone Pier, Laos, October 22, 2019

A golden turret rising against a backdrop of greenery-covered mountains, the Kings Romans Casino shimmered and shone against the bright sky on the Laos riverbank. A tour guide provided guests with an account of the owner, Zhao Wei, a Chinese tycoon who has been running his business and building the new Chinatown in the Ton Phueng district in Bokeo province in the Laos borderland for over ten years. Besides the golden crown-shaped buildings and construction sites of hotels, shopping malls, and condominiums, she highlighted that a new airport was being built within the inner area. When the ship slowly approached the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZ international pier, we could now clearly see the view of the golden domes, the two Chinese dragons snaking up the stairway, an enormous sign

written in red Chinese characters on a concrete wall '*金三角经济特区欢迎您' (Welcome to the Golden Triangle special economic zone).* A middle-aged Chinese man sitting beside me immediately asked:

> *"Is that China's island?"*
>
> "*No, sir, it's actually Laos' land. But it is called 'China's Golden Triangle special economic zone,'"* she replied.

He nodded and glared at the huge Chinese sign for a few seconds. It was astonishing to witness a sprawling modern Chinese town, complete with newly constructed infrastructure, situated on the Laotian border—a site that had been a paddy field just a decade ago. Our ship now stopped at the dock to let the tour group visit the Don Sao market, which has become a part of the special economic zone (SEZ). There is no need for a Laos visa to enter the place, but the Laos government charges a so-called "step on land fee" on arrival. It was a tourist market selling similar products to those which can be found in other border markets in Thailand – for example, knock-off designer purses, imitation goods, sunglasses, shoes, bags, and tobacco. In addition, the market offered small glimpses of local culture with some typical handicrafts and snake whiskey.

At the dock, there was a large old cargo vessel named "*Hua Ping"*; we were told that it was one of the two Chinese cargo ships that were violently attacked on the Mekong River near the Golden Triangle SEZ in 2011. A Chinese lady immediately responded that she remembered the incident; clearly, she mentioned the name of a drug kingpin, "Naw Kham", who was arrested as the mastermind of the murder (fieldnote, 2019). After a decade, I was surprised that the ship was still there. However, it is no wonder that many Chinese knew about the brutal murder: as soon as the Mekong River massacre was reported, it immediately hit the internet; terrifying photos of the dead Chinese sailors circulated online and provoked outrage across China in October 2011. The Chinese crime-action film that is based on

the incident named '湄公河行动' or "Operation Mekong" was released in China on September 30, 2016, and quickly led China's box office, raking in $41.3 million in ticket sales in two weeks (Kaiman, 2016).

Figure 6. Illustration promoting the movie "Operation Mekong".

Note. From "Operation Mekong" by DTM Publishing Co., Ltd., 2016 (https://www.dtmdatabase.com/News.aspx?id=77).

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Mekong Infrastructure: A US-China Flashpoint?

China has significantly invested in the Lower Mekong region's hard infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and highways, with hydropower dam projects being particularly controversial. Originating from China's Tibetan Plateau, the Mekong flows from the south of China through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. China's strategic investments, particularly in dam construction since 2010, have bolstered its control over the river's flow and resources. This dominance doesn't just impact the livelihoods of nations dependent on the Mekong but also curtails the US's historical influence in the region, hinting at an emerging geopolitical tussle between the two powers (Hoang, 2023, p. 10).

Figure 7. Mekong Mainstream Dams

Note. Reprinted from "Mainstream Mekong dams have been proven time after time to devastate the river's fisheries and agricultural processes along its floodplain," by B. Eyler & C. Weather, 2020, June 23, Stimson. (https://www.stimson.org/2020/mekong-mainstream-dams/).

The Mekong, as an international river, has increasingly become central to geopolitical dynamics, especially in the context of relations between the US, China, and Mekong nations. Between 2009 and 2020, the US Department of State and the Agency for International Development actively

engaged in the Mekong region, supporting a diverse range of programmes from health to human rights. The Mekong-US partnership, launched in 2020, aims to foster stability, peace, prosperity, and sustainable development through cooperation between the Mekong partner countries and the US.

While China frames these infrastructure developments as efforts to overcome natural obstacles, mitigate risks, foster prosperity, and further its mission of civilisation, the US primarily focuses on the environmental consequences. Specifically, the repercussions of China's dams on downstream nations have had significant detrimental effects on livelihoods. The recent environmental concerns surrounding the Mekong have intensified the geopolitical dynamics between the United States and China in Southeast Asia. While this situation may seem new, the tensions between these two powers have deep historical roots that go beyond current events.

During the Cold War, the region, especially the Mekong borderland encompassing Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand – known as the Golden Triangle – acted as a proxy battleground for communist and liberal alliances, with active military operations. However, post-Cold War political tensions gradually subsided. Embracing neoliberal ideals, the Thailand-Laos border reopened, catalysed by the GMS programme mentioned above. This led to infrastructure-development initiatives, framed around the idea that such infrastructure could enhance connectivity, stabilise the environment, and bolster security for borderland inhabitants. However, I contend that increased connectivity doesn't necessarily guarantee stability and security.

This chapter offers a backdrop to the transformation of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland, delving into the historical context of wartime infrastructures. I posit that such infrastructure can cultivate insecurity, amplify uncertainty, and create political ambiguity within the region. Specifically, these infrastructural projects can further exacerbate the volatility of border life. The aforementioned infrastructure initiatives, such as highways, roads, bridges and the Chiang Rai special economic zone, weren't developed on untouched terrains. Instead, they emerged in areas historically rife with multi-scaled political power struggles.

Pirate of the Mekong River and Chinese Casino Kingpin

> *"13:42, October 10, 2011*
>
> *BANGKOK, October 10 (Xinhua) – A total of 13 Chinese sailors, who were on two ships hijacked by drug traffickers last week, were confirmed dead after investigators found another body on Mekong River in northern Thailand's Chiang Rai Province, local authorities said on Monday.*
>
> *Searchers found the body in nearby Chiang Khong District early on Monday, said Seramsak Seesan, chief of Chiang Rai's Chiang Saen District, where the other bodies were found. The two hijacked Chinese-flagged ships reportedly had 13 crew members."* (Xinhua, 2011)

The Mekong River massacre occurred on October 5, 2011; thirteen Chinese sailors were killed in their two Chinese cargo boats – the Hua Ping and Yu Xing 8; the bodies were found near the river trijunction of Myanmar-Laos-Thailand Border, Chiang Saen port, Thailand (Marshall, 2012). China Daily reported that most of the victims had been handcuffed, blindfolded, and shot at close range. A million amphetamine pills were found at the crime scene; the incident was quickly circulated in Chinese Media, which sparked widespread outrage in China. In response, China suspended all Chinese shipping on the Mekong for five weeks, senior Chinese officials arrived in Thailand soon after the incident, and within a month, Beijing sent gunboat patrols to the region (Head, 2012).

China exerted significant pressure on the Thai government regarding the investigation, demanding transparency throughout the process. A year later, a joint hunting operation conducted by the security forces from Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and China arrested a notorious ethnic Shan warlord, Naw Kham, in Bo Kaeo province within Laos (Head, 2012). Naw Kham had been alleged to be the mastermind behind the kidnapping and murder of the 13 Chinese sailors on the Mekong River; he and

his associates went on trial in Kunming, and were sentenced to death by lethal injection on March 1, 2013; the executions were broadcast live by China Central Television (CCTV)(Zhai & Yu, 2013).

The Mekong River massacre was the most prominent violent attack on people of Chinese nationality in the Mekong region. Although the case was closed, a great deal about the official account is unclear. Various hypotheses supposed that Naw Kham was a scapegoat for the incident due to the conflict in the drug business in the area. At the end of October 2011, the Thai police announced that after the investigation, eyewitnesses claimed that nine soldiers from Thai army units were involved in the killings; there were witnesses who claimed that they saw several Thai soldiers board the barges and that they began shooting. The nine officers of a Thai elite anti-narcotics task force were arrested the following day, but they all denied killing the Chinese sailors, and the case disappeared into Thailand's judicial system (Eyler, 2019, p. 124; Head, 2012).

Naw Kham, a notorious ethnic Shan warlord, has become a legendary figure in the lawless Golden Triangle border for over a decade; he was accused of severe crimes, extorting, smuggling, racketeering, kidnapping, and running a narcotics business. The media portrayed him as a "freshwater pirate" of the Mekong River. Still, he had played a Robin Hood role in the local community for years, redistributing money to local villagers, officers, and armies of Burma and Laos. However, when the Chinese casino emerged in Ton Phueng along the Laotian border, Naw Kham started to lose control over the region (J. Howe, 2013).

Zhao Wei, the leader of the Hong Kong-registered King Roman Group, is a Chinese entrepreneur from Heilongjiang in northern China. He previously managed a casino and entertainment complex in Macau, China, as well as in Mong La, a border town between Myanmar and China. (Rippa, 2019, p. 253). He relocated his casino business from China due to the pressure imposed by the Chinese government's prohibition of the gambling business (Laungaramsri, 2019, p. 36). He has started to build the new modern Chinatown, and took over a casino from former Thai owners in 2007. However, it seems that the presence of the Chinese Golden Triangle's special economic zone disrupted Naw

Kham's business ecosystem. For instance, a conflict between Naw Kham and Zhao Wei took place in April 2011 when Naw Kham's gang captured three Chinese-owned casino boats. Zhao Wei was compelled to pay a ransom of approximately 25 million baht ($8.3 million) to ensure the safe return of the vessels and their crews. However, Naw Kham claimed that the sum was a protection fee and was a lesson for Zhao Wei. (S.H.A.N., 2011).

Additionally, a report released by the Thai Parliament's committee[3] investigating the Mekong massacre revealed that the turf war between Naw Kham and Zhao Wei had escalated over time, as both were involved in illicit trade within the Golden Triangle region. Zhao Wei had even offered a bounty of 50 million baht for the capture of Naw Kham. An interview with Andrew Marshall of Reuters, Thai MP Sunai Chulpongsatorn, who chairs the parliamentary foreign affairs committee investigating the case, presented another theory related to Naw Kham. He explained, "There are many Naw Khams, not just one. It is akin to a drama. He is a fabricated character. Although he exists, it seems he has been attributed with an exaggerated level of importance" (Marshall, 2012). Journalist Jeff Howe (2013) detailed his interview with the chief of the local marine police force on his visit to Chiang Saen in July 2012 about his thought on the murder case, "I really don't know," he said. "Maybe you can tell me. I heard the killers worked for the CIA".

The truth of the matter remained a mystery, but Naw Kham's capture and trial in a Chinese court demonstrated China's powerful influence in mainland Southeast Asia. The reach of Chinese law reach extended beyond the nation's borders, and the broadcast powerfully demonstrated the Chinese government's commitment to safeguarding its citizens and interests on a global scale. Consequently, under China's hard pressure, the four countries have agreed to set up joint security patrols to secure transportation routes along the Mekong River. The initiative's headquarters were set up in Xishuangbanna, with liaison offices in the other three participating countries. Armed patrol boats and

[3] The House Foreign Affairs Standing Committee. (January 12,2012). The Report on investigation of the Chinese sailors massacre in Chiang Rai province [the international relationship between China and Thailand]. Thai Parliament's committee.

Chinese border-police forces have been regularly departing from Yunnan province to conduct joint security patrols alongside their counterparts from Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand since December 10, 2011 (CGTN, 2021).

The joint patrols clearly expand China's influence on the cross-border security operation on the Mekong international river; the security force has become a concrete indicator showing Beijing's evolving action to protect Chinese economic interests in an anarchic region such as the Golden Triangle with a long-term solution (Parello-Plesner & Duchâtel, 2014, p. 102; Strangio, 2020, p. 56)

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Apparently, the tales of drug lords and criminal scenes intertwined with the spectacle of a modern Chinatown landscape challenge the development discourse that often portrays infrastructure as an inherently civilising force that improves living conditions by default. The following section delves deeper into the formation of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland before it was chosen by state and private entities as a space with potential for economic prosperity.

The infrastructure projects that emerged during the Cold War period in the Upper Mekong Sub-region demonstrate how these projects materialised political aspirations and state ideologies, and served military logistical strategies. This chapter demonstrate that a site of power contestation emerged through the historical development of Chinese road construction and infrastructure projects, supported by the United States during the 1960s-1970s in the border towns of northern Thailand and northwestern Laos.

In the region that was transformed into a centre for proxy warfare, the built infrastructure not only connected neighbourhoods but also, paradoxically, drove them apart. Therefore, my argument extends beyond the conventional view of infrastructure projects as merely technical objects. I assert

that these projects have the capacity not just to facilitate connectivity, but also to breed insecurity, foster uncertainty, and engender political ambiguity in the region. Tracing back to the infrastructure development of that era, I perceive it as part of the US military's efforts to secure the vital systems supporting their regional operations while promoting the well-being of local populations. Constructing roads and other infrastructures was seen as ways to bolster host countries' economies and political systems, which in turn protected them from external threats. Therefore, safeguarding a nation's vital systems was an essential aspect of national security, justifying their interventions in other countries.

Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff (2008) connect state-sponsored infrastructure projects with securitisation processes. In a similar vein, Knox & Gambino (2023) argue that the state's concern with infrastructures, both as subjects of and tools for risk management, has driven investment in national and international mega-projects. Using this approach, I examine how war infrastructure was developed to address security issues. This includes the Chinese-backed roads and the US Army's efforts to overcome logistical challenges, as well as the state's endeavours to secure borders through infrastructure development during the Cold War era. This trend of using infrastructure as a tool for border security has continued to shape state strategies up to the present day.

I argue that the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland infrastructure, initially perceived as a mechanism for security and prosperity creation, has paradoxically functioned as an engine of uncertainty, fostering insecurity, volatility and instability in the region. To support my argument, I focus on several key issues in this chapter. I highlight criminal activities, transnational border security, and the history of the Cold War involving Chinese and US American military operations in Thailand and Laos. I investigate the criminals that provoked China's authorities into ensuring the safety of their citizens and explore the perceptions of Thai authorities regarding the conflict in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. I then go further back in time to introduce the diverse actors living in the area, including those who strive to live independently from the state, traders, and refugees. I specifically focus on the operations of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Kuo Min Tang forces (KMT), and

Hmong troops, as their accounts effectively illustrate the conflicts associated with infrastructure development.

To better understand the formation of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland, the following section will offer a brief overview of the field site's recent history, providing essential background information. I will trace the story of the Mekong borderland, which once served as a place to avoid state power, then as a route for pioneering traders from southern China, and ultimately as a shelter for refugees escaping the political conflict.

Pioneer Trader and Refugee

Historically, a tributary mode of production – a social structure in which the ruling class procured surplus resources from the more subordinate population through political rather than economic means – has been a primary characteristic of the social formation in the upper-Mekong region (Evans, 1990, p. 30; Walker, 1999, p. 27). Within the context of relationships with China, the tributary system is more than just a diplomatic network between China and its neighbours. It involves tributary gifts to the Chinese emperor in return for protection and trade rights, and this symbolic and ritualistic system acknowledges the emperor as the "Son of Heaven", reinforcing his status while reflecting the broader cosmological order (Mancall, 1968, p. 64).

During 1800-1893; the Siamese town of Nan and the Lao town of Luang Prabang were the major tributary overlords in this area; the elites collected tax, rent, corvée labour, and slavery in the major centres supported by military force, political and religious ideologies (Amin, 1976, p. 16; Walker, 1999, pp. 27–29; Wolf et al., 2010, p. 80). Moreover, the tributary and mercantile institutions were interlinked as various commercial activities were also practiced in northern Laos and supplemented their tributary income with direct and indirect revenue (Walker, 1999, p. 29).

James C. Scott introduces the concept of Zomia to re-examine the history of the upland region of Southeast Asia and Southern China and proposes the concept of the zone of a "region of refuge"

where the upland inhabitants chose to distance themselves from state power and preserve their own free way of practising agriculture, avoiding the corvée labour system by living away from the influence of the state (J. C. Scott, 2009). The *"Golden Triangle",* a mountainous terrain extending from Burma's hills in the west, north into China's Yunnan, east into Laos and Thailand's northwestern provinces, was a part of the zone that generally has been a centre of the largest source of opium, morphine, and heroin since the 19th century. The climatic and soil conditions of this area were ideally suitable for opium cultivation; thus, opium production has provided a significant income for highland ethnic communities (Sen, 1991, p. 241).

The indigenous people who inhabit hilly Northern Thailand are generally labelled as "hill tribes" or "Chao Khao" in Thai. Historically, transborder commerce mainly depended on the refugee population, foreign aid, timber, opium, and heroin (Siriphon, 2017, p. 81). Yunnanese Chinese played an important role in cross-border trading in the area by serving as intermediaries in opium trade and daily items with the hill people; the Hui Yunnanese caravan traders using horses and mules were the early pioneers to Northern Thailand; they journeyed south from Yunnan by passing through Burma during the dry season, carried cotton, silks, medicines, and daily consumption goods from Yunnan to trade with ivory, medical plants and wild meat (FORBES, 1987, pp. 6–15; Hill, 1982, p. 7,8; Soonthornpasuch, 1977; L. Wang, 2006, p. 338)

The other Mekong border town on the Thai side is Chiang Khong, located 60 kilometres downstream from Chiang Saen. Since 1804, Chiang Khong emerged as the most crucial riverside settlement in the upper Mekong. Chiang Khong's location was ideal for trading and for collecting taxes on traded goods, and became a tribute centre for scattered mountain villages to the Siamese overlords (Walker, 1999). It was also used as a place to control the passing river traffic by collecting a toll and taxes from traders along the Mekong and its tributaries (Lefever-Pontalis, 1902, p. 100,127 in Walker,1999, p.33)

From 1893 to 1953, France gained control of all Lao territory to the east of the Mekong, and the Burmese came under British rule. There was a competition between French and British centred on securing access to the significant area to facilitate their control of trade and natural resources. In the French colonial period, the French used Chiang Saen as a strategic centre for transborder economic, cultural, and political interests. Since then, modern mapping technology has created “sharp and clear-cut” colonial demarcation and highlighted territorial boundaries in the borderlands. The ambiguous and non-bounding spatial practices of the past were immediately displaced (Walker, 1999, p. 43; Winichakul, 1994, p. 111) .

The route between Mekong upper region and Yunnan was considered as a crucial commercial channel to the colonisers’ market expansion. Some British businesspeople proposed a railway project linking Siam and Yunnan via the Upper Mekong, but lobbyists had little support in the Foreign Office; thus, the project was unsuccessful. The French then gained control of salt wells, which represented a valuable resource produced in this area, as well as extensive teak reserves that lay across the river. In 1895, the French took Boten and Mengla from the Chinese; there were abundant salt wells and essential areas for Chinese caravans. French control over the northern boundary was an effective strategy as it secured access to salt, commercial routes and travelling paths linked to the major Yunnanese centres. The French also won preferential terms for goods transportation to Yunan and rights to navigation along the Mekong into China, but the French ambition was disappointed by the Mekong rapids (Anon, 1896, p.2999 ; Chandran, 1971, p.12, Lefevre-Pontalis, 1902, p.314 in Walker 1999, p.44-45).

The French replaced Siamese power in these trading towns; however, the French intervention in cross-border trade was not successful until late 1895, when the French declared a colonial monopoly and official opium enterprise in Louangphabang in northern Laos. Opium trading was strictly monitored and regulated. As a result, the Yunnanese caravan traders were more reluctant to enter into commercial arrangements with the French. They began to conduct an extensive illegal trade as the

prices of opium were higher, resulting from the opium monopolies in both Siam and Indochina (Unger, 1991, p.325; McCoy, 1970, p. 86; Picanon, 1901,p. 262,285 in Walker, 1999,p. 49).

Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong were known as vital riverside trading communities on the banks of the Mekong River. The Chinese caravans travelled along the routes between Yunnan and northern Thailand, passing through Louangnamtha and Viangphoukha to cross the Mekong at Chiang Khong. The main products carried by the Yunnanese muleteers included silk, tea, salt, opium, metal goods, hats and Chinese baubles. They were sold in northern Siamese markets and villages along the route. On the return trip, raw cotton, deer antlers, and the bladders of bears were carried back to China (Bock, 1883, p. 230, Izikowitz , 1979, p.315 in Walker, 1999, p. 32) .

Figure 8. Opium Caravan Painting. Photographed at Baan Phin Local Opium Museum, Chiang Saen. October 24, 2019.

The Hui Yunnanese caravan traders were called *“Ho” or “Chin Ho”* in Thai, which refers to Chinese who migrated overland as opposed to those who migrated overseas from Fujian and Guangdong in the context of Thailand (Wang, 2006). In the mid-twentieth century, a small number of Yunnanese migrants inhabited Northern Thailand; however, the population dramatically increased due

to the political uncertainty in China around 1949. After a long civil war in China between Mao Tse-Tung's communist armies and Chiang Kai-shek's troops, Mao had occupied most of Mainland China by 1950. Chiang Kai-shek's defeated Nationalists were driven on to Taiwan while some of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuo Min Tang (KMT) forces had to retreat from the southern Yunnan into the borderland of Burma, Laos and Thailand. Most Yunnanese people of the KMT army were Han; the influx of KMT into Thailand in the 1950s increased the population of Han Yunnanese to 80,000, and that of Hui Yunnanese to 10,0000 in Northern Thailand during 1998 (L. Wang, 2006, p. 341).

The CIA and the Kuo Min Tang Forces in the Golden Triangle

When the communists took control of China's mainland in 1949, the defeated Nationalist Army fled to the border of Burma, Laos, and Thailand. The evacuation operation gradually started in the following years to bring them to Taiwan; however, some of the Nationalist Chinese Armies remained in the border area, hoping to win back Yunnan. During the preparation time, military aid and supplies were delivered by the US and Thai police.

In the 1950s, the world was divided into two contentious blocs: nations aligned with socialist ideologies, and those partnered with the United States. The political atmosphere in Asia was characterised by distrust and hostility among countries, with events such as the Korean War, the victory of communist forces in mainland China, the conflict between North and South Vietnam, and communist insurgencies throughout Southeast Asia. The People's Republic of China soon became a giant in the Communist world in Asia, while the United States attempted to recruit potential allies to counter the aggressive communist expansion from China and Vietnam, and Thailand was selected as a robust anti-Communist ally to counter communist expansion (Unger, 1991, pp. 275–278).

In 1949, Civil Air Transport (CAT), an American-owned but Nationalist Chinese-registered airline, faced a financial problem as communist expansion affected its commercial routes in China. The chairperson of CAT's Board of Directors found a way to save their business by lobbying for US economic

and military aid for the pro-Nationalist operation in Yunnan and the Muslim provinces in northwest China (Gibson & Chen, 2011). He convinced US policymakers that airlifting military aid would bolster Chiang Kai-shek's forces and impede a communist win in China. As the CIA targeted communists in East Asia, they agreed to fund CAT airline in Sanya on Hainan Island, making CIA missions the airline's top priority. CAT later became known as Air America.

In 1950, ex-officers from the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and a CIA team set up the secretive Naresuan committee in Bangkok, Thailand, which comprised Thailand's top military and political elites (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 101). The American-owned Sea Supply Corporation (SEA Supply) and the CIA trained and armed Thai police and military personnel as a counter-insurgency force. These forces defended Thai borders and executed anti-communist missions in neighbouring countries. SEA Supply also supported a Chiang Kai-shek royal army in Yunnan (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 102).

The People's republic of China was concerned about the KMT troops in northern Burma and Southern China borderland. On February 19,1961, *Peking Review* printed:

> "…*Particularly serious is the fact that the Kuomintang bandit troops which have fled from northern Burma are now being regrouped in northwestern Laos and northern Thailand, preparing to co-ordinate their operations with the attacks of the Laotian rebel troops on the Government forces and menacing the security of the southwestern borders of China. U.S. intervention and aggression in Laos has become more blatant...*" ('Peking Review', 1961)

In 1960-61, the Peking government and the Burmese government coordinated their military troops and successfully pushed the KMT out of the Burmese sovereign territory (P.Y. Hung & Baird, 2017, p. 3). The KMT troops retreated from northern Burma to the borders of northern Thailand and northwestern Laos, settling along the border of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces.

Alfred McCoy (2003) examined the heroin trade's history, questioning America's drug--trafficking role during the Cold War in Southeast Asia. He argues that the CIA, amidst fears of communist expansion, supported KMT forces along the borders of Burma, Laos, and Thailand and the Truman administration even armed the KMT remnants in Burma (McCoy, 2003, pp. 162–166). To prevent the Chinese Communist military's southeastwardly advance, the US backed the Nationalist forces in Southwest China's border. The KMT, serving as a barrier against China's invasion of Burma and Thailand, received US military aid, including ammunition, equipment, and provisions (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p.111).

In *The Secret Army,* an American Consul General in Chiang Mai recounted the KMT force's activities in the borderlands, emphasising their significant role in the narcotics trade (Gibson & Chen, 2011). They were in extremely difficult circumstances due to the battlefield defeats in southwestern China and Burma, and the ties with Taiwan gradually became tenuous. Without good economic opportunities, the KMT soldiers became more involved in opium smuggling and escorting at the borderland in order to support families and military troops (Gibson & Chen, 2011; P.-Y. Hung & Baird, 2017).

Figure 9. A photo of American Volunteers and KMT Soldier, Sard Town. Photographed at the Memorial Hall (Chinese Division 93 Memorial) in Mae Salong Nok, Mae Fa Luang , Chiang Rai. November 15, 2019

Figure 10. A photo of the first Yunnanese anti-communist troop departure to Taiwan. Photographed at The Memorial Hall (Chinese Division 93 Memorial) in Mae Salong Nok, Mae Fa Luang, Chiang Rai. November 15,2019

After the failure of the Yunnan invasion, the KMT shifted its focus to controlling the Shan States, collecting various fees from residents. They also monetised opium transportation across the Burma-Thailand border (McCoy, 2003,p.354-355). The United States implicitly supported the opium trade in the Golden Triangle to gain support from the KMT and ethnic minorities to counter the communist expansion. The CIA turned a blind eye to opium plantation and trading in the highland area, preferring to perceive it as a traditional practice for indigenous people (Douglas, 1972, p. 13). The relationships among KMT leaders, the Americans and the Thai police were well established through the cooperation in opium trading, shipping and military supplying across the border (Gibson & Chen, 2011; P.Y.Hung & Baird, 2017).

Guarding the Road: The KMT fighting for a new home in Thailand

The mountainous region stretching from southern China through Laos to northern Thailand is home to diverse ethnic groups. Among the most prominent are the "Hmong" in Thailand, with migration roots from southern China and strong ties to Hmong on the China mainland. In the 1950s, unlike in Laos, many Thai Hmong from areas like Chiang Rai, Nan, and Phetchabun Province joined the communists, largely due to the Thai government's suppression.

Worried about the critical situation at the borderland, the Thai central government tried more actively to take control over the far north by granting Thai citizenship to highland people and launching a “development” programme in the highland area. In the 1960s, the communist operation in the highland area was getting more intense. The Thai army reacted to the fear by launching a campaign to resettle the highland villagers to the lowland area. Discontent among the Hmong and other Highland communities was rapidly spreading.

In the 1970s, the communist insurgents, including ethnic Hmong from Yunnan, were operating in the northern highlands at the border between Thailand and Laos, and several “liberated villages” were established in Chiang Rai’s highland area (Gibson & Chen, 2011,p.454). The Royal Thai

Government began to employ the KMT troops to work as a Royal Thai Government (RTG) counterinsurgency in the Communist zone. The Thai Government offered the KMT armies permanent refugee status and resettlement in return for their fighting.

Notably, building roads into rural areas that the communist-party troops inhabited was a critical strategy of the Thai government to counter the communist insurgency. They aimed to provide greater access to the highland areas by using the excuse of facilitating economic development and increasing integration between highland ethnic groups and lowland residents. In fact, the road provided access for the Thai armies, polices and officers to monitor the highland communities. In response to this, the Communist Party in Thailand (CPT) kept interrupting by attacking the road builders and construction sites. The construction companies required security protection in order to complete the road building on schedule. In the late 1970s, construction companies hired the KMT troops as security guards for the road-building operation (Gibson & Chen, 2011, pp. 458–460).

Figure 11. Map Showing Military Movement Route, Photographed at KMT Memorial Hall, Ban Pha Tang, Wiang Kaen District, Chiang Rai. December 11, 2021

By the beginning of 1978, the construction site faced intense resistance and was being attacked. In particular, on the road being built to link the valley between Doi Yao and Doi Pha Mon in Chiang Khong District, the KMT troops encountered over 100 attacks. The valley was considered to be a more significant area of CPT operation; the severe confrontation between the KMT force and the CPT occurred in July 1979, with the Thai artillery and airstrikes supporting the KMT in the battle with the CPT. The fight was ongoing for a few weeks before the victory of the KMT. The KMT troops lost 170 soldiers and suffered over a hundred wounded (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 213)

The KMT soldiers have paid a high price for living on Thai soil. At Chiang Khong, there is a cemetery and a monument to the KMT soldiers killed while fighting under the Thai Royal Government operation and providing security for road construction. There is also a memorial to Nationalist Chinese soldiers at the KMT cemetery at Mae Salong in Chiang Rai. Today, it is similar to other KMT villages in northern Thailand; the KMT community in Mae Salong has been promoted to encourage tourists to visit the community, taste traditional Yunnanese dishes, walk in a tea plantation, and taste various kinds of tea and coffee.

Yunnanese refugee villages are scattered throughout northern Thailand, predominantly in the Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces. Much like other rural Thai youth, many from these KMT villages migrate to cities seeking better opportunities. On a brief visit to Chiang Khong in January 2022, I dined at a small Japanese restaurant. Engaging in conversation with the owner, I learned he was the son of a KMT soldier. He shared that he had left his village at a young age to work in Bangkok, learned sushi-making from a Japanese chef, and worked in various restaurants before returning to Chiang Rai to open his own restaurant in Chiang Khong

Figure 12 The Entrance of KMT Soldiers' Cemetery, Chiang Khong, August 22, 2021.Photagraphed by Playfa Namprai.

Figure 13 The KMT Soldiers' Cemetery, Chiang Khong, August 22, 2021.Photagraphed by Playfa Namprai

Figure 14 Spirit Tablet of the KMT Soldiers. Photographed at The Memorial Hall (Chinese Division 93 Memorial) in Mae Salong Nok, Mae Fa Luang, Chiang Rai, November 15,2019.

Figure 15 Spirit Tables of the KMT Soldiers. Photographed at KMT Memorial Hall, Ban Pha Tang, Wiang Kaen District, Chiang Rai, December 11, 2021

Retracing the brief yet layered history of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland reveals the complex interactions of its diverse inhabitants and migrants. This area, influenced by regional political volatility, has been a focal point of tension between major powers like China and the US in Southeast Asia. The borderland is not merely a dormant canvas awaiting development; its history is intertwined with geopolitical strife. Subsequent sections will provide a more detailed look at the war infrastructures that intensified regional tensions during the Cold War.

Mekong Showdown: the US vs. China's War Infrastructures

In 1950, with the victory of communist troops in mainland China along with the communist revolts throughout Southeast Asia, the American policymakers were warned of the “domino effect”; a theory based on the prevailing foreign policy that communists would quickly take over the entire region by spreading into Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and so forth. As a result, from the Geneva Agreements of 1954, Laos became the arena of an intense political conflict between the Communists allies and the non-Communist allies. The geopolitical interest underlying the competition between the divided political groups resulted in an unstable political situation in the country.

Thailand became a solid anti-Communist ally; the United States policy aimed to develop the country to serve as a geographical and political base in defence of Southeast Asia. The economic and military aid flooded into Thailand, enabling the expansion of the Thai armed forces. The United States established a large Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG) in Thailand in the following years to train the Thai army, it was estimated that by 1960 the United States had spent over $500 million for military aid in Thailand (Darling, 1962, p 99- 102). Consequently, between 1950 and 1975, Thailand received $650 million from the US (Girling, 2019, p. 235). Clearly, the country became one of the essential anti-communist players in the Cold War during the 1960s–1970s (Osornprasop, 2012, p. 186).

1) American Military operations along the Thai-Lao border

Similarly, in Laos, the U.S strategy to fight against the communist expansion was in a frame of low-profile rural action comprising rural resistance activities and several aids programs. The CIA played a significant role in conducting the operation in Laos. They turned the indigenous people, particularly the Hmong communities, against the communist forces (Douglas, 1972). They had trained the Hmong guerrilla force to fight the Pathet Lao forces, supported by the North Vietnamese Army. The Thai "Police Aerial Resupply Unit", supported by the CIA, joined covertly to the training programme to help the Hmong force in operation on Laos soil (Girling, 2019, p.237).

The Hmong troops were led by Vang Pao general, the Hmong troops served as mercenaries fighting on behalf of the Americans (Elliott & Thomson, 2010). The training programme was launched in the upland valleys of the Plain of Jars, followed by other development programmes that promised to lift the standard of living for the Hmong (Douglas, 1972, pp.35,.41-45). Besides the Hmong, the Lao Theung ethnic group was also recruited. Indeed, the recruitment comprised "threats and inducements" that some of the Hmong villages had no choice but to attend to the forces; otherwise, their villages would be considered as communist and attacked (McCoy, 2003,p.312).

During 1962-1972, the US provided aid to the Royal Lao government – approximately $536,278,000. More than half of the funds were spent on refugee and rehabilitation projects (for the Hmong), public health, agriculture, education, rural development, public safety, public administration, narcotics suppression, and transportation (USAID report).[4] A Provincial Maternal and Child Health Centre was established in Ban Huay Xai, Laos, opposite Chiang Khong. Operation Brotherhood hospital and public-health teams established at Huay Xai in 1969 served 130 villages with a technical staff of 2,460 persons.

[4] See more in William W. Sage Collection on Laos (1894-1999). MSS-281. Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection. ASU Library, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ. http://www.azarchivesonline.org/xtf/view?docId=ead/asu/sage.xml

The aid programmes also included the construction of a major road, and 285km reconstruction of RLG-13 north from Hin Heup to Xieng Ngeun, an Industry Laon Fund provided to the private sector, and loans financed by the United States and administered by the Development Bank of Laos. In brief, the development of basic infrastructures such as roads, irrigation systems, schools, and hospitals have reflected, for the Hmong people, the sense of being taken care of and are understood as a response to their desire for security and the ability to live in better conditions.

2) Chinese military operation along the Thai-Lao border

The most significant invasion of the Chinese in Laos in the 1960s-1970s took the form of the road construction built by Chinese workers in northwestern Laos. The project ultimately strengthened the transportation and trading links between Mengla and Louangnamtha via the border village of Boten, bypassing Muangsing in the late 1960s. Later, the Chinese continued to construct roads from Boten to Oudomxai and onward to Muangkhoa and Pakbeng. In this period, thousands of Chinese labourers and engineers were assigned to work on construction sites in Laos (Godly and St Goar 1991, p.292-297,302-309 in Walker, 1999, p. 54-55)

Initially, the Lao Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, the leader of the Royal Lao Government, visited Peking in April 1961; he asked Chinese Premier Chou En-lai to develop a road from Yunnan Province into Laos. As a result, an official agreement for the road was signed on January 13, 1962 (Peking Review,1962). The Chinese planned to build a road from Meng La in Southern Yunnan toward Phong Saly town (Godley & Goar, 1991, p. 291). For the Laos leaders, the Chinese roadbuilding in Laos would counterbalance the heavy Soviet influence within the country. At the same time, the Peking government perceived that the road would contribute to consolidating their power to control the southern Yunnan where the KMTs Army still maintaned a presence and continued their operations at the borderland of Burman, Thailand and Laos (Gibson & Chen, 2011; Godley & Goar, 1991; McCoy, 2003).

Furthermore, the Peking government was concerned about the loyalty of the local populace in southern Yunnan, where several ethnic minorities groups lived that were distinct from the Chinese Han majority in the north (Godley & Goar, 1991, pp.288-289). Remarkably, the Miao[5] people, one of the largest ethnic minorities groups in southwest China, are distributed across mountainous areas on both sides of the Sino-Lao border toward the north of Thailand. The geographic proximity and such a wide distribution of related ethnic minority groups had made the Peking government particularly sensitive to the southern border with Laos (Langer, 1972, pp. 8–10). Therefore, building the road connecting Meng La in southern Yunnan to Phong Saly town in Laos would demonstrate the Peking government's authority over the borderland of China (Godley & Goar, 1991).

In 1962-3, Chinese engineers and 10,000 Chinese labourers had been building roads from its southern border into northern Laos while the Chinese armed sentries guarded the construction sites (Elliott & Thomson, 2010, p. 547). The first phase of the road was completed in 1963 and was turned over to the Lao on May 25, 1963. It was a 50-mile highway connecting the border of Yunnan province to the capital of Phong Saly Province in Laos, under the name "Laotian-Chinese Friendship Highway" (Langer, 1972, p.21).

Chinese Roads and Severe Military Tensions

During this pivotal time, the friction between the US and the communist forces was getting more intense. One contributing factor was the movement of the North Vietnamese troops in northern Laos, near the area where China was building the road. The Washington government was concerned about the communist penetration into the critical Mekong Valley, which would affect the security of Thailand. In response to this, 5,000 personnel from the US Marine Corps, Army, and Air Force were dispatched to Northeast Thailand in mid-May 1962 (Nuechterlein, 1964, p. 1180), they were positioned to

[5] The "Miao" people are an ethnic group living in China; they called themselves "Hmong" in Thailand and they were known as "Meo" in Laos.

potentially intervene militarily in Laos if required and to contribute to the ongoing efforts in the Vietnam War. The movement of US military in Thailand implied a warning to Hanoi and Peking of the US activity in the region.

