

State Spaces of Resistance: Industrial Tree Plantations and the Struggle for Land in Laos

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Abstract: Land grabbing has transformed rural environments across the global South, generating resistance or political reactions “from below”. In authoritarian countries like Laos, where resource investments are coercively developed and insulated from political dissent, resistance appears absent at first glance. Yet, it is occurring under the radar, largely outside transnational activist networks. In this article, we examine how resistance can protect access to rural lands in contexts where it is heavily repressed. Resistance here occurs with, rather than against the state by foregrounding the contradictions of land use and ownership within state spaces, such as competing goals of large-scale industrial plantations versus smallholder agriculture and national forest conservation. Such contradictions are engaged by using historical, place-based political connections to exploit the scalar frictions of a fragmented state and occupying plantation clearance sites to highlight contested lands in situ. Nonetheless, such strategies remain spatially and socially uneven amongst the Lao peasantry.

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

Introduction

Over the past decade, new forms of land and resource investment across the global South have caught the interest of journalists, activists and academics, prompting widespread condemnation of their impacts on and threats to rural livelihoods and ecosystems (Borras et al. 2011; Carrington 2014; De Schutter 2011; La Via Campesina 2012). In acquiring large tracts of land, transnational capitalists and governments have built upon and replicated earlier land grabs (Alden Wily 2012), dispossessing large numbers of peasants, forest dwellers, and pastoralists of the lands and resources that support their livelihoods. Often pursued without consent,

and drawing on a variety of coercive and violent tactics, such undemocratic resource deals have been widely labelled a new global land grab (La Via Campesina 2013; White et al. 2012). Communities in targeted areas are often unable to negotiate or shape the terms and conditions of land deals, leading to devastating socio-environmental results (Borras and Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015).

Without consultation or consent, communities' voices are only heard by way of social resistance or mobilisation. Scholars have noted the increasing cases of resistance to land grabs occurring around the world by communities facing the threat of dispossession (Martiniello 2015; Potter 2009; Rocheleau 2015; Sampat 2015). Hall et al. (2015), however, have critiqued dominant assumptions that frame peasant resistance as either an exception to the rule or a foregone conclusion. They argue that these representations miss variegated political reactions "from below", which involve a range of acts of resistance, acquiescence, and incorporation in response to land-based investments. They note that resistance commonly includes conflicts within peasant groups, sometimes divided by class or potential to benefit from various projects. In this vein, researchers have also considered why peasants *do not* resist (Moreda 2015) or why they react in other ways, such as participation and negotiation, that fall outside the traditionally understood scope of resistance (Gingembre 2015; Mamonova 2015).

In this article, we investigate how resistance occurs in places where it appears absent or hidden. While scholarship on this often uses James Scott's (1987) framework of everyday resistance—subversive action that is practiced under the radar of hegemonic political relations—we seek to conceptualise how resistance occurs not against or in avoidance of the state, but rather *with* it, exploiting political and spatial contradictions that fragment state power. Such resistance is direct, open, and can protect access to land, but is a far cry from broad-based social movements or protests and demonstrations that disrupt social order. We are interested in understanding how resistance takes hold and operates in spaces where repression is the norm and the capacity for transnational activism is limited. This resistance treads a middle ground between everyday acts and broad-based movements, and can generate important victories behind the scenes for at least some marginalised political actors. Building on the concept of "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006), where citizens demand promised but undelivered legal rights, we argue that in closed and repressive political spaces, resistance occurs in close collaboration with rather than against fragmented state power. However, we depart from the rightful resistance framework's focus on legal rights promised by central governments but not delivered by local ones, and highlight a broader variety of ideological, scalar, and spatial contradictions of state power that provide fertile, if uneven, ground for resistance.

Laos provides a useful case precisely because it does not land on the map of transnational activism, resistance, protest, and social movements against land grabbing. There appears to be little to no resistance occurring, in large part due to an authoritarian state that imposes its economic vision via top-down, coercive, anti-democratic power and harsh repression of political and social dissent (Creak 2014; FORUM-ASIA and AEPF-ICO 2014). In contrast, we show that there is increasing resistance to the expropriation and environmental destruction caused

by land concessions in the Lao countryside, which is often hidden due to its localised nature, lack of media coverage, or absence of linkages with transnational advocacy networks.

Specifically, we argue that resistance can exploit the contradictory ways that some landscapes are framed for development; peasants resist *with* the state by enrolling certain fragments of state power that can be used to support their claims. In developing what we conceptualise as state spaces of resistance, peasants can capitalise on conflicting state ideologies concerning how these spaces should be used and managed, and more effectively refuse state efforts to reallocate these spaces to private, multinational plantation projects. This occurs, for example, when areas allocated to plantation companies include lowland spaces that could alternatively be converted to village paddy rice production, as well as national park lands whose forests are legally protected for conservation. Both comprise pillars of state developmentalist rhetoric in contemporary Laos (Rigg 2005; Vandergeest 2003), and as a result provide key opportunities for resistance with the state.

Contradictions alone, however, cannot prevent clearance for plantation development. Land defenders must strategically foreground such contradictions by exploiting scalar and institutional divisions within the state, or employing direct action. With political connections, Lao peasants can link land uses alternative to plantation concessions with actors, institutions, and scales of the state sympathetic to such concerns and authorised to address them. To overcome the constraints of obstinate local agencies and reach institutions like the National Parks Council or the National Assembly, peasants employ historical, place-based connections with high-level officials, such as those forged during the Second Indochina War. Another way to call attention to the contradictions of rural land use and make peasant claims to land legible is to take direct action, such as by camping out in lands that villagers have reserved for future conversion to paddy land. In Laos, however, such action is constrained to spaces whose uses are actively contested at the policy level, and to groups of people who are in privileged positions to exploit contradictions within the state. This means that resistance with the state is both socially and spatially uneven.

