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Negotiating post-resettlement livelihoods: the Chinese special economic zone and its impact in northwestern Laos

Pinkaew Laungaramsri[a] and Souksamone Sengchanh[b]

[a]Sociology and Anthropology Department, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand; [b]Faculty of Economics, Souphanouvong University, Luangprabang, Lao PDR

ABSTRACT
Special economic zones (SEZs) are often employed by the state as a development mechanism to attract foreign direct investment and as a key engine for rural transformation. Drawing on fieldwork in northwestern Laos, this article examines the development impacts of the SEZ, the broker state and the development investor. Deprived of their lands, many post-resettlement villagers were not incorporated into the economy of the SEZ. Re-peasantisation is thus both a path to alternative livelihoods among the uprooted population and a strategy employed by the investor to contain the surplus labour.

RÉSUMÉ
Les zones économiques spéciales (ZES) sont souvent utilisées par l'État pour attirer les investissements directs étrangers, comme mécanismes de développement et comme moteur de transformation rurale. S'appuyant sur un travail de terrain dans le nord-ouest du Laos, cet article examine les impacts développementaux d'une ZES, de "l'État facilitateur" et de l'investisseur. Privés de leurs terres, de nombreux villageois déplacés par la ZES n'ont pas été intégrés à son économie. Le retour à la paysannerie répond donc à la fois à une recherche de moyens de subsistance alternatifs pour les populations déracinées et, pour les investisseurs, à une stratégie de contention du surplus de main d'œuvre.

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Introduction

Special economic zones (SEZ) have often been defined as economic enclaves – "a physically or legally bounded 'economic space' contained in the domestic territory" (Farole and Akinci 2011, 27) aimed to attract foreign direct investment with a differential regulatory regime separate from the prevalent domestic economy. Incentives of tax breaks and flexible custom regulations are important to attract foreign exchange. Some economists suggest that SEZs can act as catalytic exclaves that prepare for liberalisation (Baissac 2011) with the capacity to absorb surplus labour in countries at early stages of development (Warr 1989). The success of the Chinese Shenzhen SEZ model in the 1980s has led to an increase of countries that adopted SEZs, from 176 zones in 47 countries in 1986 to 3,500 zones in 130 countries in 2006 (Boyenge 2007). In 2015, the world

CONTACT Pinkaew Laungaramsri pinkaew.l@cmu.ac.th

counted about 4,300 SEZs, and the number has been growing constantly (*The Economist* 2015). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the Chinese SEZ has been promoted by both the Chinese state and the international financial institutes such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) who have exported it globally (Zeng 2015).

With assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB 2008; JICA 2001), the Lao government adopted the concept of special economic zone in the late 2000s.[1] Following the feasibility study of the second Lao–Thai Friendship Bridge construction in Savannakhet supported by JICA, the first SEZ, Savan-Seno, was set up in 2003 as an experimental site.[2] At early stages, the main objective of SEZ development was to promote domestic and foreign investment along Road No. 9 that links Laos with Thailand and Vietnam, or the so-called East–West Corridor (Government Office of Laos 2012). Between 2011 and 2017, 13 SEZs countrywide have been approved by the Lao government and 28 have been under consideration.[3] The Lao government stated that the aims of SEZs were to stimulate rapid economic development, integrate the country with international and regional economies, create jobs and generate income for the population, and eliminate poverty (Government Office of Laos 2012).

Resettlement has been an integral part to the process of SEZ establishment in Lao PDR. However, SEZs and SEZ-induced resettlement differ from previous state-led development projects in several ways. First, many SEZs in Laos and countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) are built in border areas as an impetus to stimulate economic growth along GMS economic corridors. Border SEZs are thus perceived as the key strategy to strengthen economic competitiveness by turning remote areas with abundant resources into an economic gateway. Second, land acquisition and dispossession by SEZs are often conceived as necessary processes that aim not only at national integration of remote spheres but also at transforming the "poor" peasants into a "productive" working class. And third, the primary player in such processes is not the state but the private investor who has been granted the right to assume the developmental capitalist role in the entire SEZ regime. This economic strategy represents what Laungaramsri (2015) calls "commodifying sovereignty" in which sovereign rights are commodified to attract foreign investment.

