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Book review - Dynamics of cross border industrial development in Mekong Sub-region: A case study of Thailand

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Abstract

Dynamics of Cross Border Industrial Development in Mekong Sub-region is a well researched book assessing the applicability and feasibility of policies for industrial development in Thai border towns in less developed regions with mostly small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Maneepong focuses on the impacts of central and local government involvements, and how entrepreneurs operate in her selected border towns of Mae Sai, Mae Sot, Mukdahan and Nakhon Phanom. Specifically, she sets out to investigate which factors contribute to, or hinder, industrial development in Thailand's border towns.

Keywords

book, review, development, mekong, sub, region, case, study, thailand, cross, dynamics, border, industrial

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Dynamics of Cross Border Industrial Development in Mekong Sub-region: A Case Study of Thailand *Chuthatip Maneepong*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing GmbH & Co. KG, Saarbrücken, 2010, 298 pages (ISBN 978-3-8383-1910-0) (pbk).

Dynamics of Cross Border Industrial Development in Mekong Sub-region is a well researched book assessing the applicability and feasibility of policies for industrial development in Thai border towns in less developed regions with mostly small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Maneepong focuses on the impacts of central and local government involvements, and how entrepreneurs operate in her selected border towns of Mae Sai, Mae Sot, Mukdahan and Nakhon Phanom. Specifically, she sets out to investigate which factors contribute to, or hinder, industrial development in Thailand's border towns.

Her main theoretical stance highlights the inadequacy of locational advantages theory and regional growth poles theory to understand industrial growth in the border towns, in terms of political factors such as social security ignored and missing links in the vertical chain of structure of social production respectively. She therefore argues for the relevance of regional embeddedness and entrepreneurship to capture the social and economic factors which reflect the dynamics of SMEs' activities in relation to industrial development. The research output builds on an extensive coverage of interviews across several types of industries and individual entrepreneurs in the four different border towns.

The book is organized into 11 chapters. Beginning with the scope and structure of research, Maneepong first elucidates the factors critical to development in Thailand's border towns, such as the impact of government of policies and role of SMEs manufacturing, as well as the social factors and networks associated with entrepreneurship. The discussion on methods includes a rationale for cross-comparative research between, in this case, border towns that have been sponsored by the Thai government (Mae Sot and Mukdahan) and non-sponsored ones (Mae Sai and Nakhon Phanom). The importance of this differentiation is stressed as she reflects how it could affect and influence

government policies and local entrepreneurship dynamics. The next four chapters deal respectively with the theoretical appraisal of past literature and advancing her own conceptual framework to explicate the empirical analysis and with general border development in Thailand framing the four case studies. Three empirical chapters follow that provide thorough analysis with clear examples and lead to an evaluation of policy and research implications, and recommendations for future research angles. A concluding postscript presents recent developments in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) that have affected and could influence further the four border towns.

The book's treatment of the economic borderlands of Thailand unpacks the grounded geographies of trade, investment, and local and central government policies to spur industrial growth in Thailand's territorial fringes. In addition, Maneepong's emphasis on SMEs and entrepreneurs remind researchers (especially border and economic geography scholars) that smaller firms could yet play significant roles through local and overseas network connections in the borderland economy's development, as seen in the case of Mae Sai with Yunnan province, China. In a sense, this is what sets the book apart from the focus of Jim Glassman's (2010) *Bounding the Mekong* (also reviewed in this issue). Another notable observation concerns how non-sponsored border towns such as Nakhon Phanom are given less importance than sponsored towns, a reality brought home in an interview with a bank manager who states that he cannot keep pushing headquarters in Bangkok to approve loans lest he be perceived as taking a bribe from the local firm (p. 167). Furthermore, the focus on the neighbouring border towns in Myanmar (for the cases of Mae Sot and Mae Sai) and in Laos (Mukdahan and Nakhon Phanom) are vital for a fuller understanding of cross-border trade when it involves some form of political cooperation, transport infrastructure and foreign labour.

In an otherwise comprehensive discussion, there are a few areas in the book that could be improved. First, the blurry maps should be made clear, considering that these refer to explanations of not just the four border towns but also of neighbouring countries in the GMS. Second, the recommendation to firm up officer's attitudes through training workshops across different levels of local and central governments to deal with border issues (p. 210) appears simplistic without evidence of a concerted effort throughout the local, provincial and regional levels to effect and sustain changes, including better connections with local entrepreneurs. Finally, parts in the postscript referring to developments of the early 2000s and 1990s in the GMS and selected border towns are better included in the main chapters to supplement background information and analysis.

Having said this, the book's meticulous research and robust conceptual framework, together with the discussion on methodology, make it a useful guide to the conduct of grounded economic geography and/or economic borderlands research. Maneepong's book is indeed a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on border studies in general and empirical work in the GMS in particular, and complements Glassman's *Bounding the Mekong* in providing a cross-comparison of the ideals represented by different political-economic scales, namely the regional aspirations of the GMS and the concerns of the constituting border towns and communities for economic development.

Reference

Glassman J (2010) *Bounding the Mekong: The Asian Development Bank, China and Thailand*. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

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