These arguments are elaborated as follows. In the next section, we examine the types of resistance that have emerged in Laos in response to threats of land expropriation, along with a limited but growing literature on resistance there. We then review theories of resistance, social movements, and political reactions “from below” more broadly, to explain what we mean by “state spaces of resistance”. Following that, we show how resistance operates within these spaces by utilising two cases of responses to state land concessions for industrial tree plantations in Laos. In both cases, villagers used military-based political connections to reach sympathetic state actors and institutions and show them that the lands targeted for plantation development had also been marked by the state for other uses: lowland paddy rice expansion in the first and forest conservation in the second. The paper concludes by reflecting on what these cases mean for understanding resistance in Laos and other similarly authoritarian political contexts.

This paper draws on data collected under different research projects by the first and second authors, but with similar questions in mind and methodological approaches employed.¹ We chose the two cases of resistance after the research had been completed because of their complementarity, as they show how resistance manifests in different state spaces but with similar logics. The data collected come from a series of focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, key informant conversations, and baseline surveys with 16 government officials at multiple administrative levels, five company representatives, 11 village elders and leaders, three key informants, and 85 farming households. The two land investments examined include (1) Shandong Sun Paper Joint Industry's eucalyptus and acacia plantations in southern Laos, with a focus on Saphang Village² (first author); and (2) Lao Thai Hua Rubber's plantations in central Laos, with a focus on Nadee Village (second author) (see case study site locations in Figure 1).

Land grabbing is a challenging topic to research in the authoritarian context of Laos where research permission and access is strictly controlled. As foreign

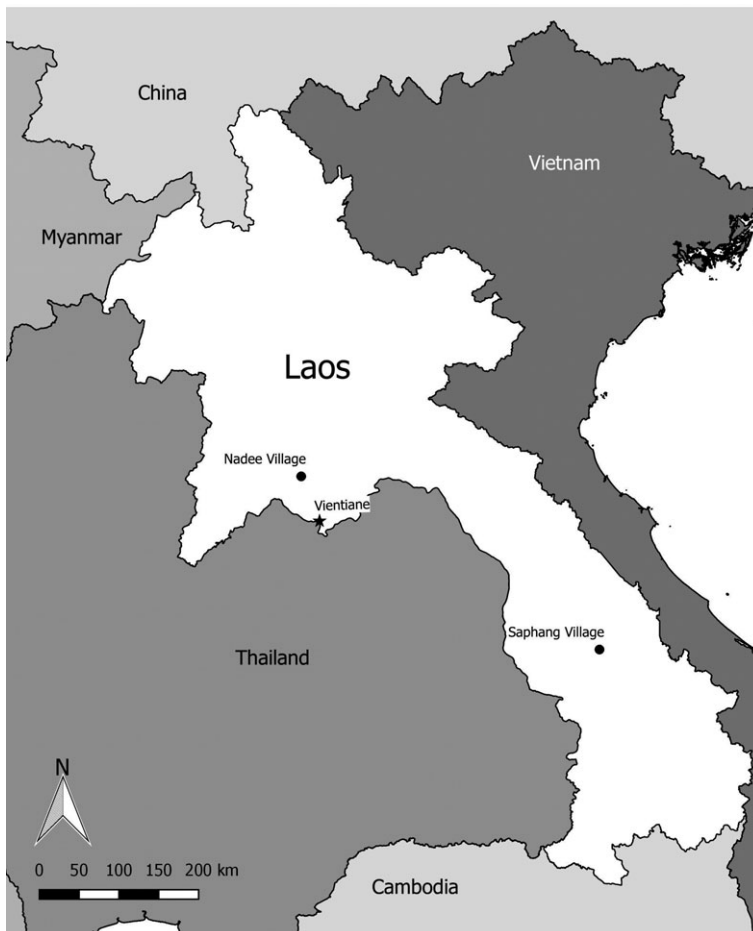


Figure 1: Approximate location of the two case studies

researchers, all three authors are in a position of relative privilege to investigate such a sensitive topic without facing threats to our livelihoods and families, unlike many Lao villagers, government officials, civil society professionals, and academics. The first and second authors addressed these challenges by working closely with government agencies that approved the research projects. Government officials even accompanied the first author to the field, and thus he had to employ creative measures to gain the trust of the communities researched and to generate frank discussion. He worked with a Brou ethnic minority research assistant who knew these communities for many years and conducted interviews in their language so that they felt safer to express themselves openly. The second author conducted the field research without the presence of government officials during interviews and household surveys due to her institution's close working relationship with the government.

