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China in Laos: Is There Cause For Worry?

*By Danielle Tan (Guest Writer)**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) programme launched by the Asian Development Bank has revitalised the historical trade routes and networks in mainland Southeast Asia, facilitating large flows of Chinese migrants through the North-South Economic Corridor linking Kunming to Bangkok.

- In just a decade, Chinese migration and capital have radically transformed the socio-economic landscape of Laos, particularly in the northern region. China currently ranks among the top three countries investing in Laos, and the number of its investments continues to rise due to China's "going out" strategy.

- Chinese investment in natural resources (mining, hydropower, agriculture) and casino tourism has spurred Laos' economic growth, but the transformation has come at a high price for both local communities and the environment.

- Conflicts over land between local communities and investors and among foreign investors are expected to increase as the government of Laos is pursuing its "turning-land-into-capital" strategy.

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- Contrary to common assumptions, the Lao communist regime is not a helpless spectator and passive victim of Chinese expansion in capital and migration. The Lao rulers rely on their Chinese partners to serve as essential mediators between the state and the global economy in order to cope with the challenges of globalisation and to maintain their power at the same time.

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INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, which connects Chiang Khong district of Chiang Rai in Thailand to Houay Xai, capital of Bokeo Province in Laos, officially opened in December 2013. This final "missing link"[1] along the China-Lao-Thailand section of the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC)—a 1,800 kilometre-highway connecting Kunming to Bangkok through the uplands of northern Laos—is expected to boost trade, investment and tourism among the three countries.

Back in the early 1990s, Thailand and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) advocated and pushed for more economic cooperation between the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries[2]. One of the major tangible outcomes of that dialogue was the inauguration of the Lao section of the NSEC during the 3rd GMS Summit held in Vientiane on 31 March 2008. However, it appears that the main benefactor is not Thailand or Laos, but rather China as the Lao highway enables Chinese goods to move south in greater quantities, while the natural resources of the GMS countries travel north to China. Concerns have also increased about the fast and growing level of Chinese migration and capital in mainland Southeast Asia, as well as the related social and environmental impacts on local communities.

The bridge epitomises the ambivalent position of Southeast Asian countries towards China[3]—in need of its investment and economic opportunities on one hand, but in fear of its rise on the other. Some have even talked of a Chinese "creeping invasion" (Lintner 2007). Against this background, Laos has increasingly been portrayed by the media as an impoverished communist country bowing to China's ambition to take over mainland Southeast Asia (The Nation 2007; Gray 2008; *Lao Voices* 2008; Gluckman 2011; Fawthrop 2011). This claim was backed by the images of huge casino complexes and rubber plantations in the north of the country—a region where Chinese currency and language predominate—conveying the idea that China is colonising Lao territory and that "Vientiane has effectively ceded sovereignty to Beijing" (Crispin 2010).

Are we witnessing the emergence of "neo-colonialism with Chinese characteristics", or a genuine growth opportunity presented to Laos by a benevolent China? To

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[1] Asian Development Bank press release, "New Thai, Lao PDR Bridge Completes 'Missing Link' in Key Regional Corridor", 11 December 2013, http://www.adb.org/news/new-thai-lao-pdr-bridge-completes-missing-link-key-regional-corridor, [accessed on 28 April 2014].

[2] The GMS countries comprise mainland Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) and two Chinese provinces (Yunnan and Guangxi).

[3] The bridge was eventually built after a long period of delay. Initially, Thailand and China pledged to build the bridge in 2004. But it was not until 2007 that they agreed to share equally the cost of the construction (44,8 million USD). Although political turmoil in Thailand undeniably delayed the plans, the Thai government also held back investment due to an uneven distribution of benefits between the three countries. According to the Thai businessmen who contributed to the rapprochement with Yunnan Province, the delay was meant to slow down the rapid progress of Chinese traders and companies. While the Thai entrepreneurs thought at the beginning that they could take advantage of the economic cooperation with China, they have come to realize that they were losing ground to Chinese competitors (interviews in Chiang Rai, July 2012).

answer this question, we will first analyse the distribution of Chinese investment in the Lao economy, the reaction of local communities, and the government's economic strategy.