This article examines the afterlives of development and post-resettlement livelihoods of local people living in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GT SEZ) in northwestern Laos – the casino entertainment complex owned by the Chinese Dok Ngiew Kham company. It discusses the Lao policy of border neo-liberalisation through the establishment of SEZs and how such policy serves the dual purpose of frontier integration and building up competitiveness of the regional economic corridor (ADB 2016). We follow the notion of "afterlives of development" by Rudnyckyj and Schwittay (2014), which entails a reconfiguration of developmentalist paradigm and practice characterised by a decline of state-centred development, a shift towards a managerial role of the state, and a deployment of instrumental reason by a range of new actors and networks that mediate and mobilise knowledge for development. The authors argue that in the case of Laos, the creation of SEZs for transnational actors to facilitate economic growth programmes has significantly transformed the relationship between the state, the capitalist and local population.

Since the Lao frontier was converted into an urban Chinatown populated by Chinese entrepreneurs and workers, Lao farmers have been uprooted from their farmlands through resettlement. Yet, most of the fertile agricultural land has not been effectively utilised. At the same time, displacement and abrupt de-peasantisation as a consequence of the Chinese-designed SEZ development project has failed to generate a productive economy that would incorporate landless farmers. As the article illustrates, casino entertainment is not the type of industry that can absorb labour of all ages. Deprived of their land and properties, the Lao people have become surplus labour stranded outside the SEZ economy. Without state intervention, local villagers were left to their own ability to negotiate with the SEZ developer during the resettlement and post-resettlement periods.

During post-resettlement recovery, local villagers continued to negotiate with the company over unpaid compensation, employment and space for engagement in the Chinese-led tourism. Many of them returned to their unused farmland and requested a temporary usufruct right. For landless peasants, re-peasantisation symbolises persistent struggle for socio-economic survival; and re-constitution of peasantry is taking place against the backdrop of rapid urbanisation and casino industry development that engulf them. The co-existence of peasantry and casino industry also represents what we call "hybrid abeyance" – the holding process in which farming and gambling work together to absorb the surplus population. Having the surplus landless labour locked within the Chinese SEZ enclave while granting them rights to access disused pockets of agricultural land serves a dual purpose: precluding social disintegration of the unwanted labour and, at the same time, sustaining the unfinished civilising mission of the Chinese-led development in the Lao frontier.

Based on previous work by one of the authors on the GT SEZ during the resettlement period in 2011,[4] this article is a result of the follow-up fieldwork on post-resettlement livelihoods carried out between 2012 and 2013, and between August 2016 and April 2017. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed to study the processes of local negotiation and adaptation in post-resettlement livelihoods. In conducting the post-resettlement study of local livelihoods, the primary data came from household surveys through questionnaires, group discussions, in-depth interviews and the authors' participation in the everyday practices of the villagers in the new relocation village. Households were differentiated into three categories based on the level of income as well as villagers' self-perception. This included 43 per cent well-off (56 households), 27 per cent medium-income (35 households) and 30 per cent poor (39 households) families. Fifty per cent of each household category was selected for an interview in order to gain an in-depth understanding of socio-economic changes and livelihoods strategies adopted by different groups of villagers.