The Hidden Politics of Lao Resistance

Since the early 2000s, the government of Laos has issued state land concessions for more than one million hectares (ha)—equivalent to 5% of the national territory—to domestic and foreign investors for a wide range of projects, including mining, agriculture and industrial tree plantations (Schönweger et al. 2012). The social and environmental implications of these projects have been well documented over the past decade, demonstrating how they dispossess people of their customary lands and resources, pollute surrounding environments, and provide little economic opportunity in the form of wage labour (Baird 2010; Barney 2011; Dwyer 2007, 2013; Kenney-Lazar 2012; NLMA et al. 2009; Obein 2007; Suhardiman et al. 2015). Despite the massive enclosure of agricultural and forest lands, however, there *appears* to be minimal resistance from peasants, and certainly no movement or broad-based social mobilisation, unlike open protests and reactions to land grabbing seen in other countries (Hall et al. 2015). High (2014) has suggested that the lack of open peasant resistance to state-led development projects in Laos reflects a “post-rebellious era” in which, although peasants are suspicious towards and disillusioned with such projects, they continue to desire them. We show, however, that resistance to the destructive social and environmental transformations wrought by land concessions *is* occurring in Laos, although in ways that are hidden at first glance.

State land concessions emerged out of government policies to transition the country's centralised, state-socialist economy towards a more outwardly oriented, market-based model. After a decade of failed state socialist policies—such as agricultural collectivisation—and dwindling aid from the Soviet Union, the government of the Lao PDR initiated several reforms in the mid-1980s to introduce market elements into the economy, such as allowing foreign investment as of 1988. In 1992, foreign investors could be granted leases or concessions of state land. Few land concessions were granted before the early 2000s but proliferated shortly thereafter due to high resource commodity prices in the 2000s and the development of the government's Turning Land into Capital (TLIC) policy, which

endorsed projects that generate revenues and profits from developing and extracting the value of land (Dwyer 2007).

While the economic growth that followed lent greater popular legitimacy to the state, rapid economic expansion has been largely based on resource extraction (Keovilignavong and Suhardiman 2017), which can threaten such legitimacy because it depends upon the use of so-called state land that rural people have customarily used, claimed, and managed for decades (Barney 2009; Dwyer 2013). The Lao state has sought to develop large-scale concessions in a top-down manner, in which projects are signed by the central government and implemented by the provincial and district governments, with little to no input from affected villagers. Citing a legal framework that grants the right to centrally manage land throughout the country, the government claims that large areas of empty, degraded, or unproductive land are state lands that can be transferred to plantation investors (Baird 2014; Barney 2011). Villagers are instructed that because the land belongs to the state, they cannot refuse its concession; various threats and forms of intimidation are often used by government officials (Kenney-Lazar 2012; Laungaramsri 2012). In other cases, company bulldozers clear village lands before villagers are aware that a project had been approved (Baird 2010).

In the face of such repressive forces, open protest or broader social movements operating beyond the confines of neighbouring villages have not emerged. Even other quasi-authoritarian regimes of mainland Southeast Asia, like Myanmar (Burma) and Cambodia, have experienced waves of protests, marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins in response to land grabbing (Lamb et al. 2017; Zerrouk and Neef 2014), none of which have taken place in Laos. In many ways, the Lao regime is more hegemonic in its capacity to limit resistance and democratic political expansion. This stems from a variety of factors, including the presence of state institutions (government, party and mass organisations like the Lao Women's Union and Youth Union) in every village throughout the country (Stuart-Fox 1997)—many of which have been resettled and re-arranged to bring them closer into the party-state apparatus (Baird and Shoemaker 2007).

Political action outside the realm of the state is thus often viewed suspiciously as a threat to the single-party regime (Creak 2014) and swiftly shut down (RFA 2014). In some cases, land conflicts challenge the government's authority to define property—a fundamental power of the state (Sikor and Lund 2009). In 2010, a community that refused to leave its paddy rice lands to make way for a Vietnamese golf course on the outskirts of the national capital was threatened with jail time (*Asia Times Online* 2010). Last year, a dozen villagers in southern Laos's Xekong province were jailed after they cut down a Vietnamese company's rubber trees on land expropriated from the community (RFA 2017). In other cases, Lao civil society members working on sensitive land issues have been silenced. A popular call-in radio show was cancelled in 2012 because it encouraged villagers to discuss their land grievances on-air (Smith 2012b). In 2012, Sombath Somphone, a Lao civil society practitioner was forcibly disappeared and has not been seen since, likely in part due to his role in facilitating a non-governmental civil society event at which land issues were hotly debated (Creak 2014).

Politics that operate *within* the state-party ambit of power, however, tend not to lead to such serious ramifications. For instance, villagers can call the National Assembly's telephone hotline during legislative sessions to complain about land expropriation (*Vientiane Times* 2012). In a particularly well-known example in southern Laos, land was even returned to a village after it had been expropriated for a coffee plantation, in part because of how villagers engaged with the state (Smith 2012a). They brought their case to the NA as a public grievance, setting in motion an official process of mediation with the company (interview with NGO staff, February 2015). Villagers justified their resistance with narratives of revolutionary fraternity (cf. Pholsena 2006), such as fighting for land during the war, converting shifting cultivation land to cash crop production in line with state agricultural modernisation goals, paying land taxes, and being awarded certificates of appreciation by the government (LIWG 2012).

Such cases have proliferated in recent years,³ and highlight the importance of specific histories, geographies and their attendant politics (social, legal, ecological and otherwise) in shaping the outcomes of Lao land conflicts (Baird 2017). Land access often depends on not just the letter of the law, but on the dense network of personal and group-based associations that individuals or groups are capable of mobilising when competing claims emerge. This can be positive, as in Ian Baird's work on the ways that memories of wartime affiliation can enhance villagers' capacity to negotiate with government officials over land concessions (Baird 2013; Baird and Le Billon 2012; cf. LIWG 2012; Pholsena 2006). But perceived (or selectively constructed) memories of historical betrayal can also hurt communities' efforts to defend their land against "development" from outside (Dwyer 2011, 2014). In Laos, as elsewhere (Routledge 2003), resistance is most effective when it combines material, discursive, and institutional elements, such as in Karen McAllister's (2015) work on upland resistance to rubber plantations in Luang Prabang, which shows Lao villagers combining everyday *and* rightful resistance—the former buying time for the latter.