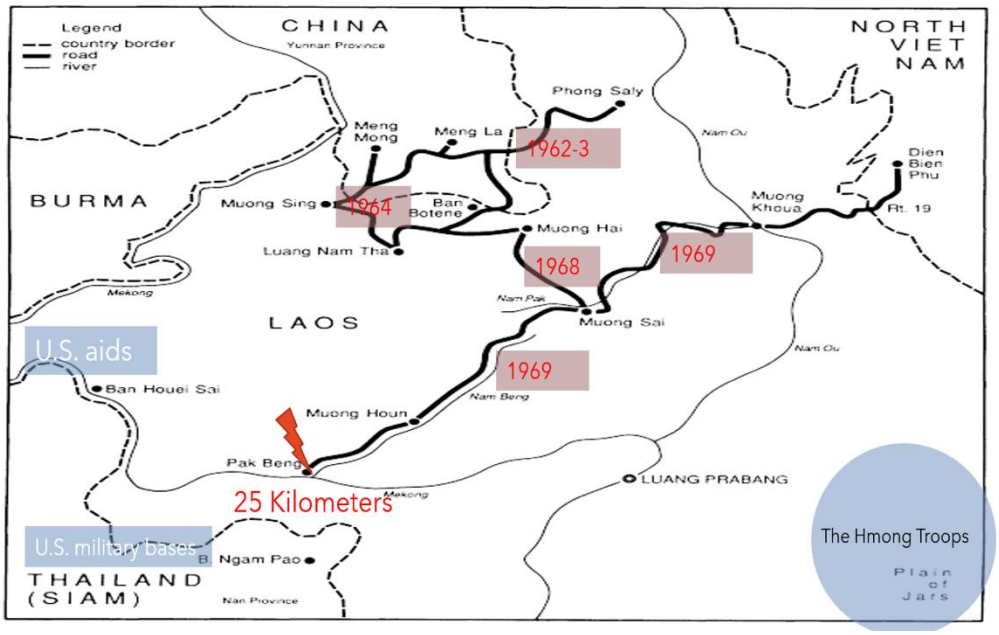

Figure 16 Map of the Chinese Road in Northwest Laos, (1961-1973)

Note. Adapted from "The Chinese Road in Northwest Laos 1961–73: An American Perspective" by G. M. Godley & J. S. Goar, in J. J. Zasloff & L. Unger (Eds.), Laos: Beyond the Revolution, 1991, p. 286, Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11214-2_12.

In 1962, American road building emerged along the bank of the river opposite Chiang Saen, connecting Bandan village upstream to Tonpheung in the RLG area. A refugee camp was established along the road. With support from the Thai and American military, Tonpheng had become a trading and military administrative centre. Later, the road north towards Louangnamtha was improved. Many infrastructure and aid projects such as water wells, schools, and irrigation systems appeared along the road funded by the Americans. The USAID office was also established in Huayxay in Laos, opposite Chiang Khong town, Thailand (IBRD 1975; Rantala, 1994, p.126 in Walker, 1999, p.56).

The Chinese continued to build roads from Yunnan province toward Laos in November 1964; they made the road from south and west of Meng La and the Meng Mong town to Muong Sing and Luang Nam Tha in Laos. The Chinese Road became a crucial link among the communist blocs. The

military hardware, material and supplies were transported along the road under the close monitoring of the Chinese.

For the supply-chain system, first the annually requested supplies for Laos went to Son La where the North Vietnam Military Region headquarters located, and then the North Vietnamese operating in northwest Loas requested supplies directly to this headquarters office. Pathet Lao forces sent their requests to the office in Sam Neua; their appeals would be collected together with other lists from another six provinces of northern Laos then forwarded to Son La, Hanoi and China. Kunming, a city of Yunnan, was the distribution hub for their required goods, food, arms, and other materials. The Laotians received supplies and additional commodities, such as agricultural tools, groceries, and clothes. They then sold them to civilians. The Vietnamese forces picked up their supplies at Muong Sing at the Chinese border, then stored them in Luang Nam Tha (Godley & Goar, 1991).

In September 1968, the Chinese continued constructing a road between Meng La and Ban Boten in Laos. There was a separated road led to Luang Nam Tha, Muong Hai then Muong Sia. In the following year, the road was built up to the north from Muong Sai toward Diean Bien Phu, while another old trail led south from Muong Sia toward the Beng Valley (Langer, 1972).

In the meantime, the Vietnamese also built a road in the east of Laos, which then met with the Chinese road at the Ou River, creating a new east-west trading and transport link during the war years. Undoubtedly, the road building supported by the Chinese and Vietnamese played an essential role in strengthening communist control of the Beng valley, which directly threatened the RLG. The Chinese consulate was established in Oudomxai and became the centre of Chinese influence in Laos (Taillard 1989, p.84-85 in A.Walker 1999, p.55).

Pak Beng town was only 25 kilometres from the Thai border. The sensitive proximity between the Thai and Laos border made the Thai nervous about the Chinese road construction moving close to the Thai insurgent activity area. It was considered that the Chinese were pushing farther south toward

the Mekong down to the border of Thailand. The Chinese Road building raised the fear of communist aggression that could soon penetrate Thailand. For the Thai army, they used the Chinese road building near the Thai border to claim the threat of communist expansion. They worried that road construction could worsen the pre-existing unstable situation in the insurgents' area of northern Thailand where the Communist Party of Thailand's Office No.30 and the Anti-American School 31 were situated (Godley & Goar, 1991).

Attitudes on both sides were clouded by uncertainty. The intentions of the Chinese remained a mystery, but the road building severely increased tension between the Thai army and the communist forces because the road would give an advantage to the Chinese due to the increased mobility between China, North Vietnam, and the communist insurgency in northern Thailand.

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Connectedness: Life in the Thai-Lao Mekong Borderland

Although the contrasting political ideology between these countries had resulted in military tensions at a national level, at a local level, the connectedness between people across the border continued through their own social networks, relatives, family, friends, trading partners, old customers etc. During the 1960s, trans-Mekong commerce was bustling with intensive cross-border trade activities, timber and heroin exports, generous foreign aid and a large refugee population. Residents of Chiang Khong could travel freely across the border due to few restrictions being in place. Many traders crossed from Chiang Khong to Huay Xai to sell groceries in the morning market. Many residents travelled to receive medical treatment in the Huay Xai hospital that was built with American aid support. Foreign commodities were transported by ship or aeroplane to Huay Xai and distributed by Thai and Lao traders. The operation of a cross-river boat in Chiang Khong was bustling with carts rice, vegetables, beer, spirits, cigarettes, timbers and fuel (Walker,1999, p.57).

The increase of cross-border trading activities resulted from an improved road construction linking Chiang Khong and the provincial capital of Chiang Rai in 1968. This road facilitated commercial activities between Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong; many wholesale shops were established along Chiang Khong's main street in the late 1960s due to the convenience of transportation. With low transportation costs and easy customs avoidance, the traders enjoyed a booming atmosphere until the Pathet Lao victory in 1975. The construction of this road was literally motivated by national security concerns as the mountain districts around Chiang Khong had been a base area for Thai communist rebels in the 1980s (Bo, 1987, p.135-139 in Walker, 1999, p.57).

In early 1975, USAID abandoned Huay Xai; a few months later, the Pathet Lao communist forces announced that Huay Xai had been liberated. The victory of the Pathet Lao in December 1975 led to a new regulator of the borderland trading. From that point, the border trade between Thailand and Laos gradually decreased. Some smugglers were even shot dead by Thai border police who patrolled the high riverbanks. The cross-border trading collapse resulted in the migration of many shopkeepers to other areas of the north.

The smooth relationship between China and the Lao government had struggled when Laos sided with Vietnam in the conflict with the Beijing-backed Pol Pot regime in Cambodia (Stuart-Fox 1980 in A.Walker, 1999: 59). The 5,000 Chinese road workers were asked to withdraw from Laos, and the Chinese consulate in Oudomxai was closed in 1979. The Chinese border closed several years later. In the early years of a Soviet-style "command economy" in Laos, the independent trading system was restricted, but it was relaxed in 1980. In the northwest, a border market operated between 1978 and 1986 on the Lao-Burmese border, north of the Golden Triangle. With the Thai and Chinese borders closed, trade in the north of Laos turned toward Vietnam, and Soviet aid was imported through Vietnamese ports. The boundary between the countries in the upper Mekong was closed until 1988.

Infrastructure: Catalyst for Volatility and Responses

The USAID Refugee Relief Program was humanitarian assistance for the inhabitants of the war-torn area in Laos. In other words, it was a commitment of the US that the Hmong soldiers and families in Laos would be relocated to a safe place, and they would be in good care. The USAID program provided food supplies, medical care, transportation, and education for their families. It was the way to materialise the promise of having a better life and recruit more allies. The commitment to them was proved by providing these infrastructures. These USAID projects, particularly visible infrastructure like roads, also contributed to the appeal of the leader, General Vang Pao, who has the power to select who would benefit from such aid, and where it would be deployed. The visibility of infrastructure development enabled him to claim legitimacy and added charisma to his leadership. Plus, it served as proof of the advantages of obeying and working under his command.

Besides, the Hmong resistance force agreed to fight against the US because of the conflict between them and the Laos officers, who often suppressed them. Thus, to fight for the US could be seen as an attempt to search for a way to become independent. In northern Thailand, the Thai Hmong did not become a proxy for the US but the reason to fight against oppression was similar. The Thai Hmong had been the most active force of the communist organisers in northern Thailand. The Hmong in north Thailand were suffering due to land grabbling by the Thais (Douglas, 1972). They were threatened by the Thai officials and the Thai military, who looked down on them. The Thai Hmong grew discontented with being suppressed by the Thai government and Thai society in the lowlands; this was one of the powerful influences that persuaded people to join the communists.

The KMT, who were employed to fight against the communist insurgency and the Hmong in Thailand, also desperately needed to resettle. They had been searching for home and citizenship for years after their departure from Yunnan. The Thai government recruited them by offering them land for their families. Similarly, the Hmong were persuaded to fight against the Thai government in order to have good jobs, and to obtain land, tractors, schools and hospitals, which were never well provided

by the central government (Douglas, 1972). Despite the fact that the Hmong in Laos and Thailand, and even the KMT were proxies for different war activators, the promise of having “a better life” was used to recruit them into the proxy war and motivate them to fight for a better future by tolerating hell in the present.

In the early 1970s, the Thai army leadership was authoritarian. They tended to be highly conservative, nationalistic, and pro-American. They feared the expansion of communism that was influenced by Moscow and Peking, aided by Hanoi (Girling, 2019, p.231). For decades, the Thai government and the US shared a mutual interest in halting communist extension. With an enormous amount of US funds, the Thai government was able to suppress communism internally through economic aid that contributed to state modernisation. A significant part of the strategy was road building and improving infrastructure in rural and border areas. These projects provided more access to border communities, preventing them from turning to communism and stopping communist expansion externally.

Conclusion

The connectedness between people in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland has been continuously shaped by various forces throughout history, and this will likely continue into the future, with the present being influenced by China-backed infrastructure. The once unruly borderland has gradually transformed into a governable Special Economic Zone through state intervention, which has consistently played a crucial role in expanding, controlling, maintaining, and shifting borderlines. I present accounts of various groups of people living in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland, demonstrating the social relationships that enable the circulation of opium, illicit funds, troops, goods, commodities, people, fantasies, and hope of having better life within the borderland and beyond. Apparently, the border serves as a space of power contestation, where multiple actors engage in dynamic negotiation and interaction.

The discourse on transborder infrastructure typically evokes images of amicable ties between neighbouring nations, envisioning lucrative economic schemes that embody a win-win partnership in regional development. Whether stemming from the ADB's emphasis on sustainable development and regional prosperity or crafted from China's portrayal as a benevolent ally committed to regional socio-economic collaboration and the aspiration to forge a “community of common destiny”, these perspectives invariably shape infrastructure projects, validating them with the aforementioned rationales.

Yet history reveals an alternative aspect of infrastructure in the upper Mekong borderland. Here, infrastructure development was born from a clash of political ideologies: the communist factions supported by China and the pro-democracy forces backed by the US In this area, transformed into a theatre for proxy wars, the constructed transborder infrastructure served not only to connect neighbours but also to drive them apart. This mirrors current tensions surrounding the Mekong River, with disputes over dams and their environmental consequences involving the US, China, and Mekong nations. The river has become a focal point of power struggles with deeper political undertones.

Additionally, the stories of the Hmong troops and the KMT refugees demonstrate that the construction of infrastructure was the way to materialise the promise of having a better life and employed to recruit allies during the Cold War period. Until now, the transborder infrastructures have played an important role in rearranging the political order. They represent the promise of having a better future while ignoring the painfulness of surrounding people in the present (P. Harvey & Knox, 2012)

At present, China’s has become a significant influencer through transborder infrastructure projects. The borderland serves as a site where infrastructure projects perform as a process to materialise states’ aspirations of modernisation and strengthen regional connectivity. In response to China’s infrastructure development, Thailand, a smaller state, has also invested domestic transportation projects to connect to China. As a result, the Thai border towns are at the forefront of

the encounter with Chinese influence ranging from large-scale infrastructure projects to small cross-border traders.

In summary, the road construction and other infrastructure developments during the war period serve as compelling examples that infrastructure is not solely technical in nature but also generates insecurity, uncertainty, and volatility, especially for those living along and across the borderlands. These projects often entail political ambiguity within the region, challenging the dominant discourse of development. For groups like the KMT forces, the Lao Hmong, and Thai communist villagers, the ensuing instability isn't just a challenge but an evolving landscape they must navigate. In the face of such crises, they don't merely seek to avoid volatility but embrace and manoeuvre through it, hoping to discover latent opportunities and possibilities within the chaos.

In the following chapters, I will critically explore various forms of infrastructure, both tangible and intangible, such as hydropower dams, cross-border bridges, transborder highways, river navigation, plan of SEZ and policies. My approach will scrutinise the social relationships surrounding these projects, delving deeper into the complexities and contradictions, rather than simply accepting them as discourse tools for economic growth. This investigation aims to reveal a more nuanced understanding of development and its impacts on the communities involved.

Chapter 2

The Sacred Speculation Zone

On an unusual night in January 2019, Chan Pen and I set out to search for her brother, who had run away after their quarrel the previous night. Chan Pen told me that this was not the first time he had fled in this manner. Using a tracking application installed on his mobile phone, Chan Pen was able to determine that he might be in Chiang Khong New City, a place locally referred to as the "Chiang Khong Abandoned City". We drove through a narrow culvert under the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and followed a dirt road to the other side of the village. The route was only visible to the distance that our car's headlights illuminated, but it was the fastest shortcut. The culvert served as a practical pathway for local residents after security fences were set up along the bridge, forcing them to take a detour. The channel was barely wider than my small Japanese car, as it was originally designed for water flow under the bridge, not vehicles. Nevertheless, we pressed on, driven by a sense of urgency and a need to find Chan Pen's brother before he moved to another location.

Chiang Khong new city was known as a failed commercial space project in the town. All shops and storages area were empty, and the tiny alleys between buildings were deathly quiet. As a Thai who grew up with Thai ghost cultures and haunted Asian movies, the last thing I wanted to do during my fieldwork was a venture into the darkness of those narrow alleys. But Chan Pen had other plans, and my fear only deepened when she suggested we search for her brother separately. Without hesitation, she stepped out of the car and walked into the shadows, leaving me to creep along in the driver's seat. I drove slowly toward the other side while Chan Pen walked straight to the front gate. A glimpse of Chan Pen in front of a shrine appeared in my rear view mirror before I turned to the other side of the alley.

The memories of horror movie scenes kept running through my head as I navigated my car through the dark alleys. Suddenly, a thin figure appeared in the shadows behind a corner. Instinctively, I let out a startled cry. It wasn't until my brain started functioning more rationally that I realised it was Chan Pen's brother*, Som Chai*! We rejoiced at seeing him safe and sound and slowly drove out of the gate of Chiang Khong New City. As we left, Chan Pen held her hands together to worship at the shrine and thank the spirit of the place or *Chao Thi* in Thai. She told me that she had asked the '*Chao Thi'* for permission and help to find her brother just before we started our search here.

…

In Thailand, the spirits of the locality are referred to as the *"Chao Thi*", or the lords of the place. In order to worship the local spirit of the land, Thai people built a small separate house called a spirit shrine *(San Pra Poom)* that served as the spirit's permanent residence. Generally, the spirit shrine is located outside the owners' house. The term *"Chao Thi"* has a sense of guardian spirits that protect those in their territory against unconverted hostile spirits. Penny Esterik (1982) suggested that guardian spirits could serve as a bridge between nature spirits and locality spirits, allowing them to become integrated into a single Buddhist worldview (Esterik, 1982, p. 11).

Many Thais believe in the spirits of place; they would humbly ask *"Chao thi"* to grant them permission when entering an unknown place. Doing so would prevent bad luck or anything else that might interfere with their intentions in the area. I almost take this for granted, as it is a prevalent practice among Thais. However, reflecting on this account provides a great vantage point to explore how the spirit world has played a significant role in land speculation. Furthermore, the concept of *"Chao Thi"* sheds light on how one searches for approval when entering a new community.

This chapter centres around the boom and bust of the special economic zone (SEZ) in Chiang Rai province, particularly the Mekong border towns, including Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen. The

purpose is twofold. While backgrounding the making of the special economic zone, I intend to foreground the ritual practices and religious dynamic that recently blossomed in these border towns. The accounts provided illustrate the multiple actors involved in land speculation at various scales. The boom and bust of real estate development within the special economic zone serve as a background for what will unfold throughout the rest of this thesis. A variety of religious practices will be described as part of a series of responses from people facing a promise of prosperity that has not yet come to pass.

I begin with my field notes searching for Chan Pen's brother in the so-called "Chiang Kong Abandoned City town", a failed commercial space project. I intend to illustrate the ruins of booming real estate speculation after building the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. A review of the studies on special economic zones at the border is presented in the first part, particularly in light of China's infrastructure development in neighbouring countries. Drawing on these works, I intend to develop a more complicated lens to examine further the relationships between the people surrounding the existing infrastructure and the future-oriented infrastructures that do not exist yet.

I approach SEZ development phenomena in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland by adopting anthropological works of future studies. Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight's *The Anthropology of the Future* (2019) demonstrates how our present and past are always and inevitably shaped by our goals (Bryant & Knight, 2019). Bryant and Knight (2019) propose the concept of "orientation," which considers how our anticipation of future outcomes influences our current actions and perceptions of the past. The concept deconstructs linear time while maintaining an element of teleology: the present owes its existence to the future. Though orientation involves planning, imagining, and hoping for a desired future, these efforts often collapse during this process. There is also a moment when enthusiasm gives way to apathy, frustrated planning gives way to disillusionment, and imagination gives way to fatigue (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 19).

How, then, do we understand this process and the struggling moment? In the second part of this chapter, I have borrowed from recent works on magic and religious studies as an analytic tool to explore how people respond to these uncertainties and volatility, and to understand their future-oriented actions. Speculation, according to Laura Bear (2020), is similar to magic. This is because divination or "magic" aims to harness invisible, ethical powers to create a fertile productivity by working on the world with special language and tools (Coupaye,2013; Novellino,2009 in Bear 2020, p. 8). While capitalism uses quantitative and time-based measures to predict potentiality, its technologies of imagination share the same advantages as magic. According to Bear (2020), speculation is concerned with revealing a hidden order of human and nonhuman powers explaining the past, present, and future in order to take some action.

Drawing from the approach outlined above, in the second part, I provide a story of a Bangkok tycoon who invested in the development of real estate in Ban Don village and across the border in Laos's Huay Xai town under the project name *Nakaraj Nakorn,* or "the city of Naga". Against the backdrop of economic volatility, I argue that non-local investors have not only brought capital to the Chiang Khong town, but also their beliefs and ritual practices. Her account reveals the relationship between investors, Naga spirits, and wealth in the context of SEZs, where prosperity is promised to come. Also, analysing the dynamic of religious practices contributes to our understanding of how people deal with the not-yet-to-come prosperity of the Mekong region and the Thai-Lao border town in particular.

Against this backdrop, I also provide an account of Chan Pen, the owner of a small hostel where I stayed during my fieldwork in Chiang Khong. Her family migrated to the area and invested in a small business hoping for a happy retired life. The special economic zone policy and the presence of infrastructure have created opportunities for multiple actors to enter and participate in the hope of the town's prosperity. My argument seeks to go beyond the discourse of local individuals being exploited by businesspeople and, instead, illustrate how various actors are trying to maximise their

own benefits from the economic changes. It can be observed that many of these actors have formulated strategies to position themselves to be part of a wealthier future.

I will also examine the role of the Naga in Thai society and the religious practices at a local temple in Chiang Khong. This temple serves as a portal connection between the human and spiritual world and the past, present, and future. It has become a unique space where non-locals and locals interact and exchange resources such as money, beliefs, and cultural practices. The interactions between non-local tycoons from Bangkok and villagers demonstrate how wealth is linked to the spiritual and cultural significance of Nagas in the Mekong community.

Part 1

"Chiang Khong Gate to the Future"

SEZs and Borderland Studies

In the past, borderlands have been sites of reluctant economic investment, especially by the private sector, mostly due to geopolitical factors and security concerns (Chettri & Eilenberg, 2021; Chettri & McDuie-Ra, 2020; Schendel & Abraham, 2005). However, in light of economic liberalisation and globalisation, borderlands are now viewed as potential sites of economic production for the nation rather than backward and remote areas (Nyíri, 2012; Saxer & Zhang, 2017). The promises of national and local prosperity have been made by transforming the borderland into a development zone. In Asian borderlands, many sites have been called “special economic zones” (SEZs), which are imbued with their own set of aspirations for the future.

In the borderland between Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, China has been the primary influence on infrastructure development in the past two decades, investing in the construction of roads, highways, waterways, dams, bridges, and railways. Examples of this include the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZ in Laos, the Chiang Rai SEZ, and the Myanmar SEZ. Simultaneously, Chinese entrepreneurs venture into the area with the image of being modernisers and “heroes” leading local people out of poverty and backwardness (Nyíri, 2012, p. 553). In many sites, both state and non-state actors have worked together to manage economic growth and control territorial sovereignty.

Several previous studies on special economic zones have engaged with and been influenced by the concept of "graduated sovereignty," developed by Anthropological analyst Aihwa Ong (2006). Ong examines how states develop ‘governing technologies’ as the ‘zones’ of political exception to maximise economic advantage that remain under state control and regulation (Ong, 2004, p. 70). On the other hand, Pal Nyíri (2012)’s work on the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZ pays more attention to the influence of private sectors in making these “special zones”. Nyíri (2012) argues that these private sectors have become the new engines of modernisation by mimicking state practice in the long-term concession land. Similarly, Pinkaew Laungaramsri (2015) examines the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZ case through the concept of “commodifying sovereignty”, by which land and the “sovereign right” to

land were turned into capital and granted to Chinese enterprises, leading to local marginalisation (Laungaramsri, 2015).

Furthermore, through the lens of Zomia, Scott (2009) contends that until the end of World War II, the region of Upland Southeast Asia served as an escape zone for individuals seeking to evade state control. These individuals sought to avoid the labour-accumulation system, frequently moved, and engaged in the cultural invention. Danielle Tan (2012) argues that the recent Chinese investment in the Lao borderland through "technologies of governing" helped the Lao state access the peripheries and reclaim territoriality, simultaneously positing itself in the global market.

In the case of the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZ, Rippa (2019) suggests looking beyond state-making processes by proposing a new "Zomia 2.0" concept. He adopts Scott's Zomia to analyse how the Chinese private sectors' projects keep the state out in the 21st century by dealing with the Lao government through infrastructure development. In doing so, the state officially "gives up" strict controlling power on a particular space and lets investors enjoy the benefits of mobility and "exceptionality" in business (Rippa, 2019). The state's expansion of power through granting long-term land concessions, compressing time and distance through technologies of transportation have already efficiently incorporated the Zomian into the state (Rippa, 2019; J. C. Scott, 2009).

The Golden Triangle area, once infamous for opium plantation and being kept on the periphery of state control, now became the site for investment. The Chinese Golden Triangle special economic zone vision was promoted to attract investors and re-package a place with fancy tourism, real estate development, and large-scale infrastructure. Over a decade, the King Roman Group, registered in Hong Kong, rapidly developed the Lao borderland into a contemporary Chinese town. In contrast, the Thai special economic zone experienced slower progress in terms of real estate investment and infrastructure construction.

However, previous research has not adequately examined the specific mechanisms that enable borderland regions to attract economic investment and how resident communities respond to

such development. This chapter addresses this gap by focusing on the cultural influence on individual responses to economic speculation in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. By examining the spiritual beliefs, cultures, and religious practices that mix with speculation, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics in the borderland, moving beyond a narrow focus on passively accepting exploitation

Turning the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland into SEZs

As I pointed out in a previous chapter, the 1990s marked the launch of an economic cooperation program by the ADB called the Greater Mekong Subregion or GMS. Delving further into this, it's worth noting that the GMS adopted the Economic Quadrangle concept, which the Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce first conceptualised in the 1980s to promote regional economic integration. The economic quadrangle refers to the upstream triangle areas of the Mekong River, comprising Yunnan, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Apparently, the Quadrangle Economic Zone (Ishida, 2012, pp. 14–15) was introduced with the promise of trans-border zones that would bring economic growth and regional prosperity to the region.

Since the 1990s, the Mekong countries have been transformed by intensive transportation developments that serve as vital connectors with China. In correspondence with the emergence of the Economic Quadrangle concept, the Thai government announced a policy to turn Indochina from "a battlefield into a marketplace" (Murray, 1994, pp. 350–353). As a result, the border crossing between Chiang Khong and Huay Xai and Chiang Saen and Tonpheung was officially launched in 1989; the formal border trade was re-established a few years later.

An inland waterway that connects Simao Port in China and Chiang Saen Port in Thailand has been discussed among the Mekong countries. As a result, a commercial navigation agreement was signed in April 2000, allowing the blasting of submerged rocks and rapids in the Mekong River from Simao to Luang Prabang (Laos)(Mirumachi & Nakayama, 2007, pp. 411–425). The Navigation Channel

Improvement led by China aimed to widen and deepen the Mekong River to enable 500 tons of cargo vessels to safely navigate down from Yunnan Province towards Laos and Thailand (Yong, 2020, p. 210) .

In addition to waterway connectivity, international land routes connecting Yunnan Province with the border of Laos and Myanmar were also constructed in the 2000s. For example, ADB, China, and Thailand gave a loan to the Lao government to build the Lao route connecting Huay Xai, Chiang Khong and Boten to Mohan, the border of China. In addition, China initiated funding half of the construction cost of the fourth Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, of which the Thai government funded the other half; the agreement was made at the 14th GMS Ministerial Meeting in 2007 (Ishida, 2012, p. 15).

In December 2013, just a few months after the proclamation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Xi Jinping, the fourth Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge between Chiang Khong and Huay Xai was officially put into operation. It has become a crucial route to the Asian Highway Route 3A (R3A), connecting Bangkok to Kunming. In addition, the Thai government has marketed Chiang Khong town as the “Gateway to Indochina”, instigating the ambition to become one of the fast-growing border cities in the Greater Mekong Subregion.

Another attempt to reimagine the borderland continued a few years later; the Thai government designated Chiang Khong as part of a STS (SEZ), claiming the border town would be an ideal location to be a “logistic hub”, operating cargo transportation via highway, river, and railway. In July 2018, the Thai cabinet approved funding for the construction of a double-track line linking Chiang Khong and Bangkok. According to the Thai Ministry of Transportation, this northern rail route project will be a part of Thailand's mega plan to boost the local economy and serve as a new link to Laos. The route's unofficial name is Den Chai-Chiang Khong, which will run from Bangkok up north through the Phrae, Lampang, and Phayao provinces, then entering Chiang Rai and finally ending in the Chiang Khong district, near the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. Amid the intense promotion of the Sino-Thai high-speed railway cooperation, the Thai Minister of Transport was conceited enough to promote the Den Chai-Chiang Khong double-track line as an ambitious plan to join the BRI(Prachachat, 2018)

(Prachachat, 2018). In his remarks at the inauguration ceremony, he claimed that Chiang Khong would become an important gateway for the North-South Economic Corridor (Bangkokbiznew, 2018).

China's engagements in the Mekong region exceed the scope of BRI by far. It is impossible to discuss these without referring to the GMS programme. The role of the Mekong countries in recasting the vision started by China is particularly crucial. The list of infrastructure projects above demonstrates that Thailand has firmly worked on aligning with global neoliberal capitalism before the recent BRI. The plan to build the Den Chai-Chiang Khong railway line has been discussed in the Thai domestic transportation plan for decades. However, the Thai government uses the BRI and the Chinese expansion of the economic circuit to envision itself as the central hub for regional logistic developments.

Since the 1990s, the number of special economic zones (SEZs) has consistently increased in Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia. China's model of developing SEZs to attract foreign investment has served as an example of a successful strategy for many countries in this region, particularly Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. As a result, it is estimated that more than one hundred major SEZs are established in frontier markets in the region (Figiaconi, 2020). The history of China's Special Economic Zones (SEZs) dates back to 1979. Then, the Chinese government implemented its “Open Door” policy by reforming and opening up the Chinese economy by attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) to foster economic growth in coastal SEZs in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen. In addition, Chinese authorities granted a special regulatory regime to accelerate industrialisation and urbanisation to create jobs and modernise the economy.

Later, the Chinese government launched the “go out” and “go west” policies to reduce the economic inequality between coastal and inland areas and seek new investment opportunities abroad. As a result, China's borderlands were designated as special economic zones (SEZs), including 1) Manzhouli in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 2) Dongxing city in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, 3) Ruili in Yunnan province, 4) Erenhot in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 5) Mengla district (Mohan) in Yunnan province, and 6) Suifenhe-Dongning in Heilongjiang

province. In addition, these borderlands serve as pilot projects for connecting neighbouring areas with China.

In fact, the SEZ model is not an entirely new strategy for boosting economic growth in Thailand. A similar plan can be traced back to the 1980s when Thailand started a process of industrialisation by attracting foreign companies to invest in the industrial cluster in the eastern region (Chachoengsao, Chonburi, and Rayong provinces). At that time, the Japanese government significantly supported the effort through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). As a result, the Eastern Seaboard Development Program resulted in a wide-ranging industrial infrastructure. Undoubtedly, the program created jobs and attracted joint ventures with Japanese and other investors, contributing to Thailand's remarkable industrialisation since the mid-1980s (Fumiharu, 2013, p. 81).

Implementing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Thailand can be understood as part of a temporal process involving the interrelation of past, present, and future. The adoption of the concept of exemptional space by the Thai junta government and technocrats was influenced by their perception of the golden economic period in the 1990s, which provided a reference point for envisioning a possible great-again future for Thailand after facing economic instability for a decade. The SEZs were proposed as a mechanism to boost the country's economic alignment with neighbouring countries that were all influenced by China's rapid economic development. This is an example of how the future shapes the present. In the next section, I will illustrate SEZ implementation in Thailand driven by a top-down structure, primarily from the central government. It reflects how the past can inform decision-making in the present and shape the future.

The Thai SEZs and Management Structure

Since the 2014 military coup, the ties between Thailand and China have become tight; the junta government actively approached China for military cooperation since America and Western countries responded negatively to the coup. In addition, the Thai military government was eager to facilitate

Chinese investment by simply waving through and approving relevant laws and regulations to boost the investment portfolio. In 2015, Thailand established 10 SEZs throughout the country: Tak, Mukdahan, Sakaeo, Trat, Songkhla, Nong Khai, Narathiwat, Chiang Rai, Nakhon Phanom, and Kanchanaburi. In addition, the following incentives scheme was launched to promote and facilitate investment for private sectors by easing investment conditions to SMEs, offering a reduction of corporate income tax of the company, a reduction of registered capital for the establishment of a bonded warehouse, and a free zone.

A targeted investment list was designed to attract foreign investors in various sectors, including agroindustry, fishery, ceramic product manufacturing, textiles and garments, gem and jewellery manufacturing, logistics, industrial zones, and tourism-promotion services and activities. In addition, the 10 SEZs were intended to serve as an economic gateway connecting with neighbouring countries and to focus on contributing to prosperity in the border area, increasing and improving the quality of life, and addressing security issues.

The junta government has established a national committee for developing SEZs, with the prime minister as chairman and the secretary general of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) as secretary. This committee has a nested structure, comprising six subcommittees: 1) privileges and designated areas, 2) labour, public health, and security, 3) infrastructure and customs, 4) marketing promotion, 5) land acquisition and management, and 6) investor recruitment and selection, negotiations for designated state-owned land development in SEZs, and progress monitoring. At the provincial level, “one-stop service centres” (OSSCs) have been established in each SEZ to provide consultations for investment and registration services for temporary migrant workers.

According to a summary document on the progress of SEZs produced by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), budget allocations for SEZ development from 2015 to 2022 were dominated by infrastructure and logistics, accounting for 71%, followed by cross-border and security at 13%. The three most significant budgets were granted in 2017, 2018, and

2019. Significant projects included: 1) the construction of transport infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and airports, 2) the construction of border checkpoints, 3) the improvement of provincial waterworks construction, 4) the preparation of land-use planning, 5) the establishment of an emerging disease-prevention and -control system and a labour health-insurance system, 6) establishment of an investment 'one-stop service centre" (OSS), training, and building networks for entrepreneurs, 7) establishment of a labour OSS and granting of work permits, and 8) expansion of border trade and investment.

In July 2021, the national committee for developing special economic zones endorsed further operational guidelines. In the next phase, the focus will be on 1) the development of infrastructure, including public utilities and customs checkpoints, with an emphasis on supporting economic growth and connecting with neighbouring countries, and 2) the development of production and service bases and linkages with major economic areas of the country, particularly the connections between SEZs and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) and the four special economic corridors (NEC, NeEC, CWEC, and SEC) throughout the country.

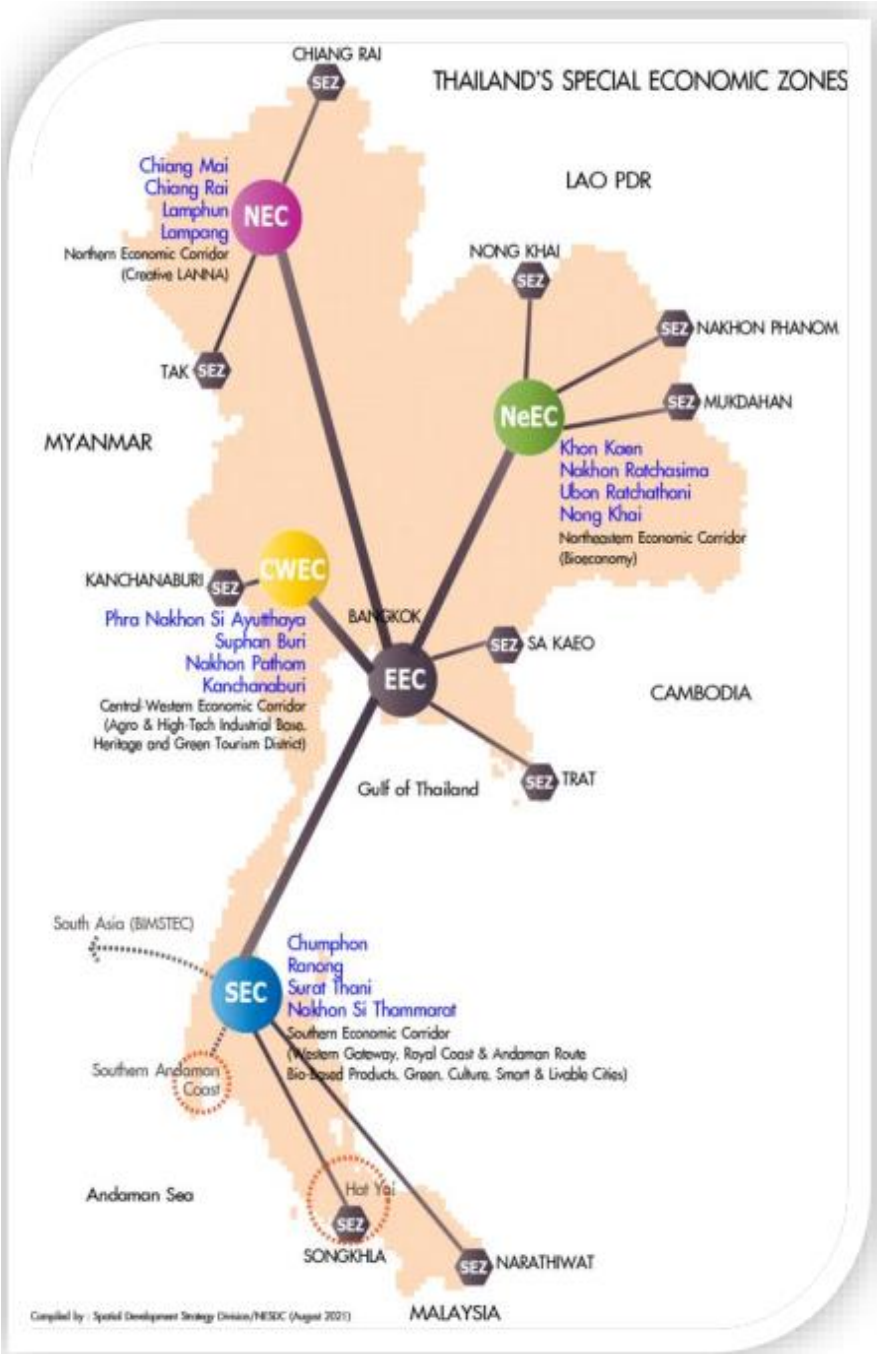

Figure 17. Thailand's special economic zone map

Note. From "Special Economic Zones (SEZs) Development Progress" by Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), 2023, February. (https://www.nesdc.go.th/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=5195).

