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One bridge, two towns and three countries: anticipatory geopolitics in the Greater Mekong Subregion

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Abstract

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Keywords

two, towns, three, countries, anticipatory, one, geopolitics, bridge, greater, mekong, subregion

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ONE BRIDGE, TWO TOWNS AND THREE COUNTRIES: ANTICIPATORY GEOPOLITICS IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

The proposed bridge between Chiang Khong and Houay Xay will form the remaining crucial link of the Asian Highway 3, connecting Bangkok to Kunming, a project highly anticipated in the Greater Mekong Subregion's (GMS) development. With China funding half the cost of the bridge, it signifies a strong player in the economic borderland. The article seeks to uncover the locals' thoughts and feelings of the bridge to raise awareness of 'voices' from the Thai-Lao border in relation to the further destinations the bridge will serve. The local perceptions of the proposed bridge are used to provide a form of comprehension of anticipatory cross-border geopolitical relations between the Thai-Lao border and China. Drawing on the concepts of critical geopolitics, anti-geopolitics and geoeconomics, it concludes by underscoring the need to listen to local perceptions at the Thai-Lao border as they signal potential ill-feelings that could jeopardize future cross-border geopolitical ties and trade.

INTRODUCTION- ONE BRIDGE, TWO TOWNS AND THREE COUNTRIES

This is about places in the upper-Mekong borderlands and about the people who create and regulate commercial linkages between those places. My journeys through these places started- and finished- in the northern Thai town of Chiang Khong, a busy trading centre on the Mekong River border with Laos. ... It was an ideal location to observe the regulation of trade and cross-border passage.¹

In his book *The Legend of the Golden Boat*, anthropologist Andrew Walker highlights an active cross-border trading zone in Chiang Khong (northern Thailand) and Houay Xay (northwestern Laos) in the upper Mekong River. Walker also alerts us to the visionary of an economic borderland called the “Upper Mekong Economic Quadrangle” which includes the two places mentioned above along with northeastern Burma and southwestern China (Yunnan Province).² Slightly more than a decade has passed since Walker wrote the book. The visionary of an economic borderland encompassing mainland Southeast Asia and southwestern China still persists, albeit at a greater intensity. Over the years, in a bid to link northern Thailand and northwestern Laos better with Yunnan Province in China, new roads have been built and existing ones improved in the three countries.³ Currently, what is crucially lacking is a completed bridge connecting the towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay to achieve the goal of the visionary. Hence, our paper seeks to focus on the fourth Thai-Lao friendship bridge in construction at the border towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay.⁴ The proposed 480m long bridge will form the remaining crucial link of the Asian Highway 3. It will connect Bangkok, and potentially from faraway Singapore via the Malaysian peninsula to Kunming on an 1800km long journey (see Figures 1, 2 and 3), a project which the Asian Development Bank (ADB) envisages for the Greater Mekong Subregion’s (GMS) development.⁵ China and Thailand will each share half of the total cost of the bridge over a sum close to two billion baht (approximately 63 million USD), which is probably an underestimate as costs of materials and construction are increasing.⁶

Figure 1 here, Caption: Economic Corridors in the Greater Mekong Subregion

Figure 2 here, Caption: Northwestern Laos and Northern Thailand

Figure 3 here, Caption: Constructing a Bridge, Completing the Corridor (January 2012)

The purpose of this particular fourth bridge over the Mekong River goes far beyond connecting two points of the Thai-Lao border. As James Sidaway observes, trans-frontier bridges are also, metaphorical spaces: serving variously the visions of state leaders, regional and provincial planners, and all manner of other agents viewing

potential closer cross-border ties, linking trans-national places, and allowing for new spaces for further investment.⁷ A bridge that connects two towns but serves the interests of three states across regional boundaries holds huge geopolitical symbolism for the proponents of the GMS. However, in very material ways, the bridge can be viewed as one part of a much bigger regional process within the Asian Development Bank (ADB) promoted GMS process, primarily creating new investment opportunities for 'scale jumping' capital, aiding easier and cheaper access to cross-border resources, through alliances between state bodies and transnational capital operating mostly outside of the local borderlands. As Jim Glassman has argued convincingly the 'GMS is worth understanding for those of us living outside of it as an integral part in which processes of "globalization" and "regionalization" are occurring ... the GMS can serve as a true metaphor for the world in which we all live'.⁸

In our research area the proposed bridge encapsulates and represents important dimensions of a process of 'building the GMS' by completing the 'final piece of the jigsaw puzzle' to allow one travel seamlessly on road from Singapore to China in future, thus projecting out an enlarged area of economic opportunity. This particular cross border bridge's development in its metaphorical sense draws us to the 'understanding of borders is not so much their material morphology, but the various forms of interpretation and representation that they embody'.⁹ With China funding half the cost of the bridge, it not only speaks of China's interest in the Thai-Lao border towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay, but also signifies China's southern regional thrust into the political economic borderlands of mainland Southeast Asia. In addition, we recognize the potential geo-economic transformations that may arise, including deepening socio-economic disparities, which may benefit some borderland agents but marginalize others. Thus, we argue that further grounded research is necessary to appreciate how such cross-border developments play out in the actual borderlands. The bridge project is already opening up new scales of economic activity, as Bangkok and Chinese investors are speculatively buying up land near to the project. Undoubtedly there will be socio-economic and geopolitical ramifications at the scale of the local borderlands, thus we are concerned with anticipatory geographies.

Our anticipatory geographies are future-oriented modes of visioning a place's (re)development, encompassing a material force that has important practical consequences.¹⁰ Anticipatory geographies about an envisioned future is also closely tied to imaginative geographies, meaning the representations that (re)development in economic borderlands are suggestive of, and the visualizations behind these. Derek Gregory has examined imaginative geographies as functions to the unexamined assumptions of space and spatial relations, which serve to frame diverse geographical phenomenon in political discourses.¹¹ What could be anticipatory and imaginary in nature requires some ethnographic details, and in this paper we are primarily concerned about what borderland residents have to say about the bridge development and some of the changes it may bring. Hence, we unpack the expectations and perceptions of (re)developing an economic borderland, specifically (in our research) from people who live in the border towns, where their livelihoods are most likely to experience changes given the physical transformations to the landscape and flows of people and goods by the proposed bridge being most evident at the border. The anticipatory geographies' focus then serves as a device to highlight the importance of local perceptions from Thai-Lao

border of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay to approach the heart of the subject matter- the anticipatory transnational cross-border relationship between the Thai-Lao border and China arising from the bridge. In other words, this means a study of anticipatory geopolitical relations at the scale of the borderlands.

The next two sections of the paper provide a review of (re)development of economic borderlands in relation to our conceptual debates on anticipatory geographies and anticipatory geopolitics, and some specific earlier socio-economic accounts of the Mekong borderlands for its empirical relevance. We also strongly believe in the salience of grounded political geography fieldwork as one strategy to examine broader geopolitical and geoeconomic issues, which are highlighted in our research methodologies. This relates to calls for ‘a more geographical geopolitics’, and supports those who advocate ethnographic methods, used alongside others, as ‘a helpful tool to build up a fuller understanding of geopolitics and international relations’.¹² As will be apparent, the local perceptions gathered reflect differing views compared with the governments involved in the megaproject, and in some cases, revealing localized anxieties toward livelihood challenges posed by the proposed bridge. In the light of these observations, we argue that the Thai and Lao central governments should seriously engage with borderlands residents and address the local concerns of people living in the border towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay, particularly as there are anxieties about the rapidly growing extra-territorial influence of China’s economy, migrants and trade within the GMS borderlands.