What unites the cases of effective resistance described above, as McAllister (2015) has suggested, is that they occur in relation with rather than against state actors, institutions, and ideologies. Although the Lao state seeks to develop concessions in a unified, top-down manner, whereby large-scale concessions are signed by the central government and developed by local administrative agencies who seek to extract villagers' consent (Lu and Schönweger 2017), disjunctures between these various actors lead to a much more fractured reality of land concession development. Local government agencies can hesitate to implement policies of the central government due to a lack of perceived benefits. Villagers may contest the state's claims to lands that villagers and communities plan to use for current and future agricultural production. Thus, there are many entry points for villagers to resist with the state.

State Spaces of Resistance

To address how resistance operates in relation to state power in Laos, in this section we conceptualise peasant politics beyond categories of quiescence versus

rebellion and strategies of avoiding versus contesting the state by building on theories of everyday peasant resistance (Scott 1987) and rightful resistance (O'Brien and Li 2006) in two ways. First, we argue that peasants resist with the state by engaging with complex and contradictory internal state politics. Using Sharp et al.'s (2000) notion of "entanglements of power", we show that because domination and resistance in Laos are imbricated with one another, resistance can manifest within the political relations that seek to repress it. Second, we contend that these contradictory internal politics materialise geographically, playing out unevenly across space.

Scholarship on resistance tends to focus on forms of protest that contest state power. Social movements are highlighted as important vehicles for contesting and moving beyond the development agendas of states, global development agencies, and corporations (Bebbington et al. 2008; Escobar 2008). They are often broad-based and organised, building upon the interests and claims of a large group of people around common, generalised issues (della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Tilly 2004). Yet how can resistance emerge and operate in situations "where there is no movement" (Malseed 2008), or where social movements, and other forms of open and confrontational protest, are highly repressed? In authoritarian regimes where resources and rural communities' territories are governed in a top-down anti-democratic fashion that involves little participation by small-scale resource users and civil society, how can resistance emerge and make successful claims to land and resources? And why are some resistance efforts more effective than others?

These questions have been partially addressed with James Scott's (1987) concept of everyday forms of peasant resistance. For Scott, oppressed subaltern groups do not consent to their dominance, even if they appear to do so publicly. Instead, they engage in a critique of power via a "hidden transcript" that occurs offstage (Scott 1990). They engage in "normal" acts that go against the grains of power, producing small and incremental gains that also act as forms of subversion. As theorised by Gramsci (1971), when subaltern groups resist they are struggling against specific material and political conditions, grappled with in the moment, through local and place-based experiences of domination. Although such acts may not openly and directly challenge hegemonic power structures, they can cumulatively lead to significant political change if practiced repeatedly over time and across a large population (Kerkvliet 2005). Furthermore, Scott (1990) and Amoore (2005) have argued that everyday resistance can set the stage for the development of more overt struggles by developing necessary counter-hegemonic consciousness.

Despite their differences, frameworks of social movements and everyday resistance are comparable in that they both frame resistance in opposition to the state. Social movements are aimed directly at state power. Everyday resistance aims to avoid state or elite power. In Laos, however, peasants are resisting by directly engaging with the terrain of power that the state operates on. To understand the Lao case, and others like it, resistance and domination must be viewed as dialectically intertwined, rather than as a binary. As Sharp et al. (2000:20) argue, "domination and resistance cannot exist independently of each other, but

neither can they be reducible to one another: they are thoroughly hybrid phenomena, the one always containing the seeds of the other”.

“Rightful resistance” (O’Brien and Li 2006) is one approach that addresses how peasant resistance engages directly with the state. The term refers to a type of resistance that:

entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy disloyal political and economic elites; it is a kind of partially sanctioned protest that uses influential allies and recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to a professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure. (O’Brien and Li 2006:2–3)

Rightful resistance is “rightful” in two ways: it is based on certain norms of what is “right” or legitimate, and upon protections or rights found in the laws or implied in ideologies promoted by policymakers. Put simply, rightful resistance emerges when the rights promised by the central government are not delivered by local officials.

We build upon the theory of rightful resistance, first, by examining the ways in which peasant actors engage with the complex and contradictory *de facto* internal politics and power relationships within the state, which go beyond a simple dichotomy between central-level legal rights and local-level obstructionism. We conceptualise such contradictions and gaps with a Gramscian perspective that views the state as a dynamic and complex web of social relations, emerging and changing with broader domestic and international social forces. This can be understood in the Marxist approach of Poulantzas (2014), in which the state is an outcome of the contradictions of capitalism and struggles among competing class fractions. Or, in the Gramscian approach of Jessop (1991), the state is both a social relation and site of strategic action, where various classes and social actors struggle to influence state power and practice through what Gramsci (1971) referred to as a “war of position”. As Wright (2010) has argued, emancipatory social struggles must be in part built upon an identification of the gaps and contradictions within oppressive structures and institutions, openings where resistance can be lodged. Thus, in Laos, resistance does not map directly onto legally prescribed rights but is heavily skewed by politics and power relations among resisters, authorities, and other key actors which is mediated through formal institutions, discourses of development, and historically rooted personal networks. The rights that peasants are calling upon to legitimate their resistance are narrower. Rather than being conceptualised as broad-based rights for all Lao citizens, they are more aptly viewed as locally specific interventions into how to ground state-defined “modern” conceptualisations of development: what is “right” when it comes to the management of lands and forests.