Chiang Rai SEZ and its desirable future

In 2015, the Thai border districts, including Chiang Khong, Chiang Sean and Mae Sai, were designated a special economic zone (SEZ) in Chiang Rai province. As a result, the Chiang Rai SEZ positioned itself as a trading hub connecting Northern Thailand with southern China, Laos, and Myanmar. Furthermore, as the Chinese government encouraged private and state enterprises to "go out" and invest abroad, searching for growth opportunities in new markets, the Mekong region became an ideal option for many Chinese investors due to its rich resources and cheap labour. Located 240 kilometres from Yunnan, the Chiang Rai SEZ became a potential choice for investment.

To promote the idea of being a significant hub connecting southern China with Thailand, the "one-stop service centre" (OSS) of the Chiang Rai SEZ organised a road show trip to Kunming and invited Chinese entrepreneurs to invest in the towns. In addition, several incentives have been offered to attract investment, such as an exemption of corporate income tax for a period of 8 years, an additional 50% reduction on corporate income tax for five years, permission to employ unskilled foreign workers in promoted projects, and the offer of double-deductible costs for transportation, electricity, and water supply for a period of 10 years (Meechaiyo & Guo, 2019).

A wide range of materials, including promotional brochures, political visions, investment guides, government progress reports, investment measures, and government incentives plans, were produced in Thai, English, and Chinese as references for Thai and foreign investors. For example, the Office of the Board of Investment provides a guidebook detailing the incentives and facilitation provided by various government agencies for those interested in investing in the 10 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) throughout the country. Regarding the Chiang Rai SEZ, it highlights the three districts with keywords such as "tourist destinations", "food manufacturing hub", "agro-products", and "multimodal transport". In addition, infrastructure-development plans, such as the Chiang Rai city bypass, the highway between Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong, and the highway between Chiang Rai and Khun Tal, were included to show how these towns should look in the future. The Chiang Rai OSS

also produced promotional brochures to visually simplify potential investment in the Mekong border towns as an infographic, animated by a cartoon purple elephant resembling its provincial emblem.

Figure 18. Brochure promoting the Chiang Rai Special Economic Zone (SEZ)

Note. From Chiang Rai Special Economic Zone's official Facebook page, affiliated with www.crsez.com. "ศูนย์บริการเบ็ดเสร็จด้านการลงทุนเขตเศรษฐกิจพิเศษเชียงราย (The Chiang Rai SEZ One Stop Service Centre)". Accessed on July 22, 2020. The original post has since been removed.

Figure 19. Brochure highlighting Brochure key sectors for investment in Chiang Rai SEZ

Note. From Chiang Rai Special Economic Zone's official Facebook page, affiliated with www.crsez.com. "ศูนย์บริการเบ็ดเสร็จด้านการลงทุนเขตเศรษฐกิจพิเศษเชียงราย (The Chiang Rai SEZ One Stop Service Centre)". Accessed on July 22, 2020. The original post has since been removed.

Technologies of imagination: planning and infrastructures

Scholars have provided important insights into the politics, practices, discourses, technologies, and artefacts related to planning, which contribute to a deeper understanding of the gap between desired futures and present practices (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2011; Anand et al., 2018; Carse & Kneas, 2019; Cross, 2015). Planning is an expression of people's beliefs about what is possible and desirable and what the future may hold (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2011). In creating special economic zones, planning is a way to conceptualise space and time and the possibilities they offer.

Under the significant influence of China, current Thai special economic zone planning has allowed the junta government and technocratic planners to reminisce about the modernist fantasy of an economic miracle in the 1980s. However, the same technocratic institution, the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB),[6] still plays a vital role in the top-down planning of SEZs at the national level. It is assigned to be the secretary of the SEZ committee, advising on strategic and overall coordination and overseeing the implementation.

The planning process has created a power structure and division of responsibilities among government authorities, with the establishment of government agencies such as One Stop Service centres serving as reference points for SEZ-related issues at the provincial level. Land-acquisition laws and SEZ rules now regulate borderlands once characterised as ungovernable spaces. They have become imaginative spaces that provide abundant commoditised resources, such as land, labour, and things, to maximise the profits of inviting companies. Risks become all-encompassing, and a flexible daily migration policy provides a cheap labour supply. The SEZ planning serves as an imaging tool that implies the future of the borderland. In planning, the future appears as a blank canvas that can be rationally shaped.

Figure 20. Photo-shoot backdrop at the Chiang Khong District Office. October 17, 2019

[6] The name has been recently changed to the office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC)

A series of SEZ materials produced by planning emerged as promissory documents and manuals for resource management (e.g., planning-guidance notes, investment guidebooks, brochures). For instance, the Chiang Rai SEZ brochures simplify complex natural resources into categories of potential industrial and commercial sectors for investment. The brochures visualise the advantage of proximity between China's major cities and the Thai border towns; the Mekong River serves as a river pathway to facilitate connectivity for cross-border logistics. Many photos of fruits, grains, and other items such as coffee beans, pomelo, pineapple, oolong tea leaves, jasmine rice, passion fruit juice, and lychee jam are presented as substantial agricultural products for export.

The produced document materials of many SEZs share a similar perspective in simplifying the borderland in the sense that it will be entirely manageable. Maps of SEZs were drawn to outline territories in which exceptional space, property, capital, resources, humans, and things have been arranged in such a way that any intervention is possible (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2013, p. 5). In the zone, several infrastructure projects (such as roads, railways, ports, dry ports, and agricultural production plants) are often displayed in 3D models or taken from a fancy location elsewhere to materialise and visualise how the completed project would look. The imagined future is shaped through planning and future-oriented infrastructure projects to enchant the sites.

As Arjun Appadurai (2013) points out, infrastructure is the tangible manifestation of a future vision. It conveys our aspirations, anticipations, and imaginations of the future: the world we envision for ourselves and the society we hope to become (Appadurai, 2013; Gupta, 2018). In SEZ planning, several infrastructure projects promise prosperity to the borderlands. These projects represent the hope of elites and planners in transforming the space based on modernisation ideology. Meanwhile, those interested in pursuing wealth must follow the instructions and regulations established by the planning. The textual material also depicts the idealism of bureaucrats and their efforts to transform border towns into prosperous places. As such, there is a moral obligation to the SEZ plan that ties the present to the future and occasionally to the past.

However, there is often a gap between a paper plan and actual practices. Based on my ethnographic research in these border towns, I detail the relations of planning to places, things, humans, nonhumans, and spirits. In the next section, I will describe how the "gaps" are filled and how people deal with the volatility and unexpected consequences caused by the planning. I argue that the future is not static in this border town, but rather can be altered by current actions. My argument is bolstered by the creativity and agency of people who face uncertainty, demonstrating that the plan is not always a blueprint for the future.

Part 2

"I just wish the railway would cut through my house!"

On a Saturday morning in October of 2019, I accompanied Chan Pen on a detour through her neighbourhood. As the van bumped along the dirt road, I gazed out at the passing landscape, taking in the lush green rice fields and the occasional stand of rubber trees. My driver, Chan Pen, chatted animatedly about the changes happening in the area.

"I just wish the railway would cut through my house," she said, gesturing to a dry port visible in the distance.

The dry port sat across from the 4th Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, surrounded by a patchwork of houses, fields, and small huts. As we drove past a rubber plantation, Chan Pen pointed to a newly constructed hut.

"My neighbour just built that," she explained. *"They think it will help them get more compensation if the railway comes through here."*

Chan Pen has been running her guest house since 2013. She lives with her mother and younger brother. Her husband saw a posting for a land plot on the internet, and they travelled to Chiang Khong to purchase it and started a small guest-house business. Chan Pen is originally from Lam Pang province. Before moving to Chiang Khong after her marriage, she worked for several years as a manager of a furniture factory in Bangkok. At that time, her husband still had a permanent job as a technician for an airline company in Bangkok and visited her every two weeks to spend time with the family. According to Chan Pen, it was her husband's plan to have a small resort to earn additional income and save for retirement.

Mr. Tong, Chan Pen's husband, originally came from Surin, a province in northeastern Thailand. He told me that his mother's house is located on the Poipet-Aranyaprathet border between Thailand and Cambodia. He had observed that there had been a significant change in the economy and landscape of the border due to the casino industry in Poipet since the 2000s. In his opinion, the land speculation in Chiang Khong is similar to the rapid urbanisation that occurred in Poipet a decade ago. Mr. Tong believes that the emergence of the Chinese market in the borderlands is an indicator of

"*Chareon*" in Thai, which implies modernisation, urbanisation, and civilisation. However, he noted that this process has not yet occurred in Chiang Khong town. Mr. Tong told me that this plot was purchased as an asset for his retirement, but he hopes to get a good fair price for it if it is seized.

Mr. Tong is keeping in touch with his neighbours, staying informed about social media and news relevant to the upcoming railway projects and other topics. During my stay at Chan Pen's guesthouse, I witnessed once a survey of land expropriation. It was a hot afternoon in October 2019 when two staff members wearing neon green jackets emblazoned with "map surveying" rode over to their house. One staff member was holding a measuring tool while the other one asked Mr. Tong about the details of his property. They walked around the houses, counting the number of buildings.

Figure 21. House owner talking to surveying staff, Chiang Khong. October 26,2019

Even though their property is very close to the construction site for the dry port and railway, it is still unclear whether Chan Pen's house will be expropriated. She told me that many of her guests express sympathy when they see the construction site so close to her house and think that her property might be seized by the government. Chan Pen told me that one guest even said that she had

visited a temple and prayed for her house not to be seized by the project. Chan Pen and I both laughed, as we both knew that she actually hoped for her property to be taken by the government in exchange for high compensation. “They should have asked me first if I wanted it seized or not,” Chan Pen chuckled.

Baan Don Village

Baan Don is a small village on the banks of the Mekong River south of Chiang Khong town. It is located around 7 kilometres from the town centre. The village lies adjacent to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. The village is home to approximately 600 people. Agricultural activities and fishing are the main occupations of Baan Don village residents, according to the village chief. Some families collect rocks from the Mekong River in the dry season and sell them for extra income. It appeared that the most part of the Thai-Laos Friendship Bridge was built above rice fields, crossing the Mekong River toward Laos. High-security fences were installed along the bridge. Some parts of the security fences obstructed villager commune pathways. Chan Pen explained to me, before the bridge was constructed the villagers used the narrow dirt road as a shortcut to reach to their rice field or cross over to another side of the village. Since the fence blocked their passage, they had to make a detour. Nevertheless, Chan Pen showed me how villagers creatively hacked into it by driving through the culvert of the bridge.

Figure 22. The culvert of Thai Lao Friendship Bridge No.4. Photographed June 11, 2020

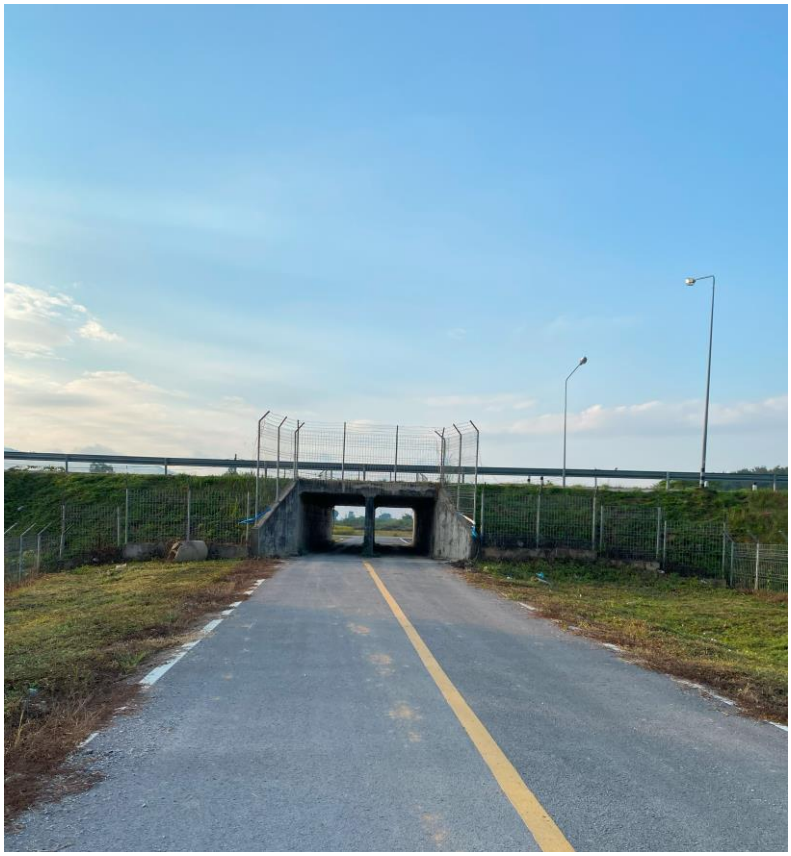

Figure 23. The culvert of Thai Lao Friendship Bride No.4. Photographed December 12, 2021

In the Baan Don village, modern concrete houses are clustered in a residential area surrounded by rice fields and agricultural land. Two temples can be found in the village – Wat Baan, a village temple, and Wat Pa, a forest temple located away from the residential area. In the centre of the village stands a house with a spirit shrine next to the entrance of the Nakaraj Princess, a three-star hotel. Across the road is Baan Don school. A small concrete street stretches through the village, dotted with small grocery stores, noodle shops, restaurants, and small rental dormitories. The Mekong River is accessible via many small alleys tucked between the houses. At the edge of the village is a crematorium. The small concrete road continues passing official accommodation of the department of highways, under a bridge, and ends at the confluence of the Mekong and Ing rivers. The mountainous terrain in Laos provides a stunning backdrop for the bridge crossing the Mekong River, where freight trucks can be seen from dawn to dusk.

Land speculation and Future Ruins in SEZs

I observed that many plots were just plain rice fields or short-term plantations. I was told that most of the plots near the bridge had been bought by non-local investors and were rented out to the villagers for agricultural plantation on a year-by-year contract. Two decades ago, many villagers sold their lands at a low price to land brokers without knowing that there would be a bridge construction and that the town would become a special economic zone. As soon as the SEZ policy and the plan for infrastructure projects were announced, the following wave of land speculation began again.

In 2018, the government started seizing and giving compensation for certain plots of land as part of the Chiang Khong dry-port project. Chan Pen told me that her neighbours received nearly 30 million Thai baht in compensation a few years ago. She pointed to a new yellow concrete house that had recently been built near her property, which belonged to the family that had just received the compensation. Chan Pen told me that her neighbours were "very lucky" to have acquired the plot from another villager just a few years before the land was appropriated. The compensation was worth more than four times the price they paid for the land, so they also gave some money to the

previous owner as a gift to express their gratitude. In this sense, the seizure of the land was seen as a stroke of luck. Many families in this village are actually *"setthi!"* said Chan Pen. The term *setthi* means magnet or wealthy person in Thai. Many of them received large amounts of compensation for the land being seized.

I observed that in response to rumours of an upcoming railway project, some landowners have built small huts on their plots and planted trees to increase their chances of receiving greater compensation. This practice is relevant to the land acquisition and compensation law that considers immovable property, e.g., a building, a structure, a perennial plant, or other things that are permanently fixed to the land or form the body of such land(Expropriation and Acquisition Of Immovable Property Act, B.E. 2562, 2019).

The high compensation price excited many landowners; I saw many small concrete houses constructed and trees planted around the dry port. A landowner told me about his anticipation of a railway track that would cut through his land, based on information he found on the internet and from his neighbours. He showed me a photo of a Google map that illustrated the potential scope of the railway station and its track direction. In response to my question about the phenomenon of many people building houses awaiting land acquisition, he responded that he had no idea. A few days later, his son took me to see several newly built houses on agricultural land, including that of his father! The established SEZ plan, the cross-border bridge, and the dry-port project seem to have generated some short-term economic advantages for some groups. The upcoming railway project is also likely to inspire people to take action at present based on their experiences in the past and create hope from their future prosperity.

Figure 24. Small concrete houses at Ban Don. Photographed in Chiang Khong. November 11,2019

Land speculation at the border has begun since the opening of the Thai-Lao border. However, the construction of the cross-border bridge has dramatically changed this area's landscape, attracting non-local investors to the town. After the construction of the R3A highway, connecting Thailand to Laos and the South of China, completed in 2008, and the 4th Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge was opened in 2013; immediately this land transportation replaced the previous ferry crossing that for years used to be a way to cross the Mekong River. In addition, the international immigration checkpoint has been moved to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. The old border-crossing point was only allowed for Thai-Lao citizens in Chiang Khong town centre. The passport control has now operated only at the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in the south of the town. Since then, the centre and northern area of Chiang Khong town has gradually become less crowded, and the business has gone down due to decreasing tourists.

Brand-new commercial buildings have been constructed nearby the 4th Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and along the main road south of the town during the bridge construction period. A real estate project of commercial buildings was constructed near the bridge. The marketplace named “Chiang Khong new city”, situated a kilometre from the bridge, has been promoted and leased space and

storage for small and medium-sized enterprises to open shops for tourists who cross the border. The real estate company invested in building a sprawling market and then leased godowns and shopping spaces to merchants and enterprises. I was told that the project was initiated by a businessman, who also worked as a deputy district chief at that time.

Before the bridge's official opening, the leasing price was costly due to the high demand of new merchants. An owner of a seemingly isolated grocery shop in the “Chiang Khong New City” shared with me that the leasing price was very high because many new merchants had wanted to open their shops in this area before the bridge's opening. However, not long after opening the bridge, many shops have been gradually closing. There were no tourists stopped by for shopping. The bridge did not bring many customers as they had expected. In contrast, the bridge serves as a drive-through pathway to the neighbouring town and other destinations. Many lorries from China, Laos and Thailand drive across the bridge from 8:00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m. Most of the lorries contain fresh fruits and vegetables from China, carrying them toward a broader market in Bangkok, Thailand. The economic situation contrasts with entrepreneurs’ expectations. The shop owner felt that the town seems to be quieter after the bridge's official opening in late 2013.

At the “Chiang Khong new city”, behind the welcome sign was shuttered shops and locked godowns. In the daytime, I saw only a few restaurants, a vehicle repair shop, a driving school, some residential buildings with doors both closed and open, and Chinese shipping companies at the entrance. The shopkeeper told me that he had to change from selling souvenirs to groceries for neighbours. The market cannot easily be seen from the street at night. This could explain why locals refer to it as the “abandoned city” of Chiang Khong.

Figure 25. Entrance of “Chiang Khong New City” a marketplace project. October 16,2019

Naga Temple and Golden Hotel

In the small village of Ban Don, a luxury hotel stands tall at the centre of the community, its golden rooms and furnishings a testament to the vision of its creator, Madame Suda. Known to the villagers as "Mae Nai Suda" in Thai, this Bangkok tycoon has imbued every aspect of the hotel with the aesthetics of Nakaraj Nakhon, the mythical city of Naga. From the red and green fabrics adorning the golden furniture to the patterns on the collars, walls, and even door handles, every detail has been inspired by Madame Suda's dream of the underworld city of Naga. Apparently, the presence of this hotel is a testament to the enduring power of Madame Suda's imagination and belief in the city of Naga.

The hotel sits on a large expanse of the riverbank, protected by a high wall and guarded by a towering Naga statue and spirit house at its shabby entrance. A sign on the road leading from the

main street to the village announces the name of this enchanted place: "Nakaraj Nakhon Road". Despite its grandeur, the hotel is said to only accept tour bookings in advance, according to the owner of a nearby grocery shop.

The Golden Hotel has a strong relationship with Mae Ya Mon Temple, which is located near the village and is known for its association with the myth of the Naga cave. The hotel often raises funds and donates to the temple. At the temple, there was a high Naga pagoda situated at the top of the hill connecting with a long stairway facing the Mekong River. I arrived at the temple for the first time in October of 2019 and was struck by the sight of a massive digging machine at work, surrounded by a group of workers. As I approached, I was greeted by a woman named Ms Ladawan, who seemed to hold the temple abbot, named Master Pongsatorn, in high regard. She told me the story of how he had journeyed from the south of Thailand in search of a sacred spot near the Mekong River and ultimately found his calling at this very temple. According to Ms Ladawan, the Master had a dream in which he felt a duty to open the Naga cave, and he had been working tirelessly to develop the temple for over a decade. She mentioned that it was his Karma, implying that it was his destiny to bring devotees to this place in order to accumulate merit.

Regarding to Naga cave stories in Chiang Khong, there are several versions about the tale of “grandmother spirit Mon” or Mae Ya Mon. One of the Ma Ya Mon tales was told by a villager I encountered during my first visit. She told me that many people believed that there was a hole leading from the human world to the underwater world at the river whirlpool and that a fierce male Naga often roamed the area, attacking passing boats. One day, the Naga was caught in a fishing net and was struggling in pain. Desperate for help, his daughter swam into the human world and came across Mae Ya Mon, a female villager who happened to be farming at the riverbank. Moved by the Naga's plight, Mae Ya Mon offered to help, cutting the net with her short knife and freeing the Naga in exchange for its promise to stop harming humans. In gratitude for Mae Ya Mon's kindness, the male Naga presented her with a basket of vegetables as a gift. When Mae Ya Mon returned home,

she discovered that the vegetables had turned into gold. Since then, the pagoda has been built at the temple and named after her.

Ms Ladawan told me that she used to hear about boat accidents happening around there. When she was young, she remembers hearing about a group who were coming back from bamboo picking and whose boat sank in that spot. Nevertheless, since the pagoda was built, she has not heard of any more boat accidents in the area. The tale of Mae Ya Mon was also detailed in a local news article when the village chief of Pak Ing village explained the concerns surrounding the blasting Mekong project, a GMS's waterway navigation improvement in February 2017.

A month later, I had an opportunity to participate in a fundraising event for the construction of a building to serve as temporary accommodation for devotees in the temple. On the evening before the festival day, the gates of the Golden Hotel opened to welcome all the guests. The huge golden buildings, adorned with bright yellow lights, were visible from the entrance, and a path lined with Naga and other mythic creature statues led to the reception. I noticed several modern buildings under construction, and there were many spirit-worship tables set up in front of Naga and Hindu god statues. The villagers had set up food stalls and were selling souvenirs, and a stage with a large canvas backdrop reading "Thank you Khun Than Rai Kham and friends" had been set up. I had the chance to meet the abbot at the ceremony. I noticed the village chief busy walking around helping a lady who seemed to be the organiser of the event. I was told that he had a good rapport with the hotel's owner Madame Suda.

Figure 26. An evening event at Golden Hotel in Ban Don. November 10 ,2019

Across the Mekong River, on the other side of the bridge, there is a hotel with a similar design that is still in operation and can be booked online. When my friend and I visited, we were the only two customers at the hotel. As part of the Nakaraj Nakhon project, they also run an entertainment complex with a casino and another hotel located inside Huayxay, Laos. This real estate project was operated by the AAC Green City Group, a joint venture between Thai and Korean investors. They received an 80-year land-leasing contract from the Lao according to local news, the master plan for the Nakaraj Nakhon project was divided into six phases: infrastructure and land development, hotel and entertainment complex construction, shopping plaza and commercial space, logistics and warehousing, and villa resorts. The company had strong business ties in Laos, I was told that Madame Suda's business

also be part of a commercial bank that belonged to her husband's family. The Nakaraj project was heavily promoted during the construction of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in an effort to attract more international partners. However, the project was forced to halt operations due to changes in the Lao government's construction plan and conflicts among their business partners. Here, I heard more about the conflict between Madame Suda and her Korean business partner, including rumours of contract forgery and betrayed business partners. This created a contrasting image of a good devotee that I perceived about Madame Suda in the Thai temple.

In addition, on the other side of the bridge in Laos, there is a construction project in operation. The two high-rise buildings belong to Yunnan Hai Cheng Industrial Group Co, Ltd, a large Chinese real estate company that has invested along the R3A highway from southern China towards Thailand. The company has also invested in the special economic zone at the Boten-Mohan border area between Laos and China. In Huay Xai, their master plan covers 13.8 hectares of the riverbank, including an entertainment complex, hotels, duty-free shopping, apartments, restaurants, a pier, and a bus station. The company received a land-concession contract from the Lao government in August 2017, while Nakaraj Nakhon project was suspended.

Figure 27. Two Buildings Invested in by Yunnan Hai Cheng Group on the Border of Huay Xai, Laos. October 31,2019.

The Culture of Wealth and Nāgas

December 2021, a few kilometres downstream of Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge no.4, Pra That Doi Mae Ya Mon temple stands on a hill overlooking the Mekong River. On the Laos riverbank, to the right of the bridge, stands a tall building under construction by a Chinese company, Yunnan Hai Cheng. At the temple's ladder, I am facing the Mekong River, and in front of me are Laos' empty river beaches covered in green grass and bushes. On the corner of the river are many rapids and roiling whirlpools close to the Thai shore. Located by the riverbank were two Naga sculptures, one green and one blue; they faced each other. In front of the sculptures were banana flower trays – banana leaves folded into pagoda shapes decorated with flowers – along with red drinks and a few water bottles. A wooden donation box was placed beside each sculpture, inscribed with “donations for the enemy in the past life” and “donations for electricity and water bills”.

The Naga staircase leads up to the pagoda, surrounded by Buddhist monks' sculptures. These sculptures are labelled in Thai and Chinese, with the names of the donors who helped build the pagoda. As I entered, I noticed that the pagoda had been built on top of an older one. A long, bright-green fabric was woven around its body, and at the base of the pagoda, there was a golden frame with a photograph of Mr Than. He was the businessman who hosted the fundraising event for the pagoda the previous year and was pictured wearing a white T-shirt.

There were several buildings inside the temple area, such as worship houses, monk's cells, meditation huts, and a dormitory for devotees. I entered a worship house of grandmother spirit, Mae Ya Mon, a shrine of an old lady in a white robe, standing behind a transparent mirror, her body surrounded by decorated lotuses. An offering table was laid with several banana-leaf flower trays and garlands, along with a photo of a woman putting something on the head of the sculpture. It was inscribed with “a miracle of Mae Ya Mon”. I noticed a few pieces of paper underneath the photo frame; there was a copy of a land title with the Garuda emblem[7] and an election leaflet of a candidate voting for a local subdistrict administrative member.

[7] The Garuda Emblem is often used by Thai governmental organisations and official documents.

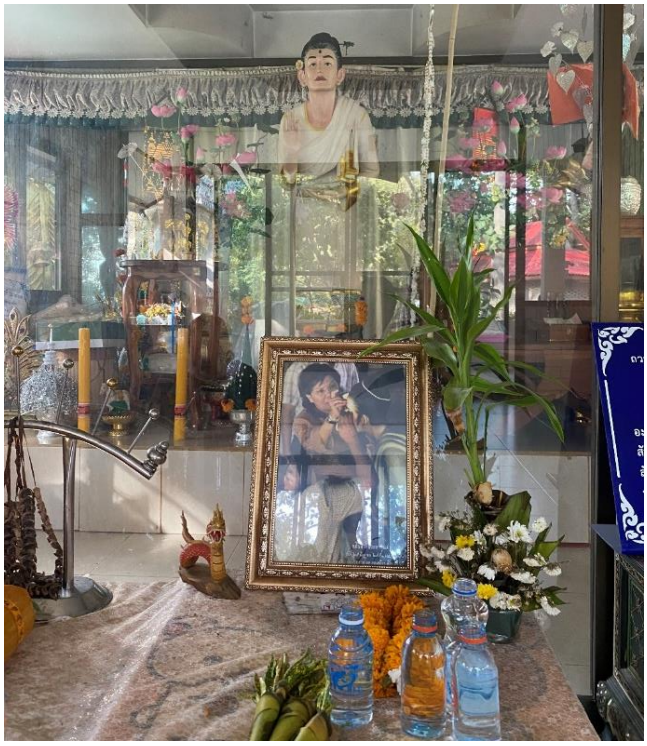

Figure 28. Shrine of Grandmother Spirit, Mae Ya Mon. December 13,2021

Figure 29. Leaflet of Candidate for Subdistrict Administrative Council, Organization Council, Chiang Khong. December 13, 2021.

Generally, Thai Buddhists often come to ask for their wishes and to seek good luck for themselves and their beloved ones by visiting the temple and worshipping an image of Buddha or other spirit statues and shrines, including making offerings to Naga statues. It is believed that blessings can be transmitted or invoked by physical contact with sacred objects or places. Touching sacred objects, lighting incense and making food and other offerings are all actions that help acquire luck. I interpreted that the leaflet underneath the photo frame reflected the candidate's belief that doing so would bring fortune and fulfil the desired wish of the candidate. The leaflet would be infused with spiritual power or blessings by being in close proximity to the shrine, or such power would be transmitted physically to bless him to win the vote. Similarly, it is possible that the person who placed the land title under the photo frame believed that doing so would bring good fortune to the land sale. Similar practices were also found when I visited other temples famous for Naga in Udon Thani Province in northeastern Thailand.

The ritual activities of the Nagas, mythical animals that are half-dragon, half-serpent, have blossomed in recent years in Thailand as the country has endured financially and politically unstable conditions (Rennesson, 2021). Naga worship has a long history in the Mekong community. Nagas are believed to be powerful and benevolent deities that inhabit the Mekong and its tributaries. Nagas are associated with the protection of water sources and are seen as guardian spirits of rivers, lakes, and streams. At the intersection of Theravāda Buddhism and beliefs in a spirited landscape, Nagas interweave with human worlds and agrarian rituals. They are worshipped because they rule the water and river from the underworld, the kingdoms of which run parallel to those of the surface world. The presence of Nagas is often associated with natural wells, water sources, and caves. In North and Northeastern Thailand, they are reputed to have designed riverbeds and ponds. In the agrarian ritual cycle, Nagas are related to soil fertility as they invoke the sky deities to ease the rain and preside over the flow of water, and they are also involved in the rotation of the seasons (Rennesson, 2021, p. 21). Thus, they are associated with fertility and prosperity and are believed to bring good fortune to those who honour and worship them.

The actions taken by individuals in the Mekong region may be motivated by various factors. Nevertheless, the presence of land titles and voting leaflets in the Maya Mon temple reflects how people seek spiritual or supernatural support to achieve their goals and aspirations. These spirits are believed to be powerful beings who can grant favours in exchange for offerings and rituals. In the context of the unstable economic conditions in the special economic zones in northern Thailand, this can be interpreted as a means of coping with uncertainty and insecurity in the future. This is particularly relevant in the real estate market, which is often prone to instability. Land speculation at border towns has become a common occurrence with the development of infrastructure projects and the establishment of SEZs. In the context of land speculation and real estate markets, characterised by uncertain regulation, land-price volatility and an unpredictable future, investors and small-scale landowners are not shying away from risk but rather actively embracing it in pursuit of potentially high profits. This highlights the close relationship between risk and wealth. The actions of these individuals suggest that the future is not predetermined and can be shaped by a person's actions and decisions in the present.

In addition, it appears that the temple is an important centre for community in terms of the site possessing spiritual power and merit. The presence of a shrine dedicated to Mae Ya Mon suggests that local spirits hold an important place in the community's beliefs and practices, as indicated by the offerings and flowers surrounding the shrine. The inclusion of donor names and a photograph of the fundraising host, labelled in both Thai and Chinese, indicates that the temple relies on the generosity of its supporters for financial support. The mystery of the Naga captivated the land speculation in the Mekong border town, not only for the opportunity to accumulate merit but also for the potential for financial gain.

Wealth and Magical Cults

In *Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment,* Peter Jackson explores the intersection of religion and wealth accumulation, offering a fresh perspective on Thai wealth cults, which amalgamate diverse spiritual elements from Buddhism, Hinduism, Chinese traditional religions, and local Thai beliefs that increasingly dominate Thai religious life in the 21st century (Jackson, 2022, p. 27). Contrary to the prevailing notion that magical practices are primarily adopted by those marginalised by capitalism to confront the economic conditions (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002), the practice of Naga rituals in Chiang Khong, and wealth-oriented magical cults associated with land speculation and future prediction, compellingly demonstrate participation from across all economic strata, illustrating a response to capitalism's economic boom and bust among its beneficiaries (Keyes, 2006, p. 6).

Additionally, Jovan Maud (2007) explains that the relationships between magic, religion, and the marketplace have become deeply interconnected in contemporary Thailand, reflecting the fact that capitalism has multiplied enchantments. He argues that neoliberal economies, supposedly characterised by “economic rationalism”, have engendered new forms of irrationality instead (Maud, 2022, p. 11). Recently, a flourishing wealth cult has amalgamated with local Naga belief at the Thai-Lao Mekong borderland, resulting in mixed ritual practices that have been innovated by diverse groups. Among them are a Bangkok tycoon, foreign investors, devotees, local and non-local middle-class devotees, monks, and villagers. They share a common practice of seeking supernatural intervention for the purpose of reaching their desired goals, e.g., success, wealth, and political power.

Thus, spiritual practices are significant as a means of coping with the volatility and uncertainty of the future. To seek guidance, protection, and good fortune, many Thai engage in spiritual practices such as meditation, chanting, and making offerings to deities or spirits. This is generally regarded as making merit; this concept is prevalent in Thai Buddhism, which involves performing actions that are believed to generate positive Karma and bring blessings and good fortune in the present and future.

These actions may include donating to temples or charitable causes, engaging in acts of kindness, or participating in rituals and ceremonies.

In the context of Chiang Khong border town, the presence of non-local investors as patrons of the Naga temple in this community demonstrates their willingness to engage with and support local traditional practices. Through donations and public charity, they demonstrate an effort to be part of the community culture, which helps them gain approval from the locals. In particular, paying respect to the local spirits associated with Naga beliefs positions them as moral investors who are not just seeking to take advantage of the land and other local resources but are also willing to give back to the community. I interpret these actions as a way for these investors to seek approval from the local community.

As previously mentioned, the concept of *Chao Thi,* or locality spirits, plays a significant role in this community. These spirits are believed to inhabit specific places, such as villages or towns, and are thought to protect and watch over the community. In this context, the Mae ya Mon spirit and the Naga spirits are important guardians of the place and the Mekong River for this community, and it is therefore vital for newcomers to pay respect to local beliefs, including the veneration of these spirits, as a way of showing respect for the locals.

Conclusion

There is a gap between document planning and practising on the ground. Throughout this chapter, I provide empirical examples of land speculation at different scales to illustrate how this gap has been filled. For example, the Chiang Rai SEZs is a top-down policy authorised by the chief of state and planned by the technocratic institutions under the junta regime. Consequently, the three Thai border towns were paired up to become the special economic zone divided into a financial, a port, and a logistic town. Indeed, many plots in the village had already been sold to non-local investors for many years.

Naga rituals have gained popularity in Thai culture in general, along with local tales of Naga in Chiang Khong, creating a portal for integrating various cults of wealth and magic. Analysing these innovative ritual practices provides a glimpse of what is hidden under this apparently rationalistic SEZ planning. The states anticipate the prosperity of the nation by promoting the SEZs plan. Foreseeing the future, simulating its emergence, and controlling it are all associated with the planning process (Bear, 2020, p. 8). Borderlands were framed as blank spaces waiting to be transformed by infrastructure development and capital investment. In so doing, the state's promise of prosperity gives a sense of moral obligation, simultaneously legitimising any form of capital that the planning would bring and hiding the back door of negotiation, exemption, and resource exploitation.

Land speculation in Chiang Khong, driven by plans for the special economic zones and Thai infrastructure projects, has emerged and persisted amid volatile borderland development connected to China. This has led to anticipation among both local and non-local property owners for high compensation for land, as they previously experienced a land boom a decade ago. In Ban Don village, a real estate development project funded by the Bangkok tycoon embraced the mystery surrounding the Naga, a spiritual entity in Thai culture, to legitimise and enchant her capital and properties. The practice of Naga rituals has contributed to make the land speculation appear more attractive and enchanted, covering up her messy conflict with ventures in the casino business across the river.

Small landowners in this community employed several strategies to cope with the uncertain future amid unstable economic conditions, including seeking spiritual support and blessings. Naga Spiritual practices serve as a way for these individuals to increase their confidence and navigate the unpredictable future of the SEZ. Through these practices, small-scale landowners hope to gain protection, guidance, and good fortune as they face future challenges. Therefore, rather than avoiding risk, these groups are willing to take it on in the hope of achieving prosperity.

In conclusion, focusing on orientation to the future in everyday life requires a shift towards examining agency, hope, planning, practices, and action that shape and project structures and

institutions into the future (Bryant & Knight, 2019). The case of land speculation in Chiang Khong illustrates how policy planning, spiritual practices, and individual actions all play a role in transforming land into infrastructure for special economic zone development. Their various responses highlight the complex interactions between policy, culture, and individual agency in this open-ended process. The future, then, is not an independent entity, but is shaped by the past and the present. The present, in turn, is also influenced by the future.

Chapter 3

Navigating Border Life Volatility

Figure 30. Japanese car waiting for export at Chiang Saen Port. December 18, 2021.

At precisely 8:00 am on a December morning in 2021, my friend and I found ourselves standing before the Chiang Saen customs office. I had an appointment with Somjai, a shipping agent based in Chiang Saen. She had been working as a full-time agent for ten years but had recently transitioned to freelancing in the wake of the pandemic. Today, she agreed to let me follow her to observe how she navigated the complex process of exporting used Japanese cars to Myanmar. Punctually, Somjai's car arrived. She got out clutching a brown A4 envelope, visibly filled with essential documents. On this early morning, we were the first group to arrive at the Chiang Saen port. Somjai guided us to the entrance, where a blue booklet lay on a table. She signed her name and noted down her arrival time.