Neoliberalising the border: the SEZ and the Chinese casino

In developing countries, especially in the Mekong region, market-based guidance models and economic efficiency and prosperity are increasingly taken as the fundamental basis for border governance while neoliberal rationales are employed to optimise border security in terms of profitability, effectiveness and cost-efficiency. As the development of international borders and neoliberal governance have become intertwined (Van Houtum 2005; Prokkola 2013), private sectors are taking up the role of the planner of border management while redefining the meaning of the border. Border SEZs represent one form of border neoliberalisation where market-based strategy is used to transform the traditional frontier with the neoliberal form of governance. In Laos, vast areas of borderland have been re-territorialised with the new state apparatus of zoning technologies which allows foreign investors to fully take up the role of the developer in order to make Laos the regional hub of the GMS.[5] The state, however, has retreated from its role as the developmental state to become the "broker state" that helps facilitate the flow of foreign investment. This shift away from direct state's responsibility for modernisation towards foreign-induced development has come with various provisions and suspensions. "Shared sovereignty" (Santasombat 2015) and "flexible citizenship" (Ong 1999) are among several marketing strategies made available to the zone developer as a means to increase regional competitiveness where rule of law is partially suspended for economic purposes and basic advantages are offered, such as tax breaks, enhanced legal enforcement of property rights, non-bureaucratic interference and legal autonomy of governance. Illegal practices such as gambling, prostitution and wildlife trafficking prohibited nation-wide are allowed within the GT SEZ.[6] SEZs in Laos represent a neoliberal space with multiple political economic missions including turning the "unproductive" villagers into entrepreneurial population, capitalising national economy through commodification of sovereignty and re-territorialising the "wild" frontier into a new economic gateway of the Mekong sub-region. The GT SEZ was established in 2010 in Tuen Phueng town on the banks of the Mekong river in the Golden Triangle region where Thailand, Myanmar and Laos converge.[7] The project was granted by the Lao state to a Hong Kong registered company, Kings Romans, with a 75-year contract (extendable to 99 years) in an area of 3,000 hectares in exchange for a total investment of US$ 2 billion with the objective to turn the northwestern frontier of Laos into a tourist centre and a casino industry. The project is a joint venture, where China has an 80 per cent stake in the operations and the government of Laos holds the remaining 20 per cent. In the first period of the establishment, 827 hectares of farmland and village settlements were transformed into basic infrastructure with an initially agreed-upon investment value of $US 87 million. The GT SEZ has been praised by the Lao government as one of the most successful models of border development with its accelerated construction of infrastructure and tourist facilities that has come to replace the "wild/drug frontier", the area over which the Lao state has long failed to take full control.[8]

Land broker state, the civilising mission and the afterlives of development

Since the late 1990s, land has been used by the state as the key driver of economic change in Laos. The "turning land into capital" policy was designed as a strategy to reduce the spending of the state budget on infrastructure development, increase government revenues and develop marginal regions (Dwyer 2007). Hydro-electric dams, mining and plantations are key strategic sectors for land capitalisation. These large capital projects are in line with the policy of international financial institutions such as the World Bank, ADB and several foreign state-owned enterprises and private companies that support mega-project development (Lestrelin et al. 2013). A total of 1.1 million hectares of land have been leased to domestic and foreign investors, equivalent to 5 per cent of the country's territory (Schönweger et al. 2012). China represents the major foreign investor, to be followed by Thai, Vietnamese, Korean and Indian investors (Lowe 2016). In 2010, the Prime Minister's Decree No. 443 on special economic zones was issued as a legal framework to promote investment in SEZs. Turning land into capital in the SEZ development sector was referred to in the Decree as "development of land in a focused manner and for turning such land into capital in order to ensure profitable development" (Government Office of Laos 2012). Not only has the Lao state provided the private sector with large areas of land in long-term leases for SEZ development, in most zones, the state authority at various levels also acts as the agent of the private sector in acquiring land and negotiating compensation and resettlement with local villages.[9] The use of coercive force by provincial authorities to facilitate the process of land acquisition also took place in some projects where local people refused to give away their land for SEZ establishment.[10]

SEZs in Laos mark a significant transition from a developmentalist regime of dispossession, in which the state carries out the appropriation of land for public infrastructural projects, to a neoliberal regime of dispossession, in which the state becomes the land broker for private capital. Under this new regime of private developmentalism, the right to rule and develop an area designated as a SEZ rests in the hands of the investor.[11] As a result, zone developers not only took responsibility for developing the industry and infrastructure necessary for urbanisation, but also took up a mission to "civilise" the "poor" local population within the zone, the duty that traditionally belonged to the state.[12] The retreat of the state in the process of SEZ development also meant that people were left on their own to negotiate with the investor, while compensation and property and crop replacement procedures were entirely determined by the private developer.

In *Afterlives of Development*, Rudnyckyj and Schwittay (2014) maintained that since the 1980s, the developmentalist paradigm with the state as the key player has been on the decline, while a variety of new actors and networks have come to perform the role of growth promoters. New zones for non-state and transnational activities to facilitate economic growth schemes have increasingly been created with the state acting as the development manager (Rudnyckyj and Schwittay 2014). Such a shift in the state's role has rendered citizens accountable for the improvement of their own lives and communities. In the GT SEZ, however, the afterlives of development were characterised by the private investor's attempt to civilise the rural populace and bring about economic modernisation.