The second important distinction of our approach is that it pays special attention to the socio-spatial dimensions of authoritarian governance and resistance. Social resistance is spatial in nature (Martin and Miller 2003): social movements are launched from socially significant places and territorialise in strategic ways such as through occupation (Leitner et al. 2008; Routledge 2015). And as articulated by Sharpe et al. (2000), entanglements of power are inherently

geographical, in which the collapse of the binary between domination and resistance plays out spatially. Thus, spaces of domination can contain the internal contradictions and seeds of resistance within them. For example, areas targeted for large-scale industrial tree plantation development in Laos are composed of contradictory claims of peasant versus resource capitalist ownership and use, which offer entry points for contestation by peasant communities.

Peasants can employ a variety of spatial strategies to intervene in the politics of contradictory land use and ownership, one of which is to negotiate the scalar dynamics of state power as different claims to land are recognised at different scales of power. Scale, or “the temporary fixing of the territorial scope of particular modalities of power” (Newstead et al. 2003:486), is socially constructed and contested by various actors, including the state, capital, labour, social and environmental movements, and consumers (Marston 2000; McCarthy 2005). Struggles over natural resource development are inherently struggles over scales of ownership, distribution of benefits, and costs of extraction (Huber and Emel 2009). Scale is also a building block of political opportunity structures available for political agents and social groups to resist (Staeheli 1994). The ability for social actors to navigate or jump across scales enables them to achieve their goals more effectively (McCarthy 2005; Smith 1993; Staeheli 1994). In this paper, we explicitly examine how peasants, as marginalised political actors, jump, navigate, and exploit different scales within the state to get around the obstacles that block their demands to protect access to land. Thus, the practice of rightful resistance *with* the Lao state is inherently scalar.

Resisting in State Plantation Spaces

As rural Lao citizens increasingly contest and negotiate expropriation related to land concession plantations, it is important to investigate how their resistance overcomes obstacles of intimidation and repression. In this section, we review two cases that show how such resistance in Laos engages the entangled power relations contained within state plantation spaces. Villagers use their scalar political connections to exploit the state’s fragmentation and contradictory land use and ownership goals within plantation-targeted spaces. In the first case, a village in southern Laos’s Savannakhet province struggled against the clearance of their lands for the establishment of a eucalyptus and acacia tree plantation by a Chinese paper and pulp company, eventually reducing the plantation size in half. In the second, a village in central Laos’s Vientiane province used their military connections to pressure the central government to cancel most of the land conceded to a Thai rubber company, much of which overlapped with village farming lands and a national protected area.

Sun Paper and Contested Spaces of Agricultural Expansion

Saphang village is a case study of how resistance can be effective in Laos when a multiplicity of strategies is employed that contest the ways in which state spaces are defined and claimed. Each strategy works within various fields of fragmented

and entangled state power to exploit its contradictions and highlight the possibilities for alternative spatialities. Villagers' actions exemplify Gramsci's "war of position" as they seek to shift the terms of debate concerning where the border is drawn between state and village land. Located in eastern Savannakhet province, southern Laos, Saphang is a low-lying, rice-farming village whose ethnic minority Brou villagers have a history of converting dry dipterocarp forest areas into paddy land, expanding the area of agricultural production within the village territory. They also have war-time connections with key state officials that have enabled them to effectively lodge complaints about the loss of village territory. In contrast, other villages targeted by Sun Paper that mostly practiced swidden, upland agriculture and lacked elite connections with the state were unable to prevent the company from clearing their land.

In 2010, the Lao central government granted a 7324 ha concession of "state land" in three districts of eastern Savannakhet Province, southern Laos to Shandong Sun Paper Joint Stock Company (hereafter Sun Paper), China's largest private paper and pulp company. This was their first foreign investment and attempt to plant eucalyptus and acacia tree plantations, the raw material that would feed a planned paper and pulp factory in the province. In 2012, a district government in Savannakhet Province allocated 423 ha of Saphang Village's land to the company. As Sun Paper began to clear land for the plantation, they quickly met resistance from Saphang villagers who physically prevented their lands from being cleared. Sun Paper eventually halted their efforts after planting trees on approximately half of the land that they were allocated, slightly more than 200 ha.

When Sun Paper began clearing land for their plantation in Saphang, villagers claimed they were unaware that their land had been allocated to the company, a lack of access to project information that is characteristic of authoritarian contexts and limits the capacity for villagers to act. Company representatives believed that villagers had agreed to the establishment of the plantation, as proven by their participation in the land survey. Villagers claimed they were told that the surveys were intended to map out village land for formal registration rather than for the company's plantations. Thus, they were alarmed to see Sun Paper bulldozers clearing land and immediately requested that they stop. District officials and company representatives returned to notify villagers that any land not in use or reserved, which the government referred to as "empty" land, now belonged to the state and would be included in the project. When village leaders still refused to concede, "the district responded, 'That's fine if you disagree, but this land is part of a state target already, it's going to be taken'" (village committee focus group interview, March 2014).