Somjai then walked over to another table, which had a sign reading "Export Contact Point" and a small plastic basket filled with wooden stamps on it. She meticulously reviewed her documents, showing us several papers required for presentation to the customs officials. As she flipped through the pages, she revealed the required information to be entered into another blue booklet – vehicle

type, price, date of manufacture, import/export dates, and applicant details. Somjai then drew our attention to the "customs bolts", tiny devices designed to secure the vehicles, ensuring they could not be replaced during transit.

With documents in hand, Somjai entered another room. Through the transparent glass wall, I could see how she familiarly greeted the front office staff, who sat just outside the head officer's room. She then proceeded to meet with the head officer in the inner room, a middle-aged woman seated further inside the area. Somjai submitted the carefully prepared documents to her, and they engaged in a conversation for a while. After the paperwork was approved, Somjai led us to the vehicles scheduled for transport to Myanmar.

Not far from the office building, we sat in front of the area referred to as the "temporary storage area" and waited for sister Mai, called J'Mai by Somjai. Somjai mentioned that sister Mai had hired her multiple times to work on exporting goods to Myanmar. Mai, an ethnic Tai woman, has a nephew who is opening a used-car shop in Tachilek, Myanmar. Somjai took out several keys from the brown envelope and placed each key on the vehicle's roof, according to the number painted on the vehicle's windscreen. About twenty minutes later, I saw a brand-new car drive towards us and park. A lady stepped out of the car and confidently walked toward us in her high heels. She greeted Somjai and glanced at me, asking Somjai, "Whose daughter is she?" Somjai simply replied that I was just a friend who had come along to help. The lady didn't seem to care much and quickly opened her car to retrieve a gallon of petrol, from which she promptly poured some into each car's empty tank. She then asked me to grab a car jump-starter from her car.

There were seven Japanese vehicles parked that needed warming up. Somjai and Mai worked quickly and efficiently, filling tanks, jump-starting car batteries, and starting each car one by one. Mai connected the car jump-starter while Somjai pushed the accelerator in some vehicles that didn't respond after pressing the start button. Somjai told us that the vessel from Myanmar would arrive soon and asked us to help start the other cars and warm up their engines.

There was little time for me to adjust and figure out how to handle these unfamiliar vehicles. Somjai started driving a car out and told us to pick one and quickly follow her to the pier area. Full of hesitation, I still jumped into the car, struggling initially to release the handbrake before following Somjai to the pier. Some cars made strange loud noises as we drove, and the windshield wiper on my car kept moving. A group of men who accompanied the vessel took charge of the remaining vehicles. The seven cars swiftly reached the pier, where the men promptly loaded them onto the vessel. They skilfully reversed the cars onto two narrow shipboards, nearly the same width as the tires. In a matter of mere minutes, all the vehicles were secured on the vessel, ready to set sail for Ban Pong port, Myanmar.

Somjai snapped several photos of each car as part of the exporting process and sent them to the customs officers. She explained that the officers should have been present to observe the process, but since it was Saturday and they knew her well, they were content with the photos as an alternative. We wrapped up the task around 11 a.m.

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Figure 31. An Overview of Transport Routes in the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

Note. Reprinted from "Transport Route of NR-DP" in "MDEALNS for Solving the Tapioca Starch Logistics Network Problem for the Land Port of Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand" by C. Chueadee, P. Kriengkorakot, & N. Kriengkorakot, 2022, Logistics, 6(4), p. 72. (https://doi.org/10.3390/logistics6040072).

Logistcal Power

This chapter examines cross-border and transborder trade practices between the south of China and the Mekong border towns in northern Thailand through the concept of *logistical power*. The concept was developed by historical sociologist Chandra Mukerji and recently expanded by anthropologist Xiang Biao – "logistical power in social life" – the state's ability to manipulate, transform, enhance, and hinder the circulation of human and non-human goods, things, and information through several forms of standardising infrastructures ranging from bureaucratic documents and customs rules to the visual technical/physical transported projects (Joyce & Mukerji, 2017; Mukerji, 2010; Olesko, 2020; Xiang, 2022).

Xiang (2022) argues that the state holds two sources of logistical power; first, *logistical provision* refers to state investment in developing logistical infrastructure, and second, *logistical intervention* refers to the state dominating the means of mobility ranging from customs control, national currency, and various personal documents. China has hyped regional economic integration in the past two decades and increased connectivity between Yunnan's border regions and its Mekong neighbours. Consequently, the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Golden Triangle area, which was once known for opium trading and was on the periphery of state control, has become a site for investment and river trade development since the 2000s.

A crucial component of the Greater Mekong Sub-region strategy was the narrative of infrastructure development aimed at facilitating economic growth, reducing transportation time, shortening travelling distance, reducing the risk of a dangerous river and mountain route, and promoting a liberal international market. In parallel, these free-trade connecting routes were well equipped with monitoring tools such as border-control points, customs checkpoints, immigration border control, and security forces, which are manifestations of state dominance over mobility. These monitoring tools were implemented to control the flow of goods and people across the routes to ensure that the dominant states' interests were met.

The border trade in the Thai Mekong towns is used as a case to illustrate how the logistical power is exercised by states. Nevertheless, infrastructure rarely works the way it was initially designed to; instead, it functions in unintended ways, and this entails unforeseeable outcomes (Kanoi et al., 2022, p. 2; Niewöhner, 2015, p. 8). In this chapter, I offer the term “deviated route”, which refers to the passage in transborder trade through several small ports along the Mekong River from Northern Thailand toward the south of China. The traders and logistics companies preferred the deviated route over the official international ports designed by the states because they could optimise cross-border trade profit by transporting goods to a less regulated passage and benefit from agreements to have customs duties waived. This chapter also explores the unintended consequences of infrastructures through accounts of traders and trading activities across the Mekong border. Further, I examine what the ports and the bridge mean for different groups of people and how infrastructure reconfigures social relations among them before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the realm of cross-border trade, various studies have explored the complex interplay between socioeconomic conditions and local actors that shape the dynamics of these trading activities. Many works have shown that border trade networks are complex, often involving multiple stakeholders and political connections. The work of Hung and Ngo (2020) in their edited volume, Shadow Exchanges along the New Silk Roads, highlights the importance of “informal connectivity” and resilience within these networks, in which traders frequently create and maintain relationships with local officials to ensure seamless transnational crossings. Additionally, Rippa (2020) assesses infrastructure development's influence on cross-border livelihoods in Tashkurgan, China. The “proximity” concept provides a comprehensive framework to analyse the relationship between borderland infrastructure, local mobility, border regulators and trader strategies in the context of cross-border trade under China's sway (Rippa, 2020, pp. 54–56)

Additionally, Saxer's (2016) “pathways” concept depicts the dynamic and resilient trading lifeworld in the Himalayas, the high mountains of Asia, emphasising encounters in fluid border spaces. This approach underscores the idea that pathways are better represented as bundles of

trading lines rather than distinct areas. Adopting this notion helps in comparing the complex interconnections and exchange systems of other borders with the Mekong trading route. In particular, recognising the characteristics of informal connectivity provides a more nuanced perspective, revealing that traditional binary categories of formal and informal trade, as well as state and non-state actors, may not adequately capture the complexity of trade networks along the Mekong pathway (E. P. W. Hung et al., 2020, pp. 23–25).

In the Thai-Lao-Myanmar borderland context, these infrastructures are not always entirely dominated by powerful state forces. I view the deviated route as a response to the state administration's efforts to dominate transborder trade. I draw parallels with Walker's (1999) work, "The Legend of the Golden Boat", which offers historical context for cross-border trade development and introduces the concept of "collaborative borders", unveiling the complex and subtle cooperation between local initiatives and state authority (Walker, 1999, pp. 111–112). Consequently, informal networks, traders, and other actors actively influence regulations associated with cross-border trade and transportation regimes. This viewpoint underscores the historically grounded and somewhat ambiguous distinction between state actors and local actors in regulating border trade. In a related manner, Rowedder's (2022) grounded research on small-scale traders in Northern Laos offers a "smallness" lens with which to scrutinise the blurred distinctions among various actors engaged in cross-border trade. The boundaries between state and small traders, large-scale and small-scale as well as formal and informal, are not clearly delineated, as actors such as customs, immigration, and border patrol illustrating close interdependence and intertwining (Rowedder, 2022, p.31).

Building on these perspectives, this chapter attempts to demonstrate that multiple actors engaged in both formal and informal Thai-Lao-Myanmar-China Mekong border trade possess the resources and expertise to overcome state customs barriers and optimise the exploitation of regulatory loopholes. These actors adeptly navigate diverse regulations and shape transportation conditions to facilitate the efficient movement of goods across borders. However, the state's power has gradually penetrated cross-border trade by increasing the ability of management forms of

transportation and filtering people who could get involved in the trading system while keeping all mobilities under state surveillance. As a result, the bridge and the ports controlled by states selectively facilitate certain groups of people while others are excluded. In particular, during the global pandemic, these infrastructures immediately hindered small-scale trading within the flow of the Mekong logistical system, filtering out goods and things that were less economically important from the circulation of cross-border mobility.

In this chapter, we explore various dimensions of cross-border trade between the Mekong border towns and southern China. I first provide the background of the borderland infrastructures in Thai border towns named Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong, focusing on the transport infrastructures, an international port, and a cross-river bridge. Then, I further provide several accounts of the trading activities and involved people and demonstrate their perspective toward the recently built world influenced by states in the past two decades. Finally, my ethnographic studies highlight the local agency involved in border-trade practices, dealings, and the mechanisms that allow for the flow of commodities across the border despite facing logistical power. Furthermore, secondary data were collected from various sources, including local newspapers, customs offices' websites, journals, and relevant regional research reports, to enrich the analysis and provide a comprehensive understanding of the local trade lifeworld.

Local Lifeworlds of trade at the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong Borderland

Historically, Mekong residents are familiar with cross-border river trading and long-distance overland trading with the Ho, Yunnanese, who travelled from south China toward the Mekong border. Various goods originated in Yunnan, Tibet, China, India, and even Europe and were carried by horse caravans throughout Northern Laos toward the border of Thailand; these items were exchanged for opium: iron and copper pots, opium smokers, small utensils, rifles, silks, cotton, medicines, tobacco, clothing, tea and horses (Halpern, 1961, p. 27; Reinach, 1901). The caravans traveled through the mountainous

area and traded with several ethnic groups such as the Khmu, the Hmong, the Yao, the Karen, the Lao, and the Tai people (Halpern 1961, p.28).

In addition, river traffic has played a significant role in the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand for centuries. The barge and pirogue have been the primary means of transport for connecting the small villages along the Mekong River and its tributaries which are not accessible by road or by air; however, the big barges often face challenges in navigating during the dry season (Berman, 1998, p. 9; Halpern, 1961, p. 33). The motor pirogues owned by many villagers were usually used for travelling, transporting, and fishing; the wooden barges were employed in commercial river traffic. Most cargo vessels from Chiang Khong either travelled up to Luang Prabang in Northern Laos or cruised from Chiang Saen to the north toward Yunnan. The larger cargo boats were often impeded by rapids in the Mekong River, while the smaller pirogues could be navigated through dangerous spots by their skillful riders.

After years of border closure between China and neighbouring countries due to political tension during the Cold War era, cross-border trade activities have been formally re-established since the 1990s, and the climate of liberalised cooperation has gradually laid the groundwork for Mekong regional development (Walker, 2000, p. 126). A number of transport-infrastructure projects have been proposed to the GMS countries supported by the ADB; millions of loans and private funds were granted to back the GMS projects, in particular the development of transport, energy, trade, and tourism (Berman, 1998, p. 8). In addition, the PRC has repositioned Yunnan from the southwestern periphery of the state to a “bridgehead” connecting China to Southeast Asia (Summers, 2013, p. 1). The agreement on the opening of the Lancang River was made by the four governments: Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and China. In October 1994, a “free navigation” agreement was established, which resulted in the official opening of several ports in each country (Lazarus et al., 2006, p. 22).

As mentioned before, regarding connectivity enhancements to foster economic growth in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, the North-South Economic Corridor plays a central role in these efforts.

International Highway R3A, which connect Bangkok and Kunming via Laos, alongside other initiatives like the upper-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement project and air services improvement, strengthens the connections between the participating countries.

In a related context, the study by Zhou (2013) illustrates the account of Tengchong County in Southwest Yunnan in repositioning itself as a vital connecting point in global trade. The local government selectively interpreted local trading history to construct a new image of the future of the town. As a result, Tengchong was promoted and repositioned as the bridgehead between China and Southeast Asia to pursue rapid modernisation. The state plays a significant role in collaborating with private entrepreneurs to promote the Burmese amber trade in Tengchong. The local government's tolerance of illicit amber trading is demonstrated in Rippa and Yang (2017), as the Myanmar market heavily depends on Chinese demand (Rippa & Yang, 2017).

Similarly to what happened in the Thai border towns like Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen, after an "experimental" shipment of apples from Jinghong to Chiang Saen had been implemented in 1995, the volume of imports from China rose dramatically from 500 tons in 1991 to 40,000 tons in 1995 (Berman, 1998, p. 10). Shipments along the Mekong River route have significantly increased, leading to proposals for improvements in navigation by blasting rapids and shoals for more extensive vessel transportation. The upgraded route is also linked to upgraded ports and road networks in downstream countries, including Thailand and Myanmar. Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridges No.1 and No.2 were built in 1997 and 2006, respectively. Additionally, the Chiang Saen No.1 port was built in 2003 by the Thai government, followed by the Chiang Saen No.2 port in 2012. A year later, the land route was connected via the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No.4 in Chiang Khong town. Over the past 20 years, southern China and neighbouring countries such as Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have constantly strengthened their connectivity through transport infrastructure development.

In addition to this, as I have described in the previous chapter, the special economic zones have been established along the border of Laos and Thailand. In 2007, the Lao government granted a

99-year lease for approximately 10,000 hectares of land in the Tonpheung district of Bokeo province, situated in Northwestern Laos' Golden Triangle, to a Chinese private enterprise known as the “King Roman Group” (Rippa, 2019, p. 253). The group runs a casino, an entertainment complex, and a new modern Chinatown, which includes facilities such as a hospital, school, and airport. On the Thai border, a special economic zone was established to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2016. Three districts in Chiang Rai province have been designated for specific purposes: Chiang Khong as a logistical city, Chiang Saen as a port town, and Mae Sai as a trading center.

In an effort to illustrate the fluctuations experienced by local communities impacted by transportation infrastructure projects, such as ports and bridges, driven by China's influence on transborder transportation, the following section provides an account of the Chinese apple trade that thrived in a Thai border town named Chiang Saen during the 1990s. This examination thereby sheds light on the intricacies of these dynamic interactions and highlights the influence of logistical power.

The Heyday of Chinese Apple Trade at Chiang Saen Dock

When I asked people in Chiang Saen town about Chinese trade, they often started the conversation by telling me about their memories of the Chinese apple trade at the Chiang Saen dock. The narrative goes back to the early 1990s, when they had directly interacted with Chinese merchants and saw Chinese vessels coming into their hometown. Similar to the written interviews recorded in several Thai research reports on local economic development in Chiang Saen, their accounts have much in common with the lively atmosphere of the apple trade and the vibrant fruit market on the riverbanks.

An account of a retired district administrator narrating his reminiscences about Chinese apples caught my interest (Kotawinn, 2006, p. 40; Wichai & et al., 2006). He was once invited to a welcome dinner hosted by the Chinese delegates. Local merchants, government officials, and Rotary[8] members were invited. As a special gift, the Chinese host provided Chinese apples for all guests. The

[8] Rotary Clubs in Thailand are part of a global network of community-based service organisations committed to humanitarian services, ethical standards, and promoting goodwill.

unique combination of green and yellow attracted everyone's attention, and they took those apples home to show their friends and family (Kotawinn, 2006, p. 40).

This is similar to an interview with the village chief of Sob Ruak, the largest Tai Yai community in Chiang Saen town. He explained that before Chinese cargo ships boomed in Chiang Saen, traders from Thailand and Laos profited more by importing Chinese fruit and commodities. This was in the early 2000s. The chief had been in the border-trade business for many years and claimed to be the first to import apples from China to Chiang Saen. He used to run the trade with his Tai Lue friend in Xishuangbanna, China, and opened a warehouse in 1993. After the trans-border trade boomed here, he sold everything to his friend and returned to Chiang Saen to continue his business (personal communication, 17 June 2020, Chiang Saen).

In 1994, the Chinese apple trade saw substantial growth and lasted several years. During this time, transportation was limited to small and medium-sized cargo boats carrying 4,000 to 5,000 cartons of apples. Men in Chiang Saen town found work as porters, loading apples from the boats onto the dock and earning daily wages of THB 400 to 500 (around USD 15). Many Chiang Saen residents became Chinese-apple and -pear traders, buying apples from Chinese merchants in the morning and selling them for a profit in the evening. A successful business could be run with just a table, chair, beach umbrella, calculator, and cash (Kotawinn, 2006, p. 41)

Small traders in Chiang Saen formed groups of 2-3 people and purchased all the Chinese apples on the boat. They negotiated prices on the boat, which changed daily based on supply. After agreeing on a price, the Thai trader paid the Chinese merchant in Thai baht and hired Thai porters to transfer the apples from the boat to the dock at the cost of THB 2-3 per box (Kotawinn, 2006). Customs officials collected the duty fee on the spot from the Thai traders. Soon after, other Thai buyers purchased the apples for retail in other markets across Thailand. They negotiated prices with the Thai traders and hired porters to load the apples into their vehicles, either using trolleys or their own pick-up trucks. The Chiang Saen dock transformed from a peaceful border dock to a bustling

trade market. Apple traders and related businesses often described the time as “sanook”, meaning fun; the dock was alive with neon lights and people bustling about all night.

The bustling activity at Chiang Saen docks is a clear testament to the state's nuanced exercise of logistical power. By choosing a temporary non-intervention approach in the apple trade, this resonates Xiang's (2022) perspective on the state's selective intervention or, in this case, non-intervention. Allowing traders and Chinese ship transporters to interact directly demostrates the state’s power in determining when and how to intervene. Nonetheless, the thriving apple trade started to face fluctuations in the late 1990s. In the subsequent paragraph, we explore how the infrastructures play a role in generating volatility within the town.

The Greater the Supply, The Smaller the Profit for Small Thai Traders

Since 1998, the trading competition has been sharpened. There were more supplies of apples and peaches imported directly from China. The Thai traders could not profit by selling everything in one day; they needed to put leftover apples in the warehouse. The selling time extended from a day to a week, and many imported apples and peaches gradually became rotten. This forced the traders to sell without profit. The daily cash-running business changed to long-term credit payment or instalments.

According to an overview of local business in Chiang Saen, many Thai retailers no longer came to pick up goods in person; they preferred to communicate via telephone (Wichai & et al., 2006). Small apple traders began facing cash shortages and business losses due to bad debt. Only a prominent business trader had the capacity to purchase goods from the large vessels and sustain the trading operations at Chiang Saen. These prominent traders garnered more trust from Chinese merchants, which allowed them to access longer-term credit compared to smaller traders. Therefore, many smaller traders have been forced out of the game; they subsequently transitioned into working as local market merchants or searched for other careers. The apple traders gradually shifted from wholesale to retail sales along the riverbank. Besides apples, items in their shops included Chinese

snacks, beans, dried plums, and dried seaweeds. Still, the number of customers was declining day by day.

It can be said that the booming apple trade was relevant to the Mekong navigation project that started in the 1990s. An agreement for commercial navigation on the Mekong-Lancang River has been made by the Mekong countries, including Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. China led the project to demolish rocks blocking shipping routes from Simao, China, to Luang Prabang, Laos. In 2001, the project blasted islets in Laos and Myanmar, facilitating large cargo boats (weighing 500 tons) departing from Xishuangbanna in Southwestern China, passing Laos and Myanmar, and then arriving at the Chiang Saen border town within 1 to 2 days. As a result, the large-scale river trade from China via Myanmar and Laos was far greater than the trading route between Thailand and Laos that used to depart from Chiang Khong to Luang Prabang (England, 2006). Also, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA), signed in 2002, has played an essential role in facilitating apples and several kinds of Chinese vegetables into Thailand. Thus, the hard infrastructure that paved the pathway down from China, and the soft infrastructure such as the trading agreement, simultaneously facilitated the flow of Chinese goods down to Thailand.

Due to the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement, the previously unregulated apple trading system has completely changed. The fruit trade between Thailand and China is currently regulated by the customs regime. The source of fruits must be declared, and the receiver must be reported clearly. Consequently, the proliferating number of cargo vessels coming down from China led to the construction of the first Chiang Saen port on the Mekong River. Situated in the old town area, this port began operations on October 1, 2003. Consequently, small traders found themselves excluded from the border-trade system, while local porters faced reduced earnings due to the growing presence of Myanmar porters who provided a more competitive labour market. This heightened competition resulted in lower wages for Thai porters following the opening of Chiang Saen No.2 port, and Myanmar workers became the majority at the Chiang Saen No.1 port.

The Chiang Saen ports, which are located on the Mekong River, serve as an example of the state's "infrastructure power" – the ability to penetrate civil society and cross-border trade activities through logistics policies (Mann, 2008, p. 355). This is achieved through various means, such as the collection of taxes, control of vessel mobility, and regulation of goods circulation. In this sense, the port and bridge can be seen as tools that the state uses to monitor and regulate the movement of goods and cross-border trading activities by providing infrastructure and enforcing regulations. Thus, the intensification of logistical power has reinforced infrastructural power by making the circulation of goods more transparent, locatable, and traceable. By closely monitoring the flow of goods, the state can more efficiently regulate trade activities, often leading to increased taxation, tariffs and regulations. This ultimately enhances the state's ability to exert control and despotic power (Xiang, 2022).

Myanmar Migrant Workers in Chiang Saen

Visiting a Myanmar grocery shop in the town allowed me to get to know Mimi, a 40-year-old Myanmar based in Chiang Saen. Mimi came to Thailand when she was ten years old. She first worked in Mae Sai as a housekeeper. She followed her brother to stay in Chiang Saen when she was 18 years old. She stopped working as a housekeeper after she got married. Her husband also came from Myanmar, and he used to work as a dock worker in Chaing Saen. He was now working as a construction worker in another province.

The system for legally registering migrant workers in Thailand was infamous for its overly complicated procedures. Its complexities, unstable, slowness and high costs have frustrated migrant workers every year. Mimi shared with me how she experienced difficulties legalising her worker status.

> *"It is not easy to stay in Thailand. It costs a lot for working registration, passport, health insurance. We need to have a Thai employer guarantee our working status; we must register our work and residence. Many of us don't have enough money; their employers must pay for them and deduct from our wages later…"*

We met again several times. She told me that she used to work as a waitress in a frozen-food factory, in several shops, and as a cleaning lady. At present, she earns money from laundry service, using her house as her working station. She rents her house and lives with two children. She told me that she would rather not go back to Myanmar. Staying in Thailand was better for her children's future. Both already have Thai citizenship, and she expected them to live and work in Thailand.

In Chiang Saen, Myanmar workers worked in several jobs, for example as dock workers, housekeepers, construction workers, waitresses, and retail-shop workers. In general, a group of dock workers has approximately 5-10 people. They work as a team when loading and unloading goods onto and off boats. They get paid for the total number of tasks they have completed per day, divided among the group members. For example, loading fruits from the truck to the boat is one task for the group. The price of each task depends on the negotiation between the group head and the clients. The head of each group only searched for orders from several clients such as suppliers, shop owners, passengers, and then organised members in his team to load or unload goods.

The dock workers started working around 6 a.m. and went on until 5 p.m. or later. They received their wages in the evening. The Myanmar grocery shop was one of the meeting places where they gathered after work. I was told that Myanmar dock workers had already taken over Chiang Saen's old town pier, making it nearly impossible for Thai workers to work there. Mimi suggested that one reason Thai workers might prefer Chiang Saen Pier No. 2 is because its ladder is less steep than that of the old town's pier. She also mentioned that the service fees can vary depending on the dock workers, and Lao passengers frequently complain about being overcharged by Myanmar dock workers.

In Chiang Saen, closely situated to the Myanmar border, the vibrancy of the migrant ecosystem is underpinned by the intricate networks these individuals have woven. The state's intricate procedures for legally registering migrant workers, characterised by slowness and redundant documentation, signify a state's logistical power to regulate the migrant flow (Xiang, 2022). Yet, in the

face of these administrative hurdles, migrants find ways to navigate the system. Mimi's transition from a housekeeper to various roles exemplifies the adaptability and resilience innate to many migrants here.

Throughout our encounters, whether sharing a meal, visiting a café, or strolling the streets, Mimi's wide network of acquaintances in the town was evident. In one instance, while dining at a restaurant, she effortlessly chatted with the owner, later revealing to me that she had once worked there. This was further highlighted during my visit to the Chiang Saen port with Somjai, where I also saw Mimi, she was on a cleaning task for a port officer. From Mimi's freelance position, she possesses the adaptability to entertain diverse job opportunities. Yet, she doesn't just accept any offer that comes her way. Instead, her choices often reflect the depth of her connections and trust with certain employers. This characteristic of valuing personal connections exemplifies the informal networks that many migrants rely on to navigate life in this town. Similarly, dock workers, functioning in tight-knit units, underscore the crucial significance of these informal, yet robust, networks in sustaining life in these borderland communities.

The Deviated Route

On a sweltering July afternoon in 2020, I parked my car at the main entrance of the 2nd Chiang Saen Port, situated in the Chiang Saen District of Chiang Rai Province in Northern Thailand, patiently waiting for the security guard to let me in. The port, which was built after the first one began operations in 2012, was about 10 km east of the town. I had an appointment with Ms. Philai, an employee of the port. A long concrete road stretched from the main gates, where security guards stopped every vehicle before entering, towards her office. The only two office buildings appeared empty and quiet. The 2nd Chiang Saen Port was significantly larger than the first one, with a larger capacity for handling cargo and vehicle traffic, as well as providing better security measures. When I entered the room, Philai greeted me from behind a long counter. She invited me to sit on a sofa and

began the conversation by drawing circles on a piece of paper, pointing to the largest one and the smaller ones and saying,

> *"Look at this. This is China, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. Our port is here. These goods need to be transported to China. Some of them come from European countries and other parts of the world. What do you think is the best way to transport them? The cheapest route, right?"*

As China has developed its borderland infrastructure, large-scale Mekong transborder traders have adapted to the restructured customs zones to participate in international trade. Along the Mekong commercial transport route, prominent ports include Jinghong, Menghan, Simao, and Guanlei, all situated within China. Myanmar and Laos also benefit from increased river trade; their important ports include Wan Seng and Wan Pong within Myanmar, and Xiengkok Port in Laos. After the first Chiang Saen port started operation in northern Thailand in 2003, the Thai government claimed it was necessary to expand the transborder river-trade capacity. This is due to the high number of ships crowded into the port and the number of trucks congested on the street. They then built the Chiang Saen No.2 port, which was about 10 km away from the old one. The first port later closed after all relevant offices moved to the new port.

The second port started operating in 2012, and was about 40 times bigger than the previous one. The port is situated on the Mae Nam Kok estuary (Kok river) of the Mekong River. Compared with the first port, it was farther east, and the vessels needed to travel longer to reach the new port. I was told that at the feasibility assessment stage, the Maritime Department of Thailand had suggested having the port built on the Kok River. The main reason is that the area is within Thailand's territory rather than the international Mekong River. Therefore, it would provide full authorisation for Thai officials. In addition, the Thai government believed that the planned 2nd Chiang Saen international port would become an effective port for international trade between Thailand and

China. As such, the Thai government invested in highway projects connecting the port to the airport in Chiang Rai and the route to another seaport in Bangkok.

The trade route from the Thai border to China mostly passes through Laos or Myanmar. However, not far from Chiang Saen, there is a small port named “Soah Loi” ferry checkpoint or “Sob Luay” in Thai; the port was mostly mentioned whenever I interviewed any informant about cross-border trade. “Sob Luay” port is in the Wa Self-Administered Division within the Eastern Shan state special region (4); the port is a significant transit point for Thai cargo ships from Chiang Saen heading to China. It is about 200 km from Chiang Saen port.

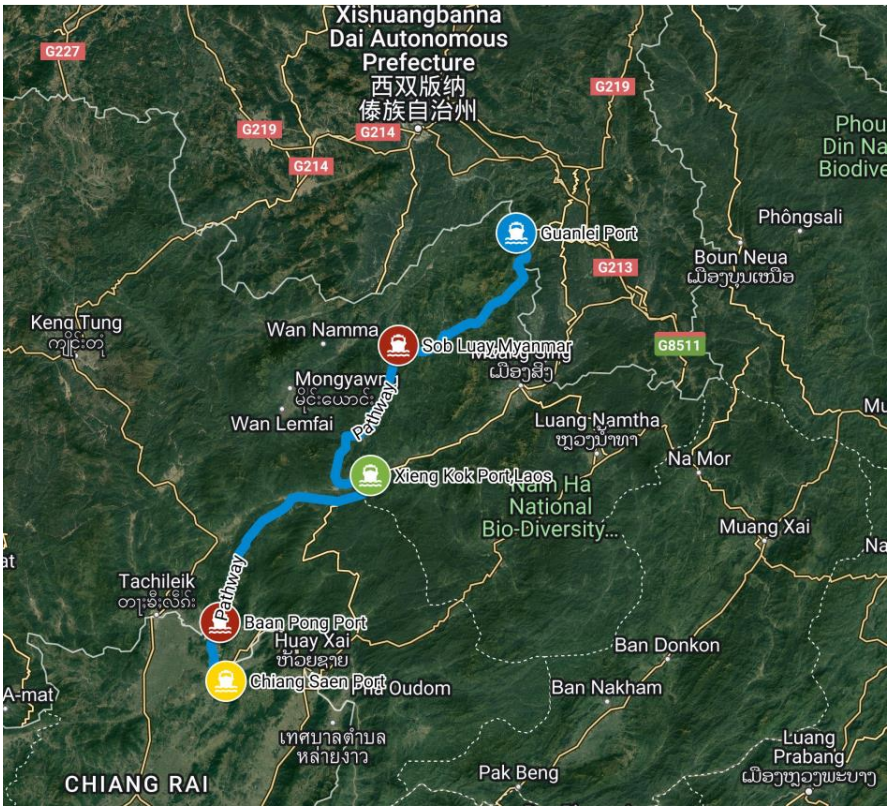

Figure 32. Map showing the movement pathway.

Note. Map created by the author based on data from Google Maps (2023).

Sob Luay Port attracted traders because of the cheaper transportation cost due to an agreement on waived borderland customs between Myanmar and China. At Sob Luay port, goods are unloaded and transported by truck into Yunnan through the “240-hill” border checkpoint between Myanmar and China before being distributed to several destinations within China. Yet, the Mekong

border-trade agreement regarded it as an unregulated pathway. The Sob Luay Port has not yet been officially recognised as an international port for commercial trade between Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and China. Thus, it is difficult to estimate the volume of commercial goods along the route, and it is challenging to implement customs regulations due to its location.

This deviated routing has been used to avoid customs duties. For example, the practice involves shipping goods to Thailand and transporting them to Myanmar to avert tariffs on goods shipped directly to China. Other common practices include transborder shipments, where goods are sent to a third country, where they are then consolidated with other products and shipped to their final destination. This practice is often used to bypass trade barriers and take advantage of lower tariffs in the third country.

Another practice is “under-invoicing”, meaning registering a lower declaration value than their actual value to pay less in taxes and customs duties. Misdeclaration of the type, quantity, or value of the goods is also part of many other methods. I learn that smuggling activities may occur at different points of the Mekong River. It is not only at ports but also in other areas, such as remote areas with less customs and immigration control, which makes it more challenging for the government to detect and prevent. In addition, border warehouses play a crucial role in storing and consolidating goods before they are transported across the border, or temporarily holding them before they are transported into the inner areas of the country. It is also possible to repackage and rebrand goods in warehouses before reshipping them to their final destinations, concealing their true origin.

In the trading landscape of Chiang Saen, the interplay between Saxer’s (2016, p.105) ‘pathways’ and the intricacies of ‘shadow exchanges’ (Huang and NGO, 2020) reveals a complex socio-spatial tapestry characteristic of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. Through this lens, the 'deviated route' becomes more than a mere trade corridor, but a nexus of infrastructure, river dynamics, regulations, entities,formal and informal trading networks. As skilled traders and brokers

navigate these realms using 'shadow exchanges', they adeptly work within the precarity defined by space, time, and agency (Huang and NGO, 2020, p. 25). This confluence of formal and informal factors forms a rich web of exchange, socio-economic ties, and adaptability, capturing the essence of life along the Mekong's deviated routes.

However, as the state starts to intensify its control over the area, the deviant route experiences fluctuations. The subsequent section explores how the emergence of transportation methods and facilities influences trade activities.

Transnational Trade in Flux: From Apples to Chicken Feet

I was told that the new port's business situation was reasonably positive for the first five years. The highest number of cargo boats entering the port reached a hundred daily. After that, however, the number decreased yearly; the lowest number was three cargo boats per day in June 2020. Since the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge opened in 2013, traders have preferred to transport fresh fruits over land since they were delivered faster and kept in better quality because of less manpower required for loading. The freight truck generally takes less than a day to reach China's border, while it would take almost two days or more via ships.

Although fresh-fruit freight numbers were down, other goods made up for the loss. The commercial items changed yearly, such as frozen chicken feet, chicken offal, wholegrain, sugar, and rubber. In particular, the port facilitates exports from Thailand and transiting shipments from other parts of the globe. However, Chiang Saen port was hit hard by the closures of Sob Luay port and Guanlei port in 2016. It was officially reported that the Guanlei port was under renovation. However, Philai told me a rumour about an international meeting on regional Mekong trade. During this meeting, all relevant Thai government officials attended, along with Chinese officials. Thai units proudly presented the monthly data on entering and exiting cargo boats headed to China. When Chinese officials saw the figures, they were all surprised. There were far more cargo vessels passing through Chiang Saen port than they had in hand for the cargo vessels entering China! Since then,

their records have been inspected, and relevant Chinese officers have been examined extensively (personal communication, 25 July 2020, Chiang Saen port).

In addition, Myanmar's and China's customs policies are essential for determining the type and volume of commercial goods. The closure of Sob Luay Port in July 2016 significantly affected the Mekong River trade. Local Thai newspapers published many articles showing photos of hundreds of Chinese and Laos cargo boats parked along the Mekong riverbank, waiting for the revival of cross-border trade. I noticed it seems to be fairly common public knowledge that traders often take advantage of customs duties waived by exporting goods to China via the Sob Luay port; even the local Thai newspaper bore the headline on July 2017, "China has placed tight restrictions on Thai commodities wearing Myanmar sarongs entering China – Chiang Rai border trade has shrunk to three billion baht in the first five months of the year". [9]

It was reported that the major export products included fuel, livestock, mangosteen, rice, fresh longan, cement, beverages, and agricultural products. Thai goods were exported to China via the Laos or Myanmar trade zones, with frozen chicken feet products being very profitable export items. However, after China placed a tight restriction on imported frozen products, which must transit through Guanlei port, it immediately hindered the flow of the Mekong border trade. Since 2016, Sob Luay port and Guanlei port operations have been inconsistent because of political instability in Myanmar and strict import regulations in China. Nevertheless, the Thai Ministry of Commerce claims that the Sob Luay port is in the process of becoming an international commercial port.

The Mekong cargo boat could transport 100 tons on average in the dry season, but it could reach 300 tons per vessel in the wet season. In general, the size of Lao and Myanmar cargo boats ranged from 50 to 200 tons gross, while Chinese cargo barges ranged from 200 to 500 tons gross. Chinese cargo barges mainly transport dry goods such as whole grains, sugar, and plastic pellets.

[9] Translated from *Thansettakij,the 37th Economic Base Newspaper, No. 3,278, dated 13-15 July 2017 accessed* https://www.thansettakij.com/business/177726

Several traders share freight spaces on the Chinese vessels to optimise trading profit and save transportation costs. I was told that many Thai shipping company owners prefer to register their boats in Laos, Myanmar, or China with help from their business partners or a trusted local nominee. In doing so, they could enjoy reduced customs duties. In addition, I was told that it would likely enhance security along the Mekong River, as the longest part of the shipping route belongs to Laos and China.

Data from Chiang Saen No.2 port between 2011 and 2022 reveals the state's exercise of logistical power. The initial surge in ship volume between 2013 and 2015, following the port's opening, demonstrates a period of accessibility and perhaps optimistic trade prospects. Yet, the subsequent decline, underscored by events like Sob Luay's closure in 2016 and China's increased scrutiny on entering vessels from 2017, reveals how state decisions can dramatically influence logistical flows. China's rigorous monitoring and control over ships entering its ports is a stark exercise of its logistical power, constraining the movement of vessels and commodities along the Mekong. Notably, while free trade agreements exist between China and other Asian countries, the on-ground reality underscores China's dominant position in dictating the pace and flow of trade along this waterway. This control, however, doesn't prevent trader adaptability. The shipping statistics by nationality unravel a story of resilience, as Chinese ship entries wane and Laotian vessels sustain their presence, traders adeptly navigate the state's logistical provisions. The strategy, where Thai traders register as Laotian ships to optimise duty incentives, illuminates the robust informal connectivity and shadow exchanges that define the Mekong trade landscape.