CHINA'S FDI SPEEDS UP PACE OF CHANGE IN LAOS

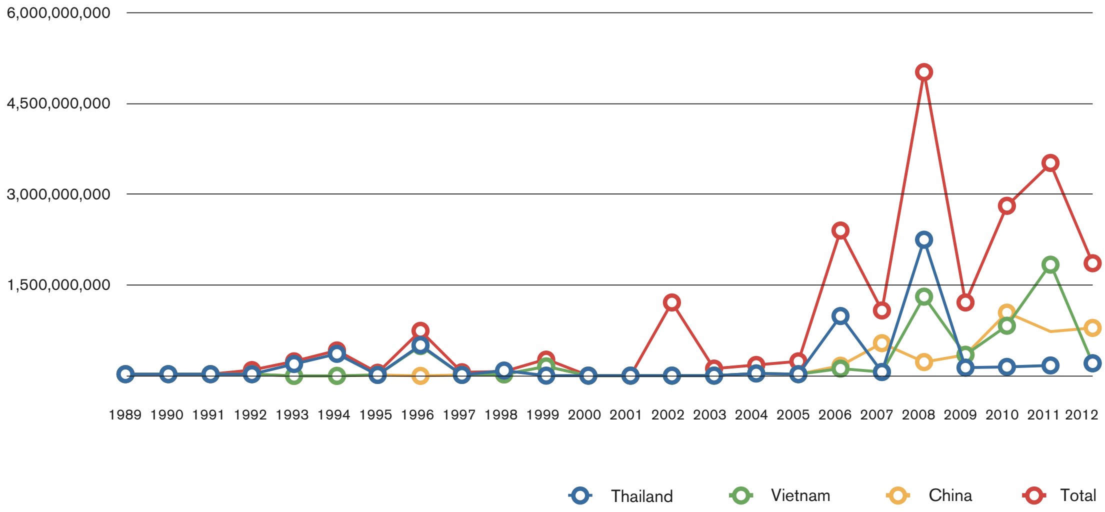
In just a decade, Chinese migration and capital have radically transformed the socio-economic landscape of Laos in both urban and rural areas. This change has been particularly significant in the northern region, including Luang Namtha, Oudomxay, Bokeo, and Phongsaly provinces. The North-South Economic Corridor has partly contributed to accelerating the transition from semi-subsistence farming based on shifting cultivation to market-oriented agriculture, and has revived the ancient caravan trade routes which once traversed mainland Southeast Asia.

The improved road network in the ethnically diverse and poor mountainous areas has become a crucial route of entry for Chinese companies and migrants looking to seize economic opportunities offered by this under-populated country rich in natural resources. As soon as Chinese bus companies started to connect the border towns of Yunnan with the main cities of northern Laos and Vientiane, Chinese traders began to settle throughout the northern region as well as in the capital city, supplying cheap Chinese goods to the urban and rural populations. In particular, they have transformed Lao urban centres–Chinese markets, shops, restaurants and guesthouses have become the most visible markers of urbanisation (Tan 2014).

Apart from these new migration flows, China's foreign direct investment (FDI) has been the main driver of change in Laos. In the 1990s, FDI in Laos was dominated by Thailand. Chinese investment in Laos started to increase dramatically in the mid-2000s after the implementation of China's "Going Out" strategy to encourage its domestic enterprises to invest overseas. China currently ranks among the top three countries investing in Laos, and the number of its investments continues to rise. Laos' traditional ally, Vietnam, has also followed suit and increased its investment over the past decade (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Top Three Countries Investing in Laos between 1989 and 2012 (USD)

Countries	1989-1999	2000-2012	1989-2012
Thailand	1,298,403,462	4,137,543,156	5,435,946,618
Vietnam	172,963,757	4,883,953,033	5,056,916,790
China	100,235,380	4,076,912,734	4,177,148,114
Total	2,303,067,109	19,817,761,026	22,120,828,135



Source: Source: Department of Investment Promotion, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Laos. The values are committed FDI.