As the leading and only firm investor who has full rights in the management of GT SEZ, Zhao Wei, the head of the Kilroy Realty Corporation (KRC), has often announced in public that the aim of his project is the well-being of the Lao people and that it is his wish to help them improve their standard of living (*Radio Free Asia* 2013). A casino complex along with its facilities and a Chinatown market with various restaurants and shops selling a variety of retail goods were developed within a decade of the SEZ establishment. Besides the gambling industry as the key activity in the zone, the KRC has also invested in several modernising projects such as agricultural extension, road construction and donation to schools in the area. It is claimed by the company that by 2020, Ton Phueng will be developed into a nouveau town, a Golden Kapok city[13] with 200,000 residents, and, with the help of the company, the local Lao people will no longer suffer from poverty and underdevelopment. As Zhao Wei said in an interview with a state broadcaster CCTV, the investment in the GT SEZ did not target only the economic prosperity of the company. The "Kapok culture", as he coins the term, is formed through the business's dedication to the locality it operates in.[14] In Zhao Wei's words, "doing business is like making merit. Business and society – they grow together" (*Asian Commerce Magazine* 2010).

In reality, the business brought by the KRC has been monopolised by a few Chinese business groups with no involvement of any local entity. The new SEZ town is often referred to as a Chinese enclave, where all businesses are owned and run by Chinese entrepreneurs. Most of them are from the so-called Dong Bei network, the northern region where Zhao Wei is from. Others are migrants from Sichuan, Yunnan, Guangdong and Guangxi regions, as well as overseas Chinese communities in Thailand and Myanmar. Apart from owning shops, the Chinese work as card dealers and offer other services in the gambling industry. Most of the zone's 4,500 workers are Chinese or Burmese, with a few Lao staff members. With a view to catering to Chinese tourists, the existing hotels, restaurants, shops and currency used in the SEZ are all Chinese. The language of communication is Chinese while the time in the SEZ is set in "China time" which is an hour ahead of the Lao time zone. The SEZ exercises its own rules, regulations and penalties without the interference of the Lao state. Within the zone, Zhao Wei, the zone developer, is chair of the Economic Board. He has full authority in the economic and financial management of the SEZ and determines the success or failure of the social and economic development of his enterprise. The role of the Lao state, however, is to ensure the availability of resources for the investor and guarantee security for Chinese businesses.

The current active border of SEZ development is part of the larger contemporary phenomenon of Chinesisation/Sinicisation of space and economy. Such transformation has occurred in an asymmetrical economic relation between Laos and China in which the economy of the first depends on the aid of the latter. Over the past few years, China has been the largest foreign investor in Laos with a total investment of US$ 5.1 billion, outpacing Thailand and Vietnam (Quartz 2014). With at least 240 projects being planned by China to be developed along the Chinese-Lao borders in order to boost sub-regional economic cooperation between the two countries, the economy of Lao PDR inevitably relies on the assistance of its Chinese counterpart (Reuters 2015). The role of the development agent and economic superiority has allowed the Chinese investor to design the kind of development outlook that suits his taste – that is the Chinese model of progress.[15] Development as a civilising mission is therefore built upon the idea of self-legitimation, the claim that deprivation is necessary in order to bring the fruits of progress and modernity to the Lao subject, the so-called "enclave of improvement" led by ethnic Chinese migrant capitalists (Nyíri 2012). Such an economic enclave, the model that is expanding across Lao PDR, exemplifies what Aihwa Ong has called "neoliberalism as exception" – an extraordinarily malleable technology of governing that involves the re-engineering of political spaces and populations in order for the Southeast Asian states to be able to compete in the global economy (Ong 2004, 2006). Over the years of GT SEZ establishment, the rhetoric of poverty, backwardness and pitifulness has been repeatedly employed by the investor to mark the identity of the inferior other as different from the civilised Chinese and to normalise the coercive relocation of the local population. Such rhetoric can be found in various publicity exercises of the zone developer. As Zhao Wei told the CCTV broadcaster,

> When I first arrived here, I found the place very poor. Upon talking with the villagers, I felt they were quite conservative. Their thinking was at least 50 years behind that of the Chinese. This made me curious to study them. Lao people are kind, honest and pitiful. I was sympathetic towards them, wanting to help them. I felt like a parent wanting to take care of his children. My hope is that I will be able to help them.