Villagers were intimidated but aggrieved and sought alternative methods to contest the project, beginning a lengthy Gramscian war of position in which they found various ways to foreground their customary rights to land and push back at where the boundary of an expanding plantation should end. They were shuffled back and forth between different scales of government. As a village leader remarked, "we didn't know what to do, we sent a letter of complaint to the district, to the province, but to no effect, so we eventually had to go the [National]

Assembly”, one of the few democratically elected institutions in the country, and which receives and inspects its constituents’ grievances. All the villagers chipped in to raise four million kip (\$500) for village leaders to visit the NA in the national capital, Vientiane. They were lost at first, not knowing the location of the NA building or how to submit their complaint. But with the help of their military connections, they eventually convinced NA officials to visit their village and inspect their complaint. As veterans of the Second Indochina War, they had appealed to a fellow veteran who they fought alongside with and was now well placed within the Savannakhet branch of the NA.

Villagers sacrificed a cow so that NA officials could eat well during their trip to the village. Disappointingly, however, NA officials suggested that villagers accept Sun Paper’s project so that they can earn money as wage labourers and develop their village. NA officials also claimed the project would only use unproductive land, a point that villagers contested: “the [National] Assembly said let it go, it’s degraded land. We immediately responded that all of this land is under production”. Yet, NA officials also gave villagers an opening for action, exemplifying how within the entanglements of power, statements of domination contain seeds of resistance within them. Villagers were instructed to fence off any paddy land yet to be cleared by the company, start farming it immediately so that it would be visibly under production, and convert any other reserved land into paddy. This was a useful tool in their struggle to draw the boundary between state and village land, so villagers ran with this idea and began marking off all lands that could be reserved for future production, an approach which resonated with the district government’s statements after the earlier land survey that village land under productive use would not be expropriated.

Soon after the NA team returned to Vientiane, villagers began posting signs in Lao language on land that they had reserved for future use, but the Chinese bulldozer operators could not read them. As their land continued to be cleared, villagers began to non-violently protest. They were ignored until a bulldozer hit a hand tractor that had been placed in front of a villager’s paddy land. A village police officer—an official government post that is the lowest administrative level of the security ministry—expressed the importance of direct action for demonstrating village control over land:

We’ve said everything to the company, so much that I can’t remember anymore. We protected the land, we said that if you [the company] do that [clear our land] we will shoot you, so they marked off our land where I told them, otherwise, they would have cleared everything, I really carried my gun to show them. (Interview, October 2014)

Ultimately, villagers’ successive actions challenged how state land was understood, used, and defined, showing how a spatial categorisation of land used by the state to control village land for purposes of industrial development, is an entangled and contradictory category that contains within it villagers’ autonomous claims to land. Sun Paper feared a further escalation of the conflict and district officials were sympathetic to villagers’ loss of productive agricultural lands. Thus, the district government eventually advised Sun Paper to seek land elsewhere. Saphang villagers had demonstrated their legitimate land use rights within

the planned plantation area, albeit only for current and future paddy rice lands, a land use sanctioned and promoted by state ideologies and policies of modern agricultural development, unlike swidden rice fields. These claims were supported by district and NA officials, during land surveys and the inspection of the villagers' land complaint, despite the fact that these same agencies actively worked to ensure the transfer of village land to the company. Yet without military connections, it would have been difficult to reach NA officials and raise the profile of their case. Villagers used direct action to highlight the state's limited recognition of their agricultural land. The village was mobilised and well organised, taking such actions collectively, chipping in to travel to Vientiane and sharing their labour to camp out in their fields in rotations. These factors interfaced with the spatial and scalar fragmentation of the state to contest how the uses and claims of rural spaces were defined.

Resisting Thai Rubber: Military Connections and Spaces of Conservation

The case study of Nadee village illustrates how villagers resisted land dispossession by using their military connections with state officials to highlight the spatial illegalities of a rubber tree plantation concession. The Lao Thai Hua Rubber Company (LTR) was granted a 3000 ha concession of "state land" by a local military institution and planted rubber on 800 ha of Nadee Village's land. However, their project was eventually cancelled when Nadee villagers used their veteran connections with the military to lodge a grievance with the central government, which revealed that the company's project illegally overlapped with a National Protected Area (NPA). The case exemplifies the entanglements of power in the Lao political regime and how they manifest spatially. Despite being approved by a military institution, villagers contested the project through military channels, using internal fragmentation of the military apparatus as a point of entry. Additionally, villagers contested the notion of "state land" as framed by one segment of the state (a local military institution) as land available for a rubber concession, showing that it was composed of other state land use goals: a national park and village agricultural land. Thus, villagers engaged in a war of position to question the legitimacy of the land transaction.

Located off Route 13, the country's national highway leading to northern Laos and China, Nadee village is about a one-hour drive from Vientiane. Much of their farmland is located 20 km from the village residential area, in the foothills of the mountains that border an NPA. In 2006, the district government suddenly halted a land zoning and registration process (see a chronology of events in the timeline in Figure 2). This followed a decision made by the Army Academy, a unit under the Provincial Army Authority (PAA) (see relationships of key actors in Figure 3) to expand an army training ground to 11,000 ha, overlapping with village farming land. In the same year, the government established an NPA nearby, adding to the national system of protected areas originally established in 1993. While the NPA overlapped with village forest and agricultural areas, villagers continued to practice swidden agriculture within the park boundaries.