ANTICIPATORY GEOGRAPHIES, ANTICIPATORY GEOPOLITICS AND ECONOMIC BORDERLANDS

Over the last two decades, economic borderlands receive great attention from geographers in the backdrop of a so called ‘borderless’ world.¹³ However, this ‘borderless’ world perception is highly misleading as economic borderlands and its capital still function in multi-layered compartments determined by political boundaries.¹⁴ Economic borderlands do function in political boundaries that separate nation states, but they do not necessarily restrict cross-border trade interactions. Some economic borderlands consist of bustling cross-border towns and account for significant exchanges of trade, labour and investment, which are taking place in several parts of the intensively researched European Union border zones¹⁵, and the US-Mexico borderlands, such as Tijuana (Mexico)/San Diego (USA)¹⁶, and Hong Kong/Shenzhen (China).¹⁷ Studies of larger Asian economic borderlands include the Upper Mekong River region, which encompasses the borderlands of northwestern Laos, northern Thailand, northeastern Burma, and Southwestern China¹⁸, and the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle.¹⁹ We recognize that previous and current works on economic borderlands have done well to focus on getting insights from the borderlands to tease out the intensity and extent to which (re)development projects affect people on both sides of the border. To provide an example, we refer to the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle. Grundy-Warr, Peachey and Perry argue how this particular economic borderland in Southeast Asia is a reflection of fragmented integration against the global economy because the surrounding environments of the flagship projects which took place saw limited progress and success.²⁰ By carrying out grounded research, borderlands

scholarship examines processes that include analysis of top-down perspectives, but also incorporate many individual border narratives and experiences.²¹ However, there appear to be two angles that do require more research attention. First, research tends to skirt around anticipatory geographies' on economic borderlands (with Matt Sparke's work an exception to the rule²²) and borders' issues at large, which limits the potential to be critically informative to contemporary and future (re)development projects affecting the economic frontiers. Second, anticipatory geographies leads to considerations of future transnational cross-border geopolitical relationships between the border towns, external actor(s), and the requisite state agencies involved.

Next, borders with their material meanings and practices tend to be interpreted and represented as 'windows' offering views onto the world's geopolitics, or are part of the geopolitics themselves.²³ However, if borders are to be more connected with geopolitics, we need to arm ourselves with relational geographies and broader regional ties. As Massey persuasively argues, places must be thought more as routes rather than roots.²⁴ Borders are places that witness movement of people, investment and goods. Borders are not inflexible, static venues where there is no related connection to other places. This is especially true in the case of the Thai-Lao border and China, two areas enthusiastically promoted by the ADB as a region of competitiveness and connectivity in the GMS.²⁵ Although earlier works by Walker and Hill have acknowledged the existence of Chinese merchants in the history of trade exchanges with mainland Southeast Asia through caravans and river trading in the Mekong River²⁶, the intensity of exchanges now will be greatly increased with the upcoming bridge. The proposed bridge in its material form will bring even more people and goods across Thailand to Laos and vice versa, and its interpretations and representations go more than just the two towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. In reality, it must be remembered that the bridge is half-funded by China, and perceived to bring more Chinese people, investment and goods into the Thai-Lao border. The proposed bridge in the GMS's economic borderland is physically between Thailand and Laos, but speaks of wider relational geographies with external actor(s), specifically China. Thus, the proposed bridge finds itself appropriated as a metaphor for the wider trajectory of anticipatory cross-border geopolitical relations²⁷ between the Thai-Lao border and China.

GEO-BODIES, UPPER MEKONG BORDERLANDS AND RIVERSCAPE

The geographical imaginary of the GMS is relatively new, but regional trade links along and across the Mekong have connected the borderlands with distant places for centuries. Our focus is on a present-day bridge development and anticipatory geographies, but it is necessary to contextualize current developments within a deeper historical-temporal geographical context. The upper-Mekong region has a long history of spatial competition over the control of trade routes, strategic natural resources, and cross-river connections.²⁸ Furthermore, the 'upper-Mekong communities have had longstanding experience of managing uneven and unequal connections with other places'.²⁹ However, the current regionalization processes symbolized by the bridge may lead to intensified processes of uneven development within the contemporary borderlands, as local authorities and people have to deal with new central state regulation, trade agreements, public-private sector involvement dominated by national cores, and transnational capital investments.³⁰

Looking at the past indicates that we should be cautious in our projections about anticipatory geographies, geopolitics and geo-economics. For the upper-Mekong borderlands should not be viewed purely from a center-periphery perspective as rural, isolated backwaters, distant from national power domains, and easily exploited by external interests. Prior to the creation of the fixed river boundary now delineating Laos and Thailand, there existed in the 19th century a Nan trans-Mekong tributary state within which Chiang Khong was a highly strategic cross-river outpost, controlling tolls and taxes on river trade, ferry services across and down river, as well as trans-“Golden Triangle”³¹ caravan traffic from China into the Mekong heartlands.³² Chiang Khong served as a vital port between Nan, the Lanna Kingdom (northern Thailand) and Luang Prabang (in current-day Laos).

Imposing territorial ‘geo-bodies’ in the Mekong region, particularly between the Siamese and former French colonial authorities, was often a ‘violent’ business in several areas where surveying and mapping was usually backed up by military force.³³ The conceptualization of ‘geo-body’ owes much to Robert Sack’s theory of human territoriality³⁴, although Thongchai applies the notion to an historical examination of modern political geography in the making of Siam as a bounded nation.³⁵ By the end of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, the Siamese authorities were just as capable and eager as their European rivals, Britain and France, to settle ‘ambiguous space.’ ‘The power of the new geographical knowledge exercised by both the Siamese and the French forces prevailed and created a new kind of space’.³⁶ However, there were many areas where the Siamese and the French were uncertain where to place the political ‘interface’ between the emerging geo-bodies. Attempts to delimit new spheres of undiluted sovereignty was not a project that could be completed neatly by delineating boundaries, because places on ‘either side’ had previously enjoyed looser non-territorial forms of political tribute and allegiance, often to more than one overlord, and the people viewed the river-space as a uniting rather than a dividing one. Furthermore, the French colonial authorities failed to fully bring the upper-Mekong territories under their full administrative control. ‘Boundaries were re-drawn, but the French were unable to translate the discursive power of colonial maps into a new regulatory regime’.³⁷ Until the present-day, cross-border and intra-regional ties have flourished, and it is ‘connectedness’ and inseparable ties between ‘local’ and ‘non-local’ power that characterize this part of the upper-Mekong borderlands more than relative ‘isolation’³⁸ and exploitative relations with ‘external’ forces.

Political geo-bodies are definitely not the only way to conceptualize socio-spatial relations. Daily trans-river and down-river traffic, as well as trans-frontier social and blood ties, help to mould a distinctive cultural riverscape. Whilst the coming of modern political geography enabled the Mekong River to be divided by international boundaries along several long stretches of its course, thus partially displacing ‘indigenous tributary space’ with new ‘geo-bodies’³⁹, it could not wipe clean the sense of ‘cultural community’ along many stretches of Siam – Laos border.⁴⁰ Kinship and cultural ties forged over centuries in the era before international boundaries, did not completely vanish, although relations adapted over time as a result of central state nation-building, various forms of state regulation of border crossing-points, taxation, and so on.