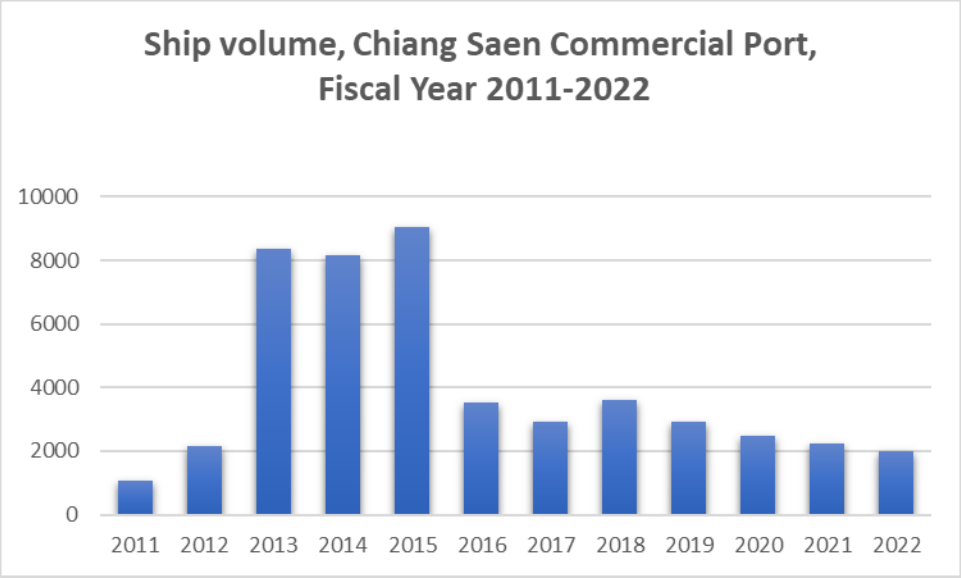

Figure 33. A Chart Showing Ship Volume at Chiang Saen Port.

Note. Thai Fiscal year starts in October. The chart adapted from "Historical Yearly Statistics: Volume of ships and goods: Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong Commercial Ports, Fiscal Year 2011-2022", by Port Authority of Thailand, 2023, September 21. Retrieved from https://www.port.co.th/cs/internet/internet/สถิติรายปีย้อนหลัง.html?page_locale=en_US.

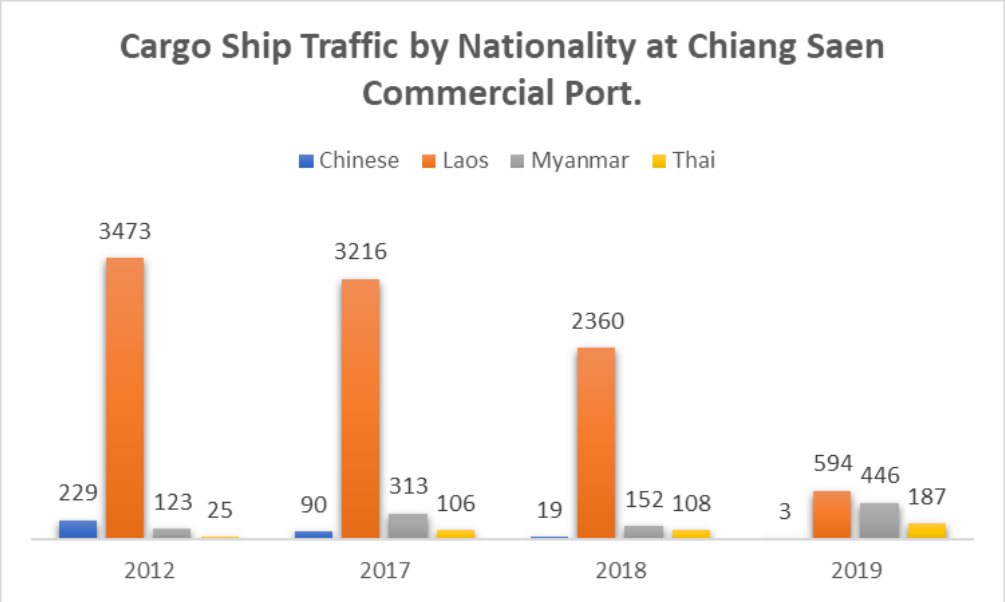

Figure 34. Selected Yearly Cargo Ship Statistics at Chiang Saen Port: 2012, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Note. Data for 2017-2019 were collected during the author's fieldwork at Chiang Saen port. Data for 2012 were adapted from "The use of Chiang Saen Commercial Port services (Number of boat trips that use the cargo loading service in 2012)," by Marine Department Statistics, 2012. Retrieved from https://md.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/สถิติและผลการดำเนินงานท่าเรือพาณิชย์เชียงแสน-1ม.ย-31-ธ.ค.-55.pdf.

Local Boat Association: A Pre-existing Thai Laos Cross-Border Microsystem

At Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong, each pier's cross-river boat operation is part of its own association. All boat operators are members of an association that monopolises cross-river activities. The association's rules are ideally designed to divide opportunities for their members to earn money equally. Standard rates are set for passengers crossing the river. At Chiang Saen old town pier, the association called *Chomrom Sri Chiang Saen*, 20 boats were operating on a roster system known as *Khiw* ("queue" in English), there were eight boats runs each day, in their boat-number order (one, two, three, four…), the numbers were written on a little blackboard and rewritten each time the boat departure the pier. At the end of the day, all the fees were collected and distributed to the members who were running the boat. Every boat must pay 100 baht per week to the association. Each boat operates around 7-8 rounds per day, which can earn about 200 -300 baht per round in normal time. One could earn 2,000 baht per day approximately, but it was not regular income; they had to wait for their *Khiw* rotation. They had made a mutual agreement with the Lao boat association, too; the Thai boat took only passengers from the Thai pier, Lao boat took only passengers from the Lao pier.

For the Tha Ruek Bak pier in Chiang Khong, there were 72 boats. The association's regulations underwent several adjustments over time. Initially, they used the *Khiw* roster system, operated by order of their boat number. Subsequently, a new system was introduced, dividing the 72 boats into four groups, with 18 boats in each group; each group has its header, who arrange their members' orders—each day operated by one group. It was a four-day rotation system, but it was also designed to compensate each group for the less-busy day (Saturday and Sunday). Therefore, any group which operates on Monday of each week would also operate on the weekend. On their operating days, each group would pay 500 baht, but no fees were required on Saturdays and Sundays. The collected fees were distributed among group members at the end of the day.

At Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong, the boat associations resonate with Saxer's 2016 "pathway" concept, intertwining socio-spatial dynamics, mobility, and everyday practicalities. These

piers are integral junctions in the broader trade and livelihood tapestry along the Mekong. These boat operations exemplify “bundled lines of exchange”, shaped by the river's topography and state-defined borders (Saxer, 2016,P.115). Their structured, yet flexible 'Khiw' system and the mutual agreement between the Thai and Laotian associations not only highlight their adaptability but also manifest a communal vision of the river as a bridging entity, rather than the divisive boundary often depicted in state narratives. In the eyes of mordern states, borders may define political boundaries, but in the very towns of the Mekong, they remain fluid and traversable in daily practices.

Here, the boat drivers skillfully traverse not only the river's physical pathways but also the mutable terrains of state power and local dynamics. In essence, the boat operations at Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong exemplify how the concept of infrastructure goes beyond just tangible structures. Their micro-system, as demonstrated by the boat associations, holds the potential to either enable or hinder connections. It directs the flow of passengers and cross-border trade, reflecting an intricate interplay with social and spatial dynamics.

However, as the situation unfolded with the COVID-19 pandemic gaining momentum in early 2020, border regions worldwide faced unprecedented challenges in trade and transportation, including the Mekong trade. In the following section, we delve into the fluctuations in transportation and the effects of border closures during the pandemic.

Figure 35. Small Traders Awaiting Load, Ban Cham Pong Pier, Wiang Kaen town, October 30, 2019. (Right)

Figure 36. Early Morning, Porter Loading Cement Bag at Tha Pha Than Pier, October 20,2019, (Left)

Mobility in Crisis

On February 3, 2020, I lay in bed, browsing Weibo and coming across several distressing video clips, photos, and news stories. Numerous online posts circulated about rumours and events occurring in Wuhan, China, during the pandemic. Almost midnight, I heard a group of people speaking in Chinese over the loud engine noise. It was dark and cold outside, and as I looked out the window, I saw a van parked in front of the gate. The guest-house owner, Chan Pen, attempted to communicate in English with a man, while a young girl translated everything into Chinese. A tall man wearing glasses spoke, holding a cigarette; he seemed unhappy about the insufficient number of rooms for the group. I decided to step outside and assist Chan Pen in communicating with them in Chinese. Ultimately, we managed to explain the situation and provide temporary accommodation for the entire group.

The group arrived at Chiang Khong after a nearly 5-hour journey from Chiang Mai. Chan Pen, the guest-house owner, boiled water for their instant-noodle dinner. The exhausted group shared that they had traveled from Chongqing on January 20, 2020, visiting Xishuangbanna before crossing into Thailand and reaching Chiang Mai. As the pandemic broke out in Wuhan, they were afraid to return to China due to the unstable situation and potentially unwelcoming reactions from neighbours and friends. So, they decided to seek a visa extension to stay in Thailand longer, as their Chinese passports allowed them to stay in Thailand for 15 days with a land-entry visa. A tall man, who allowed me to call him Mr. O, told me that he intended to enter Laos the next morning through the Huay Xai border immigration checkpoint. Then, they would continue to Laos and likely find a small town in Xi Shuang Panna to stay there. They told me that there were no infected cases yet.

I observed that Mr. O seemed to be under considerable pressure, as he was the leader of both his family and the group. He had to determine their plans each morning. After finishing their late-night dinner, he asked me to translate his words into Thai and express gratitude to Chan Pen for her help and warm welcome.

The next day, after breakfast, we drove the group to the immigration checkpoint. The grandfather, three children, and their mother rode in my car. Along the way, the quiet mother began discussing the situation in her hometown. Even though Chongqing was far from Wuhan, they were afraid to return because their neighbours might not welcome them. During their trip to Thailand, they felt unwelcome, and the boy interjected, saying, "everyone is afraid of us". The grandfather quickly stopped him, gently explaining to the children that "there are different types of people in this society; some may have empathy, some may not, and that's just the world we live in". Amidst the pervasive global fear of the pandemic, his words left a strong impression on me. At the border, we said our goodbyes and wished each other good health.

…

In late January 2020, Thailand was the first country outside China that found a positive Coronavirus infection case. As one of the most popular destinations for Chinese tourists, the infected case raised public alarm; the Thai government started escalating several measures against the pandemic. On March 20, 2020, all border crossing checkpoints between Thailand and its neighbouring countries were sealed. A few weeks later, the Thai authorities decided to reopen the international checkpoints on the borders with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia, but only commercial goods and freight were permitted. Tourists and individuals were not allowed to cross the border; following this, interprovincial travel bans were also announced. Furthermore, the Thai government issued a border-control order on April 3, 2020, all incoming international flights to all airports were banned, except for repatriation flights (naewna, 2020; Rugkhapan, 2020).

After months of bans on commuting between provinces in Thailand, I eventually travelled back to Chiang Rai on June 4, 2020. Chiang Rai International Airport was eerily quiet, a stark contrast to its previous state of overcrowding with tourists, particularly Chinese visitors. In recent years, the

airport had experienced significant growth due to the influx of direct flights from major cities in mainland China, starting as early as 2012. The airport's expansion was largely attributed to its strategic location near the renowned Myanmar-Laos-Thailand Border Golden Triangle. Situated just 60 kilometres away, it served as the closest airport to King Roman Casino within the Chinese Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, which is owned by Zhao Wei, a billionaire hailing from northeastern China.

The hotel in Chiang Rai where I stayed on the first night was utterly deserted. The hotel staff told me about how their business was interrupted and closed for a few months. The main customers were Chinese, Westerners, and Indians, in that order. When the bookings from China were all cancelled, it hit their business badly. Similarly, the rental-car company staff member told me that he had no customers at all, and he had only received 20% of his salary in the past three months. Upon my arrival in Chiang Saen, the town was serene. The street at the Thai Golden Triangle border in Chiang Saen was deserted; many shops, restaurants, and hotels were shuttered. A few small souvenir shops and small eateries remained open, yet there were no customers in sight. The Mekong River appeared desolate, devoid of the usual bustle of cargo boats and the sound of long-tail boat engines.

Chinese Workers: Navigating the Ebb and Flow of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong Borderland

> *"A Chinese man flees COVID-19, swam across Mekong River from King Roman Casino to Thailand… a 33-year-old of Chinese nationality testified that he had been deceived into working at the King Roman Casino SEZ in Laos, with another three friends, but he did not receive his wages. He decided to smuggle himself across the Mekong River by swimming to the Thai border…*" (Khamfubud, 2020)

The headline above was only an example of many cases found since the border closure was implemented. The Thai police have arrested many Chinese who illegally crossed borders from Laos

into Chiang Saen town. The flow of illegal cross-border cases increased; many undocumented Chinese were arrested; some hired a speedboat from Laos to cross the border in a big group or a small group. On August 3, 2020, the local news website published a report about 18 Chinese men fleeing into Chiang Saen by riding a boat across the Mekong River from King Roman Casino. They were found sitting at the riverbank behind a Thai restaurant, all wearing masks; none of them carried a passport. In other cases, the groups were getting smaller; even an individual case was found, such as that of a man who claimed that he swam across the river. However, the officers were suspicious of his story. They assumed that he might just have hired a speedboat crossing to the Thai border (Khamfubud, 2020).

During the same period, hundreds of Chinese workers and gamblers illegally sneaked into Luang Namtha province, Laos. They all entered without passports, as reported by RFA's Lao Service. The Chinese used a small road to avoid border checkpoints; they met their middlemen in Luang Namtha to continue their journey toward the casino in the Chinese Golden Triangle Economic Zone, Bokeo province. To avoid a 14-day quarantine, they travel on foot from the China skirt border, take small boats across rivers, or travel on a large cargo ship. They come in groups of 20-50 people. In fact, it was not only the Chinese who tried to smuggle themselves into Laos; 30 Burmese who were looking to work in a construction site at the Casino were sent back in August 2020 (Eugene, 2020)

Individuals from China who are arrested for crossing the border into Thailand without a passport are considered illegal migrants and will be repatriated to China through the cooperation of the Thai immigration police and the Chinese embassy. As with anyone who enters Thailand without proper identification, local police will contact the relevant embassy and facilitate their return to their place of origin or claimed origin. During my stay in Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen, it was not uncommon to hear about North Korean refugees appearing in the towns and seeking assistance from the local police, who then passed them on to the South Korean embassy for further handling.

Drawing on the concept of logistical intervention (Xiang, 2022), conventionally, states exercise border controls through customs checks, passports, ID documentation, and various permissions to regulate both the inflow and outflow of people and goods. However, during the pandemic, many Chinese migrants found themselves in a predicament. Crossing the Mekong from Laos to Thailand became their only viable route home. In a twist of state logistical power, paradoxically, losing their passports seemed the best strategy to navigate these stringent movement regulations. This echoes the experiences of North Korean refugees traversing the Mekong pathway. Without proper documents, their aim isn't necessarily to evade officers but to be apprehended for illegal entry, hoping that such an act might lead them to a safer future. This underscores the complex interplay between individuals and state systems, where even strict regulations, volatile circumstances can be turned into strategic opportunities.

The Pandemic Hit Border Trade Hard

According to the Thailand Immigration Act, boundary checkpoints are divided into Permanent Crossing Points, Temporary Crossing Points, and Border Trade Checkpoints. To curb the spread of Covid-19, the Royal Thai government announced the closure of all land border checkpoints throughout the country on March 20, 2020, allowing only one permanent border checkpoint between each country to remain open in each province. In Chiang Rai, out of 17 checkpoints, only two remained open: the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No.4 at Chiang Khong-Huay Xai and the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge No. 2 at Mae Sai-Tachileik. These two permanent checkpoints were open for cross-border cargo trade only. However, a week later, the Chiang Rai provincial government announced the reopening of four checkpoints along the Mekong River to facilitate cross-border trade. The allowed checkpoints included the Chiang Saen International Port No. 2, the Ha Chiang Port (which is run by a private company), the Chiang Saen Livestock Port, and the Chiang Saen pier at the old town. However, they were only open for the export of essential daily commodities.

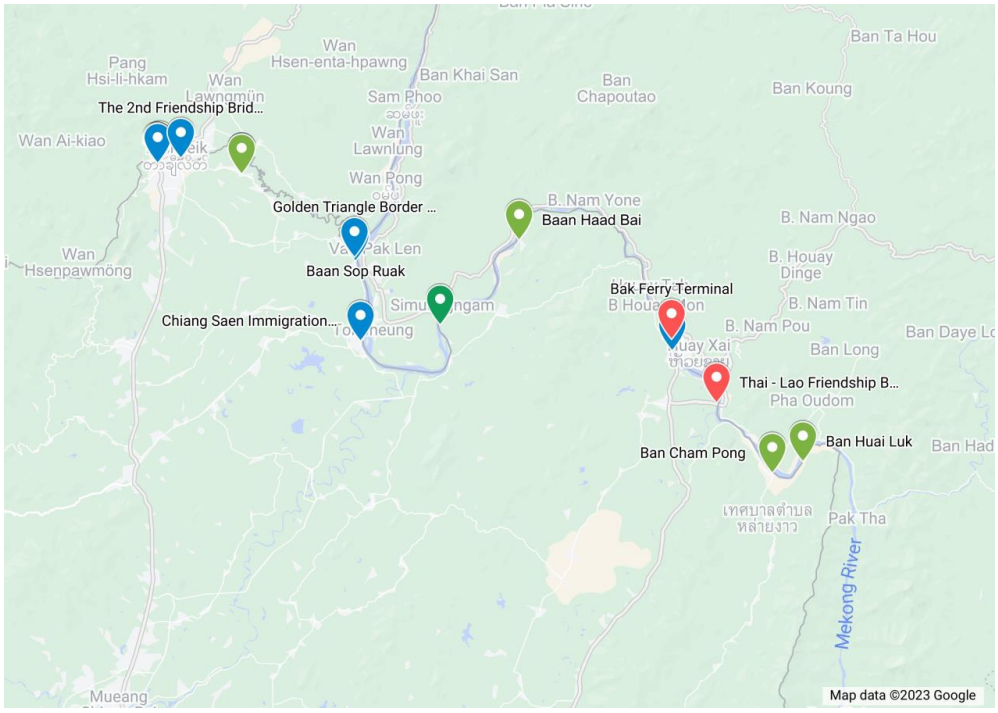

Figure 37. An Overview of Border checkpoints in Chiang Rai

Note. Map created by author, based on data from Google Maps (2023)

In Chiang Khong, the import and export of commercial goods were only permitted to be transported across the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 by freight truck. However, I was told that the process had become more complicated due to the public-health measures in place to combat COVID-19. In addition, only one person was allowed on a tractor-trailer. The Lao authorities had also changed the regulations for freight trucks, requiring a Thai driver to drive the truck across the bridge and then leave the trailer at the Lao checkpoint, where a Lao driver would take over and drive it towards the Boten, China border. The Thai driver was then required to drive the tractor back to Thailand within a day. The restrictions on drivers have significantly increased transportation costs for Thai exporters.

Hiring new Lao transportation companies to drive toward the Chinese border doubled the price. In addition, it increased the risk of accidents due to the driver's poor driving skills and lack of experience on the R3A international highway. A Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce member told me that many accidents have occurred, causing significant damage to exported goods, mainly fresh fruits like durian and longan, which have placed a heavy burden on Thai export companies. He emphasised

that it requires a high level of proficiency to drive in the mountainous areas toward China's border (fieldnote, December 10, 2021).

Furthermore, previous cross-border agreements were suspended during the pandemic. Lao traders also suffered from increased customs duties during this time. Having insufficient purchase orders made it difficult for small local suppliers to export by freight truck. Large suppliers could deliver goods in large quantities in a single shipment, whereas small suppliers had to wait for sufficient purchase orders or search for available freight space to share. The border closure has been a death knell for small shops. The strict regulations implemented by Thai officials have shut down their operations, as only truck deliveries via the bridge are allowed. Many small shops opt to continue doing business by asking for their goods to be shared on a freight truck. However, when large shops have already received their purchase orders and filled their trucks, small shops are left without an opportunity to share space.

Figure 38. Empty Tha Rue Bak Pier, Chiang Khong, After Border Closure. June 6, 2020

The Thai-Lao Cross-Border Bridge: A Barrier for Small Business?

Before the pandemic, the Mekong border was bustling with daily trade activity. Small Lao traders crossed the border to buy inexpensive goods, small Thai family-run shops provided daily necessities, and boat operators transported goods and local passengers. Larger-scale trade was mainly delivered to China, while small-scale businesses operated across the border between Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. Typically, small-scale exporting across the border was exempted from strict customs control. The exported commodities valued under THB 50,000 (approximately USD 1,400)[10] are less regulated; a small cross-border boat or small cargo boat is the primary means of transport for small-scale trade.

However, during the pandemic, small Thai suppliers faced difficulties running their businesses as their regular orders came from small Laos traders. Waranya, a small supplier who has operated a wholesale grocery shop for ten years at a border-trade checkpoint in Chiang Khong, shared her struggles during the Thai-Laos border closure. She was unable to deliver goods via freight truck and attempted to negotiate with officials to use small Lao boats instead (personal communication, 10 June 2020, Chiang Khong). However, this approach was unsuccessful as the officers insisted that the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge was still open for trading.

> *"They say the bridge is just over there, but for small shops with small purchase orders, it's impossible to deliver our goods by freight truck. The large suppliers have orders for things like 100 cartons of detergent powder and 100 cartons of orange juice bottles, but for us, our orders are just one carton of juice and a dozen bars of soap. How can we possibly compete with that and get our three dozen boxes of detergent across the border?"*

[10] As of September 15, 2023, the exchange rate between Thai Baht and USD is 1 USD = 35.84 THB, retrieved from the Bank of Thailand. https://www.bot.or.th/en/statistics/exchange-rate.html

The location of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Chiang Khong was used as an excuse by officials to reject Waranya's request. In times of crisis, only certain groups have access to this privilege of land-freight transportation. The function of the bridge, along with government regulations, selectively facilitates certain groups of people while excluding others. The small suppliers were not the only ones affected by this exclusion; several jobs within the trading system, such as boat operators, Tuk Tuk drivers, porters, and small Lao traders, were also severely affected.

Similarly, in Chiang Saen, border trade is only permitted through the international Chiang Saen port. Lao cargo boats are forced to dock along the riverbank as the Lao government prohibits all river-crossing activities. As a result, Thai boat operators can only deliver goods to the King Roman Casino international pier. However, small Lao boats are still smuggling daily goods from the Thai riverbank across the border to Laos, as the Thai government allows the delivery of essential daily goods for locals. Despite the continued operation of the Chiang Saen international port, cargo boats rarely depart or pass through the port due to the border closure in China.

Figure 39. Truck driver waiting for porters to load pomelos onto a cargo boat at Chiang Saen port. July 25, 2020

During the pandemic, the flow of border trade was kept active only through selected borderland infrastructure such as the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and the international port. Small-scale traders struggled to maintain their businesses, resulting in many people losing their means of livelihood. The bridge only facilitates freight transportation, while cross-border boat operations were utterly ignored. The crisis has exposed how the bridge shapes border-trade relationships. Small traders typically rely on boat operators for commodity transportation, while larger traders mainly use the cross-border bridge to export to China. In Chiang Khong, only the flow of trade across the bridge was selected during the border closure, not the flow via boat operators.

Surviving the Pandemic

Figure 40. Lao boat ferrying a washing machine across the Mekong River at Chiang Saen pier. July 18, 2020

On a refreshing, breezy morning, I pedalled my bicycle along the riverbank towards the Chiang Saen pier, located near the district office in the old town of Chiang Saen. The flow of traffic on the Mekong River appeared to be unusual during the border closure. I saw only one slow-moving cargo boat, flying a Myanmar flag, steadily passing the pier. Meanwhile, four speedboats rushed back and forth across

the river. At the pier, I saw a group of Myanmar dock workers, who were standing, sitting, chatting, and chewing betel nut as they awaited the loading of commodities from trucks onto the speedboats. The dock workers kept a keen eye on the street, scanning for trucks, Tuk Tuks, and motorbike sidecars that might be parked nearby. As soon as one was spotted, they would hasten over to the vehicle, assess the items, unload them, and then transport the goods to a pontoon. The duration of the loading process varied depending on the quantity of items and the number of workers in each group. The young male dock workers moved energetically up and down the stairs to the pontoon, completing each job in 5 to 15 minutes, depending on the number of items. The commodities they handled included daily necessities such as milk powder, condensed milk, diabetes medicine, aspirin, livestock, fresh vegetables, fruits, snack boxes, cooking-gas tanks, sacks of rice, palm-oil buckets, Red Bull energy drinks, and bags of mushrooms.

Across the street, numerous stores offered a diverse range of products, including groceries, agricultural tools, fertilisers, mattresses, whole grains, and gold. These stores were owned by Chinese migrants who had migrated to and settled in the town around 1980s. The dock workers were mostly young men. I observed that one of them was carrying a bag on his shoulder as he walked around collecting money from truck drivers. I later learned that he was the head of a Myanmar dock-worker group.

It seemed like a typical busy morning at the Chiang Saen pier, but not for everyone. A group of Thai men were sitting at the pier, doing nothing but watching the Myanmar dock workers and the speedboats crossing the river. They were the Thai boat operators. In normal time, the Chiang Saen old town pier was vibrant with Thai Lao long-tail boats crossing Chiang Saen pier and Ton Phueng pier. The area was often full of traders and passengers from Laos. They came for shopping, to visit their relatives, to go to a hospital or a dental clinic, or to continue their journey to Chiang Rai. Laos customers rely very much on Thai goods; Thai suppliers and related businesses also rely on Lao's consumption demand. Many interviewees want the border to be reopened as soon as possible; the

fact that only freight trucks and freight ships are allowed to cross borders has entirely excluded them from cross-border trading activities. Many vendors, porters, boat drivers, taxi drivers, and Tuk Tuk drivers were all out of jobs.

At the pier, I came across Pracha, a middle-aged male boat operator, who shared the challenges he faced during the pandemic. A few days later, I returned and, with their consent, engaged in a detailed discussion with a group of boat operators, including Pracha and his colleagues. In the afternoons, they were seated comfortably in an open-air hut, covered by a roof of dry leaves, next to the pier's stairs. This spot also served as a gathering place for the Chiang Saen Boat Operator Association. Its proximity to the pontoon allowed us to clearly observe the loading activities. All of the speedboats racing across the Mekong River were considered illegal, as Laos' border was still officially closed. According to Laos' current regulations, they were considered smugglers. Pracha referred to them as the "little ghost boats". He described their work as being like that of an "ant army".

I sat with Pracha and his colleagues, observing a small speedboat carrying a large cardboard box as it departed from the pier. The sight of the giant box on such a tiny boat caught my attention. Pracha told me that it was a washing machine. I asked him if they were in danger of being caught by Lao officers. He laughed and replied,

> *"They just turn a blind eye to these ghost boats. Let's say that they loosen regulation for a small boat. They come to pick up goods at this very spot, but they can deliver anywhere along the river, like an ant army. If the officials were too strict, how would people make a living…"*

As we watched the dockworkers load goods onto a Thai long-tail boat, preparing for delivery to King Roman pier, Pracha pointed to a man on a speedboat approaching the pier.

“That man is a Lao ship captain. They usually transport livestock, such as cattle and pigs, to China. However, all ships are now prohibited from operating. They have to find a way to make a living… he is now the captain of the 'ghost pig boat!’”, Pracha said with chuckle.

The Lao boat smuggling service appears to be highly profitable during the border closure. The smuggling operation demands exceptional boat-driving skills. Pracha and his friends were in awe of their skills, saying that a narrow boat requires excellent control to glide over the water's surface. The narrower the boat, the higher the skill level required.

In the context of the pandemic, what was once considered routine cross-border trade activity for Thai-Lao residents has been reclassified by state authorities, using logistical intervention, as smuggling. However, rather than being deterred by the risk of arrest, skillful Laotian boat drivers are leveraging the vacuum created by the absence of Thai boat drivers, turning a potential threat into an economic opportunity. This exemplifies how individuals, even in the face of stringent state controls, can tactically engage with and maneuver around logistical interventions to optimise opportunities, reshaping the dynamics of mobility and trade in the process.

The fluidity of legalisation and illegalisation

The smuggling of commercial goods from Thailand to Laos occurred along the border via unregistered speedboats. These boats could easily access the Thai pier, wait for the goods to be loaded, and then depart to unload anywhere except the official Lao pier. Thai officers monitored the commercial goods on a daily basis. In theory, their job was to ensure that all items crossing the border were essential goods for humanitarian purposes. Occasionally, I observed them inspecting a few boxes and livestock roughly as they walked by.

During the border-closure period, I was struck by the nuanced distinctions between licit and illicit goods and trading practices. Goods that Thai law permitted were transported on speedboats,

yet these same items were prohibited by Lao legislation. The licit goods from Thailand immediately became illicit items in the middle of the Mekong River. In Chiang Saen town, Thai boats were only allowed to transport commercial goods to Laos at the international pier in the King Roman Special Economic Zone. Transporting goods to any other location was considered illegal trade.

In *States and Illegal Practices*, Heyman and Smart (1999) highlight an anthropological perspective on the concept of illegality and state functions in non-Western contexts – in particular, the studies on social control in stateless societies, the dispute resolution through the informal processes, and their relationship with formal rules regulated by states. Reflecting on the Thai-Lao situation during the border closure, the power dynamics become evident as the state amplifies its authority in defining what's legal and illegal. The Mekong River, which was once an infrastructure serving as a waterway for all trading vessels, is now a manifestation of this state power, serving as a controlled zone for strict regulation of movement and trade. Apparently, through the Mekong River and its official piers, the state manipulates these infrastructures to determine the contours of legality and illegality.

The situation was even worse in Chiang Khong. All piers had been closed since March 2020, with only the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 allowed for cargo trading. When I arrived in Chiang Khong, the town was eerily quiet. The Leua Bak Boat Pier, once bustling with boat operators, traders, and passengers waiting to cross the border to Huay Xai, the capital of Bokeo Province in Laos, was now deserted. Boats were parked, the canopy tent was gone, and the signs of the Leua Bak Boat Association lay on the ground beside a broken chair. The same was true for Pha Tan pier, which used to be lively with trucks, Tuk Tuks, sidecars, and long-tail boats transporting goods to Huay Xai pier. Now, the dock was empty.

The trading situation in Chiang Khong was different from that in Chiang Saen. Due to its proximity to the bridge, all the piers in Chiang Khong and the surrounding area were prohibited from any operating. I did not observe any smuggling boats crossing the river, as was the case at the old

town pier in Chiang Saen. However, according to my interviewee, smuggling activities still took place in Chiang Khong. They delivered essential goods, such as medicine and food, to their relatives in Laos.

It was more challenging for Thai boat operators to smuggle goods across the river due to the regular patrols by Thai officials along the Mekong. In Chiang Khong, I was informed of a case in which a Thai boat operator was arrested and fined heavily. The bail was set at 400,000 Baht,[11] and he was unable to pay it. Another case involved two boat drivers who smuggled goods to Laos by dropping them off at an islet in the middle of the Mekong River, where they were collected by a Lao boat driver. They were eventually caught by the Mekong River Operation Unit. In Chiang Saen, a boat operator told me of a recent case in which a boat operator was caught by Lao officials just a week before the reopening of the old town pier. The fine was set at 2,600 USD. He had delivered some food to someone he knew well in the early morning, around 4 a.m. Upon returning to the Thai border, he was arrested again by Thai officials due to the curfew in Thailand.

Trade Broker Keeping Business Afloat

Most of the Thai-Lao border trading was based on oral agreements, typically made over the phone. In Chiang Saen, even though Lao traders were unable to purchase goods directly from Thai suppliers, they were able to maintain their business through phone communication. Regular customers would call their Thai suppliers, agents, or trusted boat drivers to place orders and negotiate transportation fees. They would either hire a Lao speedboat to collect and deliver the goods to the designated location or pay for a Thai boat to deliver the goods to the King Roman Casino pier.

Chinese clients would call Thai agents to help them search for commodities or purchase goods on their behalf. I was told that large quantities of fresh vegetables were normally transported from the Chiang Saen old town pier and the Thai Golden Triangle pier to the Chinese King Roman

[11] 11,160 USD approximately. As of September 15, 2023, the exchange rate between Thai Baht and USD is 1 USD = 35.84 THB, retrieved from the Bank of Thailand. https://www.bot.or.th/en/statistics/exchange-rate.html

Casino pier. Upon receiving the order, the Thai agent would purchase the goods from the Chiang Rai central market, load them onto a boat, and deliver them to the clients. However, due to the border closure, only the Chiang Saen old town pier was able to operate.

In Chiang Saen I met Mana, a taxi driver who frequently picked up Chinese passengers from the Thai Golden Triangle border in Chiang Saen to Chiang Rai airport. Along with a friend, he opened a taxi-parking-lot shop across from the Thai Golden Triangle immigration checkpoint. Previously, he had worked at a casino in Myanmar owned by Thais for 20 years. When the business changed ownership, he chose to leave his job and start his own taxi-parking-lot business. Additionally, he was hired to manage the commercial rental space across from the checkpoint, which was owned by Thais during the border closure.

In addition to his taxi business, Mana also earned income as an agent for entrepreneurs in the King Roman Casino SEZ, including Chinese, Laotian, and Thai women who were married to Chinese men. He frequently helped them search for needed products. His regular customers included those who opened tattoo shops, hair salons, restaurants, and massage parlours in the SEZ. He would journey to downtown Chiang Rai to procure their required items, then hire a cross-border boat for delivery. He became acquainted with these clients due to their frequent travels from the SEZ to Thailand, relying on his services to transport them to Chiang Saen for shopping. Most of his clientele were acquired through word-of-mouth referrals, and he stayed in touch with them using the WeChat mobile app.

Cash and Credit Dynamics in Border Trading

In the borderlands of China and broader Asia, the study of cross-border trading often delves into the dynamics of trust and mistrust. The research in 'Trusting and Mistrusting across Borders' is based on fieldwork and investigates how trust and mistrust are negotiated when diverse cultures and languages converge. Humphrey (2018) posits that distrust should not merely be viewed as the opposite of trust. Instead, its unique function and its specific role in interactions within varied cultural backgrounds

should be examined. Both trust and mistrust elicit distinct reactions and have the potential to be productive, especially in a cross-border context. This mistrust can result in the emergence of intermediaries or mediators and lead to the initiation of trust verification mechanisms (Humphrey, 2018,p.10).

In Chiang Khong, the owner of a modest wholesale grocery store described her cross-border trading credit system to me. The majority of her clientele were Lao traders. She usually bought new stocks from larger wholesale shops and Thai companies, which allowed her to pay off the debt month by month. Through a documented contract, she could take goods and pay for them later. She then let her trusted Lao clients be in debt for a week or a month. When they paid off the previous debt, she would allow them to make a new order. With this credit system, she was able to pay off her debt to the companies. Her credit account was a formal agreement; to keep her credit account reliable, she must pay off her debts on time, even during the closed-border period. Without income from Lao purchasers, she had no choice but to take the burden on her own shoulders.

At the small Myanmar grocery shop in Chiang Saen old town, the shopkeeper told me that she has been in Thailand for 20 years. She used to work in a tobacco barn in Mae Sai town before moving to open a small Myanmar grocery shop in Chiang Saen. The products were transported from Myanmar to the Mae Sai market in Thailand. She transferred money to the supplier via the trusted drivers who would pick up her ordered goods at Mae Sai bus station. Most of her customers were Myanmar dock workers. She allowed them to be in debt for half a month, ten days, or within the same day.

Mana the taxi driver, told me that cross-border traders in the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZ often use WeChat, online banking, or cash to transfer money. His clients would give money to their trusted boat driver to deliver to him. They called him to make an appointment and sent a photo to identify a person. They must first transfer money or give cash; then, he would then buy the required products. His regular customers paid for any incurred transportation fee and customs fee. He told me

that he could still make a living from being an agent during the border closure. He earned money from the transportation fee and service fee. Similarly to a boat driver in Chiang Khong, he told me that he made money from both Lao clients and Thai suppliers in normal time. They gave him a transportation fee and commission fee.

> *" They occasionally transferred nearly a thousand Yuan to me, sending it via their trusted boat driver. Just say we trust each other; the boat driver is very familiar; we see him every day. Cash is more convenient to me",* Mana said.

In normal time, the Thai Golden Triangle pier (Sop Ruak Checkpoint) allowed both passengers and commodities to cross the border to Laos or Myanmar. The boat drivers also made money from transporting daily items and fresh food to clients in King Roman Casino. The village chief told me that his clients made an order via mobile phone, and he then bought the products and delivered them. He only took orders for dry goods, not fresh food such as Red Bull, snacks, dry fruits, or soda. He preferred cash on delivery as he distrusted his Chinese clients. He was not sure when they would move away, and the cost per order was too high to take a risk.

> *"For King Roman clients, they regularly order goods from Thailand, for example, daily commodities, vegetables, fish, pork for consumption. They placed an order, we deliver, and they must pay on delivery. We need to collect money on the spot for Chinese clients because we do not know them well. The cost is above a million baht, and we have no idea when they would go away."*

Based on the interviews, it appears that the long-term, regular Lao clients have earned more trust compared to the new, regular Chinese clients in King Roman Casino. However, when it comes to exporting goods to China, a shipping agency typically requires a deposit before beginning the process. I interviewed Winai, who runs a shipping agency in Chiang Saen that has been in business for 14 years. He informed me that his family originated from China, and he was the third generation born and raised in Thailand. Winai speaks Chinese fluently, which helps him directly communicate with

Chinese clients and build trust in his business. His company offers services for handling shipments and cargo, managing customs documentation, and finding product suppliers. When he first started the company, he attracted customers by quickly shipping goods without the need for a deposit guarantee.