The main Chinese investors are state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and large private companies. While the former invest heavily in developing the mining industry, hydropower plants, and commercial agriculture (Rutherford, Lazarus, and Kelley 2008), the latter have chosen the tourism sector, and particularly the lucrative sector of casinos (Nyíri 2012). The Laos mining industry (bauxite, copper, gold, lignite, tin, iron, zinc, gypsum), in particular, has been the target of Chinese investment over the past few years, accounting for more than half of Chinese FDI (Goto 2011:78)[4]. In 2008, there were 113 companies operating in this sector, of which 33 were from China (Rutherford, Lazarus, and Kelley 2008).

[4] Source: Ministry of Planning and Investment. The data are approval-based, cumulative from January 2000 until September 2009.

Chinese companies started to survey and exploit mining opportunities in Oudomxay Province in 1995. Since then, many Chinese SOEs have invested in larger scale mining operations across the country. For instance, in the aftermath of the 2008/2009 financial crisis, China Minmetals acquired the core assets of OZ Minerals which operates gold and copper mines in Sepon (Xinhua 2009). The controversial USD 4 billion bauxite project on the Bolaven Plateau—potentially one of the biggest bauxite deposits in the world—was also signed in October 2009 involving Chinese SOEs partnering with Lao, Thai, and Australian companies to form various consortia (ORD 2009).[5] The aluminium produced will be exported to supply China's industry. While the overall benefits are expected to average USD 29 billion, including USD 9 billion for the Government of Laos (Lazarus 2009), concerns were raised over the Chinese companies' plans to develop massive bauxite mining projects in the most fertile land in Laos, where more than 99 per cent of Laos' coffee is produced and which is the main source of income for more than 80 per cent of the households in the area.

China is also investing significantly in Laos' dam industry, with 32 per cent of China's FDI going into hydropower projects over the last decade (Urban et al. 2013). These projects are developed, constructed, and contracted out primarily to major Chinese SOEs, which are backed by the China Exim Bank and the China Development Bank (CDB). The most prominent operators are China International Water & Electric Corporation (CWE, a subsidiary of China Three Gorges Corporation), NORINCO which is also known outside of China for its high-tech defence products, China Datang Corporation, China Southern Power Grid Co, and Synohydro Corporation. Synohydro is the world's largest hydropower dam building company, and is responsible for the financing, developing, and building of six large dam projects in Laos.

As of February 2014, Chinese developers and financiers are involved in 14 hydropower projects (six in operation and eight under construction, see Table 2). They are also part of three other planned dams, and of at least 11 projects that are at a feasibility study stage, including three hydropower dams on the mainstream of the Mekong River. Most of these projects are joint ventures between Chinese and Lao companies under a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) model, meaning that after a 25 to 30 year-concession period, the ownership will be transferred to the Government of Laos (GOL).

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[5] Lazarus (2009) notices that in the past much of the Lao SOEs activity in the mineral sector was undertaken by the Ministry of Defence (MOD). However, under the pressure of the World Bank, a recent decree was passed to prohibit the MOD from directly undertaking mining activities through SOEs. They will be ultimately privatized and encouraged to form joint ventures with foreign partners.

Table 2: Chinese Companies and Financiers Involved in the Hydropower Sector in Laos