The boundary in the Mekong River became ‘one of the best (or worst) examples of the non-conformity of political borders to ethnic distributions’ for there were nine

times as many ethnic Laotians in Thailand than there were in Laos. People 'share the river', its ways of life, and through intermarriage and kin relations people have contacts across river, and they also share a social calendar with key Buddhist ceremonies and river festivals uniting both sides. These relations and exchanges are cultural, not geopolitical, and arise from a strong 'family feeling or kinship rather than any particular associations with governments or states.' Thus, Mekong River- border-scapes are akin to close-knit cross-border 'neighbourhoods.' The river itself has become a common space that frequently subverts the notion of rigid and fixed geo-bodies, as fishers from each side of the river often meet on the rocks, reefs and sand-bars within the river, and there are daily localized trans-border transgressions of the actual boundary.⁴¹

Social 'relations' have transformed local people's views of the river and border. From an anthropological perspective: 'The "border riverscape" entails relations and perceptions toward a particular location where the porosity of border and fluidity of river coincide. The 'scape' of each agency is derived from, and shaped by, its vista, impression, interactions, and meanings given to the space and situated in the matrix of relations' of agencies on both sides in relation to those using the river.⁴² As in other parts of the Mekong, 'people come and go easily' across the border, 'they cross to visit, to socialize, to consult, to worship and to work.' School children from the Lao side cross the river to attend classes on the Thai side. Lao women traders regularly sell goods in the Chiang Khong market. Thais often purchase consumer goods from the 'Chinese market' in Chiang Khong. These are some of the multiple, everyday and banal forms of mobility and exchange across and within the river, which are considered normal by border residents, incorporating regulated and unregulated forms of activity. They represent some of the myriad ways in which local agencies and agents recognize, negotiate, transgress, and transcend national geo-bodies.

In fact the presence of Chinese traders has a long history associated with caravan routes and river traffic, including long-standing Chinese settlements in some parts of north-western Laos and northern Thailand. Thus, the current GMS initiatives are unremarkable in terms of historical Chinese mobility, trade and settlement, but may prove more disruptive within the border region insofar as distant Chinese and highly mobile transnational capital are the prime movers and economic beneficiaries of the bridge, highway and associated investments. Indeed, from sub-national trans-border perspectives, the development of a new transnational bridge is not vital to economic integration. Local people have numerous long-established and binding social, economic and cultural ties that transcend centralized notions of sovereign geo-bodies. In effect, the new bridge project is part of a much bigger scale geo-economic geographical GMS imaginary, supported by national governments, aided by the ADB, and strongly spearheaded by Chinese investments. This geo-imaginary builds on an earlier geometric imaginary of 'the Economic Quadrangle' (a vast cross-regional border zone encompassing parts of China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand mentioned in the introduction), pushed by regional entrepreneurs, development-planners of key state ministries (trade, energy and transport in particular), investors, business associations, and backed by the ADB (see Figure 1). It is more relevant for us to consider how these regional goals, and the bridge that links Chiang Rai Province by road to Southwest China, is going to affect the borderlands, disrupt the older local and non-local connections, and transform aspects of the riverscape and cross-border river life in future.

GROUNDED POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES

Adopting grounded field-based political geography research can yield much about the dynamics of multi-scalar regionalization through an in-depth examination of particular prestige projects such as trans-border bridges. Uncovering local voices about a major trans-border project is arguably able to shed light on a range of issues that link the sub-national trans-national scale with bigger issues of regionalization, uneven development, and geopolitical relations between participating agencies, particularly the three states involved in this particular GMS project.

First, the local perceptions of the proposed bridge at the Thai-Lao border of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay will be highlighted. By local perceptions, we mean those people living in the two towns, not necessarily in the sense they have to be pure Thai or Laotian. Our research stems from an initial fieldwork conducted December 2010 and January 2011 by the first author, and most recently by a follow-up research by the second author in January 2012. Even though we have a basic understanding of the Thai language⁴³, a translator helped the author(s) during fieldwork so as to prevent misinterpretations. A total of twenty-four individuals (thirteen in Thailand and eleven in Laos) were interviewed. As for our choice of interviewees, we have chosen people on both sides of the border that are likely to be affected by the upcoming bridge in terms of earnings and livelihood. These include individuals, who work at the construction sites and river ports, owners of restaurants, guesthouses, travel agencies and shops that sell household items, villagers who stay close to the proposed bridge, and one who is part of an environmental group (Rak Chiang Khong) that seeks to preserve and protect the Mekong River's ecosystem. Rak Chiang Khong are a locally significant environmental lobby group, and by interviewing someone from there is not merely soliciting 'anti-bridge' sentiments, but aimed to get a cross-section of differing opinions from local stakeholders. Focusing on these borderland perspectives is central in a part of the upper Mekong region where there are numerous transnational cross-border activities involving Chinese who move across the Chinese border and reside in Laos or Thailand. It is our intention to uncover various borderland viewpoints about the trans-border bridge which is envisaged as one catalyst of grandiose regional infrastructure integration schemes likely to benefit metropolitan centres of power more than the towns most directly involved.

Second, the local perceptions of the proposed bridge provide clues concerning anticipatory cross-border geopolitical relations between the Thai-Lao borderlands and China. Our research in two strategic GMS border towns has tried to add localized 'voices', visions, and viewpoints to an understanding of larger scale processes that are driving the whole GMS concept. Subnational borderland perspective often diverge from dominant GMS regional and state-centred discourses, or at least provide local knowledge of actual and potential consequences of specific GMS projects. Hence, research within Chiang Khong and Houay Xai sheds more light on real and imagined geographies relating to specific cross-border infrastructure projects, which also have geopolitical ramifications. The analysis that follows relates to our field research in the borderland.

ANTICIPATING THE CHINESE PRESENCE

With China's growing financial clout and assiduously pursued economic relations undertaken with Thailand and Laos, the proposed bridge must be read more than just a Chinese investment. The Thai – China FTA makes this bridge 'a high priority site, and perhaps most significant, are the growing interests of China as well as Chinese businesses moving into the area'.⁴⁴ The bridge acts as springboard to speed up exports of Chinese goods into mainland Southeast Asia and spur Chinese migrants to seek economic opportunities south of Yunnan. Having said this, the increasing Chinese presence represents a complex mix of problems and opportunities, which will play out distinctly for different sectors, in different countries and between different actors.⁴⁵ Hence, this particular section reviews the current concerns of the people living in Chiang Khong and Houay Xay regarding the future bridge and the increasing Chinese presence in terms of economic competition for livelihood and goods, and unpacks very different responses from both sides of the border. The analysis of the empirical data thus facilitates the understanding of the anticipatory transnational cross-border geopolitical ties between the Thai-Lao border and China.

Thai import-export ferry operators interviewed expressed concerns that they might have to shift their businesses to the bridge in future, which present a different working environment.⁴⁶ The worries shared by the Thai import-export ferry operators are not surprising, considering that the proposed bridge offers a direct alternative to river transport. However, we should not just be concerned with the infrastructural impact of the bridge. With the proposed bridge acting as a symbolic piece of infrastructure to connect the Chinese, Lao and Thai economies closer, perceptions on the Chinese capital that funds half of it generates more insights to the anticipatory geopolitical relations between the Thai-Lao border and China. As we interviewed people in Chiang Khong on the representations of Chinese investment via the bridge, opinions from a villager and a tour agent respectively reflect a wary view on the impending increased Chinese presence and a pessimistic outlook on their economic livelihood:

The Chinese are rich. They have the money to invest, and can look for local businessmen to partner and buy our land. Poor people like me can only be employees.⁴⁷

Now you can see more and more Chinese touring, exchanging currency and shopping here. I see them as prospective investors in Chiang Khong and Chiang Rai, but I don't think it may be good for us. I don't foresee an equal sharing of benefits.⁴⁸

On the other hand, the Chinese presence across the border in Houay Xai provides a glimpse of an optimistic outlook as a construction worker, opines:

The bridge project was looking for people to provide labour, so I'm happy I got a job. The Chinese company pays me quite well so I can support my family better with this income.⁴⁹

His sentiment was echoed by a few others who agreed to his assessment. However, we learnt of something the Laotians may be unaware of. A Chinese surveyor at the construction site shared with us the reason why the Chinese company employs Laotians:

We help them to build the bridge but the Lao government states that we have to use Laotian labour for most construction workers. Only those in planning positions can be Chinese. It's legal so we have to follow.⁵⁰

In this sense, the Laotian construction workers' satisfied feelings may not last long as once the bridge is completed, they have to seek jobs elsewhere. Also, as mentioned in a newspaper report,

One telling example is the thousands of Chinese who have come to work on the Asian Development Bank-funded Route 3 in northern Laos that runs from the Chinese border, through the Lao town of Luang Nam Tha, and down to the Thai border. Many of the workers have stayed on and opened shops or found other work after their construction contracts ended.⁵¹

Hence, the Chinese construction workers of this bridge project may similarly choose to stay on and compete with the locals for jobs in the future.