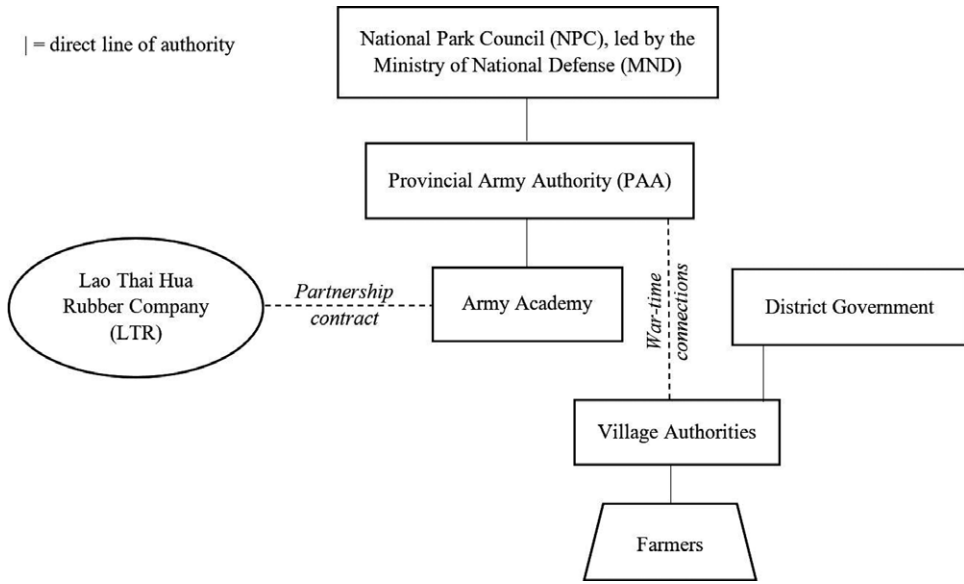


Figure 2: Timeline of land conflict in Nadee village

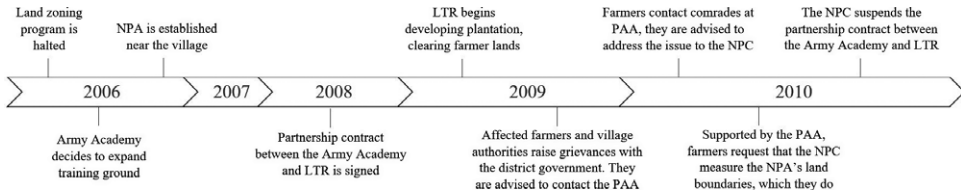


Figure 3: Relationships of key actors related to the LTR project

In 2009, LTR signed an agreement with the Army Academy to develop a 3000 ha rubber plantation within the expanded army training ground. Most Nadee villagers lost some or all their land to the rubber plantation without compensation. While the company initially provided villagers with the option to work as wage labourers, most villagers refused to work for a company that had taken their farmland. Some angered villagers directly confronted company staff during the land clearing process by blocking paths for the company’s vehicle to enter the targeted farmland areas. Others sought to protect their land by planting livestock grazing areas with their own rubber trees and paying “fees” to the Army Academy providing them with informal access to land. Thus, through various forms of direct action and everyday resistance, they began demonstrating that the Army Academy’s “state land”, conceded to LTR, was contested.

Unable to effectively curtail the loss of upland rice fields⁴ and cattle grazing lands through direct action, villagers brought their frustrations to village elders and authorities, questioning the legality of the company’s land acquisition. In the words of one villager, “I do not understand why LTR could take our farmlands even though we have registered our land, received land certificates, and paid

taxes over the years" (interview, May 2014). Another questioned the government's right to transfer state land to a private company rather than to reserve it for village use: "In Laos, all land belongs to the state. So, how can the government give villagers' lands to the company?" (interview, May 2014). Furthermore, villagers were suspicious that the Army Academy had taken more land than the stated 11,000 ha, explaining the encroachment on Nadee and other villages' farmland as well as the NPA. Thus, they sought a way to raise these issues with the government in a way that would gain traction.

District officials sympathetic to Nadee villagers' loss of legitimate lands they paid taxes on felt they could do little to help as the concession was granted by the Army Academy and thus should be handled by military institutions. Advised to approach the PAA by the district government, villagers knew they had to be careful and strategic to avoid political repercussions. Thus, they took advantage of their political connections from the war with "old comrades" in the PAA. As one villager expressed:

If we are to contact the PAA through the formal channel, our message might not get noticed. But through my connection with a PAA official, whom I have been in regular contact with since the wartime, we could convey the message to the right person. (Interview, May 2014)

Bonded by the experience of fighting side by side in the war, some Nadee villagers maintained close relationships with high-level officials in the PAA by raising their livestock and tending to their teak plantations.

Since the villagers claimed that the land concession not only encroached upon their farmland but also the adjacent national park, PAA officials advised them to take their case to the National Park Council led by the Ministry of National Defense (MND). Although the PAA recognised the impropriety of the Army Academy's actions, they felt that it would be politically safer to refer the matter to higher authorities, demonstrating the challenges of operating within entangled power relations of domination and resistance. PAA officials ensured that the villagers' inquiry reached the MND, who then conducted a land survey which showed that part of the concession lay outside of the Army Academy's training ground and fell within the national park boundary, a legal violation taken seriously by the Lao government. Thus, the Council suspended the partnership contract between the Army Academy and LTR, leading to the cancellation of the 3000 ha project. However, LTR was permitted to continue using land already planted with rubber, including 800 ha within Nadee village.