Project	Location (Province)	Installed capacity (MW)	Commercial Operation/ MoU signed	Planned Market	Institutions involved
OPERATIONAL (6 Chinese projects out of 17)					
Nam Leuk	Vientiane	60	2000	Laos, Thailand	Electricité du Laos (EDL). Main contractor: **CWE**. $130 million financed by ADB and the Japanese government.
Nam Mang 3	Vientiane	40	2004	Laos, Thailand	$63 million, 80% by **China EXIM Bank** and 20% by EDL. Main contractor: **CWE**
Xeset 2	Saravane	76	2009	Laos, Thailand	$135.5 million, 80% by **China EXIM Bank** and 20% by EDL. Norconsult (Norway) carried out construction supervision. Main contractor: **NORINCO**
Nam Lik 1-2	Vientiane	100	2010	Laos	25-year concession, BOT contract between EDL (10%) and **CWE** (90%). $149 million, loaned by **CDB**
Nam Nhone	Bokeo Luangnamtha	3	2011	Laos	**MK Dynamic Resources Development Company Limited** (Hong Kong) acquired 70% of Nam Nhone Hydropower Company, a French-Lao joint venture.
Nam Ngum 5	Luangprabang Xiengkhouang	120	2012	Laos Vietnam	25-year concession, BOT contract between **Sinohydro Corporation** (85%) and EDL (15%). $200 million covered by **Bank of China** ($140m), **Sinohydro** ($54m) and EDL ($6m).
UNDER CONSTRUCTION (8 Chinese projects out of 17)					
Nam Beng	Oudomxay	34	2016	Laos	**China National Electric Engineering CO., Ltd. (CNEEC).**
Nam Mang 1	Bolikhamxay	57	2016	Laos	$90 million. Saytha Construction Company, **Dongfang Electric International Company** (Sichuan) and **Far-East Industrial Company Ltd** (Hong Kong)
Nam Ngiep 2	Xiengkhouang	180	2015	Laos	25-year concession, BOT contract between **CWE** (90%) and EDL (10%). $345 million, 80% by **CDB** and 20% by **CWE**

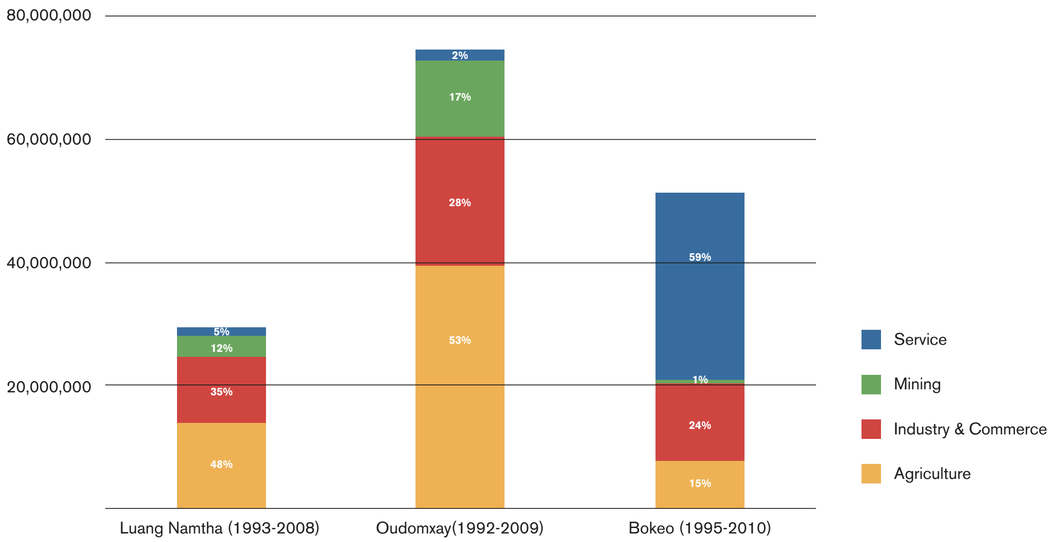
Project	Location (Province)	Installed capacity (MW)	Commercial Operation/ MoU signed	Planned Market	Institutions involved
Nam Ou 2, 5, 6 cascade	Phongsaly Luangprabang	540	2016-2018	Thailand (90%)	29-year concession, BOT contract between EDL (15%) and **Sinohydro** (85%). $1.035 billion, 85% loaned by **CDB**
Nam Khan 2	Luang Prabang	130	2015	Laos	$308 million, 5% by EDL and 95% by **China EXIM Bank**. Contractor: **Sinohydro**
Nam Tha 1	Bokeo Luangnamtha	168	2017	Laos, China	$340 million. 30-year concession, BOT contract between **China Southern Power Grid Co** (80%) and EDL (20%).
Xepone 3	Saravane	70+35	21/04/2008	Mines	**China Machinery Engineering Company (CMEC)**
Xenamnoy 1	Attapeu	14,5	09/10/2012	Laos	Phongxubthavy Bridge Road Construction. Supplier and financier: **Dongfang Electric International Company**
PLANNING STAGE (3 Chinese projects out of 23)					
Nam Phay	Xaysomboun	86	2017	Laos	$218 million. 25-year concession, BOT contract between **NORINCO, Fame Star Development Ltd and EDL**
Sanakham (mainstream)	Xayaboury Vientiane	660	2018	Thailand	GOL (19%) and **Datang Overseas Investment Co., Ltd** (81%)
Pak Beng (mainstream)	Oudomxay Xayaboury	921	2018	Thailand	GOL (19%) and **Datang Overseas Investment Co., Ltd** (81%)
FEASIBILITY STUDY (11 Chinese projects out of 38)					
Nam Khan 3	Luang Prabang	60	2016	Laos	**Sinohydro**. $127 million, loaned by **China Exim Bank**
Nam Ou 1, 3, 7	Phongsaly	616	2016		**Sinohydro**. $1 billion, loaned by **CDB**
Xekaman 2	Sekong	135	10/09/2012		**CWE**
Nam Feuang	Vientiane	60	2/10/2008		**Yunnan Provincial Power Investment**
Pak Lay (mainstream)	Xayaboury Vientiane	1,320	11/6/2007	Laos, Thailand	$1.7 billion loaned by **China Exim Bank**. BOT contract with **China National Electronics Import & Export Corp (CEIEC)** and **Sinohydro**
Xebanghieng 1	Savannakhet	50	10/6/2012		**CWE**