The anticipation of the Chinese presence also translates into the topic of Chinese goods. As a newspaper account and an interview demonstrate:

The politicians responsible for bulldozing these ideas into practice should visit Chiang Saen or Chiang Khong on the Mekong River and count the number of heavily laden barges arriving from China on an hourly basis. Cheap goods and fruit unloaded from these boats give little comfort to our farmers and manufacturers, many of whom simply cannot compete.⁵²

The bridge means Chinese goods will arrive faster in Thailand. It is just a matter of hours. The bridge will be well connected to other roads. Traders don't need to use the boats which are slower and have to depend on the water level in the Mekong... Thailand exports fruits mainly to China... China, they export almost everything.⁵³

Whether via the river or the proposed bridge, the view on having Chinese goods on Thai soil does not seem to go down well with the local Thais. With the signing of the Thailand-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2003, trade frictions occur frequently over agricultural produce.⁵⁴ In particular, the severely dampened prices of Thai garlic to as low as 17 baht per kilogram in 2008 caused by smuggled Chinese garlic saw the Thai government moving in to place garlic on a list of goods with state controlled prices.⁵⁵ As such, Chinese goods are seen as direct competition in Thailand, and the bridge is imagined to exacerbate the situation in future. Already, many Chinese manufactured goods are sold in border markets, not only in Houay Xay, but also in Tachilek a bustling border town of Myanmar, opposite the 'sister city' of Mae Sai, Chiang Rai Province.

Over in Houay Xay, a different scenario emerges as far as attitudes to the increasing Chinese commercial presence are concerned. Through interviews with the locals, it seems that Chinese goods are welcomed:

There is a Chinese market about 4km away from the town. There are many different items on sale and they are cheap.⁵⁶

I like to use Chinese products. My motorcycle is from China. Laos does not produce its own motorcycles.⁵⁷

Their comments are supported by a Chinese wholesaler working in the Chinese market whom remarked that Chinese products are cheap and are quite good in quality, also offering Laotians something which their country does not produce for them.⁵⁸ The differing sentiments in Houay Xay as compared to Chiang Khong are most likely to be attributed to the fact that Laos does not produce many consumer goods on its own, and thus Chinese goods are seen as value for money purchases.

Following Power and Mohan⁵⁹, we concur that China's growing economic strength means that it is unlikely to have a partnership of equals with Laos and Thailand. This particular bridge in construction is an exemplar of how China's growing strength is perceived on the ground at Chiang Khong and Houay Xay in current concerns and future imaginaries. Our fieldwork has uncovered the pressing need to consider local voices from the borders because these voices encompass something of an 'anti-geopolitical eye'⁶⁰ that counters the dominant geopolitical scripts of China's rise, such as Robert Kaplan's remark in the influential *Foreign Affairs* magazine that 'it is with relatively weak states of Southeast Asia that the emergence of a Greater China is meeting the least resistance'.⁶¹ We should remember that grounded realities are more diverse and complex.

Undoubtedly, Chinese bilateral investments, aid and trade with each of the Lower Mekong countries have tended towards state-centered emphases on economic relations and national goals without critical examination of regional social and environmental costs, such as in relation to unilateral upper mainstream hydropower developments already underway along the *Lancang*, China's name for the Mekong River.⁶² However, Kaplan's simplifications miss multiple forms of resistance within those states to some of China's regional aims. For instance, China's plans to turn the upper Mekong mainstream into a super highway for trade through a navigational channel improvement project, first mooted in the early 1990s, and officially started in April 2000⁶³, also entailed that reefs and rocks in sections of the river between China and Luang Prabang in Laos must be blasted away by dynamite. However, this grandiose navigation project was only partially successful, for local Thai opposition groups, supported by national and regional NGOs, campaigned against the damage the reef blasting would do to livelihoods, fisheries and biodiversity.⁶⁴ Eventually, the Thai Ministry of Defense opposed blasting in the Thai-Lao zone due to unresolved positional boundary issues⁶⁵, but the voices of groups such as *Rak Chiang Khong*⁶⁶ continue to reverberate through the Lower Mekong.

Thus, the 'least resistance' from Southeast Asia as suggested may not materialize, and Chiang Khong and Houay Xay may resent China's growing clout. Although the interviews revealed only worries and frustrations in Chiang Khong and a welcoming attitude in Houay Xay to the impending Chinese presence, worries may escalate (Chiang Khong) or joy could be short-lived (Houay Xay) in the future. As David Ley notes,

‘flows of migrants follow paths of economic opportunity’⁶⁷, the economic borderland of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay are imagined as future ‘economic boom’ towns with the bridge acting as a ‘magnet’ to attract even more Chinese capital and citizens. Competition from increasing quantities of cheap Chinese goods coming through the future bridge could easily trigger even more outbursts in Chiang Khong. In Houay Xay, if the Chinese presence increases and reaches a level like that in Boten⁶⁸ (see Figure 2) where the Chinese dominate the local economy⁶⁹, cheap Chinese goods may not sound pleasing to Laotian ears anymore if most job opportunities go to the Chinese.

While strong social movements acting as anti-geopolitical measures⁷⁰ may not surface in time, we cannot discount other manifestations of resistance, such as small protests that sow practical alternatives for a life beyond the Chinese presence. Hence, the concerns expressed in our work and any form of future resistance would then be telling clues on the anticipatory cross-border geopolitical relations between the Thai-Lao border and China, where geopolitical ties could be strained due to persistent geoeconomic inequalities and the uneasiness of having so many Chinese migrants at Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. The expected strains on geopolitical relations are perhaps far off from triggering a border war, but certainly put Thais and Laotians in a heightened state of worry about everyday life concerns.

ANTICIPATING THE THAI AND LAO CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS

Everyone looks at the opportunity. It’s not China alone. Thailand and Laos want the bridge too. If there are potential benefits for them, any government would want the bridge.⁷¹

In the economic borderland of the GMS, Thailand and Laos are seeking to have a share of the trading pie along with ‘massive’ China. It is in this opportunistic sense that Thailand has promoted the internationalization of capital, and became more internationalized⁷², and Laos inviting foreign aid to pursue infrastructure projects.⁷³ Thus, it is also critical to engage the imaginaries of the Thai and Lao central governments towards the proposed bridge. This is required as Thailand and Laos have their own political and economic policies to implement through the bridge. In particular, Thailand’s usage of the term ‘Gateway to Indochina’ for Chiang Khong is investigated on whether it strikes a chord with the people living in the border town (see Figure 4).⁷⁴ As Kuus rightly points out, we should take note not only of what the states say in their content of arguments, but also the context of delivery and process of the arguments’ production.⁷⁵ With these reminders taken note, we seek to uncover how the policies undertaken by Thailand and Laos to compete with China for the benefits of the proposed bridge influence the anticipatory transnational cross-border geopolitical relationship between the Thai-Lao border and China in two angles, which are the clash of imaginaries and the purchase of farmland near the bridge.

Figure 4 here, Caption: Chiang Khong is the Place to Invest in

While the construction of the proposed bridge at Chiang Khong and Houay Xay started recently, the plans and visions for the bridge were brought up about two decades ago. Andrew Walker notes that in the 1990s, Thailand and Laos conceptualized the idea of having a bridge and surrounding roads paved to improve trade links with Yunnan province of China.⁷⁶ However, it is in the last few years that the bridge idea started to materialize as affordability was a main deterrence in the 1990s. Now aided with Chinese funding for at least half the bridge's cost, high hopes are pinned on it to propel Chiang Khong and Houay Xay into prosperity, as illustrated in the notion of it being a 'Golden Gate to Indochina' (see Figure 3). The prosperity belief is echoed by an engineer who is employed by the Thai central government to the bridge's construction:

I think this bridge will attract more development for Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. It is definitely a 'Gateway to Indochina'.⁷⁷

The issues highlighted here speak of the respective Thai and Laos governments' beliefs and aims to give China a run for its own money and claim their own spatial imaginary desires via the bridge project.