However, he no longer used that strategy anymore as it was too risky. In the past 7-8 years, most of the time, for any purchasing order, he would ask for the deposit guarantee of about 30-40%, then the clients need to pay the rest before loading to the ship or before the ship departure from Thailand or before crossing the border to Myanmar or China. He emphasised that credits given also depend on the type of products and the details of the deal. He noticed that recently many phone calls were just from another agency. Therefore, paying a deposit could roughly screen trustworthy clients. He explained that his Chinese clients sent payments in Ren Min Bi (RMB) to one of his trusted friends, who then forwarded the money to him. He rarely used traditional bank transfers. He also pointed out the challenges of securing a bank loan without an extensive banking history.

Drawing upon Humphrey's (2018) insights into the functional roles of mistrust, which can shape new transactional methods and interpersonal dynamics, the intricate landscape of cross-border trade between countries like Thailand, Laos, China, and Myanmar becomes evident. Winai's journey offers a poignant example. Initially, he anchored his business in building trust. Yet, when confronted with instances of mistrust, he pivoted, innovating more reliable ways to handle a broader spectrum of cross-border clientele. Through this adaptation, he forged transactional methods tailored to his circumstances. This mistrust in the trading community, especially among unfamiliar partners, often paves the way for intermediaries or brokers with established networks. For instance, Mana , a taxi driver, assists Laotian traders by sourcing and delivering supplies on their behalf, while other brokers coordinate commodities for Chinese vessels. Furthermore, the proliferation of Chinese technological payment platforms like WeChat outside China's borders signifies an evolution in the mechanisms of trust and transactions in the region.

Waiting …

Amidst the pandemic, akin to the situation in countless other places worldwide, numerous residents of Thai border towns found their daily routines punctuated by different modes of waiting. They anticipated the border's reopening, the return of tourists, lockdown compensation, relaxed border regulations, economic relief measures, the vaccine's distribution, or even the virus's eventual vanishing. Andits (2020) proposed questions on the interplay between agency and waiting; waiting has politically become a new norm which should explore the comprehensive structure that shapes our understanding of practice, how individual waiting is experienced, and what conditions compel people to wait (Andits, 2020; Janeja & Bandak, 2018).

While the border remained closed, many locals expressed feeling trapped in a state of waiting. Over several months, I came to recognise that this wasn't merely passive waiting, it was akin to rolling the dice, infused with emotions like anger, fear, doubt, and hope. In Chiang Saen, I encountered numerous boat drivers at the pier daily, despite the halted border operations. They told me they had no other way of making a living; they just tried their luck, hoping to be hired to deliver goods to the King Roman Casino pier. Their waiting was an act of hope amidst the prevailing uncertainty.

Much like Mana, the taxi driver at the Thai Golden Triangle border expressed his strong determination to wait and kept his office door open daily, even when neighbouring shops remained shuttered. He often brought up rumours of the border reopening and remained optimistic about the return of Chinese customers, believing that many still resided in the SEZ. Hence, he opened his shop daily, believing it improved his odds of attracting customers. On one occasion, he served a Chinese tourist who was staying at a nearby hotel in anticipation of the border reopening. However, that individual eventually had to return to China because of visa expiration.

Figure 41. Boat operator at Tha Pha Than Pier, Chiang Khong. June 6, 2020

One evening in Chiang Khong, I encountered Charat, a middle-aged boat operator, seated alone amidst a lineup of docked boats. Throughout our conversation, it became clear how much he missed his career. He expressed his fear of the pandemic, but with the decreasing case numbers, he nurtured hope that the government might reopen the border within the next two weeks. However, he expressed that the border closure had trapped him in a state of helplessness; uncertain about how to navigate the situation, he believed his only recourse was to wait patiently. In contrast to Chiang Saen, the pier in Chiang Khong was utterly shut down, leaving no opportunity for any clients. Yet Charat visited his boat and the Mekong River daily. I spotted him again at the same location on another day, sitting in a boat, chatting with his acquaintance. He mentioned that the number of tourists in Chiang Khong town had been dwindling for years, and the border closure left it virtually deserted. However, he told me that the town was not ready because many infrastructure projects were not finished. He was optimistic that once the bicycle lane and other riverside development projects were fully realised, tourists would flock back to the town (Charat, personal communication, June 6, 2020).

Another boat operator I spoke to expressed frustration with the government for blindly following medical advice. He criticised officials for alleged bribery during the border shutdown. He believed that the stringent border policies weighed heavily on everyday people, preventing them from earning a living, while also providing avenues for authorities to legally exploit them.

During these difficult times, I consistently observed acts of solidarity, as individuals supported one another in navigating their challenges. One small supplier, in particular, seemed proactive in her approach during the period of waiting. She ardently petitioned the local government to relax restrictions on minor trading, given that using freight trucks for her deliveries was unviable. She took the initiative to engage and negotiate with relevant government offices, the Mekong Riverine Operation unit, and the Provincial Commercial Chambers, though her efforts were met with no favourable response. She also tried to resume the trading atmosphere in the area; I witnessed her encouraging other shop owners to keep their doors open and arranging the flea markets to open even though there were not many customers. She shared with me her sentiment that the market had been bleak and desolate for the long months of the lockdown. Fostering an illusion of a bustling market life, she believed, could alleviate their collective stress, and uplift the overall mood.

Much like a souvenir-shop owner, she ran one of the most expansive commercial spaces in the heart of the Thai Golden Triangle Street in Chiang Saen. She ensured her shop remained open every day. She mentioned that the smaller shops around her drew some comfort and motivation from her operations; her regular openings added a semblance of vitality to the area. Before the border closure, her store was always bustling with customers. But in the current slowdown, she chooses to see a silver lining, remarking that she now has the unexpected luxury of time to tackle her long unfinished tasks.

She also conveyed her dissatisfaction with the slow pace of the Thai government's compensation for her staff, as well as the challenges of securing soft loans from banks. She believed the situation might persist for more than a year. I witnessed other similar supportive actions both on

individual and community levels. For instance, a mattress-shop owner continued to place regular orders from her long-term supplier, even though she knew selling them would be difficult during these times.

In summary, the notion of ‘waiting’ transcends the mere act of standing still, demostrating a richer complexity bound to individual experience. Their responses to the situation vary widely, from passive waiting to proactive anticipation. Amid the prolonged border closure, I've observed a spectrum of strategies to navigate the crisis. These include smuggling, negotiating, speculating, sharing, offering support, exerting control, waiting patiently, and fervently holding onto hope despite the prevailing volatility and uncertainties.

Conclusion

As a result of the rapid growth of river trading from south Yunnan to the northern border of Thailand, many residents of Chiang Saen became daily apple traders and workers. National ports, however, have reduced small traders’ business channels as they try to organise and regulate border trade. Due to this, border trade activities were forced to enter the formal channel and were exposed to state monitoring via the river port and the cross-border bridge. As a result, in the past 20 years, the boom and bust of border towns have been entangled with infrastructure networks and their unpredictable outcomes

The infrastructure networks ran parallel, informally, and legally regarding Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong border trade. As part of the Mekong border trade promotion, the marginal border town was repackaged as a special economic zone, investing considerable sums in transportation infrastructure to claim a connection with China. Customs officials, local private chambers of commerce, and the Thai port authority frequently claim that the value of border trade contributes substantially to the country’s export figure. The cross-border bridge and international river port provide an advantage for economic development in general, but it does not ensure equal access for all. It only allows specific users whose equipment meets fixed technical standards and conditions to

connect with the borderland infrastructure. Additionally, they must comply with any regulations, which may vary between the states. By doing so, users are exposed to regulators and granted permission to be monitored and controlled without a choice.

However, the deviating route along the Mekong borderland reveals that various actors possess a certain capacity and expertise to manage the movement of goods and resources. Despite the presence of state-provided infrastructure, traders, and other actors actively seek ways to optimize their profits by navigating and circumventing regulations in unstable political areas. Their capabilities and expertise in managing the movement of goods and resources allow them to surmount complex regulations and customs procedures. This provides them with an advantage over state customs regulations when it comes to moving goods across borders.

Therefore, border trade here is characterised as unregulated and informal; the trading process involves official and unofficial activities. Transborder trade practices fall into the gray areas of legality and illegality. The export of legal goods outside the authorized channel allows traders to benefit from lower transportation costs and reduced customs duties. The Sob Luay port operates in the Wa autonomous zone, facilitating the flow of commodities and making Thailand – China trading possible via the unregulated passage. The informal trade pathway unofficially filled China's high demand for livestock and other products (Smith et al., 2018). Freight shipping was another option for exporters when the truck freight transportation cost was too high. For proficient traders, the 'unprofitable port' and 'unofficial port' have become part of the efficient transport route to bypass state control.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Logistical Power became more evident and difficult to resist and avoid. The states of China, Laos, and Thailand are strengthening their Logistical power by sealing and closing their borders. For the wholesalers and large-scale traders, the Chiang Khong Bridge and Chiang Saen Port became an alternative passageway for their trading business. Still, the most critical circulable conditions were Chinese import-export regulation and purchasing demand of

Chinese customers. From my observation, smaller-scale traders face considerable challenges, verging on exclusion in the border trading market. The Chiang Khong Bridge completely overrides the cross-border boat operator systems. The pandemic control strategy allowed the state to intervene in border trade and penetrate people's social lives at an unprecedented scale, marking a significant break from the past (Xiang, 2022, p. 3). During the crisis times, this heightened control greatly impacted society, affecting daily life, global supply chains, and both formal and informal border trading activities.

Nevertheless, the various responses to the border closures shed light on an often-neglected dimension of infrastructure: the intricate web of social relationships underpinning these borderlands. This connectedness becomes even more apparent as state-operated systems face disruption. Amidst this backdrop, the resilience, adaptability, and tenacity of these interactions, embracing volatility and uncertainty, come to the forefront. The narratives presented in this chapter detail the journeys of people as they navigate these challenges. They not only spotlight the importance of human agency in times of crisis but also underscore the crucial role that communal bonds play in shaping and defining the very essence of borderland dynamics. Rather than shying away from volatility, many seek opportunities within the crevices of formal structures, improvising and adjusting their ways of life amid the crisis.

Chapter 4

Retrofitting the Mekong River

Figure 42. Searching for Mekong Kai, February 2, 2020

It was 7 a.m. when I arrived at Baan Had Krai pebble beach. I stood on the riverbank, looking at the stunningly peaceful view of the Mekong River. The sky above the Mekong was covered with soft white mist mixed with the golden light of the sun and clouds. This morning, we were the first group of five women carrying wooden bamboo baskets, mobile phones, and cameras, walking into the Mekong River to search for kai pen, a freshwater alga known as *Kai* or *Klainam* by local people. *Malee*, a staff member of the *Rak Chiang Khong Group*, invited me to join her for the Kai collection, which takes place only in the dry season from January to March.

I was struggling to balance on the slippery pebbles and avoid stepping on Kai swaying slowly beneath the shallow water when another group of four women appeared. They walked quickly towards a waist-deep spot and started pulling out the *Kai* under the rocks. Each of them wore a long-

sleeved T-shirt and trousers, a hat and long waterproof boots. The group was fully equipped with big wooden baskets, rice sacks, small fishing nets, and a portable radio placed on the riverbank. A woman told us that they were from a nearby village. In her opinion, *Kai* did not grow here last year because "China held back much water upstream" (Fieldnotes, 2 Feb. 2020). Although they fortunately found *Kai* again this year, I heard many women complaining that it was dirty because of unstable water levels. It took a longer time to wash out excess sand and mud. They piled the *Kai* into small fishing nets and hit it with a wooden stick to wash and drain it.

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Since the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) was launched, large-scale Chinese infrastructures have been hyped as a lucrative grand vision to boost economic growth worldwide. Chinese leaders presented the BRI as an excellent opportunity for South-South cooperation, claiming that the BRI projects would improve connectivity, leading to inclusive development in the member countries. As a result, the massive investment in infrastructure and its potential plans have received significant academic attention for a decade (Klinger & Muldavin, 2019, p. 1; Oakes, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2020, p. 1).

Nevertheless, many scholars have recently prompted questions regarding these aspirations, emphasising the need to expand our understanding of the BRI and China's transnational infrastructure using grounded approaches (Oliveira et al., 2020, p. 1,4; Sidaway et al., 2020, p. 795,802). A significant number of studies have been written on geopolitical and geoeconomic implications, but they rarely examine how smaller states and local agencies, as crucial actors, have reacted and improved their strategies to engage with the BRI (Liu & Lim, 2019). Thus, there are calls for in-depth explorations of the "site of struggle" that the project encounters (Lindberg & Biddulph, 2021, p. 139). In short, scholars are urged to provide further information on how locals experience and respond to these China-backed transnational infrastructures on the ground.

Recently, the BRI has been conceptualised as a relational and contested process that entails political ambiguity and messy outcomes that contrast the monolithic narrative of Chinese elites

(Oliveira et al., 2020, p. 1). Scholars are increasingly considering the environmental consequences of these large-scale infrastructure projects at different sites. For instance, a case study of Sri Lanka has demonstrated how the BRI might bring about political rupture and moments of chaos together with environmental degradation in a political unstable state (Ruwanpura et al., 2020, p. 339). The grounded views have contributed to complicating studies on the BRI by including various responses of local actors to China's proposed projects.

Many nuanced accounts have been studied in countries of the Global South where the actual infrastructure projects backed by China are taking place. These infrastructure projects have been criticised for posing significant threats to the ecosystems of BRI countries. In response to these challenges, China pledged to make the BRI more sustainable and eco-friendly. As a result, the BRI's vision of green development has become more pronounced in recent years. Generally, China portrayed the “Green Belt and Road” as an alternative way to grow through developing infrastructure in a clean way (Bogojević & Zou, 2021, p. 44)

Drawing on these works concerned with China's transnational infrastructure, this article serves as a fine-grained case study of Southeast Asia, particularly focusing on the controversial issue of the Mighty Mekong River, one of Asia's most essential rivers for over 60 million people in China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. For decades, it has been the site of ongoing tension between China and neighbouring countries due to hydropower dam issues. It is worth noting that Thailand's border area faced tremendous infrastructural changes influenced by the Yunnan provincial government before the launch of the BRI. For instance, cross-border bridges and highways were built in the Mekong region with the promise of prosperity and better regional connectivity. The central government of Thailand has generally welcomed these infrastructure investments. However, the environmental movement in a Thai border town, Chiang Khong, has revealed the variety of responses regarding China's transborder infrastructure projects and the recent implementation of the Green BRI.

This chapter aims to examine how the grand idea of the BRI and Chinese transnational infrastructure is put into practice. I will offer an account of a community-based environmental movement located in northern Thailand at a Mekong border town where residents and local NGOs are faced with many infrastructure developments influenced by China.

I explore the work of the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group, as the group is the key actor that has run several campaigns against China-backed infrastructures. They have, for instance, protested against hydropower dams on the Mekong River and the China-led Mekong navigation project, which was called the Blasting Mekong Project by the NGOs. They have also recently interacted with Chinese NGOs and academics, actively reaching out to them regarding the Green Belt and Road implementation. In the area, the tension between China-supported infrastructure projects and local NGOs focused on the fear of natural-resource grabbing, transnational enclosure, livelihood impact, and the environmental risks regarding life along the Mekong River basin (Santasombat, 2011, pp. 25–47).

I adopt the notion of a moral ecology of infrastructure, developed by the anthropologist Caterina Scaramelli, to analyse the relationship between humans, non-humans, water, and infrastructures (Scaramelli, 2019). The term *moral ecologies* refers to people's concepts of just relationships between themselves and their surroundings. In Scaramelli's view, moral-ecology concepts contribute to understanding the motivation for the actions of people who confront and respond to environmental transformations (Scaramelli, 2019, pp. 389–391). Thus, this paper will employ this concept to explore how the actors involved compete for their vision of the Mekong ecology and take action to transform the infrastructure. I also examine the recent implementation of the “Green Belt and Road” in Chiang Khong town by focusing on community engagement between Thai NGOs, Chinese NGOs, a Chinese academic institution, and Chinese state-owned enterprises regarding Mekong environmental issues.

I demonstrate that, even though the Chinese government has put great effort into portraying the BRI as promising a predictable future of prosperity in the Mekong region, the Chinese-backed transborder "infrastructures" have generated insecurity, volatility, political ambiguity, and an unstable situation on the ground. In this chapter, I focus on the local experiences and conflicts with respect to infrastructure projects that aim at making the Mekong a waterway and building hydropower dams. I will discuss how local NGOs, residents, dam builders, Chinese NGOs, and Chinese agencies have argued for their own purposes in engaging with the Mekong River. Through the analysis of three cases of interaction between the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group and Chinese agencies, I argue that China's transnational infrastructure and the BRI take on new meanings when they are exposed to shifting social, political, and environmental conditions on a global scale, whereas in practice they are reshaped by a variety of agencies to align with their advantage on the local level.

Moral Ecology of Infrastructure in Retrofitting the Mekong River

The concept of moral-ecology infrastructure is built on the notion of moral economy and moral ecology. Caterina Scaramelli suggests expanding the concept of moral ecology beyond its previous meaning as resistance to capitalist processes and applying it to a broad context, not limited to peasant or indigenous society. The concept was drawn from ethnographic research on local daily experiences and conflicts among fishers, scientists, NGOs, and middle-class and working-class residents in transforming a Turkish delta name Gediz Delta to serve multiple purposes, ranging from a wetland to a real estate development site. These actors have taken measures to change the delta's landscapes and livelihood according to their moral evaluations of specific deltaic configurations. In Scaramelli's view, the relationships between ecology and infrastructure are interwoven within capitalism, land-expropriation histories, and class hierarchy in Turkish society. In short, at the Gediz Delta, ecology and infrastructure were seen as complementary, not antagonistic.

In addition, some scholars suggest a broader understanding of the term *infrastructure*, which refers to a set of organisational techniques modifying the environment globally, blurring the

boundaries between nature and technology (Balée, 2006; Bowker, 1994, p. 191; Cronon, 1996; Reuss & Cutcliffe, 2010). Anthropological works in particular highlight that nature *becomes* infrastructure through human practices involving techno-politics and environmental politics, suggesting that infrastructure and the environment are entangled and inseparable. Ashley Carse, for example, proposed a "nature as infrastructure" conceptual framework to examine the socio-political work of water provision and the relationship of people involved in the Panama Canal watershed management (Carse, 2012). Another example is the research on the construction of the Chao Phraya Dam, funded by the World Bank in 1950s Thailand. Jakkrit Sangkhamanee adopts Andrew Pickering's "dance of agency" concept to explore the interactions among agencies in complex dam-construction networks, highlighting the unintended consequences that arise from such intricate assemblages (Sangkhamanee, 2018).

Drawing on these anthropological infrastructure concepts, I will treat the Mekong River as infrastructure. I will analyse the practices, politics, and multiscale relationships in developing the Mekong River projects. The roles of multiple actors and their relationships with the Mekong River will be examined, particularly their vision of the Mekong River and practices in developing it on the ground. The following cases demonstrate how the Mekong River is physically integral to political processes, and how the meaning of the river emerges from these relationships at different scales (Krause & Strang, 2016).

Furthermore, recent infrastructure studies have described infrastructure as an open-ended process of maintenance, decay, and retrofitting (Cousins, 2020; Gupta, 2018; C. Howe et al., 2016). In order to anticipate future projects, it is necessary to evaluate whether past projects were successful or unsuccessful; retrofitting then demonstrates how infrastructure anticipates future needs and tackles crises that emerge from existing projects. In short, retrofitting follows a futurological approach, which involves thinking into the future by intertwining it with the present.

Viewing infrastructure as a process, I examine the role of the Chiang Khong Conservation Group in responding to China's transnational infrastructure through different projects. Finally, I illustrate how these infrastructures, such as the Blasting Mekong project and the Mekong hydropower dam construction, have enmeshed several actors at various levels, which represent the different interests in the river. The Mekong River has thus become a site where national and local governments, officials, Chinese enterprises, academics, and NGOs have co-constructed China's transnational infrastructures.

Additionally, in the past two decades, state and hydropower investors have primarily rated the river as a resource for connectivity, mobility, and energy sources for regional economic growth. However, with shifting environmental concerns, the Mekong dam's recent retrofit aligns with an effort to produce clean energy that will contribute to a reduction in CO2 emissions and will become an alternative energy source that does not rely as much on fossil fuels(Matthews & Motta, 2013, p. 1).

Using the Mekong region as a starting point, I examine socioeconomic imageries and politics that have shaped infrastructure and social life from 1990 to the present. I will demonstrate how the functions of infrastructure have been repurposed to address various environmental concerns. This has resulted in multiple forms of moral practices, for instance, in contestation, negotiation, cooperation, and projection of the Mekong future.

Making Land and Water Connect with China

How did the Mekong River become an infrastructure serving regional economic growth? The Mekong region has been a target of neoliberal policies for several decades. In the colonial period, the British and French were highly interested in building a railway and creating a ship route for commercial trade with Southern China (Menon, 1971). In the 1990s, the Economic Quadrangle concept was promoted, leading to an economic cooperation program that resulted in an infrastructure development plan, which sought to boost regional connectivity, emphasising both land and river routes (Chapman & Hinton, 1993).

Numerous transborder transportation projects have been proposed with the goal of seamlessly connecting southern China to the Mekong-region countries. In particular, in 2000, a China-led project was approved to blast submerged rocks and rapids in the Mekong River between Simao and Luang Prabang (Laos), resulting in a significant retrofit of the river. This was done to accommodate larger cargo vessels and enhance trade within the region (Mirumachi & Nakayama, 2007; Yong, 2020, p. 210). Moreover, the Fourth Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, connecting Chiang Khong and Huay Xai, was officially inaugurated just a few months after the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proclamation in 2013.

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, before the waterway project, an attempt to control, manage, capture, and manipulate the Mekong River has been extensively exercised through hydropower dam developments in China since the 1990s; 11 hydropower dams have been built on the Lancang-Mekong River in Yunnan Province. Lancang cascades have been constructed to regulate the flow of the whole river to generate electricity, enhance irrigation, capture water supply, and control water-level navigation (P. Wang et al., 2014). Although the Chinese government portrayed the Lancang cascade dam as a successful hydropower development model, the environmental impact of impounding water has caused controversy in downstream countries.

The Mekong River is an illuminating site to explore how nature has been modified through hydrologic engineering and politics. Geoffrey Bowker defines infrastructural work as a collection of organisation techniques, comprising administrative and technical support, that facilitate a higher-order objective (Bowker, 1994, p. 10) For example, the operation of the Lancang-Mekong hydropower dam involved complex technical and political works to regulate water levels serving multiple purposes; an altered navigation condition is part of those objectives. Thus, the blasting Mekong project performed on the already modified river created more tensions between China and communities in downstream countries.

China's engagements in the Mekong region exceed the scope of BRI by far. It is impossible to discuss these without referring to the GMS programme. The role of the Mekong countries in recasting

the vision started by China is particularly crucial. The list of infrastructure projects above demonstrates that Thailand has firmly worked on aligning with global neoliberal capitalism before the recent BRI. The plan to build the Den Chai to Chiang Khong railway line has been discussed in the Thai domestic transportation plan for decades. However, the Thai government uses the BRI and the Chinese expansion of the economic circuit to envision itself as the central hub for regional logistic developments.

In order to understand what these transnational infrastructures mean to communities; I will zoom in to visualise the interplay between local people and the modified environment along the Mekong River in the following sections. Finally, I will give an account of my experience of how Chiang Khong residents are struggling and dealing with the livelihood changes resulting from erratic fluctuations. Additionally, I will narrate their perceptions toward Chinese dams.

The Disappearance of Kai, a Freshwater Weed in the Mekong River

Kai, a freshwater weed, is mainly found on pebbles in shallow water. In Chiang Khong, mainly women harvest Kai at specific locations along the Mekong River during the dry season (Yong, 2020, p. 210,212) After picking the Kai, they dry it into sheets, deep-fry or season it with some spices. They can also earn money by selling fresh Kai. However, due to the uncommon fluctuation of the river level Kai is no longer abundant. I was told that they had earned more money from selling fresh Kai before "China's dam" was in operation. I noticed that the dam was mentioned critically when talking about the fluctuation of the Mekong water level. It was not only local environmental activists but many ordinary people who often brought up “China's dam” in a general conversation about the Mekong River. Throughout my stay in the town, there were a lot of complaints about a severe drought, insufficient water for rice farming, decreasing fish variety and quantity, water flooding over the riverside farm, and delays in commercial shipping in the upper stream because of too-low water levels.

Much has been written about the concerns regarding the environmental degradation and social impact caused by Mekong dams found across countries in the Lower Mekong River basin. The

disappearance of Kai is part of the criticisms of how the hydropower dams have threatened food security in Mekong communities. In addition, scholars and NGOs often highlight the effect that these dams have on humans and non-humans, as they bring about changes in the life cycles of migratory fish and birds due to a fragile ecosystem (Baird, 2011, pp. 211–235; Hirsch, 2011, p. 1). In response to this, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) was established in 1995; the intergovernmental organisation included Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam to jointly share water-resource planning and coordinate sustainable development across the Lower Mekong River basin.

However, many studies have shown that the MRC regime has not effectively tackled the Mekong problem. The primary reason is that China is not a member of the MRC. Besides, the diversity of water interests among the six riparian countries results in the complexity of expectations and the weakness of the legal basis (Backer, 2007, p. 31,35; Fu, 2017, p. 16,17). The ineffectiveness of the MRC mechanism has weakened the political power of the lower Mekong countries to negotiate with China in controlling the flow of the Mekong River. In the meantime, a communities-based environmental movement has long been searching for alternative support to receive greater attention through the media; thus, they have attempted to connect with several environmental organisations and transnational river-protection networks(Yong, 2020, p. 206).

Figure 43. A woman washing kai pen in the Mekong River, February 2, 2020

The Emergence of the Mekong Activists at Chiang Khong

Rak Chiang Khong can be translated as “Preserve Chiang Khong” or “Love Chiang Khong”,[12] and Niwat Roykeaw is a charismatic leader of the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group. His fellows address him as Kru Tee, which means teacher Tee. In Chiang Rai, he is a well-known environmental activist, who has been working on Mekong River issues for over 20 years. He is a former teacher of a public school, but he resigned in 1995 to work as a full-time environmental activist in his hometown. In 2004, he established the group, inviting several residents from all walks of life to gather under the name Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group.

In the early stage, the group operated loosely. Most activities focused on creating mutual understanding between hill tribes and lowland residents. However, a critical period for the organisation to appear as a group of local environmental activists who strongly opposed the China-led

[12] The word รักษ์ (Rak) and รัก (Rak) are homonymous in Thai.

projects began around the year 2000 when they launched a campaign against the Lancang-Mekong navigation project and disseminated information about the dams in the Lancang-Mekong River.

Kru Tee then founded the Mekong School in 2013. Situated at the Mekong riverbank, it is a two-storey wood structure, the roof of which is covered with dry teak leaves. This open-air space serves as a multifunctional area for a classroom, a working area, a living area, and a dining area for its visitors. Through outdoor learning and participatory action research, the Mekong school aims to promote local culture and social justice associated with the Mekong River. However, as the school was surrounded by greenery without a fence, tourists often misunderstood and thought it was a restaurant or resort. Instead of giving a long explanation, the staff sometimes simply and gently showed them out by saying “Sorry, today our restaurant is closed!”.

According to Kru Tee, the Rak Chiang Khong Group divided their tasks into four categories: 1) strategy and policy-making, 2) NGO network cooperation, 3) fieldwork research and local engagement, and 4) media and public relations. At present, the Rak Chiang Khong Group has a broad network in various sectors, such as journalists, local NGOs, international non-profit organisations, university professors, independent researchers, village chiefs, activist monks, fishers, boat operators, and provincial chambers of commerce and culture (Kru Tee, interview, 19 Oct. 2019).

Figure 44. Kru Tee giving a talk about Mekong River issues, Chiang Khong, December 9, 2021. (Left)

Figure 45. Rak Chiang Khong Staff showing students water-quality testing methods, Chiang Khong, December 9, 2021 (Right)

Since the 2000s, the Rak Chiang Khong Group has played a prominent role in opposing China's navigation project and dam construction along the Mekong River. The image of local activists striving to protect their hometowns has become a vital characteristic that appears in local, national, and international media. The emergence of the Rak Chiang Khong Group serves as an example of a local response to China's transnational infrastructure. This demonstrates that China-backed infrastructures penetrated the borderland community over two decades before the promotion of the BRI. In the following section, I will further illustrate the relentless campaign against the China-led navigation project, which both governments have recently discontinued.

Stop Blasting Mekong Rapids!

The plan of the navigation channel improvement, drafted in September 2001, involved the blasting of rapids in Chiang Khong. In response, the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group argued that the dredging scheme will destroy the local ecosystem, spawning fish species, and other aquatic lives. The same year, they played a vital role in fighting against the project. Once the Chinese survey vessel

appeared surrounding the Kaeng Kai rapids in Chiang Khong, Kru Tee led Chiang Khong staff and a group of residents to occupy exposed rocks in the middle of the Mekong River and showed placards. Then, in May 2002, the Rak Chiang Khong Group approached the Thai Senate's Committee, requesting to halt the blasting project due to the risk of border demarcation and ecological effects. As a result, the project was temporarily suspended, because the Thai government worried about the territory's sensitivity and insufficient data on EIA (Yong, 2020, p. 208).

Since then, the navigation project has been postponed for several years. However, in light of China's growing influence in the region and the intense promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, in 2015, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism authorised the navigation-channel improvement project again by claiming that it would enhance the commercial shipping capacity on the Mekong. In the following year, in December 2016, General Prayuth Chanocha's military government of Thailand revived the blasting project by approving a development plan of international navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River 2015-2025. The Thai Ministry of Transportation proposed the plan, allowing China’s state-owned company CCCC 2nd Harbour Consultant., Ltd. to carry out a feasibility survey along the Mekong River.

In response, the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group made several headlines again in 2017. Two long-tail boats with handwritten Chinese, English, and Thai banners saying "Stop Rapids Blasting" approached a Chinese engineering-survey vessel while operating the “survey and design” task. On the Khon Phi Long islet in the middle of the Mekong River, staff pulled out handwritten banners stating "The Mekong River is Not for Sale". This was followed by a larger event called "The Peaceful Chiang Khong 93", where environmental activists gathered at the Pha Phra viewpoint, opposite the site labelled rapid no. 93 in the blasting plan. They pulled out written banners saying "Lancang-Mekong is the same river"; several multicoloured umbrellas served as a colourful background, implying the diversity of the Mekong people (Thecitizen, 2017)

Figure 46. Rak Chiang Khong group protesting the Mekong rapid blasting project.

Note. From "Rak Chiang Khong showing protesting banner in 3 languages, before the Chinese survey began" [Photograph], by Matichon, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.matichon.co.th/local/news_543870.

The effort to stop the navigation project is not free of risk. After seizing power in 2014, Thailand's military authorities limited civil-society movements throughout the country. Nevertheless, the Rak Chiang Khong activists kept running campaigns against the blasting project throughout 2017, while the Chinese survey vessel was working in the area. Because of the protests, the provincial military commander once invited Kru Tee to "talk" about their influential movement. On the same day, the Thai government spokesperson quoted prime minister Prayuth Chanocha, saying that he was concerned about the protest group against the Chinese-led project. Thai officials attempted to convince the public that it was only a feasibility-study phase, and no decision had been made yet (Siamrath, 2017) .

China's state-owned company CCCC 2nd Harbour is the enterprise that directly confronted NGOs while working on a river survey and conducting project-feasibility studies. In November 2018, the Rak Chiang Khong Group expressed vehement opposition in a public hearing of the China-led Mekong project. The group emphasised that they disagreed over the clearing of the Khon Pi Long rapids. They insisted that removing the islets and rapids would dramatically affect the ecosystem.

At Chiang Khong, the last public meeting was held in January 2019, arranged by the CCCC 2nd Harbour Consultants company, which brought a representative of the company and a Thai consultation team to answer relevant questions raised by participants. The representative of CCCC 2nd Harbour clarified that they would submit the study results to the government of the four countries (China, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar) to decide whether they wanted to continue the blasting project individually. He explained that the company was not a representative of the Chinese government; the company only carried out the “survey and design” tasks, which were mutually agreed upon by the four countries.

Before the public-hearing event, the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group worked actively to disseminate information about the potential impact on the Mekong River. During the presentation, attendees addressed several issues, such as insufficient ecosystem details, the risk of the Thai-Laos boundary changing, and unequally sharing the benefit with China. The Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group appeared at each public hearing site to confirm that they would not tolerate any activity beneficial to the project.

The cost of this irresponsive reputation on the Mekong dam project has increased because of extensive critics on a global social media platform. On April 18, 2020, the hashtag “#StopMekongDam” surfaced on Twitter and was retweeted millions of times. This occurrence unfolded after the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok issued a statement on Facebook addressing online controversies surrounding the "One China principle" and "China-Thailand friendship". The response included millions of Twitter posts criticising China’s damming of the Mekong River. The hashtag “#StopMekongDam” was attached along with hashtag “#MilkTeaAlliance”, which had hit a million retweets on previous days.

Indeed, between 15th and 17th of April 2020, the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance emerged on the Twitter amidst a virtual clashing involving Thai and Chinese users then brought in Taiwanese and Hong Kong users together to fight on the origins of the coronavirus. This exchange, which included assertions that Taiwan and Hong Kong are independent countries, ruffled nationalistic sentiments

among Chinese users. This digital dispute spilled over into international relations when the Chinese embassy in Bangkok responded to the online controversy. Consequently, the Mekong Dam issue was highlighted on Twitter as a tool for criticising and embarrassing the Chinese government. The search term "Mekong Dam" experienced a dramatic surge in Google searches by Hong Kong users during this period. Even if this Twitter confrontation did not lead to any tangible resolution, the broad online mobilisation across countries that discussed the Mekong Dam issue significantly contributed to raising global awareness of this matter beyond the Mekong boundaries.

The Victory of Relentless Resistance in Chiang Khong

On 4 February 2020, in the late afternoon, I was chatting with other members of the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group at the Mekong school when Kru Tee broke the news to us that the Thai cabinet had formally withdrawn from the Blasting Mekong Project. From the group's perspective, it was their first accomplishment, and the first official response from China. Kru Tee told me that he felt delighted about this victory, as they had been fighting for issues concerning the Mekong River for over 20 years. However, it was not as surprising as one might think, as it could be observed over the previous few years that China had changed its approach to communicate with local communities, as Kru Tee had noticed. For him, this victory was a dawn of hope regarding negotiations to stop upcoming dam projects in the Mekong River.

Notably, the Mekong navigation project has encountered local resistance over the last 20 years. In fact, it was put on hold for several years due to the dispute over environmental problems and sensitive territorial issues. The decision to revive it could be understood through the recent influence of the Belt and Road Initiative in the region (Lin & Grundy-Warr, 2020, p. 831). The blasting project was not originally part of the BRI. Nevertheless, the reappearance of the strategy to strengthen regional connectivity aligns well with other land-connectivity projects, such as the Sino-Thai high-speed railway and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) investment zones during the Thai military regime.

Since the 2014 military coup, the military ties between Thailand and China have become tight; the junta government actively approached China for military cooperation, since America and Western countries responded negatively to the coup. In addition, the Thai military government was eager to facilitate Chinese investment by simply waiving and approving relevant laws and regulations to boost the investment portfolio. Consequently, China is now the largest trade partner and the second largest source of foreign direct investment in Thailand (Storey, 2019, p. 11).

Over the past 20 years, the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group has employed a range of tactics, including protesting and shaming, running campaigns, forming networks, disseminating information, lodging a complaint with the Supreme Administrative Court against Thai authorities, and giving emphasis to the Mekong issue through international environmental organisations. Clearly, they know how to place the Mekong issue into a global framework that induces the Chinese government to reconsider the blasting project. As a result, the community-based movement, which was able to evoke international pressure, has contributed to reshaping China's approach to transnational infrastructure projects (Yeophantong, 2014).

At present, the Rak Chiang Khong NGOs successfully presented themselves as local activists who fight against China's transnational infrastructure. The constructed local identity and relentless efforts to preserve the Mekong River have contributed to their accountability and have prompted broader international support. In addition, the steady support from the local, national, and international media on various platforms substantially amplifies the local activists' influence on the public. As a result, numerous articles, photos, video clips, documentaries, leaflets, stickers, interviews, etc., have been produced in Thai and English by the group and others interested in the NGO’s work.

Undoubtedly, there are better means of overland shipment now that connect China with the Mekong countries. Thus, dropping the controversial navigation project would reduce tensions between China and the Mekong communities and strengthen China's reputation as a caring neighbour. Furthermore, due to China's commitment to environmental responsibility, it might be that

Chinese leaders are more sensitive to friction outside China. To further illustrate how Chinese companies adhere to social and environmental standards at the international level, another case of interaction between Chinese companies and the Rak Chiang Khong Group is provided in the following section.

The Dialogue Between the Dam Builder and the Dam Opposer

The community-based movement did not prevent dam construction in the Lancang-Mekong River. Nevertheless, the scale-up strategy has made the transborder projects that followed more transparent for the public and increased pressure on China to show responsibility for neighbouring countries and to pay more attention to communities along the Mekong River. Recently, the implementation of the Green Belt and Road Initiative can be seen through community engagement, such as the dialogue between Chinese state-owned enterprises and the Rak Chiang Khong Group. These activities aimed to reduce tension and provided a better image of China's transnational infrastructure in the Mekong subregion.