Project	Location (Province)	Installed capacity (MW)	Commercial Operation/ MoU signed	Planned Market	Institutions involved
Xebanghieng 2	Savannakhet	52	10/6/2012		**CWE**
Xelanong 1	Savannakhet	80	28/6/2011		**Sun Paper Holding Lao Co** (Shandong) & Daosavanh Investment & Construction Group
Xelanong 2	Savannakhet	50	11/7/2012		**Gezhouba Group**
Xetanuan	Savannakhet	30	11/7/2012		**Gezhouba Group**
Nam Ngiep 3	Bolikhamxay	38	25/2/2010		Phongxubthavy Bridge Road Construction. Supplier and financier: **Dongfang Electric International Company**

Source: the datasheet was compiled from media reports, government and company information. Although the data collected were double-checked and updated, the author cannot vouch for the accuracy of the information.

In northern Laos, Chinese FDI is mainly concentrated in agriculture (48 per cent in Luang Namtha and 53 per cent in Oudomxay), except in Bokeo (only 15 per cent) where tourism megaprojects, such as the Dokgniewkham Casino in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ), absorb the majority of Chinese investment in the province (Tan 2012). However, these figures from the provincial Departments of Planning and Investment should be treated with caution because several megaprojects, such as Golden Boten City and the dams, are not registered at the provincial level (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Chinese Investment by Sector in Luang Namtha, Oudomxay and Bokeo Provinces (USD)



Source: Departments of Planning and Investment in Luang Namtha, Oudomxay, and Bokeo Provinces (2009-2010).
Compilation and computation by the author.

Chinese companies have played a key role in the development of the plantation industry and other agribusiness sectors (rubber, corn, sugarcane, cassava, banana, watermelon, etc.). The country's "rubber boom", in particular, has been the result of favourable policy incentives and generous subsidies supported by the Chinese government through its 250 million Yuan Opium Replacement Special Fund as part of its "Going Out" strategy (Shi 2008). Although typically headquartered in Xishuangbanna or Kunming in Yunnan Province, investment from these companies can come from as far away as coastal China. These companies have strong governmental ties and usually subcontract with existing local Chinese communities (mostly Sichuan and Hunan migrants engaged in petty trade and who moved into the lucrative rubber sector in recent years) and employ Lao Akha or Lue personnel as translators and supervisors.