However, the states' visionaries are not matched at the borders:

Chiang Khong,

The bridge is being built according to the city's motto of being the 'Gateway to Indochina'. It is not a 'Chiang Khong People's Bridge'. The construction company is a big government company that wants to earn money through the bridge.⁷⁸

Houay Xay,

There will be a spa resort and a hotel built near the bridge. But I don't think many people in Houay Xay can afford to use the facilities.⁷⁹

These comments underscore serious considerations raised by some excluded 'voices' from the border towns. While the Thai and Lao central governments have their own ideas to promote trade links with China through the proposed bridge, their actions result in disagreements of policies, and even place worries for the people who live in Chiang Khong and Houay Xay in terms of the anticipatory geographies uncovered. In particular, the next sub-section looks at the land acquisition carried out by both governments which will influence the cross-border ties with China in future.

Also, in their bids to capitalize on the anticipatory geographies of wealth and prosperity through the proposed bridge, the Lao and Thai governments have started to acquire significant plots of land from the villagers near the bridge at *Baan Vieng May* and *Baan Don Mahawan* in Houay Xay and Chiang Khong respectively. These two villages are where the proposed bridge is constructed at both ends and are approximately ten km away from the towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. Specifically, the lands that have been acquired from the villagers on both sides of the border are mostly farmland and are seen as future 'goldmines' by the central governments. It has also been revealed through

the interviews that Chinese businessmen are subsequent buyers and/or leaseholders of several plots of land acquired by the governments from the people living in Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. These collective land sale transactions drew unhappy responses:

Chiang Khong,

I can see the price of land increasing. This is especially so in the land close to the bridge. It can cost up to 1 million over baht per *rai*.⁸⁰ The government buys up the land. I also heard Chinese businessmen bought land in Chiang Khong through their Thai partners.⁸¹

You see the land over there? The village people own it last time. Now the government bought up all already. The government compensated us 300,000 to 400,000 baht per *rai*. This place will look so different next time.⁸²

Houay Xay,

The Lao government took back some of the village's land for development. They gave us compensation but it's very low. We asked for more compensation but it is not allowed. We cannot do anything about it, so we just sell to the government.⁸³

The government said land must be acquired to widen roads... I think our agricultural land is going to be leased to foreigners, like the Chinese and maybe Thais too.⁸⁴

The land issue is particularly sensitive to villagers, and their expressed discontent towards their governments is mainly due to the insufficient compensation. Things get more complex when subsequent land sale and lease transactions are concluded with the Chinese, such as one example where the Lao government has awarded a group of Chinese investors a concession to lease and develop a plot of land covering about 5,169 *rai* into a major trade and tourism complex.⁸⁵ Another example goes deeper in Thailand, where 'Chinese merchants often marry people of Thai nationality, and purchase Thai real estate, including agricultural land; the produce is then exported back to China'.⁸⁶ As another updated fieldwork interview in early 2012 reinforces that the bridge development may actually have little impact on local borderland businesses, a Chiang Khong entrepreneur who runs a business selling precious and unusual rocks from the river, commented that: 'this is not "*pattanaa* (development) Chiang Khong or Houay Xai", this is "*pattanaa* GMS and Asia"'.⁸⁷ He observes that land has already been bought at very cheap prices in the vicinity of the bridge, mostly by Bangkok-based and Chinese concerns, and since then land prices are sky-rocketing near the bridge zone. He also suggested that Highway 3 and the proposed future rail link would largely benefit China, Yunnan and distant Bangkok, Lampang and Chiang Mai more than the people in the borderlands. This is a common local viewpoint and one that resonates with the notion of 'scale-jumping' and uneven development processes relating to the larger regionalization associated with the GMS.

In this empirical section, we highlighted the clashes of imaginaries and expectations of the of the proposed bridge over at the border towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay between the central governments and the people living in the border towns. Critical geopolitics is pertinent to study the reasons of the clashes. Oftentimes, ‘the media and politicians are storytellers- and in order for their stories to be accepted by their audience they have to resonate with meta-level hegemonic cultural values’.⁸⁸ Both the Lao and Thai central governments sought the people in the border towns for backing in the form of conceptualizing complex geopolitical and geoeconomic issues with China for the share of the growing wealth in the GMS, and make them comprehensible to the people through the power of discourses such as the ‘Gateway to Indochina’. But in the context of the Lao and Thai central governments, their ‘stories’ of ‘Gateway to Indochina’ and promised prosperity are not envisaged by most of the people (especially villagers) living in Houay Xay and Chiang Khong. More broadly, the failure reflects the need to ‘create a public political culture that demands, requires and values grounded geographical knowledge over geopolitical sloganizing’.⁸⁹

Specifically, the land conflict issues arising through the anticipatory geographies in Chiang Khong and Houay Xay are raised with great urgency, as the need to match the development projects of flagship projects with the improvement of their surrounding environments tend to expose future disputes between the public and the state.⁹⁰ We stress this not merely as an attempt to ‘identify with the marginal such as the villagers as the border’s development may be the project of those seeking to gain further advantage in society: entrepreneurs or affluent citizens, for example’.⁹¹ With capital from Bangkok and Vientiane flowing in to buy the land near the proposed bridge, any increase in land sales and leases to the Chinese businessmen over time are likely to stoke anti-Chinese sentiments among the poor villagers. As we have stated in the previous section, the increasing Chinese presence of migrants and cheap goods are already causing a degree of anxious concerns. The land conflict issues could easily worsen the situation and dampen interest to engage the Chinese in the border towns, because of the questioning of the immense political and economic competitiveness posed by the Chinese. In worse scenarios, violent acts against Chinese migrants cannot be ruled out. In short, the anticipatory cross-border geopolitical relationship between the Thai-Lao border and China also hinges upon the policies pushed by the Thai and Lao central governments, and cannot be studied solely from the angle of a rising China trying to exercise influence in the GMS.

WHO BENEFITS MORE WITH CHINA? A BRIDGE THAT CONNECTS AND DIVIDES CHIANG KHONG AND HOUAY XAY

China has replaced Thailand as the biggest foreign investor in Laos for the first time in five years... Thailand was the top investor in Laos from 2005 to 2009 before losing the position to China due to a rapid increase in Chinese investment over the first two quarters of this year. Chinese companies have decided to invest in 16 projects with a total value of US\$344 million over the

past six months, while Thai firms decided to invest in only 4 projects worth just US\$3.7 million over the same period.⁹²

The above quote reflects a new geoeconomic reality in the economic (re)development of Laos. Thailand had been the traditional country to lead economic development in Laos until after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-1998, where a weakened Thailand left Laos to embrace an emerging China in attracting much needed investments to its poor economy.⁹³ In a similar vein, the proposed bridge mirrors the new geoeconomic reality as well. Although China and Thailand each shares half of the cost for the mega infrastructure project, China's relatively much stronger economic prowess propels itself ahead of Thailand to expand its footprint in Laos. The acknowledgment of this new geoeconomic reality is clearly salient, as cross-border ties between Chiang Khong and Houay Xay are progressively more influenced by China. For example, people in Chiang Khong may feel Houay Xay will gain more with China through the bridge given the closer proximity to the Chinese border. As such, perceptions on which side of the border benefits more through the bridge with China in time matters in influencing the overall anticipatory geopolitical relations between the Thai-Lao border and China.