An example of a hydropower dam supported by Chinese investments is the Pak Beng dam, proposed for construction on the lower Mekong River mainstream in Lao PDR. The Chinese-backed Pak Beng dam is approximately 90 kilometres from the Thai border. The Lao government signed a memorandum of understanding with China Datang Overseas Investment in 2007; however, the Rak Chiang Khong's campaign against the dam construction has contributed to a delay.

China Datang Corporation is one of five state-owned large-scale power-generation enterprises in China. Several subsidiary hydropower companies are building dams along the Mekong River in Lao PDR. In January 2018, the first direct conversation between China Datang Overseas Investment Co., Ltd., Chinese Datang Hydropower (Lao) Pak Beng Hydropower Co., Ltd. and Thai anti-dam opponents took place in a simple setting at the Mekong school, the site of the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group (Thairath, 2018).

One side of a long wooden conference table was filled with the deputy director-general of the Laos Energy Policy Office of the Laos Ministry of Energy and Mines as well as with the Datang delegation. On the other side, the Thai civil society sat with university professors and a representative of the Thai Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. Officials from the Thailand National Mekong Committee Secretariat (TNMCS) and the Lao National Mekong Committee Secretariat (LNMCS) also took part in the meeting. NGO staff members and several national and local media also participated as observers.

The meeting was the first peaceful encounter that allowed both sides to exchange concerns regarding the Pak Beng dam project in Laos. Kru Tee told me that he had agreed to enter into a dialogue with the Datang company, although it could have been perceived as an activity to complete the consultation process of the Pak Beng dam project. [13] However, considering that the company might use the meeting to improve their image with regard to community engagement, Kru Tee insisted that the meeting must be held at the Mekong school as a site of Thai civil society. In doing so, he believed that a certain balance between the negotiating parties could be established and that both sides perceived the meeting as a fair and equal conversation based on mutual respect (Kru Tee, interview, 19 Oct. 2019).

Following the second meeting in November 2018 at Chiang Mai University, the Thai Mekong People's Network and the Datang representatives held a technical consultation meeting to further exchange data regarding the potential effects of the Pak Beng dam (transbordernews, 2018). The Thai delegation raised concerns, for instance, about sedimentation affecting downstream areas, inadequate information about the dam structure, a decline of fish species due to disrupted ecosystems, and insufficient compensation for potentially affected habitats. In response to these questions, the representative of Datang affirmed that the company had attempted to cooperate with

[13] The MRC established five procedural guidelines associated with the 1995 Mekong Agreement, addressing water quality, data exchange, monitoring water usage, maintaining water flow and other water-related concerns. The PNPCA, which stands for Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation, and Agreement, was introduced in November 2003. See more in www.mrcmekong.org

people in the Mekong region. Furthermore, as developers, they were aware of the regulations required by the MRC and were willing to comply with international standards. A Datang representative said:

> *"By participating in all arranged activities, we have sincerely shown our intention to solve the problems and respond to demands. We have proposed a specific plan to cope with the raised problems and worries. For example, we provided a security plan for safe navigation. We set up a new team and redesigned the fish passageways. We also launched a study on the fish migration program for further practice. Besides the earlier worry on the dam's design that might cause flooding on the Thai side, we have reduced its size and height to prevent any effect that might happen to the Thai riverbank"* (transbordernews, 2018)

However, based on an interpretation on the part of the Thai delegation, the Datang and Lao delegations were rather reluctant to consider new environmental assessment research; the Lao delegation insisted that the EIA had been completed and expected an approval from Thailand soon. The China-backed hydropower dam has brought several groups to discuss their positions, including engineers, administrators, academics, environmental activists, and the media. The purpose of describing this meeting between the Chinese dam builders and their opponents is to show how the Mekong River has become a site where multiple actors claim the decisional power over issues of modification, regulation, conservation, and redevelopment.

The dialogue between them is representative of the politics of environmental knowledge; on the side of the dam builder, it implies a firm stance on employing modern technology to mitigate the effects of the dam construction on the residents, the animal world, and vegetation. This suggests that a new moral ecology would be created through the process of re-engineering and redesigning. Through the lens of moral-ecology infrastructure, this process is influenced by humans and non-

humans; fish, birds, anglers, residents, engineers, officials, and activists could take part in shaping the material futures of the Mekong River. The moral interest of the dam-building company competes with that of the opponents regarding the new inhabitable ecologies that might result from infrastructure transformations.

In light of the green BRI, in addition to the dialogue with the dam builders, the Rak Chiang Khong Group recently welcomed several Chinese agencies that reached out to them for potential cooperation. In the next section, I provide another case of interaction between the Rak Chiang Khong Group and Chinese actors. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how the Chinese actors have recast China's BRI and the Thai NGOs' responses.

ASEAN-China NGO Dialogue: Are We Sharing the Same Pain?

As mentioned above, the attempts to create a better image of the BRI have resulted in a range of official documents, academic papers, research journals, policies, financial guidelines, and official international forums. For instance, *a Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road as well as a Plan for Cooperation in Ecological and Environmental Protection for the Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI portal, 2017) were circulated among relevant government departments in 2017 (Teo et al., 2019, p. 2) Additionally, the official keynote speech by Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation promised to pursue an "open, green, and clean" cooperation with international partners (Xi, 2019). This was followed by several guidelines and documents providing details on environmental protection and biodiversity conservation for Chinese enterprises to enhance their collaboration with international agencies, and government and nongovernment organisations (Teo et al., 2019, p. 2).

In addition, the Chinese government has supported the involvement of NGOs in the BRI through a part of the BRI action plan, which emphasises the people-to-people bond (Ketels, 2020, p. 86). Therefore, the official government opinions on NGOs implied a supporting attitude to encourage Chinese NGOs to engage in people-to-people exchange activities and international NGO network-

building across the BRI countries (CSEBA, 2017). An example of how a Chinese NGO was involved in the BRI are the ASEAN-China NGO dialogue events that began in November 2017. The first ASEAN-China NGO dialogue, arranged by the Shaoyang Environmental Protection Association and Fragrance Culture Research Institute, was held in Shao Yang city, Hunan Province, China. The representatives from NGOs in Southeast Asia (SEA) were invited to discuss Chinese investment and social and environmental impact in SEA. The following activity took place in June 2018: members of the NGOs, the Research Centre of Hunan University, and Chinese NGOs arranged a five-day trip to Chiang Rai, Thailand. They visited the Mekong school in Chiang Khong and attended an academic conference at Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand (Nopparat, Interview, 19 Oct. 2019).

The 2nd ASEAN-China NGO and scholar dialogue was held in Changsha, Hunan Province, in October 2018 (Sina, 2018). The meeting was sponsored by the Shaoyang Environmental Protection Association and Shaoyang Fragrant Academy. The Research Centre for NGOs at Hunan University hosted the conference on cultural exchange, environment, and sustainable development. The conference aimed at promoting exchange between civil organisations, academics, and NGOs in China and ASEAN. Notably, an excursion to the Changsha high-tech zone was arranged to visit several enterprises involved in green technology development.

The 3rd dialogue again took place in Changsha, Hunan, in November 2019. The session was sponsored by the Non-profit Organisation Research Centre of Hunan University and hosted by the Shaoyang Environmental Protection Association and Chengdu Urban River Association (CURA). The participants included NGOs, NPOs and academics from the U.S., Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. Investment, green development, and the cooperation between China and Southeast Asian NGOs were the focus of the dialogue conference. Interestingly, the guiding theme of the meeting was Green and Symbiotic Development; a set of keywords pertaining to the Green Belt and Road Initiative were among the topics up for discussion, for example, “BRI and Community Residents' Sense of Fulfilment”, “BRI and Regional Social and Economic Sustainable Development”,

“Research on Social Responsibility of Oversea Investment Enterprises”, and “Community Reconstruction and Cultural Inheritance and Protection” (Green Dialogue, 2019). Additionally, an excursion to visit several advanced technology enterprises was again arranged.

Nopparat, a staff member of the Rak Chiang Khong Group told me that he had met with the Shao Yang NGOs at the 2nd ASEAN-China NGO meeting. They agreed to arrange an educational exchange programme for junior leaders from China and ASEAN countries. In Chiang Khong town, an educational exchange activity between Shao Yang NGOs and the Chiang Khong conservation group took place in July 2019. Nopparat explained that the event was held at the Mekong school; the speakers from both sides shared their own experiences of environmental degradation, particularly regarding the river issues in their hometowns. The Chinese volunteers from the Shaoyang organisation also travelled to a small village in Chiang Khong and accompanied local anglers who had to change their careers due to the vanishing of many fish.

According to the report shared by the Rak Chiang Khong staff, Shaoyang NGOs and the Research Centre for NGOs at Hunan University aimed to learn more about the Chiang Khong NGOs' work and create a mutual understanding of China's development project in Southeast Asia. They expected another educational exchange programme with a team from Hunan University in June 2020. Unfortunately, the conference and exchange programme was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic

Even though the language barrier was a huge obstacle, the members of Rak Chiang Khong were impressed by the stories told by volunteers from Shaoyang. They presented local history and shared their experiences regarding environmental problems in their hometown in Hunan. Although it was just a small measure, which lasted only for a limited time, Kru Tee and other staff members expressed their hope that the exchange programme would contribute to a better mutual understanding. In addition, they told me that they occasionally arranged online meetings with the Chinese academic organisations. Some staff members still have questions about the concrete

outcomes of the China-ASEAN NGOs dialogues and are sceptical about implementing environmental responsibility. However, they remain optimistic that they will continue their exchange programme and cooperate in the future as well.

As mentioned above, Chinese NGOs have recently been encouraged to get involved in the Green BRI. Indeed, NGOs have extended their roles in the PRC since the 1980s. At the beginning, most Chinese foundations were sponsored by the Chinese government and received donations abroad; then, in the 1990s, the foundation gradually started fundraising in their own country (Ketels, 2020). In 2004, the official regulations for fundraising activities were implemented in China. The second stage of the NGOs' development began around 2004-2005, which mainly involved fundraising for disaster relief projects, of which the Chinese government centrally coordinated donations. Finally, the third stage began in 2012; Chinese NGOs increased their roles in China's foreign policy and globalisation strategy, officially involving Chinese NGOs in the talk of "going global" and the BRI (Ketels, 2020; Li & Dong, 2018)

These NGOs have several working models, generally regulated within an authoritarian environment (Hildebrandt, 2013). Anja Ketels (2020) argues that the recent development of NGOs in China has three characteristics: the channelling of private wealth for public welfare, the integration of NGOs into social governance, and the engagement of NGOs in China's international diplomacy, which is becoming a significant tendency in the context of the BRI. In addition, Chinese NGOs have been encouraged to engage with private companies, social actors, and other NGOs beyond their own country.

The interaction between the Rak Chiang Khong Group and Chinese NGOs in the China-ASEAN dialogues demonstrates the actual practices of the Green BRI. My conversation with Rak Chiang Khong staff members exemplified that these Chinese agencies, Chinese NGOs, and Chinese scholars attempt to demonstrate their willingness to learn and build mutual understanding of environmental issues. The involvement of many enterprises in Hunan Province has conveyed the impression that Chinese

overseas enterprises tried to meet their local environmental and cultural responsibility. Furthermore, their engagement with local NGOs in Thailand was supposed to exhibit their active cooperation with Chinese policies and benign enterprises contributing to investments outside China (Jiang, 2015).

Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as an ongoing process involving multiple actors engaging with "ecological infrastructure". In practice, the Green BRI was quickly adjusted by multiple Chinese actors according to the context of the recipient countries. As a result, the Mekong River became a site of power struggles, where different actors reveal their visions of how to utilise the Mekong River according to their own purposes. The actions range from state policy implementation to local activist protests. This represents a complicated picture of multiple actors performing on infrastructure, giving meaning to the Mekong River issues through their interaction. Regarding the case of the town of Chiang Khong, it has been revealed that the BRI is not a rigid master plan containing fixed and predetermined land- and sea-route projects. Instead, it is steadily adjusted by the local government in China, Chinese transnational enterprises, and Chinese agencies (Sidaway & Woon, 2017).

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, China's influence in Southeast Asian countries has expanded greatly through hard and soft infrastructure projects, and in particular the global Belt and Road Initiative. In this chapter, I have started with the background of a border town, Chiang Rai, which is influenced by its proximity to China. Next, I moved from a bird's-eye view of changes in the borderlands to the examination of specific infrastructure projects on the ground. Finally, I have illustrated a transitional period of regional economic cooperation, the ambitious vision of modernisation, and the liberalised cross-border economy between the Mekong region and southwest China, which has emerged since the 1990s.

This study takes a close look at the Rak Chiang Khong, a community-based environmental movement that emerged in response to issues arising from Chinese infrastructure development along

the Mekong River. The group's actions highlight the limits of global China outside its own state territory. Moreover, the confrontations and negotiations have revealed the entangled relationships among the actors involved. Disputes over transnational infrastructure have constantly reconfigured the power relationship among associated actors, including intergovernmental mechanisms, powerful states, weaker states, international environmental organisations, local NGOs, state-owned enterprises, and local communities.

Notably, some infrastructure projects in Thailand are also promoted and implemented with the influence of the BRI, even though they were not part of the original master plan. Thus, the BRI is not only China's unique vision to connect it to the world; instead, it is open for an exchange with the governments of countries that are to be connected with China. It can be argued that the borderlands including cities such as Chiang Khong serve as sites where infrastructure projects materialise aspirations of modernisation and strengthen regional connectivity. In response to China's infrastructure development, Thailand, a smaller state, has invested in international highways, cross-border bridges, and river ports. Additionally, the government has waived some regulations, launched SEZ plans and even expanded railway construction to attract foreign investors.

However, some transborder infrastructure projects, such as the blasting of the Mekong rapids, have been perceived as irresponsible with regard to long-term ecological sustainability and the livelihoods of local communities, which has resulted in extensive and long-lasting resistance. Even though this project is primarily designed to enhance Chinese commercial navigation, it also introduces new environmental threats. The controversy around the Mekong River reflects the dynamic and unstable consequences of the blasting of the rapids and building of dams that stand in contrast to a coherent geopolitical strategy designed by the state (Oliveira et al., 2020, p. 2).

In light of local and global ecological awareness, the Chinese government has recently started to encourage Chinese developers overseas to be more sensitive to local issues and strive to develop more ecologically friendly technologies. On the ground, the BRI is adjusted and implemented by

multiple Chinese actors who face civil society opposition, and local actors also attempt to adjust, or even cancel some elements of BRI projects, working at different scales.

However, while individuals, institutions, and civil society groups try to mediate, translate, and reshape China's transnational projects to align with their interests, their influence might be limited when it comes to halting the most destructive and sizeable projects, especially when individual GMS governments are in favour of the project, as in the case of the Pak Beng dam. Here, the notion of a moral ecology of infrastructure contributes to transcending infrastructure and environment, enabling us to understand human and nonhuman relations in retrofitting dams and waterway projects. Through a lens that moves beyond an anthropocentric perspective, we are able to engage with a world comprising a multitude of actors, shedding light on the distribution and contestation of agency and power among these diverse entities (Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 4,6). Based on my observations at one site of struggle, I conclude that the BRI is a contingent process involved in reimagining a viable future for the Mekong ecology infrastructure.

Chapter 5

Infrastructures of prosperity

Figure 47. Fundraising parade at Ban Don, Chiang Khong. November 19, 2019

It was 8:30 in the morning when I arrived at Nakaraj Nakhon hotel in Ban Don village, Chiang Khong. This hotel sits on a 10-acre riverside plot owned by Madame Suda, known by villagers as *"Mae Nai Suda"* in Thai, the owner of a real estate development project along the Mekong River in the border area of Thailand and Laos. This morning, I wore a sarong and white T-shirt, joining the *Kathin*[14] parade

[14] Kathin is a ceremony to offer new robes and other donations to Buddhist monks, regarded as an important opportunity for members of the laity to make merit (Jackson, 2022, p. 328). It generally takes place during a one-month period between October to November.

to the Maeya Mon temple, which is famous for the myth of the Naga cave of the Mekong River. We gathered at the Nakaraj hotel as the event host this year was *Mae Nai Suda's* business partner. I was told that *Mae Nai Suda* was a wealthy patron who had supported Maeya Mon Temple since she began her project. Every year during the *Kathin* festival, she arranges a fundraising event that brings many devotees from across the country to support the temple.

On the front row, a group of males held white flags painted with Buddhist mythological symbols like crocodiles; centipedes; half-human, half-fish creatures; and soft-shelled turtles. They were followed by a group of women wearing traditional sarongs and colourful blouses holding several sculptures in the shape of money trees ornamented with banknotes. The other group wore neat white clothing and held monks' robes, mats, brooms, and basic utensils as gifts for the monks. It might have appeared to be a typical Thai *Kathin* parade like those I have seen in many rural areas, except for a group of Taiwanese women in colourful costumes holding a yellow flag written with traditional Chinese characters "舞蹈妈妈" who were standing in the front row.

I stood in the back row next to a middle-aged man clutching three brooms intended as offerings to the temple. Ahead of the ceremony, he and eight of his friends had journeyed from Lop Buri province to present a money tree to the Maeya Mon pagoda. This tree was adorned with banknotes folded into the shape of peacocks. As the time approached to begin, a group of military personnel bearing national flags took their positions in the front row. The parade slowly moved across the hotel gate and stopped; we were then directed to board the designated vehicles that would take us through Ban Don village to two ferries that awaited our arrival.

After a chaotic scene, I found myself sitting in the truck of Mr Denchai, the village chief of Ban Don village. During a short drive along the Mekong River, I learned from him that the event was hosted by Mr Danny, a Singaporean businessman, and his associates. They had invited a group of Taiwanese dancers to present a performance in homage to the Maeya Mon pagoda. Mr. Denchai mentioned that in previous years, guests would board the ship directly from the Nakaraj hotel's dock.

However, due to the unusually low water levels in the Mekong River this year, a different boarding location was chosen.

Within minutes, we reached the riverbank, where devotees walked along the shoreline carrying their offerings towards the vessels. On the bank, before we boarded, the abbot of Maeya Mon temple, Master Pongsatorn, sat down facing the Mekong River and lit a bundle of incense sticks. Holding a microphone, he began to speak, and the crowd settled into a hushed silence. In his address to the Mekong River, he invoked the names of two renowned Nagas, a prince and princess, from Thailand and Laos, extending them an invitation to the event. Concluding that it was an auspicious moment to embark, we were then split into two groups to board the wooden ferries.

I was in the same boat as the Taiwanese dancers. The ferries rode along the Mekong River, and the passengers enjoyed themselves by dancing and capturing photos of the picturesque Mekong landscape, all set to the rhythm of Thai folk songs playing in the background. I was sitting next to a Taiwanese woman who told me she was there with her boss. I learned from her that the Wudao mama dance group is based in Taoyuan, Taiwan. Her boss has a business in Chiang Kong town, and he brought the group to perform a Buddhist dance at the floating lantern festival in Chiang Khong and other cities.

On our way to the temple, two more Lao boats joined us in the middle of the Mekong River. Another water parade of devotees greeted us as we got off the ferries. The rhythm was provided by a Laotian grandmother beating a traditional drum while traditional Laos songs accompanied our steps. The parade slowly made its way to the pagoda, while Lao and Thai devotees danced and sang along. The money trees and other offerings were slowly carried toward the Maeya Mon pagoda hill.

Today, Maeya Mon temple was adorned with colourful flags. Over 15 food stalls provided guests with a variety of food, desserts, bread and bakery, and drinks in support of charity. Under colourful tents, hundreds of blue plastic chairs had been arranged for the participants. As a host of the *Kathin* event, Mr Danny stood out in a traditional blue Thai silk shirt with his Thai wife, also

dressed in formal Thai attire. Next to them sat an older Chinese man wearing an elegant conventional Chinese shirt and white hat, holding a black walking stick. The shows started with the Taiwanese dance group, followed by several Thai traditional dancers. The moderator announced the name of Mr Danny and his friends throughout the event as they continued awarding money to the performers after each show and provided scholarships to students and novices.

After all the performances had concluded, the liturgical ceremony started. To the right of the pagoda, a line of Thai monks sat facing the front rows of attendees in uniform – military officers, navy personnel, police officers, administrators, and teachers. Pra Kru, a provost, led the monks in their chanting. The individual beside me mentioned that the provost was the elder brother of the abbot and that they had come from southern Thailand with their monk father.

The front row was occupied by military personnel, police, and affluent devotees from afar, while other attendees scatted in the back rows. As the event's speaker started reading out a lengthy list of names, donors queued up to present their offerings to the provost. Thick Bundles of banknotes and intricately crafted money trees, given to fund the construction of a new building within the temple, were steadily handed over. Afterwards, the microphone was handed over to another guest monk. To my surprise, this local monk clarified that the location was an informal monastery, not an official temple! As a result, in adherence to Buddha's guidelines, he opted not to recite certain mantras here.

At the event, I encountered *Pim*, a forty-year-old woman who initiated a charity project to build a three-kilometre road. Having kickstarted the project with her personal funds of approximately 70,000 [15] Thai baht last year, she expressed her desire to “develop” the countryside by assisting in the

[15] 2,000 USD. As of September 15, 2023, the exchange rate between Thai Baht and USD is 1 USD = 35.84 THB, retrieved from the Bank of Thailand. https://www.bot.or.th/en/statistics/exchange-rate.html

construction of a road for a hilltop village. During our cruise that morning, her cause resonated with many devotees, who generously contributed over 40,000[16] baht.

As I was getting ready to head home, I ran into Pim once more. She enthusiastically displayed a thick stack of banknotes on a golden plate. Mr. Danny had generously donated 500,000 baht[17] to her road-building fundraising effort. “The project is estimated to cost around 4 million[18] baht", she said. With the backing of her social networks and military support, she felt more optimistic about completing the project. Especially now, as she had received a substantial donation to support the project at this event.

I learned that this was the temple's 8th annual ceremony, and with each passing year, the event has grown grander. As the ritual came to a close, the provost disclosed the amount of his donations, emphasising the last three numbers. Once he departed, murmurs filled the crowd. Swiftly, I jotted down those three digits on my phone; they'd be my guide for choosing a lottery number later.

Figure 48. Khatin Fundraising ceremony at Maeya Mon Pagoda Temple, November 19, 2019

[16] 1,150 USD 1,150 USD. See footnote 15 for exchange rate details.
[17] 15,152 USD.
[18] 14,285 USD.

Figure 49. Naga statue at Maeya Mon Pagoda Temple. December 13, 2021

Buddhism, Prosperity, and Futurity

Prosperity and merit have long been embedded in the wealth culture in Thai Buddhist society; as part of the capitalist world, various innovative forms of religious rituals are emerging to help individuals cope with their miserable lives seemingly moving toward bleak futures. Theravada was the predominant religion in the Mekong region, and it is the official religion of Thailand. In my experience as a general Buddhist practitioner, I was familiar with the conception of Buddhism as a religion that rejects materialism and the accumulation of wealth. Yet, it is ubiquitous in Thailand and the Asian Buddhist society that temples, monks, and laypeople intensively engaged in ritual activities that involve the accumulation of property, land, building, material resources and monetary abundance (Boonjubun et al., 2021; Fisher, 2008; Jackson, 2016; R. M. Scott, 2009).

Some scholars have characterised this phenomenon as “capitalistic” or materialistic Buddhism. However, the work of Rachelle M. Scott in the book *Nirvana for Sale?: Buddhism, Wealth,*

and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand studies Theravada Buddhists in Thai societies by conducting fieldwork research on the Dhammakāya movement in Thailand, offering a grounded perspective to analyse the new religious movement. Although the Dhammakāya controversy emerged during the Asian economic recession in the late 1990s, the temple has evolved from a relatively small meditation group to a larger, more financially successful organisation offering meditation retreats, seminars, inspirational sermons, and public-service programmes (McDaniel, 2010).

Despite their popularity among the Thai middle class, their practical Buddhist teaching was harshly criticised as overly simplistic and commercialised. There was a heated discussion throughout the country; many Thai Buddhists questioned the role of golden stupas, Buddha images, amulets, miracles, and merit-making within Buddhism. Some critics pointed to the temple's marketing of amulets and miracles as evidence of the corruption of Buddhist tradition influenced by global capitalism (R. M. Scott, 2009).

Instead of lamenting authentic Buddhist rituals, Scott's work offers a shift in Buddhist studies from a singular attitude to a dynamic, heterogeneous view of wealth in religious practices. According to Scott, there is a complex relationship between wealth and piety in the Buddhist tradition, which goes beyond a simplistic view of “authentic Buddhism”. Scott provides a sampling of discourses on wealth in the Theravada tradition from a variety of sources in Buddhist literature to demonstrate the importance of wealth and possession to Buddhist communities as it directly relates to their everyday religious values (R. M. Scott, 2009, p. 28).

For example, Buddhists typically consider a wealthy birth a definitive sign of merit (*Bun* in Thai). Being born into a prosperous, amiable family is regarded as infinitely more meritorious than being born into a poor family (R. M. Scott, 2009, p. 29,31). In addition, Buddhist texts abound with examples of wealthy individuals who fail to give generously in their lifetimes, leading to an unfavourable rebirth. Scott (2009) highlights that the assessment of wealth in the Buddhist tradition is context-sensitive, wealth might signify the great stores of merit that one has accumulated over

several lifetimes; in a different context, one is admonished not to be attached too much on wealth as it will lead to suffering in this life.

Rather than seeking to prove or disprove the authenticity of pro-wealth forms of religiosity, scholars suggest examining the implications and relationships of power that constitute authentic religiosity and analysing the dynamics of religious practices and traditions (Jackson, 1999, 2016, 2022; Rennesson, 2021; R. M. Scott, 2009). Exploring the socioeconomic and political context that has shaped the meaning and legitimacy of religious practices contributes to deepening our understanding of the culture of wealth that has always been part of Buddhism.

In order to re-examine the concept of wealth, recent anthropological work on the subject, such as the work by Rakopoulos & Rio (2018), refers to Marx's well-known work *Capital*; the authors highlight a process of alienation wherein natural resources, infrastructure and clan estate from the social structure of kinship were commodified into an exchangeable property during industrialisation. Furthermore, the collections of comparative studies contribute to our understanding of wealth beyond merely accumulated assets, many cases demonstrating how wealth is always bound up in our social relations entangled with the dynamic concepts of power, capital and commons (Rakopoulos & Rio, 2018, 2020).

Furthermore, Harvey (2010) notes that Marx defines capital as a process of value circulation, as opposed to neoclassical notions of “fixed capital” as physical assets, tangible objects that contribute to production and services and cannot be easily adjusted or altered. For Marx capital refers to “value in motion” (D. A. Harvey, 2010, p. 90; Soto, 2000, pp. 39–41). The so-called completed fixed capital was mainly capital waiting to be exchanged; its "values might increase while it waits to be sent in circulation" (Marx, 1978, p.282, Harvey, 2010, p.8 in Rakopoulos & Rio, 2018).

Similarly, in my fieldwork, the state of “waiting” is another form of action during a transformation through time that could increase the value of land, space or things in a capitalist society (Janeja & Bandak, 2018). Various responses have been observed, such as land speculation,

property construction with the expectation of higher compensation and market price (Chapter 2), or cargoes waiting in warehouses to cross the border in deviant routes (Chapter 3). This chapter tries to demonstrate that merit-making is also associated with "waiting" through time; the return from merit-making can be in the form of luck, health, fame, social charisma, legal power or prosperity at some point in this life or the next life.

Nevertheless, the illusion of prosperity that promised a better life, whether in this life or the next one, has already altered and transformed all aspects of life across the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. In previous chapters, I have shown that resources and capacity have been extracted and commodified intensively, including land, river, culture, belief, labour, hope, and imagination. They have been converted into capital and merit that can be utilised in the secular and spiritual world. According to recent research on land in the Mekong region, "Capitalisation" has mobilised land and other resources through land improvement, land commodification, and financialisaton (Hirsch et al., 2022). As with my findings, the ownership of lands in the border town has been transferred to real estate companies, and some were developed property for enhancing market value. The commodification of borderland is being done under the name of SEZs development plans, which aim to give out long-term leases to authorise control over it.

Kathin festival*,* a kind of fundraising ceremony, serves as my vantage point to explore the relationship between merit making, money and capital. This chapter focuses on the nexus between local culture and capital which flow into this region. I have shown in previous chapters that the Mekong River and land have been turned into special economic zones and regional water pathways that serve as catalysts for the prosperity of the Thai-Lao Mekong borderland. In this last chapter, I offer the concept of meritisation, the process of mobilising capital value generated from several sources into the uncountable value called merit, or *bun* in Thai*.* Buddhist laypersons from all walks of life and across cultures can easily relate to the concept of merit. Generally regarded as Buddhist ethics, it refers to karmic virtue acquired through moral and ritual action.

In these border towns, community connection through fundraising rituals isn't limited to Thais and Laotians; Chinese, Singaporeans, and Taiwanese also engage. Both locals and non-locals all participate in converting, purifying, legitimising, and sustaining the capital and wealth in merit accumulation. In this sense, capital and merit share a common value of something that makes claims on the future, while the converting ritual continues to generate a nexus between the past, present, and future.

Therefore, the wealth culture and intense merit-making will be examined to illustrate the flow of capital into the creation of the Mekong sacred zone. The conversion of money to merit will be examined through the lens of anthropology work in religious and wealth studies. Lastly, I argue that temples and merit networks operate as infrastructures of prosperity, circulating cultural practices, beliefs, cash, things, information, expectations, and imaginations of prosperous futures throughout the Thai-Lao Mekong borderlands and beyond.

Temples in the Mekong border towns

While I was conducting fieldwork in the town, I was frequently recommended to visit several temples. Along with describing the fancy architecture, locals often tell stories about the abbots, particularly their fame and *barami* (social charismatic power) that bring many devotees and wealthy lay Buddhists, both domestic and overseas, to the towns. The non-local tycoons, having become such vital devotees of a local temple, were the themes of similar stories I heard throughout my stay in Chiang Khong. For example, a wealthy lay Buddhist donated money to the temples and brought many devotees from far away. Likewise, these tycoons all had some connection to the towns, such as an investor in a casino, real estate developers, hotel owners, or landlords.

In recent years, temple tourism has become a lucrative industry in Thailand. Many temples have been renovated, rebuilt, and constructed. In Chiang Rai, several temples have developed into well-known tourist attractions. Many of them are very popular with Chinese tourists, such as *Wat*

Rong Khun, known as a white temple (白庙), *Wat Rong Suea Ten,* or blue temple (蓝庙), and Baan Dam Museum (黑庙); despite many of them being called temples, no monks were practising there however.

Many temples impressed me with their fancy architecture, enormous staircases, delicate sermon halls, stunning paintings, huge Buddha images, mythical animal monuments, decorative pagodas, trendy Instagram corners, and fabulous coffee shops. For instance, in Chiang Khong, many Thai devotees from all over Thailand flock to worship a famous abbot of recently built temples. In many temples, several fundraising campaigns have been promoting renovation, construction or building some things up in these temples throughout the years.

My observations indicate that these famous temples differ in their interactions with local devotees. Famous temples are visited mostly by tourists and devotees from far away, while locals often practice their daily ritual in their community temple. When organising fundraising events, the temple, which mainly receives guests from afar, usually arranges several performances and fancier rituals. However, in my experience, although locals do not regularly attend, they enjoy participating in the big events. These special activities were described as a fun experience for most of them. In the case of the special cruise to the Maeya Mon temple, a villager told me that participants had to pay for the ride, but the Nakaraj hotel held accessible seats for Ban Don residents every year.

During my stay, I heard various accounts about different abbots, covering their backgrounds, places of origin, meditation expertise, ascetic practices, reputations, and personalities. Simultaneously, there were whispers about the affluence, landholdings, social networks, and backgrounds of their devotees. Some notable stories included an abbot who owned a sizable rubber plantation, another who underpaid a subcontractor, one who took a dominant role in a local environmental even, and an abbot who expressed dissatisfaction with the modest merit donations made during a local ceremony.

There was an evening when I returned from an event organised by a famous temple. We were sitting in a truck as we passed a rubber plantation, and a local woman told me that the expansion of the temple and the desire to purchase land nearby were causing concerns among rubber-plantation owners. She mentioned the word in Thai, *"Sen Yai";* in Thai, *Sen* refers to the line, and *Yai* refers to big or huge. In this context, it seemed the temple held a privilege, perhaps endorsed by higher authorities. When I inquired if she frequented the temple, she mentioned her visit the previous year during a major event where they distributed blankets.

Casino Owner: A Wealthy Lay Buddhist Patron

Lay Buddhists generally believe their contributions to temple construction and donation are important ways of gaining merit. A similar phenomenon was also seen in the Chinese special economic zone in Laos, where Mr Zhao Wei, the casino owner, became an important patron of a temple name Wat Sri Don Sak Golden Triangle. In August 2022, several photos of Zhao Wei sitting beside a 26-year-old monk name *Pra Kruba Nin Phu li ya no, were* posted on Wat Sridonsak Golden Triangle Facebook page*;* they were in a ceremony of installing an elaborately carved apex on the gable of the ordination hall of Wat Sri Don Sak and a prolonging-life ritual of the monk's birthday. Mr Zhao Wei, a chairman of the Chinese Golden Triangle Economic Zone committee and the governor of Ton Phueng province, attended the ceremony in the role of honoured guests. On the Facebook pages, many photos also presented several monks, officials and devotees participating by bringing money trees and other offerings to contribute to the event.

Figure 50. Mr Zhao Wei and Pra Kruba Nin Phu li ya no pouring water of dedication.

Note. From photographs on "The Golden Triangle SEZ" and "Wat Sridonsak Golden Triangle" Facebook pages. (2022, August 5). Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/watsridonsak.GoldenTriangle/

Zhao Wei often appears as an important patron of the temple and a significant donor to several fundraising on the Golden Triangle Facebook page and Laos media. The name of chairman Zhao Wei is presented as that of a moral developer in the Golden Triangle SEZs area, and photos of infrastructure projects and real estate development including roads, a river port, airport, luxury condominiums and schools were often posted on the SEZs' offical page. They often receive official visitors and delegations from Laos and other countries showing modern Chinatowns, modern farming and tourist attractions in the SEZs. In addition, the cultural activities and religious ceremonies organised by the Myanmar and Laos communities were recently presented, showing lively social life in the town.

Recently, Wat Sridonsak Golden Triangle temple has engaged in several projects, including hall construction and a giant Buddha statue. The Facebook page often updates and posts photos of the devotees who donate cement, stones, sand, money and other things to contribute to the construction. It is not only locals that contribute; several overseas devotees also visit the temple with money offerings in various currencies; Laos keep, Thai baht and Chinese Ren mi bi. Among his other

contribution, on November 8, 2022, Mr Zhao Wei was also named as a significant contributor to the Buddha statue construction by giving 1 million baht to the temple.

The relationship between lay patrons and Buddhist clergy has deep roots in the history of China and Southeast Asia (Fisher, 2008; R. M. Scott, 2009). In China, there are several reasons that wealthy entrepreneurs and elites invested in temples and became Buddhist patrons; scholars argue that one of these reasons was to establish a “cultural nexus” that legitimised their position by tying their interests to those of the state (Brokaw, 2016, p. 48,49; Brook, 1993; Fisher, 2008; Naquin, 2000; Yang, 2000). It's an effective strategy for legitimising their authority in national or local circles. In Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, several studies have demonstrated the close relationship between the King, royal family members, high-ranking government and military officials and the Buddhist monastic community; a famous monk would gain Buddhist power in monastic circles, while simultaneously elites legitimised their authority through the actions of Buddhist patronage (R. M. Scott, 2009, pp. 36–44).

This situation is reminiscent of the account of a Bangkok tycoon in Chapter 2. The fame of such a good Buddhist patron has not remained the same when their name crosses the Mekong border. In my fieldwork, there are various perceptions toward Mr Zhao Wei; some describe him as a mafia casino owner who ruled over the land of Laos for 99 years, some refer to his gambling business as an economic booster benefiting the border town. His wealth from the casino industry and as a special economic zones developer has been well-known in Laos and the Mekong Thai border towns for decades; however, he remained low-profile in Thai society in general, yet his name resurfaced in Thai media during an extensive investigation dubbed "Chinese grey capital" in Thailand in the last quarter of 2022.

Casino capital in the region

> *"A total of 104 customers, 99 Chinese nationals, tested positive for drugs during a police raid on three adjacent buildings illegally operating as a nightclub in Bangkok's Yannawa area in the early hours of Wednesday. Thirty-four luxury cars found on the building's grounds, including a Rolls Royce, were impounded. The nightclub was said to be operated by a Chinese national owner...*(Ngamkham, 2022)

In the last week of October 2022, Thai media outlets were flooded with news about Thai Police investigations into the "Chinese grey capital", a term coined by Thai media after the Royal Thai police had operated the investigation. These operations were an extension of the raid on *Club One* in Pattaya, Chonburi province, believed to be related to the *"Jin Ling"* club (金陵) , a luxury entertainment venue in Bangkok. The Jin Ling club was charged with illegal narcotics distribution, which led to further investigation into money laundering and police corruption.