CHINESE-LED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Chinese-led development has had mixed effects on the livelihood of smallholders in northern Laos (Lyttleton et al. 2004; Khonthapane et al. 2006; Diana 2008; World Bank 2008; Thongmanivong et al. 2009; McAllister 2012). The introduction of new cash crops through Chinese aid and land-use change as a result of the North-South

Economic Corridor initiative have contributed—in a short time—to poverty reduction, modernisation of agricultural practices, and enabled parents to send their children for education to China or Vietnam. In particular, such development has benefitted farmers who have been able to capitalise on cross-border ethnic networks.

However, this shift from subsistence to a market-based agricultural system has also widened the income inequality of households within the village and among villages. In addition, it appears that the profit distribution of the contract farming or "2+3" model (farmers contribute land and labour, while investors provide capital, technology and access to markets)—which depends on negotiations between villagers, companies and local authorities—has benefitted Chinese companies more than Lao farmers. The latter have become dependent on the Chinese-dominated agricultural production and distribution networks due to asymmetric power relations. Exacerbating the situation in the case of rubber production, those who could not afford to wait the seven to eight years until the plant reaches harvesting age had to give up their land rights and became agricultural labourers to sustain their daily livelihoods.

China's opium replacement policy in the country has also severely affected farmers (Shi 2008; Cohen 2009). In some cases, joint-venture contracts arising out of this policy have been made with local state officials and the Lao military rather than with local communities. In collusion with officials at both national and local levels, large land concessions (up to 300,000 hectares) have been granted to these Chinese joint-ventures, forcing upland farmers to change their farming practices or abandon their land with little or no compensation.

In the end, Chinese investment comes at a high price for both local communities and the environment. The geographic area where bauxite deposits have been located lies on important agricultural and forest lands. Thousands of people have been—and will be—resettled to raise Laos to the rank of "the battery of Southeast Asia", not to mention the significant socio-economic and environmental damage the mainstream Mekong dams will cause on fish biodiversity and people's livelihoods. While these megaprojects will provide revenue to the Lao government, how local communities will benefit is still unclear. Extractive industries tend to have a minimal impact on the labour market, and the Chinese megaprojects are likely to accelerate Chinese migration to Laos because of the local lack of skilled labour. In the future, conflicts over land between local communities and investors and among foreign investors will certainly increase as it is estimated that five million hectares are currently leased under land concession agreements (including both active and not yet implemented projects), which amounts to 21 per cent of the total area of Laos (Wellmann 2012).

The most emblematic and recent example of this increasingly tense situation happened in January 2014 when villagers gathered to block construction workers from digging up their rice fields to build the airport as part of the Dokgniewkham Casino in Bokeo Province. They displayed a rare act of resistance against the Lao police, which were armed with AK-47 assault rifles to enforce the order made by the Hong Kong-registered firm behind the project (RFA 2014). In 2008, the Government of Laos signed a 99-year concession over 10,000 hectares to the King Romans Group, which plans to invest 2.25 billion USD by 2020 in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone. The "gambling enclave" now includes an international border checkpoint and river port, a casino, hotels, and a Chinatown market with as many as 70 restaurants and shops selling a variety of retail goods. It is expected to welcome 200,000 residents, potentially becoming the second largest urban development in Laos after Vientiane. The Chinese company offered to compensate the villagers 110,000 Thai baht (3,340 USD) per rai (1,600 square meters)—30,000 baht (about 900 USD) for the land and 80,000 baht (2,429 USD) for crop loss, but the offer was rejected as extremely low. Finally, the villagers have stopped their protests and agreed to meet with officials to negotiate over the compensation.

CONCLUSION: LAOS UNABLE TO RESIST CHINESE POWER?