People living in Chiang Khong are aware that even though with the construction of bridge, Thailand still does not share a border with China, hence the interviews elicited a tinge of 'jealousy' towards Houay Xay:

Laos shares a direct border with China. Laos has also so many new improved roads from Houay Xay to Yunnan. All these improvements are done with Chinese help.⁹⁴

I think Chiang Khong will not benefit much from China. There should be more Chinese businessmen in Laos. Laos is closer to them. It is easier for them to do business there.⁹⁵

Although their views may not be wholly representative of Chiang Khong, the thoughts expressed suggest they perceive Houay Xay will benefit more with China through the bridge. Lintner also observes that Laos is becoming more land-linked through roads and rail to other neighbouring countries despite being a land-locked country⁹⁶, which support the perceptions of the two interview quotes that Houay Xay will get closer to China in trade links.

While there are claims that Houay Xay will benefit more than Chiang Khong with China through the future bridge, 'voices' from the Lao side of the border offer alternate perspectives:

Houay Xay is just a transit town where Chinese goods come through here to go Thailand, and Thai goods pass here to go Yunnan.⁹⁷

The bridge will bring more people to Houay Xay. But they won't stay here for long. Tourists will leave soon after one to two days. They will go to Luang Prabang They will go to China or return to Chiang Khong. Houay Xay will still be very much a transit town even when the bridge is completed. We don't have many attractions like Luang Prabang.⁹⁸

The idea of Houay Xay as a transit town is evident in the minds of the people living there. First, the transit perception is perhaps justified by the fact that China last year became Thailand's top export destination, replacing the United States, as it imported 11% of all Thai exports.⁹⁹ Houay Xay is the town to pass through for Thai goods taken to Yunnan on road after crossing the Mekong River on ferry. Second, Houay Xay is the second preferred choice after Vientiane to set off tour visits to Luang Prabang via the slow boat services.¹⁰⁰

These underlying thoughts are telling signs that the proposed bridge is not spared from the dynamics of rivalry shared by Chiang Khong and Houay Xay in the cross-border geopolitical relationship with China. The concerns are to be taken note in relation to the rising geoeconomic clout posed by China, because each side of the border perceives the other as the party that will benefit more with China in terms of economic development. The value of geoeconomics as an analytical framework proves valuable in examining the underlying tensions as it is concerned with the geographical distribution of wealth, drawing links between economic flows and the national/border economies of China, Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. Geoeconomics manipulates the imaginaries of future visionaries of prosperity because people at the Thai-Lao border have different expectations of what the bridge can offer to the towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. In addition, the anticipatory geographies uncovered in Chiang Khong and Houay Xay reflects the geoeconomic conceptions of space, power and security as relational to an external party (China). In this sense, geopolitics is recalibrated by market logics¹⁰¹, and the geopolitical relationship between the Thai-Lao border and China hinges on the dynamics of geoeconomics.

Economic (re)development projects at the borderland could represent a perfidious impediment for prosperity or a tantalizing window of opportunity at one or both side(s) of the border. The bridge as symbolized by China's immense financial clout sensationalizes the perceptions of impediment and opportunities among the people living in Chiang Khong and Houay Xay as in who gains more or less across the Mekong River. It is a bridge that will connect the towns closer and faster physically and yet can divide them culturally and politically in future economic development with China.

AN ANTICIPATORY CONCLUSION: TAKING HEED OF LOCAL 'VOICES' AND BORDERLAND TRANSFORMATIONS

Indeed, a bridge links local communities, but also articulates with and makes movement possible between far distant ones.¹⁰²

The changeable nature of cross-border spaces suggests that to some degree they are based on "imaginary" spaces envisioned by politicians.¹⁰³

Geoeconomic visionaries tend as a result to anticipate capitalist inclusion rather than the expulsion or containment of others. Their focus is on networks not blocs, connections not walls, and transborder ties instead of national territories.¹⁰⁴

The above quotes capture and summarize our purpose of uncovering the anticipatory geographies surrounding the proposed bridge at the Thai-Lao border towns of Chiang Khong and Houay Xay we expounded in our article. The three quotes suggest imaginaries of connectivity that promise hope through the eyes of the central governments. These include closer foreign ties, increased wealth and improved infrastructure through the proposed bridge in our empirical study of the three countries (China, Laos and Thailand).

However, hope is not envisioned the same way at the border towns. The three empirical sections have underscored the need to listen to local perceptions at the Thai-Lao border as they signal potential ill- feelings that could translate into discriminatory practices or even violence towards Chinese migrants in future. The detrimental effects would then jeopardize future cross-border geopolitical ties and trade between the Thai-Lao border and China. Having said that, we have also shown how grounded research carried out exclusively at borders are often and perhaps too emphasized on the affairs of the two countries that share the political boundary, missing out on how a third country can influence border relations between the first two states.

A further possible relevance and contribution of our article is on a policy level. Following Anderson's urges to take anticipatory practices seriously¹⁰⁵, such as scenario planning, preparedness and preemption, we seek to push the anticipatory geographies presented in our research to provide urgency for anticipatory practices to be drafted by China, Laos, Thailand and even ADB to counter any resentment towards growing disparities among the border towns and Yunnan through the proposed bridge. In particular, our work pushes critical geopolitics to be more policy relevant instead of becoming an academic fad.¹⁰⁶

We recognize that the data collected and the conclusions reached are context-based and are by no means representative of the entire spectrum of views in Chiang Khong and Houay Xay. Nevertheless, we want to stress certain anticipatory geographies that are likely to influence future cross-border geopolitical relations. This is especially important in the area of our research. First, 'ADB officials recognize that the projects they fund are likely to encourage further socio-spatial unevenness, but they state that there is no other viable way they know of to develop the GMS's basic infrastructure'.¹⁰⁷ Second, in a recent road trip taken by the foreign ministers of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) from Chiang Rai to Jinghong in Yunnan, the politicians are even more eager to explore greater connectivity through road and rail in the GMS with China and even India.¹⁰⁸ Thus, there already exists a powerful political economic juggernaut based on certain shared regional geoeconomic imaginaries fostered by various cross-border infrastructure projects.

The two reasons clearly suggest that future research must engage anticipatory geographies more than ever, and to create anticipatory practices. As Jim Glassman eloquently puts it:

The GMS might bring greater peace and prosperity to peoples throughout Southeast Asia; it might also generate new conflicts that reflect the interests of some of the major actors pushing regionalization and globalization.¹⁰⁹

For example, China's upstream projects along the Mekong have generated multiple conflicts of interest, anxieties and coalitions challenging certain hydro-power developments, which could create serious intra-regional and inter-state tensions in

future.¹¹⁰ In this paper we have focused on a new cross-border bridge that is less controversial than the contested waterscapes of the Mekong, but even so, there are numerous unintended and potentially contentious issues that are likely to arise. Certainly the bridge is already harbinger of socio-economic and political changes, including an Chinese presence; investors from Kunming, Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Vientiane; transnational capitalizing on cross-border and riverside land development; and increasing local awareness of “*pattana* (development) GMS”. Then the crucial take home message here is to listen to the local ‘voices’ at the economic borderland because the actual geographies happening within the borderland now are visions and a portent into the anticipatory future.