On November 9, 2002, a few weeks before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, the Thai police arrested a Chinese businessman at his luxury office suite in a building owned by a respected Thai mercantile trade organisation in the heart of Bangkok for allegedly holding a fake Thai ID card. They also found a luxury car resembling a diplomat's limousine decorated to look like an embassy car with two national flags on its bonnet, a fake escort police motorcycle and a military uniform with a badge showing the suspect's name.[19]

The activities of Chinese triad gangs that have sparked alarm have been highlighted by Chuwit Kamolvisit, a Thai businessman known for his former massage-parlour business and a former politician and candidate for governor of Bangkok. His Facebook post about the five triad gangs

[19] See more in https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/easy/2434509/chinese-man-arrested-with-fake-thai-id-embassy-limo-and-military-uniform

running a grey business throughout Thailand drew heated attention on social media. Mr Chuwit believed they had established a close relationship with Thai politicians and senior polices. He claimed that these five groups were connected to a giant business network owned by a Chinese tycoon in Bokeo, Laos, called Zhao Wei. A series of scoops about “Zhao Wei” appeared in the Thai media over the following weeks. His image appeared in media outlets and social networks in Thailand as a mafia tycoon engaged in online gambling and scamming in Laos, Cambodia, and the Philippines.

Indeed, this is not the first time that Zhao Wei's name has appeared in the media; the news about the United States Treasury Department imposing sanctions on his transnational criminal organisation in 2018 has given a negative image of his SEZs in Laos. In contrast, he has received prestige status from the Lao government; his business has prospered and expanded smoothly in the country.

In response to the negative image in Thai media, the King Roman Casino name appeared again a week later. It states that Mr Zhao Wei did not engage in any business in Thailand and had no relationship with the mafia gangs as claimed by Mr Choo wit. Zhao Wei's representative states that Mr Zhao Wei likes to do agricultural commercial deals with local villagers and isn't involved with drugs or criminal activities. Just a week before his negative portrayal on Thai news, on October 20, 2022, the Government of Laos presented Mr Zhao Wei with the Medal of Bravery, Second Class, honouring his contributions to the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (Visapra, 2022). Videos and photos illustrating infrastructure projects such as airports, riverports, and real estate were shown to demonstrate his success as a developer for Laos SEZs.

Figure 51. Mr Zhao Wei, President of Dok Ngiew Kham Group, was awarded a Medal of Bravery by the Government of Laos.

Note. From "Laos government presents medal to Chinese casino operator" by P. Visapra, (2022), Laotian Times. [Photograph]. Retrieved September 14, 2023, from https://laotiantimes.com/2022/10/03/laos-government-presents-medal-to-chinese-casino-operator/

Figure 52. Chinese temple in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone. November 13, 2019

It is not surprising to find news about gambling operators being arrested in Bangkok or other big cities in Thailand. Thai law prohibits casinos from operating, but that does not mean there is no gambling house in this country. On the contrary, gambling has been part of Thai culture for a long time. Nevertheless, this phenomenon has recently attracted public attention due to the involvement of Chinese grey capital, politicians, senior police officers, and corruption against the backdrop of intensive Chinese investment in casino industries in Southeast Asian. Although gambling capital has prospered in neighbouring countries, and there have been heated discussions about legalising it in Thailand, the issue is still a matter of debate.

In fact, most emerging SEZs that permit gambling businesses are found throughout Asia and around the globe. For instance, the Macau territory of China was infamous for casino and entertainment complexes that attracted tourists and gambling lovers worldwide. It has played a significant role in economic growth, partly contributing to China's modernisation in the 1990s. Recently, casino models have expanded throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, Malaysia, and many border towns of Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Many of them were operated on long-term land concessions by Chinese investors.

Over the past decade, Sihanoukville, a coastal province of Cambodia, has been the target of Chinese real estate developers and casino resort investments. As Chinese capital poured in, a wave of Chinese tourists, entrepreneurs, and workers followed. Land prices have skyrocketed due to massive demand. Even though the investment has contributed to the real estate development of the province, most of the wealth is kept in Chinese bubbles, restaurants, hotels, resorts, small shops, and services (Alffram, 2022; Po & Heng, 2019, p. 10,11). A growing number of crimes have been reported, such as gun possession, drug smuggling, money laundering, human trafficking, sexual harassment, kidnapping, prostitution, the publicising of sexual services, and violence. As a result, it has been observed that there is a growing anti-Chinese sentiment among Cambodians. The Cambodian government enforced a ban on arcade games and online gambling in August 2019 resulting the

collapse of Sihanoukville's development. Many Chinese who work in the online gambling industry returned to China and stayed there after the pandemic. As a result, Sihanoukville's booming has been halted, and economic development has yet to resume (Lim, 2022).

In Thailand, the SEZ of Chiang Rai is often referred to in tourist advertisements as a sacred land with a flourish of beautiful temples, in contrast to the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZs on the Laos border, which are famous for the casino and entertainment-complex industry. Most Thai gambling lovers play at a Thai-operated casino on the Myanmar border. In contrast to neighbouring Mekong border towns, the Thai towns advertised themselves as religious tourism destinations.

…

Under the money tree

In Thailand and other Theravada Buddhist countries, the *Kathin* is part of an agricultural ritual cycle that marks the end of the rainy season and the onset of the rice harvest (Gray, 1986, p. 2). Today, people use *Kathin* ceremonies to raise funds not only for temples but also for public goods such as schools and hospitals. Moreover, the *Kathin* ceremony is regarded as a way to distribute wealth from the capital to rural areas, which elites often utilise to further their business and political interests (Tambiah 1976:392-394). Drawing on my fieldwork experience, in this section, I adopt the notion of the *Kathin* ritual to better comprehend land speculation and resource exploitation in the Thai-Lao Mekong borderlands.

Many temples organised spectacular fundraising events during *Kathin* period in Chiang Khong. Attending these events was a fun way to entertain myself in this small town. In particular, the events arranged by famous temples usually include special elements. An example was an event to build a monument of a renowned abbot. A few nights before the event in December 2021, all hotels in Chiang Khong were fully booked due to the number of guests who came to participate in the event. Activities ran from dawn until dusk on a ceremony day. Hundreds of vehicles parked in every space in

the temple, their license plates indicating they were from all over the country. Several local traditional dance performances and a certificate of commendation were presented before the liturgy. There was an astonishing lineup of devotees wearing white-and-gold costumes that, in my personal opinion, looked like Greek gods' robes. Raising a golden wand tipped with a golden star, the team formed itself into an honorary arch of a golden wand while the awards for "doing good" were handed to other devotees by the famous abbot.

Figure 53. Fundraising ceremony at a temple in Chiang Khong. December 10, 2022

In *Kathin* ceremonies that I attended, money was displayed in various creative forms, for instance, a big bush, an umbrella, a peacock and a fan. Seeing the size of the money trees, their displays along the parade, and their placement on the altar gives the impression that money is all around and prosperity is in the air. Participants usually dress neatly and cleanly, such as in elegant Thai silk T-shirts, delicate pattern of sarongs, white and clean cotton blouses, perfectly ironed

uniforms, and shining shoes. Many women wore their best make-up, gold necklaces, silver bracelets, and dazzling jewellery, while many men wore bright uniforms and casual outfits, clean leather shoes, neatly styled hair, and expensive watches.

In the parade, the participants appeared to be having fun and enjoying themselves among friends and neighbours. There was a wide variety of delicious food distributed with no limit, a spectacular musical performance with lightning displays, colourful flags, and dazzling ointment all over the place. It seems that all participants are living in another metaverse of prosperity. It was the moment of creating heaven on earth. It was an overwhelming feeling of gratitude when one felt proud of what they had given and grateful for the contributions of others. The paradise might look like this, if there is one.

Figure 54. Several forms of Money trees in Kathin ceremonies in Chiang Khong town.

In the article *Spirits of 'Dark Finance' in Thailand: a Local Hazard for the International Moral Fund*, Alan Kliman argues that "In northern Thailand, the money tree is a sovereign sign whereby value reproduces itself. Strictly speaking, money doesn't grow on trees in Thailand either, but something else, we might call *bun,* or Buddhist merit-karma, the effect on the world produced by giving in the interest of higher communal purpose, and one's interest simultaneously" (Kliman, 2006, p. 53). In this sense, it is a ritual to purify money into merit. The role of Buddhist monks is to circulate

the cycle of this exchange. As the recipients of gifts, the temple becomes a vital node for rechannelling wealth through public works (Klima, 2006, p. 47).

As part of their service, the monks might offer talismans of good luck or blessing to help one to navigate through vulnerable areas of life. Whether they are investors, traders, entrepreneurs or gamblers, the role of monks is crucial in cultivating the climate of confidence and optimism necessary for speculators to conduct their business or navigate through the mazes of money. Moreover, the process of merit-making through donations gives them a sense of agency. It moves them from an uncontrollable market to a field of merit, where a sense of control over their futures is generated (Zhu et al., 2020, p. 100).

Whether a host or guest, making merit is the central objective of participating in a *Kathin* ceremony. Klima (2006, p.53) argues that the giving ceremony forged bonds between community members and also evaluated the financial architecture in the area. Similarly, in my fieldwork, the *Kathin* festival is the time when the community and temple share resources to organise an event to welcome donations from faraway patrons and local devotees. The *Kathin* ceremony is the process of redistribution of wealth to society. Community members' presence and contributions are crucial in a small village like Bann Don village where I stayed. Several forms of assistance were observed, such as food offerings, time devoted to preparation of the event, traditional dance practice as a performance offering, and money.

The *Kathin* ceremony was also a time when the wealthy local or non-local businessperson could show their most outstanding contribution by hosting the giving ceremony. This is reciprocated by the host being treated as a prominent figure at the event. A ritual is meant to produce prestige, honour, merit (*bun*), virtue, and charisma (*barami*) in general, and it is a means of accumulating moral capital, which is a necessary precondition for accumulating monetary capital in the Thai-Lao Mekong border towns in particular.

The ritual transformed a big monetary donation made of calculable bank notes into uncountable merit. Yet, merit cannot be measured; donating more money does not guarantee greater merit. However, the temple ensures that the host gains fame from their contribution to the temple. Thus, the merit then transforms into fame, credibility, and a good image for wealthy patrons. Being renowned for being a good businessperson increases the potential for acceptance as part of a community, which in turn secures their chance of optimising their business to flourish in semi-rural areas like Chiang Khong and beyond.

Therefore, this is a process of legitimising wealth while simultaneously dissociating the source of such wealth. The source of donated money might be celebrated by writing donors' names on temple walls, or printing them behind the Buddha statue or on the given objects. In most cases, it has a set of criteria based on the amount of money given, or donations may anonymous. Scepticism about giving money that has already been converted to merit is often seen as a taboo in Buddhist Thai society. When one holds on to their curiosity about the journey of the money, the merit (*bun*) will not happen since it is believed that the possessions of the money are transferred. Merit, in this sense, refers to a feeling of satisfaction after giving and letting go. Thus, money auditions are loosely implemented in the Thai temple. Generally, a temple may form a committee that is composed of monks and community members to act as auditors and treasurers.

One might believe that money given will earn merit in the form of luck, or one may give without expecting material returns. But the merit return may still be an exchange out of time(Laidlaw, 2000, p. 625). Drawing parallels with the Bulang society in Xishuangbanna, merit can be used both in the afterlife and in this world, here and now. Since the tea market, which provides all Bulang donations with cash, is uncertain, merit serves as a blessing to cope with such uncertainties. The market may remain unstable, but the Bulang people's merit blessing helped give them a sense of security (Ma, 2021). This concept resonates with Chiang Khong case, where merit-based blessings offer a semblance of security in a volatile world.

Legitimising and Sustaining Wealth

In my fieldwork, rich businesspeople are often praised for their generosity. Wealthy investors and businesspeople show their contribution to the community by donating to the construction and renovation of local temples. Also, they give donations to basic social and family services, such as education, basic healthcare, and elderly care. A teacher I met told me about a school in Baan Don that received televisions for each classroom from Madame Suda, an owner of the hotel opposite the school. In her opinion, Madame Suda is also very generous with teachers in Baan Don school. At a reunion party for teachers, she and her colleagues enjoyed a variety of seafood provided by Madame Suda. "It is common for newcomers to give good treats to the community", she said.

The contribution of the Bangkok tycoon and her business partners to Baan Don village and the Maeya Mon temple serves as a process of wealth redistribution in the community. People are much more favourable towards redistributive practices when they know about the sharing of the wealth of businesspersons in society. Wealth is disapproved of more if people believe it is primarily self-accumulated. It is no secret that Madame Suda, along with her business partners, accumulated her wealth working as a real estate developer, a casino owner in Laos and a land speculator in the village. It can be deduced that the legitimacy of her wealth is determined based on how it is used rather than its source.

Hosting *Kathin* fundraising events and contributing to the community can be interpreted as a way to achieve wealth legitimacy, and ensures its continuity. When wealth, regardless of its original source, is directed towards noble causes, it not only gains societal acceptance but also builds a protective barrier. By investing wealth in the community, it effectively anchors one's assets in a way that reduces the risk of external criticism, condemnation, or challenges, thus ensuring their long-term sustainability.

In addition, I observed that most *Kathin,* along with other fundraising events in the local temple, seem to require the presence of politicians, military officials, police officers, and wealthy

businesspeople. There are many forms of participation, from host to honoured guest. For example, in Chiang Khong there was a temple that arranged a long board showing photos of the abbot with royal family members, high-ranking officials and movie stars at several events in Bangkok and other places. Celebrities, such as actors, models, business figures, musicians, and TV personalities, increasingly participate in the rituals organised by the famous Temple. During a typical day of my fieldwork at a town café, I noticed a famous abbot walk in accompanied by a Thai singer and her friends. On Instagram, I have also seen TV stars posting about their activities with the well-known abbot in Chiang Khong.

The appearance of these celebrities or politicians visiting the famous abbot contributes to the temple's fame and increases the abbot's *barami*, which can be translated as social charisma. In the same way, when a monk has much social charisma, politicians and celebrities run to him to increase their image of virtue (Fuengfusakul, 1993; Jackson, 1999). In addition, lesser-known monks may draw participants by borrowing the fame of local spiritual beliefs such as the Naga spirit, as I have shown in Chapter 2. In *the Kathin* ceremony, these elements played an important role in inviting many people to the event, because it could make an impact on the financial structure of the ceremonies. A renowned monk, widely believed to have no personal wealth, invites people from all walks of life, local and non-local, Thais, Laos, Chinese, Taiwanese, Singaporeans and other foreigners to participate and contribute to the giving ceremonies according to their faith and economic conditions.

Furthermore, in the Thai society context, members of the military, high-ranking police officials, and politicians were seen as having *Amnat*, meaning the ability to use power. Despite this, they might not have much *Barami*, or social charisma, which is the basis of a leader's ability to command voluntary obedience from their subjects. Their contribution to the *Kathin* ritual and relationship with the famous monk who had *Barami* became a means to build up social charisma or borrow it to maximise their power. The wealthy businesspeople, investors, and gamblers, who might

lack *Barami* and *Amnat* might borrow from them to pursue their desire through this merit-making process. The monk who owns *Barami* can turn the wealth into public goods, and the community then gives legitimacy in exchange. In most cases, legitimacy from the community and the society enables them to optimise their interests, protect their business operations, increase their chances of prosperity, and maintain and sustain their wealth. This circulation can be described as a cycle of moral wealth.

Nevertheless, this mechanism does not always work harmoniously; members of communities have the agency to respond differently to each element of this cycle; for instance, several rumours about abbots are often shared in the community. Under the Thai authoritarian regime, however, the political actors, high-ranking authority officials who have *Amnat* in the form of legal power, can operate this power to maintain the social prestige of their circles; legal capacity can be used to suppress truths that threaten their prestige (Jackson, 2022, p. 97).

Meritisation: Translocal Merit Networks and a Cycle of Moral Wealth

The Spiritual Land Rush: Merit and Morality in New Chinese Buddhist Temple Construction by Fisher (2008) offers insights into the translocal networks of temple construction and renovation in rural China. In his view, believing in merit-making by investing money in constructing temples is only the beginning. A further crucial step is cultivating relationships and connections that will enable permission to be granted for the expansion of religious structures (Fisher, 2008, p. 152).

I witnessed many hotels being fully booked during the *Kathin* festival in Chiang Khong town. As Chan Pen told me, her small guest houses were always fully booked when the Maeya Mon temple organised fundraising ceremonies. These participants were called *"sai bun",* which I literary translated to merit networks; "*sai*" refers to a line, connections, and *"bun"* indicates merit. This is the term to describe how devotees organise themselves as a group with a coordinator who acts as a node to link with other lines of devotees. People from all walks of life are forming a merit network in the preferred temple. The fundraising event draws resources through its merit networks using these connections.

The temple serves as a platform for creating new networks across political boundaries and regional cultures, and including both transnational and local devotees. Using the events and fundraising ceremonies, they can expand their networks, which, in turn, will increase the fame of the abbot and temple.

Building upon the description provided earlier, I propose the concept of a "cycle of moral wealth", which comprises five key elements: infrastructures, capital, merit, social charisma, and power. These elements are in constant interaction, transformation, and circulation. This cycle of moral wealth operates over the merit networks, which served as infrastructure for connecting each element and circulating the converted output. Merit networks can strengthen connections by echoing the fame of abbots, politicians, officials, and businesspeople. Yet, they can also weaken connections to damage the monk fame and elites' social prestige when they lack legitimacy – for instance, by sharing rumours among their networks, commenting on Facebook pages, and ceasing to participate in the event. Therefore, merit networks play a crucial role in lubricating or increasing friction in the cycle system.

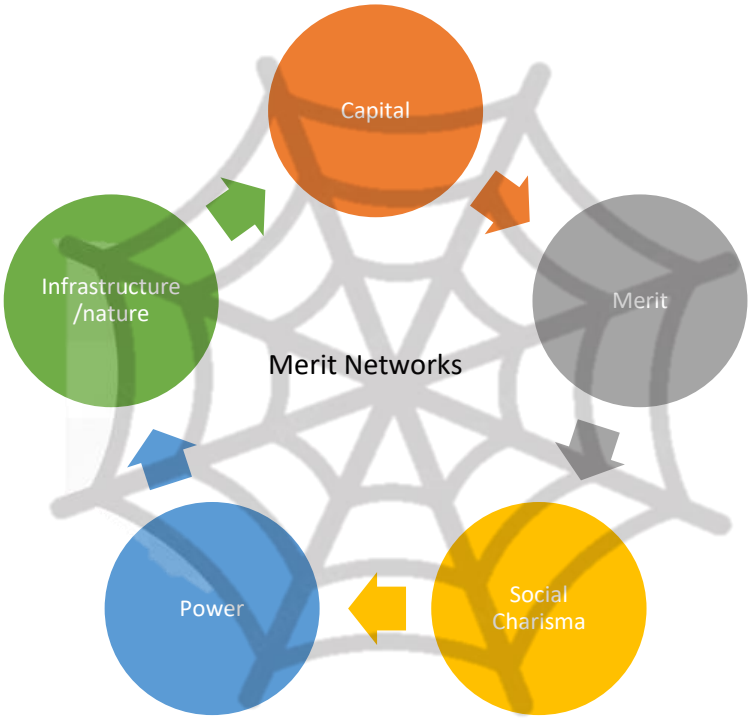

Figure 55. A cycle of moral wealth

Semi-Rural Temple, Local Financial Structure and Tourism

During the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, the tension of political ideology between anti-communists and communist supporters in Thailand was very intense. The Thai sangha was involved in a government program to strengthen national identity and centralised political establishment. To combat communist insurgency, monks were sent to north and northeast Thailand to work on development projects, such as building roads, bridges, and schools, which are propaganda as well as merit-making activities (R. M. Scott, 2009). Buddhist conversions were also undertaken to foster a sense of national community among diverse ethnic groups, such as the Meo, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, and Karen. It can be seen that a few decades ago, Buddhist Monks played a vital role in implementing the National program that served the state's desire to control these disparate groups in the name of political stability and economic development (R. M. Scott, 2009, p. 38).

Today, Buddhist monks' journey to the rural area has taken a different role in the borderland community. Long, exhausting trips to a remote temple can attract worshippers, mainly if it is a place where famous religious specialists lived or a place where miracles took place. A small town such as Chiang Khong, located on the edge of the state, serves as a place to satisfy some urban residents' exotic imagination of being far from the centre of modern life.

Therefore, the borderland space has been reinvented and transformed into an appealing visual and conceptual archetype of the conjugation of belief of Naga, Buddhism and tourism. The cycle of moral wealth demonstrates a complex relationship between elites, Buddhists, and local cultures. The tourism industry facilitates pacification of the centre-periphery conflict (Evrard & Leepreecha, 2009, p. 319). Charismatic monks, the famous temple, the Chinese casino, and the Modern Chinatown have all become tourist attractions scattered along the Mekong River. They all participate in didactic imagery of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland under the ideology of modernisation and meritisation.

Buddhist Economic ethics and the monastic role are shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts and more significant social and political issues (R. M. Scott, 2009). The recent boom in temple construction reflects the borderland financial structure at the peak of the religious market's competition. I interviewed a retired sub-district headman who became a temple manager and treasurer at Hua Wiang temple sub-district in Chiang Khong old town. He was working with an abbot to build a new worship hall. He proudly showed me three large stone Buddha statues imported from Myanmar and a painting of an enormous Bodhi tree covering one of the walls inside the worship hall. It might appear like a general Buddhist temple, except for the two columns adorned with Chinese dragons and golden cranes. He explained to me that the design was inspired by his imagination. In his remarks, he said the colourful Mekong Naga sculptures and golden dragon columns might attract more Chinese tourists to the temple.

Figure 56. Worship Hall of Hua Wiang Temple in Chiang Khong. January 22,2020.

While I recognise that temples hold significant meaning in terms of personal Buddhist beliefs around merit-making, in this context, I interpret temple construction or renovation in these border towns as another form of investment. Many new temples are designed to boost economic development by drawing in tourists and laypeople both locally and from abroad. Additionally, the borderland location appeals to laypersons keen on making pilgrimages to distant temples. The region's rich history of saints and spirits also provides significant religious allure, which can be leveraged to attract tourists.

Similar to other abundance of natural resources countries, the Mekong borderland is paradoxically cursed and blessed by its enthralling natural resources and cultural embodiments. The assets are marketed as tourism products, which could generate domestic and foreign earnings. In spite of sustained and substantial growth in tourism for decades, it is worth noting that the industry has completely collapsed during the pandemic time. Using religious tourism that emphasises merit-based charity might be a way to divert people's attention from the source of inequality. In particular, the charity aims to put a band-aid over the state's social-structure problems or duties in providing access to public goods, monitoring natural-resource extraction, implementing environmental regulation, auditing religious-financial management, investigating money laundering, preventing corruption, etc.

Conclusion

The infrastructure of prosperity conceptualises various forms of infrastructure as capital to create a prosperous landscape that covers up messy borderlands with moral activities. By engaging in merit-making activities, we enable immoral practices such as land grabbing and intensive resource extraction to be transformed into moral means for achieving future prosperity in this life and the next one.

I propose the concept of meritisation to contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of the capitalisation and commodification of abundant resources along the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong

borderland. The cycle of moral wealth illustrates how capital has been sustained and expanded through *Kathin* ceremonies, a form of Buddhist fundraising. Converting money/capital into merit helps legitimise the capital through the performance of redistribution of wealth to the society. When wealth is converted to merit, it creates social prestige and power relationships, while the merit networks retain their agency in generating lubrication or friction throughout the cycle of moral wealth. Tourism applies as a filter feature to help pacification the relationship between the centre and periphery by overlaying the issues of resource exploitation and social inequality. Involved actors can continuously legitimise their actions by modifying, adjusting, and transforming infrastructure amidst illusions of modernity and merit toward an uncertain future in the Mekong borderland and beyond.

Conclusion

In our globally intertwined world, where connectivity becomes a prime focus, a seamless connection is often the paramount goal of infrastructure networks. These networks form an expansive grid designed to circulate entities including human and non-human beings, things, energy, information, culture, capital, ideologies, and more. However, in many places in the Global South, infrastructure does not always function as intended. Indeed, in certain areas, infrastructural failures are commonplace. In this thesis, I turn our attention to a small corner of Southeast Asia, the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland in Northern Thailand, proximate to Laos, Myanmar, and Southern China. Here, I spotlight the lives of various groups in Thai border towns, the community living amidst the volatility generated by state-backed and private infrastructural investments for more than two decades.

This thesis challenges the conventional view of infrastructures in the mainstream development handbook, which often promises a prosperous future, improved quality of life, stability, and security. This proposition is specifically scrutinised in Thai Mekong border towns, where inhabitants have long dealt with volatility triggered by a diverse array of infrastructures. Rather than passively being affected by them, these actors actively engage with them. They retrofit infrastructure according to their moral desires and purposes. Throughout the thesis, I present the actions of various groups navigating the volatility. They confront an indeterminate future, embrace inherent volatility, and act strategically to optimise potential uncertainties.

I commenced the first chapter by tracing the history of war infrastructure during the Cold War, a transnational Chinese road. Subsequent chapters then delve into the exploration of existing and future-oriented infrastructure projects. Through this approach, I attempt to illustrate the dynamic characteristic of infrastructure as its meaning transforms over time. I argue that for the residents of this area, these built infrastructures during wartime create tension rather than fostering stability. In the subsequent chapters, my study investigated various responses to this instability,

ambiguity, volatility and uncertainty that were embraced as an opportunity to navigate possibilities. The disruption of some infrastructure reveals multiple layers of alternative infrastructures that operate simultaneously to facilitate similar circulation. These layers coexist, despite seeming contradiction. Further exploration of this topic will be provided in the subsequent sections.

Volatility

Here, volatility refers to transient moments in both time and space where anything is possible. It serves as a necessary condition that fosters hopes of various possibilities. Each chapter demonstrates how various groups seek to establish themselves and prosper in their respective ways. For instance, the KMT refugees were striving to establish a new home in Thailand, even amidst the tumultuous backdrop of the Cold War (chapter 1). Similarly, landowners are attempting to boost their compensation by tactically erecting buildings on their properties, taking advantage of the period before the official establishment of land-expropriation laws (chapter 2).

Meanwhile, land investors are working to establish their credibility in the town. The Mekong traders, on the other hand, are navigating alternate cross-border routes to maximise their profits in Chapter 3. The individuals known as “ghost-boat” riders persisted in their efforts to earn a living, even amidst border closures. In Chapter 4, NGOs seized the chance to shape more ecological infrastructures. Finally, tycoons leverage the ambiguity inherent in SEZ development to land maintain their prosperity.

Scholars have highlighted the agency and dynamism of infrastructure, emphasising its embedded social meanings (C. Howe et al., 2016, p. 548). In alignment with this, I focus specifically on instances when infrastructure is in a suspended state of operation, being held in abeyance, waiting for connectivity, and yet has not fulfilled its initial design or purpose. This thesis emphasises a liminal moment that encapsulates the tension between desires for connectivity and the longing for autonomy. The liminal stage of this border town is characterised by ambiguity and indeterminacy. Due to the presence of several established physical infrastructures, such as the river port and cross-

border bridge, the Mekong River and the border town itself no longer function as they once did. The town is in a state of flux, caught between its familiar past and an unknown future shaped by these developments. The border town's bustling activity of the past decade has been suspended, yet it has not fully transitioned into an envisioned booming future.

I contend that this liminal state has been partially induced by retrofitting infrastructure to accommodate China's logistical control. During these moments, the usual rules may become irrelevant, creating a potential space for new possibilities. This transitional or transient phase alters the function of existing infrastructure and affects the life rhythm in the town (chapter 3 and Chapter 4). The shared theme of each chapter focuses on this period, filled with volatility, to understand how various groups respond and navigate their lives at this threshold.

My intention is not to romanticise the concept of volatility. Indeed, as my research demonstrates that the extreme political, economic, and environmental disruptions, along with rapid changes and severe fluctuations, undoubtedly generate chaos and hardships for many groups. These repercussions are not limited to the human landscape but extend to a broader ecological context. However, findings from my fieldwork suggest that contradiction and volatility are not perceived as wholly detrimental phenomena by many of those residing in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. On the contrary, they partially perceive volatility as moments brimming with boundless potential. Consequently, this interpretation of volatility can instil a sense of agency in those affected, allowing for the adaptation, response, and possible conversion of uncertainty into constructive outcomes. ("DELTA Workshops", 2021).

In this thesis, for instance, I demonstrate volatility through land speculation stirred by infrastructure developments. The inception of a China-backed cross-border bridge and the SEZ precipitated dramatic land-price swings. Amid this, some small landowners, despite investor pressure, chose to hold onto their land and invest in buildings, anticipating future value increases. The arrival of the new railway project vindicated their strategies. In addition, consider the Chinese tycoon-

backed casino and entertainment complex in the Chinese Golden Triangle SEZ in Laos. Harnessing volatility and possibilities, they have constructed a modern Chinatown fuelled by a flourishing gambling economy and more. This underscores the interplay of volatility, anticipation, and improvisation, fostering tangible outcomes in these border towns.

Infrastructuring Connectedness

In addition, volatility can also signify the changeability and improvisation that emerges from the tensions between state control and the dynamism of borderland life. By paying attention to this volatility, this thesis recognises the connections between personal life, environmental movements, material infrastructure, border-trade regulations, political instability, and the cultural dynamics of prosperity. I have defined these complex assemblage relationships as "connectedness", which penetrates and operates over various scales.

Recognising the capability of this connectedness, I have gained a clearer understanding of the necessity for numerous infrastructure layers in the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. These layers are not solely limited to tangible, state-backed forms. Instead, they also include informal ones that operate in tandem with their formal counterparts to ensure complete functionality. They can even evolve into an additional layer of infrastructure operating beneath the disrupted or suspended ones. For instance, the diverted routes of the Mekong and traders' networks, as discussed in Chapter 3, serve as perfect examples of this.

The anthropology of infrastructure proposes an ecological and relational perspective, perceiving infrastructure as a network that intertwines social organisation, moral order, and layers of technical (Buier, 2023, p. 50; Niewöhner, 2015, p. 8; Star & Ruhleder, 1996). Applying this approach to the dynamic border world enables me to examine the often-overlooked interstices that mediate and regulate the flow of life and activities. This recognition of formless infrastructures is not a dismissal of their tangible counterparts but a call for a broader, more comprehensive understanding of the role infrastructure plays in shaping the dynamics of border life and beyond.

In addition, the transition in anthropology studies from understanding “infrastructure” as a noun to appreciating “infrastructuring” as a verb signals a crucial shift in perspective (Krieg et al., 2020; Niewöhner, 2015). Rather than viewing infrastructure merely as a static, fixed entity, this thesis highlights its dynamic characteristics, its ongoing transformation, and its continual process of becoming by underlining the constant interaction of infrastructures with sociopolitical and historical factors. Recognising this processual aspect of infrastructure allows us to understand better how infrastructures emerge, adapt, and sustain themselves over time. This approach acknowledges the transformative power of infrastructure, its complexity, and its implications on society.

Notably, throughout this thesis, the Mekong River serves as an infrastructure facilitating a vast array of circulations. These encompass human and non-human life and things, ideologies, norms, and cultures. For instance, the river functions as a link uniting local residents. However, under the modern state regime, it is used to mark the boundary separating different territories. It is a source of electricity while providing a habitat for aquatic plants and animals. It also acts as a nexus between spirituality and modernity, housing the sacred Naga and providing a pathway for trading and transportation. At times, it has been an informal passage during border closures. Thus, the Mekong River is a vital and versatile infrastructure that plays diverse roles and mediates relationships among various actors.

Furthermore, this thesis zooms into the ongoing process of infrastructuring, interactions among humans, non-humans, spiritual elements, and ecological constituents. This examination transcends the anthropocentric approach by “ecologising and moralising” infrastructures, which this thesis study as a medium for myriad forms of life (Krieg et al., 2020; Scaramelli, 2019). In addition, infrastructure’s fluid and open-ended characteristic poses a challenge when using such a mutable system to construct societal stability. To address this paradox, I illuminate the more enduring aspects of infrastructure and its potential to cause harm. For example, transnational road building during the Cold War, which I discuss in Chapter 1, incited tensions among neighbour countries.

Similarly, the construction of hydropower dams, a topic elaborated upon in Chapter 4, led to ecological fluctuations and sparked conflict between the developers – a Chinese state-owned enterprise – and local environmental NGOs. This thesis, hence, extends beyond the typical confines of anthropocentrism. It contributes to understanding infrastructure as a living, evolving entity intricately intertwined with the physical and ecological spheres.

Prosperity

Besides focusing on the instability of infrastructure and the effects of infrastructure on societies and ecosystems, I delve further to demonstrate how such contingent infrastructure is entwined with the influential and deeply rooted capitalist system (Buier, 2023, pp. 56–57). Doing this enhances my analytical effectiveness, allowing me to understand better the fundamental principles behind the creation of infrastructure and its relationship dynamics within the context of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. I provide an in-depth exploration of the political, socio-economic, and cultural aspects of infrastructure and its relationship with capitalism, crises, and the process of capital value circulation.

By paying close attention to the principles leading to the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which convert the land into capital awaiting value in motion (discussed in Chapter 2), I then demonstrate how capital is circulated and sustained by attributing moral value to it and converting it into an unquantifiable entity, such as merit or *bun* (discussed in Chapter 5). Thus, the infrastructure of prosperity concept, derived from investigating this process of capital circulation, sheds light on the procedures that legitimise and perpetuate wealth.

Sacred beings serve as a tool for risk reduction to propel the economy of uncertainty, transforming risks into potential prosperity. Modern infrastructures can be analysed through the lens of religious belief and spirituality, with local practices shedding light on how residents perceive and cope with the changes around them (Gurchiani, 2022, p. 2). As increasing uncertainty arises from these development ambiguities, spiritual worship practices are thriving in the Mekong border town.

This trend indicates a correlation between the escalation of uncertainty and the expansion of spiritual practices.

The land appropriated due to SEZ demonstrates that infrastructures are part of state power mechanism that creates ambiguity during the not yet materialise prosperity; however, my thesis shows that individuals and many groups of people take this ambiguity and volatility as a space of prosperous making. For instance, the middle class has been building houses and planting trees, which serve as methods to optimise the risk for higher compensation; billionaires have been investing in real estate on vacant plots to maximise the potential for profit.

This thesis underscores that while the functional design of the border town's planning seemingly restrains the Mekong River within a dam, transforms waterways into controlled routes, commodifies land into SEZs, and erects infrastructure on this land, the sacred elements such as the Naga in the Mekong River and the deity of the land persistently influence and play a significant role, particularly in land speculation and wealth accumulation in an unpredictable future.

In these Mekong border towns, land speculation and spiritual worship practices are flourishing and coexisting harmoniously, mutually supporting each other. Framing volatility as an opportunity in the future enables me to observe not only how infrastructures may sustain and destroy the border lifeworlds but how it catalyses the emergence of alternative infrastructures that lead to more productive outcomes. The flourishing of fancy temple construction and Naga worship culture at the Mekong border towns exemplify this.

Overall, drawing from Mekong border residents' experience of embracing volatility generated by a diverse array of infrastructures and critically analysing their various responses reveals the power dynamics embedded within infrastructures. This thesis provides insights into the complex relationships that emerge around this infrastructure, detailing how these bonds sometimes interlace to form networks that can either facilitate or hinder circulation. It challenges the often-created illusion of economic prosperity, security, and state welfare that inspires hope for a prosperous future.

As a result, the more we witness the construction of modernity through infrastructures inducing volatility, the more we see these spiritual practices proliferate.

Thesis Contributions

This thesis is intended to contribute to the anthropology of infrastructure by shedding light on the "seamfulness" of infrastructure (Vertesi, 2014, p. 269), the moments of friction that slow down connectivity, and the spaces that resist immediate linkage with other systems. By undertaking this approach, we can disassemble the commonly held dualities associated with modern infrastructure, which frequently manifest paradoxically (Gurchiani, 2022, p. 14; C. Howe et al., 2016, p. 559). This challenges the assumption of dichotomies as distinct separations, such as nature versus infrastructure, public versus private, local versus global, rational versus irrational, legal versus illegal, stability versus volatility, functional versus sacred, and Buddhism versus capitalism. Instead of viewing these elements as clearly separate, this thesis proposes that it is more insightful to examine the points where they clash, and investigate how this discord shapes interactions, fosters adaptations, forms connections, or in some instances, produces complementary relations in unique ways.

In studying infrastructure, I suggest focusing on the relationship between entities that may initially appear separate but are intrinsically intertwined. Elements that seem distinct can actually be understood as hybrids or assemblages when we consider emotions, imagination, and ambition, revealing their combined existence at specific points in time. Infrastructure not only enables our way of life but actively shapes it. It is essential to perceive infrastructure not as a static entity but as a mutable construct. This perspective broadens the scope for considering moral infrastructure and incorporates the importance of local spiritual and religious beliefs into meaningful discussions. In so doing, this thesis is intended to foster respect for all forms of life, both human and non-human, that inhabit these shared spaces.

The concluding argument suggests that the Mekong border towns ought to be recognised as assemblages of interwoven multi-layers of infrastructure, encompassing nature, spirits, morality,

technology, and human and non-human elements that jointly constitute the moral ecologies of infrastructure (Scaramelli, 2019). This connectedness signifies a varied assembly of entities, each maintaining their distinct identities and purposes while simultaneously interacting to forge alternative infrastructures, thus contributing to the formation of a comprehensive whole.

Rather than merely defining what infrastructure is, this thesis is an attempt to build a more comprehensive understanding of how people interact and respond to infrastructure. Therefore, the infrastructure is not statistical but always shaped according to those individuals' desires and practices. Infrastructure is not only a tool for economic development but also a site of power struggles and a historical product revealing suffering, inequality, and immorality that happen in specific places.

In an era that increasingly values seamless connectivity, studying the "seamfulness" can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the interim moments filled with various lives that rely on these not-yet-connected instances to sustain themselves. The narratives presented in this thesis highlight how such periods of in-betweenness sustain the Mekong livelihoods. As we draw to a close, these stories beckon us to embrace a new perception of temporality and volatility, urging us to delve deeper into the complexities of our ostensibly interconnected world.

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