The case of Nadee village reveals how villagers resisted dispossession by working within the entangled power relations of the state to highlight the contradictions of space that state actors laid claim to. They used a variety of strategies characteristic of a Gramscian war of position to call attention to the ways in which an expansion of "state land" by the Army Academy, conceded to LTR, was rife with spatial contradictions, comprising land that had been zoned out for agricultural use, land that villagers had paid taxes on, and land incorporated into an NPA intended for conservation. They underscored these spatial contradictions by exploiting scalar disjunctures between the local-level Army Academy, other

district-level agencies sympathetic to villagers' claims, the Army Academy's provincial superiors, and the central-level MND that leads the national park council. They could exploit the internal fragmentation of the state by using their historically rooted military connections, forged during the Second Indochina War, and maintained with PAA officials. Their history as veterans gave them legitimacy (see Baird 2014; Baird and Le Billon 2012) but also political connections that allowed them to bypass bureaucratic constraints to reach the highest levels of government. Although only some village leaders in one village had elite political connections, they were used to protect the land of all villagers in the vicinity that had yet to be affected by the plantation's further expansion.

Conclusion

This article shows that, despite heavy-handed government repression, resistance can still flourish and take hold in the most unlikely of places, especially as peasants come to understand their collective power to contest land-expropriating projects and protect their rural livelihoods by resisting with the state. Rural people throughout Laos are coming to understand the power that they can exert over their territories as rural land users and citizens, that their rights to land and space are not given but must be taken. At the same time, however, the important role that discourse, political connections, and physical struggle play in protecting access to land show how resistance is unevenly available as many rural communities do not have access to such powers of resistance. Thus, a divide could widen between communities that are well connected and positioned to resist and marginalised ones that cannot.

The cases of resistance to plantation concessions described above highlight the important links to power that drive the potential for effective resistance and protected access to land. Villagers based their resistance strategies on socially and legally recognised rights, but such resistance differed in key ways from that of "rightful resistance". The rights that villagers called upon enabled them to resist, not because they are legally enshrined and protected rights, but because they act as a form of political connection with key elements of the state. They could be enacted because they are representative of the entangled power relations operating within the Lao political system—agents and institutions of repression are fragmented and can also operate as pathways of resistance.

It can also be seen in how the power to resist was built upon state contradictions concerning the use of land and space, the spatial manifestations of entangled power in Laos that moves between village- and capital-oriented land use and ownership as the country has opened to regional and global capitalist forces in the past three decades. For Nadee village, the ways in which the company and the Army Academy had established their plantation in spaces where it was prohibited—in the NPA, beyond the boundaries of the Army Academy's training ground, and on villagers' lands—created spatial illegalities that villagers could exploit. Saphang villagers exploited a different spatial contradiction: land allocated to a company which was already used by villagers to fulfil state goals of modern agricultural development via the expansion of paddy rice land—a type of agriculture

associated with the politically dominant Lao ethnic group and viewed by the Lao state as productive and modern. Both spaces draw their power from competing national-level discourses concerning land use priorities—the importance of conservation in protected areas, the value of paddy rice in agricultural areas, and the need to develop projects following the law as Laos seeks to become a “rule of law” state (Ministry of Justice 2009). However, the land use of many villages—especially those incapable of preventing the acquisition of their lands—is swidden agroforestry, which is associated with the politically marginalised ethnic minorities of the country, framed within government discourses and policies as empty, unproductive, and environmentally destructive, and therefore ripe for conversion to industrial tree plantations.

Such spatial contradictions alone are insufficient to protect access to land. They must be highlighted and demonstrated by using political connections to reach sympathetic and entangled actors and institutions within a fragmented state. First, this can be achieved by scaling up such claims to move beyond the obstructions met at the local level of government. Such scale-jumping was achieved via war-time or revolutionary connections that link regular villagers to high-level officials who fought as equals during the war—military connections dominated by men but exploited for the benefit of all villagers. Many villagers, however, do not have access to such elite connections, regardless of their involvement in the war, such as several villages targeted by Sun Paper that were unable to enact their legitimate claims to land. Second, spatial contradictions can be highlighted in situ via direct action and occupation. Saphang villagers occupied their fields with their bodies and farm machinery. Some Nadee villagers planted their own rubber plantations on their land to demonstrate ownership. Swidden agroforestry, however, a mobile form of land use that is not as visibly under production like paddy land, is not as easily guarded against conversion.

Uneven access to state spaces and powers of resistance means that the socio-environmental geographies of plantation development are also highly uneven across the country (see Kenney-Lazar 2017). This is in part due to the ability of communities to effectively resist the acquisition of part or all of their targeted lands and thus mitigate the worst social and environmental transformations wrought by land expropriation and conversion to industrial plantations. Understanding and advocating peasant rights to protect access to land in constrained and repressed political contexts begins with determining what pathways of resistance are open and actively used. Nonetheless, such strategies remain spatially and socially uneven, highlighting the importance of thinking through how they can be expanded beyond a minority of vulnerable and marginalised peoples.

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Endnotes

¹ For the third author's prior work on related issues, see especially Dwyer et al. (2009) and Dwyer (2014).

² Village names in both case studies are pseudonyms, used for purposes of protecting villagers' identity and guarding them against potential political repercussions.

³ NGOs, Lao Non-Profit Associations, and government officials interviewed noted an increase in the number of cases to resistance to land concession projects.

⁴ These are levelled upland rice fields that are not rotated, unlike swidden rice fields.

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