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- ⁴⁸ Interview with Thai tour agent, 11 Dec. 2010.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Laos construction worker, 12 Dec. 2010.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Chinese surveyor, 12 Dec. 2010.
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- ⁵² A. Khoman, ‘Sad State of Affairs’, *Bangkok Post*, 12 Dec. 2004.
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- ⁵⁶ Interview with Lao villager, 13 Dec. 2010.
- ⁵⁷ Interview with Lao villager, 13 Dec. 2010.
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- ⁵⁹ M. Power, G. Mohan, ‘Towards a Critical Geopolitics of China’s Engagement with African Development’ *Geopolitics* 15 (2010), pp.462-495.
- ⁶⁰ G. Ó Tuathail, ‘An Anti-geopolitical Eye: Maggie O’Kane in Bosnia, 1992-93’ *Gender, Place & Culture* 3/2 (1996), pp.171-185.
- ⁶¹ R. Kaplan, ‘The Geography of Chinese Power’ *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2010), pp.29.
- ⁶² P. Sokhem and K. Sunada, ‘Modern Upstream Myth: Is a Sharing and Caring Mekong Region Possible?’ In M. Kumm, M. Kestinen, and O. Varis (eds), *Modern Myths of the Mekong* (Helsinki: Helsinki University of Technology 2008), pp.135-149.
- ⁶³ The Transportation Ministers of PR China, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand officially signed an Agreement on Commercial Navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River on the 20 April 2000 in Tachilek, Myanmar. The agreement stipulated that one year after it’s signature vessels of any contracting parties are entitled to sail freely between the port of Simao in Yunnan and the port of Luang Prabang in Laos.
- ⁶⁴ Southeast Asia Rivers Network, *Mekong Rapids Under Fire* (SEARIN and Oxfam America, October 2002). Local community-based groups received support from SEARIN and later the global International Rivers organization.
- ⁶⁵ S. Chuenudomsavad, ‘Fast Boat from China’, *The Nation*, 29 March 2004
- ⁶⁶ *Rak Chiang Khong*, literally Love Chiang Khong, is a local group operating out of Chiang Khong and Wiang Kaen districts that seeks to raise awareness of threats to the life of the river and livelihoods along it. They were a key member of some 76 organizations from 25 countries that petitioned the Ministers of Transportation and Communications against the navigation improvement project. *Rak Chiang Khong* continues to be very active in NGO networks lobbying against major hydropower schemes in the Lower Mekong region.
- ⁶⁷ D. Ley, ‘Shaky Borders? Transnational Migrants as Strategic Actors’ in H. van Houtum, O. Kramsch and W. Zierhoffer (eds), *B/ordering Space* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), pp.61-76, p.61.
- ⁶⁸ Boten is a border town at the Lao-Chinese border. Its’ extreme close proximity to Yunnan Province sees Chinese traders and workers outnumber the Laotians there.
- ⁶⁹ N. Ghosh, ‘Little China in Laos’, *The Straits Times*, 2 Oct. 2010.

⁷⁰ See, for example, on the topic of anti-geopolitics and social movements, P. Routledge, 'Anti-geopolitics' in J. Agnew, K. Mitchell and G. Ó Tuathail (eds), *A Companion to Political Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell 2003), pp.236-248; P. Routledge, 'Anti-geopolitics' in G. Ó Tuathail, S. Dalby and P. Routledge (eds), *The Geopolitics Reader* 2nd edition (London: Routledge 2006), pp.233-248; J. Pickerill and P. Chatterton, 'Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self-management as Survival Tactics' *Progress in Human Geography* 30/6 (2006), pp.730-746.

⁷¹ Interview with the leader of *Rak Chiang Khong*.

⁷² J. Glassman, 'State Power Beyond the "Territorial Trap": the Internationalization of the State' *Political Geography* 18 (1999), pp.669-696.

⁷³ Glassman (note 5); V. Phraxayavong, *History of Aid to Laos: Motivations and Impacts* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Mekong Press 2009); J. Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos: Market Integration in Southeast Asia* (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon 2005).

⁷⁴ There is no similar slogan used in Houay Xay. We choose not to engage the term 'Battery of Southeast Asia' (a term associated with Laos) for Houay Xay in this paper, as it refers to the hydropower dams and is irrelevant for our arguments.

⁷⁵ M. Kuus, 'Professionals of Geopolitics: Agency in International Politics' *Geography Compass* 2/6 (2008), pp.2062-2079.

⁷⁶ Walker (note 1) p.79-87.

⁷⁷ Interview with Thai engineer at the bridge's construction site, 10 Dec. 2010.

⁷⁸ Interview with Thai restaurant owner, 9 Dec. 2010.

⁷⁹ Interview with Lao boat driver, 12 Dec. 2010.

⁸⁰ 1 million baht is approximately 43,000 SGD. 1 *rai* of land is approximately 1.6km² in size.

⁸¹ Interview with Thai cross-border service provider, 10 Dec. 2010.

⁸² Interview with Thai villager, 10 Dec. 2010.

⁸³ Interview with Lao villager, 12 Dec. 2010.

⁸⁴ Interview with Lao villager, 12 Dec. 2010.

⁸⁵ T. Khamthita and S. Khuenkaew, 'Lao Tourism to Bring Profit, Vice', *Bangkok Post*, 1 Aug. 2009.

⁸⁶ T. Swe and P. Chambers (note 30) p.77.

⁸⁷ Interview with local entrepreneur, 5 Jan. 2012.

⁸⁸ J. Sharp, 'Reel Geographies of the New World Order- Patriotism, Masculinity, and Geopolitics in Post-Cold War American movies' in G. Ó Tuathail and S. Dalby (eds), *Rethinking Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge 1998), pp.152-169, p.156.

⁸⁹ G. Ó Tuathail, 'Re-asserting the regional: political geography and geopolitics in a world thinly known' *Political Geography* 22, pp.653-655, p.655.

⁹⁰ Grundy-Warr, Peachey and Perry (note 19); Sparke, Sidaway, Bunnell and Grundy-Warr (note 19).

⁹¹ C. Rumford, 'Seeing Like a Border' in C. Johnson compiled. 'Interventions on Rethinking "The Border" in Border Studies' with contributions of: C. Johnson, R. Jones, A. Paasi, L. Amoore, A. Mountz, M. Salter and C. Rumford *Political Geography* 30/2 (2011), pp.61-69, p.68.

⁹² E. Phouthonesy, 'China surpasses Thailand as biggest investor in Laos', *Vientiane Times*, 16 July 2010.

⁹³ B. Lintner, 'Laos: At the Crossroads' *Southeast Asian Affairs* 28 (2008), pp.171-183; J. Rigg, 'A Particular Place? Laos and its Incorporation into the Development Mainstream' *Environment and Planning A* 41 (2008), pp.703-721.

⁹⁴ Interview with the leader of *Rak Chiang Khong*, 10 Dec. 2010.

⁹⁵ Interview with Thai guesthouse owner, 14 Dec. 2010.

⁹⁶ Lintner, (note 66) p.173.

⁹⁷ Interview with Lao construction worker, 13 Dec. 2010.

⁹⁸ Interview with slow boat driver, 13 Dec. 2010.

⁹⁹ J. Fernquest, 'Thai Exports Tied to China', *Bangkok Post*, 21 Feb. 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Luang Prabang is a UNESCO world heritage site that draws many tourists to visit. The popular way to enjoy the scenic beauty of the surrounding areas is by taking a boat on the Mekong River from either Vientiane or Houay Xay.

¹⁰¹ D. Cowen and N. Smith, 'After Geopolitics? From the Geopolitical Social to Geoeconomics' *Antipode* 41/1 (2009), pp.22-48; M. Power, 'Geopolitics and 'Development': An Introduction' *Geopolitics* 15 (2010), pp.433-440.

¹⁰² Sidaway (note 7) pp.763.

¹⁰³ A. Church and P. Reid, 'Cross-border Co-operation, Institutionalization and Political Space Across the English Channel' *Regional Studies* 33/7 (1999), 643-655, p.654.

¹⁰⁴ M. Sparke, 'Geopolitical Fears, Geoeconomic Hopes, and the Responsibilities of Geography' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97/2 (2007), 338-349, p.340.

¹⁰⁵ B. Anderson, 'Security and the Future: Anticipating the Event of Terror' *Geoforum* 41 (2010), pp.227-235; B. Anderson, 'Preemption, Precaution and Preparedness: Anticipatory Action and Future Geographies' *Progress in Human Geography* 34/6 (2010), pp.777-798.