In 2012, the Government of Laos once again announced a moratorium for four years on new mining investments and the granting of concessions for rubber plantations after receiving complaints about projects encroaching on villagers' land and causing environmental problems. The objective was to give the government time to enforce the regulatory framework and ensure that its agencies were able to monitor large-scale operations. However, the "turning-land-into-capital" strategy—based on leasing its land and exploiting its natural resources as the main engine of national development—remains unchanged despite concerns expressed by international NGOs. To them, hydropower along with mining, tourism, timber, and agro-processing industries are high priority sectors for investment given their potential to stimulate economic growth and generate greater revenues. Laos has even sought help from the Yunnan provincial government to design a development strategy for the Northern provinces (Northern Laos Industrial Economic Development and Cooperation Planning Preparation Group 2008), and from Beijing to conduct detailed surveys of its mineral wealth, in order to help regulate the mining industry (Vientiane Times 2013).

So do these developments support the persistent image of a weak Lao state unable to resist China's rising power? Perhaps not. Receptiveness to foreign investment should not be interpreted in terms of (re)colonisation in this case, but as renewed strategies akin to "extraversion"[6]—the manner in which African elites have similarly sought to mobilise resources derived from their unequal relationship with the external environment. Indeed, contrary to common assumption, the Lao communist regime is not a helpless spectator and a passive victim of Chinese expansion in capital and

[6] A concept developed by the French Africanist scholar Jean-François Bayart (2009).

migration. The Lao rulers rely on their Chinese partners to serve as essential mediators between the state and the global economy in order to cope with the challenges of globalisation and to maintain their power at the same time. They assist the Lao state in renewing its repertoire of modernity, development, and "socialist capitalism" to legitimise its authority over society by bringing in prosperity.

Laos's reliance on its external environment, especially China, is a deliberate strategy to put regional powers in competition with one another in order to avoid being drawn into the orbit of just one of them (China, Vietnam or Thailand), and to enhance its bargaining power with investors. The USD 5-billion funding agreement signed in April 2013 with Malaysian firm Giant Consolidated Limited (GCL) to build and operate the high-speed railway linking southern Laos to Vietnam and Thailand is a case in point. It can be argued that the Lao government is utilising GCL—an obscure company based in Malaysia (but incorporated in the British Virgin Islands and funded by Rich Banco Berhad, an offshore bank[7])—to pressure the Chinese government into finalising another USD 7-billion loan required to build another railway line linking Southwestern China to Vientiane via Boten.

The Lao government decided to assume sole ownership of the project after the Chinese construction companies pulled out of the joint venture because of the lack of profit. The ADB and the World Bank warned that these two megaprojects would entail an onerous debt burden that the country could not afford. The position of the Lao government is that short-term sacrifices are needed for the long-term economic development of the country.[8] Moreover, the Lao rulers are convinced that they are on the right track because this growth strategy brings civilisation to their "backward people". Unsurprisingly, the cost of this transformation in Laos will be borne by the weak, that is to say the minorities, the farmers and the poor living far from the centres of power, Vientiane and the regional capitals.

Despite the modest weight of Laos, in both political and demographic terms, it is more likely that the Lao leaders have little to fear from their Chinese neighbour, who is actually a powerful ally to the regime. China has no political ambitions in Laos. Its intentions are primarily economic, and its leaders are willing to provide economic aid and political support for the Lao government. In return, the Lao government gives Beijing access to natural resources, a passage through the Southeast Asian peninsula, and guaranteed support of the country's one-China foreign policy. The regime might have a bright future ahead.

[7] According to the website of Rich Ban-Corp group, the company was first established in September 2011 the New Zealand but operated illegally without a banking license. Then, the UK head office transferred the operations to Rich Ban-Corp Holding based in Hong Kong, cf: http://www.richbancorp.com/aboutus.php?m=u&p=1, [accessed on 1 March 2014].

[8] Interview with the Deputy Minister of Planning and Investment, Vientiane, June 2009.

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