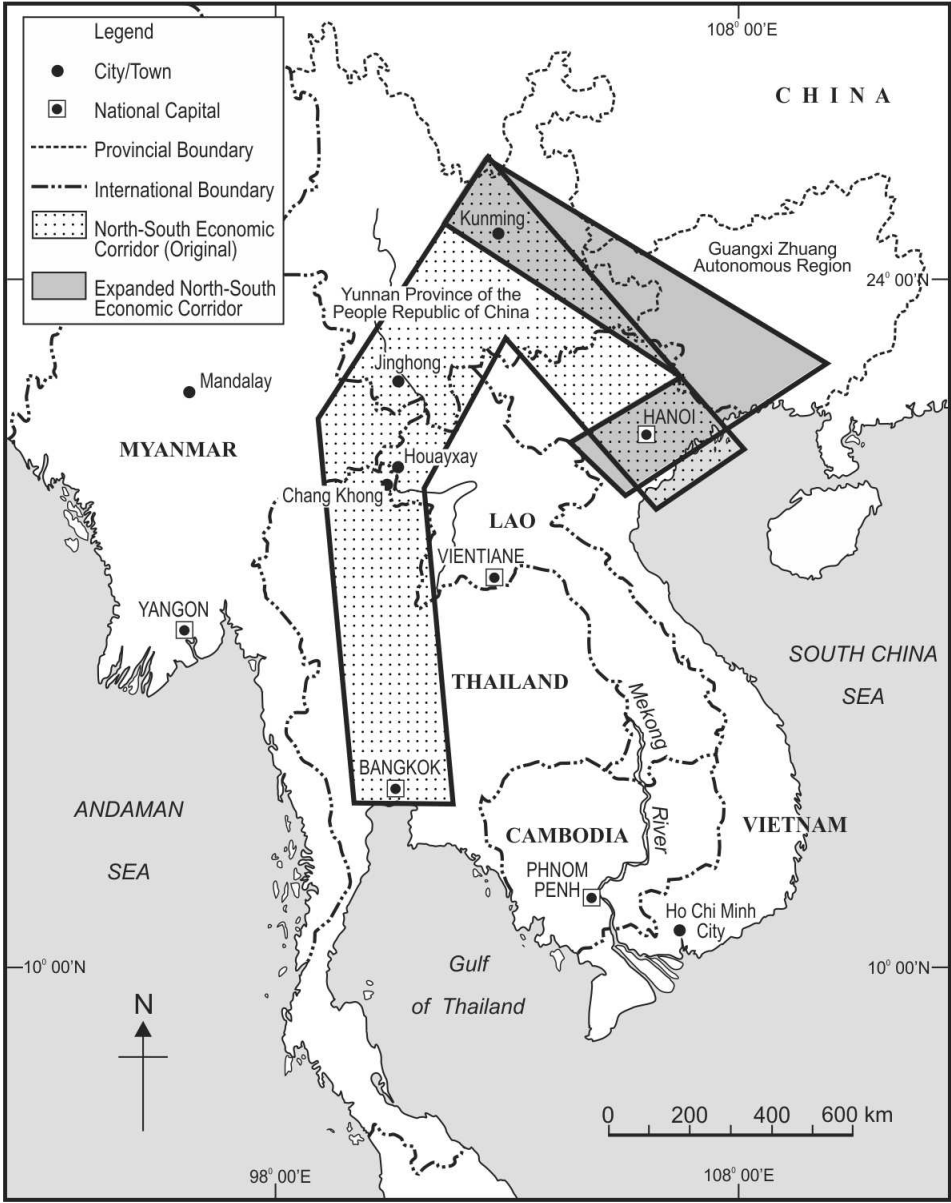
¹⁰⁶ F. MacDonald, 'New Directions in Critical Geopolitics' in L. Jones and D. Sage compiled. 'New Directions in Critical Geopolitics: An Introduction' with contributions of: G. Ó Tuathail, J. Hyndman, F. MacDonald, E. Gilbert and V. Mamadough *Geojournal* 75, pp.315-325.

¹⁰⁷ Glassman (note 5) p.61.

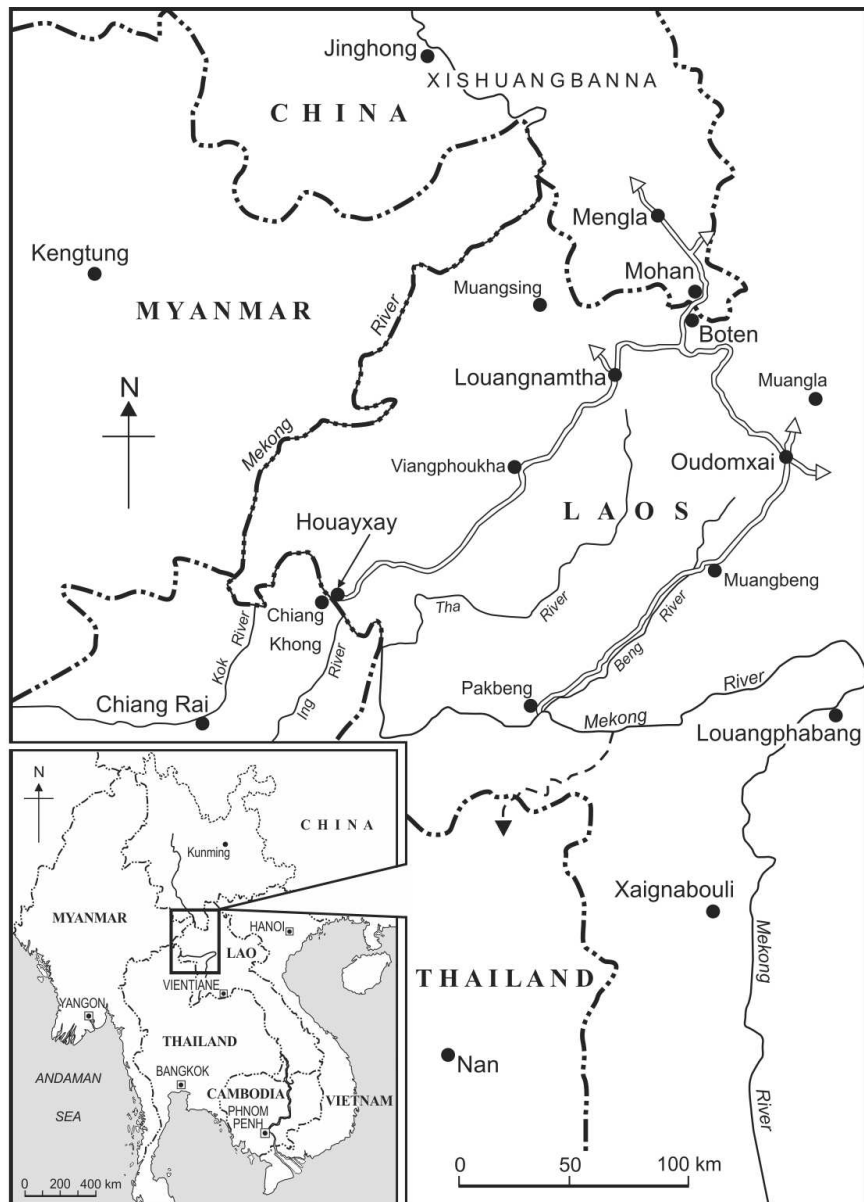
¹⁰⁸ N. Ghosh, 'ASEAN by Road, Rail and Bridge', *The Straits Times*, 27 Jan. 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Glassman (note 5), p.170.

¹¹⁰ F. Molle, T. Foran, and M. Kähkönen, *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region. Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance* (London: Earthscan 2009).



Economic Corridors in the Greater Mekong Subregion
100x127mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Northwestern Laos and Northern Thailand
93x130mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Figure 3 here, Caption: Constructing a Bridge, Completing the Corridor (January 2012)
338x190mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Chiang Khong is the Place to Invest in

451x338mm (72 x 72 DPI)