Resettlement and de-peasantisation

Development-induced resettlement and displacement often form a broader conceptual realm within which resettlement is seen as a paradoxical process of bringing progress that is exclusionary of marginal population (Terminski 2012). In the case of Laos, involuntary resettlement has historically been part of village life due to the civil war that spanned over two decades (from 1953 to 1975). The development era that began in the 1980s has only intensified the relocation process in which ethnic minorities and upland communities became target of forced displacement (Goudineau 1997). In many cases, local people were transferred to a new place without an adequate provision of infrastructure such as housing, electricity, clean water or food security (Kouangpalath, Sacklokham, and Kousonsavath 2014). In most cases, resettlement resulted in increased levels of poverty due to economic pressures and the need to purchase more expensive land (Kouangpalath, Sacklokham, and Kousonsavath 2014). In projects that included land provision, the poor quality of resettlement sites led to food security problem as villagers were unable to grow sufficient food for their families (*International Rivers* 2010).

Debates on resettlement in Laos centre around the issue of poverty versus modernity. Scholars such as Chamberlain (2007), High (2008) and Rigg (2012) argue that resettlement fosters closer integration between the state, market and people, which can alleviate poverty. Although resettlement might create a new form of poverty, these scholars believe that it will only be transitional and that development can release people from the old form of bondage. High, for instance, argues that resettlement responds to the deeply held aspirations for poverty reduction and modernity among the rural people in Laos (ibid.). Local people are already familiar with state-sponsored resettlement programmes, and it is the aspiration for change that motivates people to move. However, other scholars such as Baird et al. (2009) caution against the simplistic interpretation of voluntary resettlement put forward by High. In the political context of Laos where coercion is normalised and top-down, planned resettlement has often been tied to development policies (Baird et al. 2009). A careful analysis of local response is thus important in order to avoid falling into the trap of legitimising forced eviction by the state. Evrard and Goudineau (2004) further argue that planned resettlement of the highlanders, instead of bringing in development, often generates new migrations, or, what they call, “resettlement-induced” forms of mobility.

Similar to other projects in Laos, resettlement implemented by the GT SEZ was a top-down process without prior consultation with the community affected by it. But unlike previous planned resettlement projects, the conditions for requiring resettlement appeared to be arbitrary. While most state-operated resettlements have often targeted upland minorities whose practice of shifting cultivation is presented as the cause of poverty and deforestation, the resettled village within the GT SEZ (Ban Khuan, or Khuan village) is a lowland farming community with a long history of settlement, secured paddy fields, grazing land and gardens. The two villages in the relocation plan, Ban Khuan and Ban Si Boon Hueang, are well-to-do border villages of ethnic Yuan and Lue who migrated from Thailand's Lamphun to the Mekong River bank several hundred years ago. The discourse of poverty eradication propagated by both the state and the Chinese investor as the rationale for relocation is apparently out of harmony with the well-established economy of the two villages. As a result, both villages took action to resist relocation in different ways. Ban Khuan residents sent village representatives to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, to petition against the resettlement project, but the government rejected their request on the grounds that the project had already been approved. At the village level, district officials acted as brokers who persuaded the local villagers to accept the deal put forward by the Chinese company. Their actions went as far as providing false information to the villagers that the resettlement site was only a few hundred metres away from the village and that villagers would still be able to return to their gardens to collect vegetables and other products. Since the former village headman and his group allied themselves with the company in return for benefits, the villagers became disunited and eventually agreed to low compensation and resettled to the new village.

In contrast, Ban Si Boon Hueang residents staged several protests at their paddies, refusing to easily give away their land to the company for airport construction (Souksavanh 2014). Steadfast defiance enabled the villagers to collectively negotiate for a better bargain with the company. Although the residents agreed to let out some of their paddies to the KRC, they rejected the company's resettlement offer – the model used in Ban Khuan that came with low compensation. Instead, they insisted that the compensation for their land and property should meet the market value or should be sufficient for them to buy new property nearby of quality equivalent to that of the lost asset. In the end, the company agreed that Ban Si Boon Hueang would remain at its location, while Ban Khuan moved to a new resettlement site. The complex process of local responses and negotiations with SEZ development raises the question of normalisation of resettlement in the name of modernisation and the need for careful analysis of the nexus between dispossession and aspiration for modernity. Resettlement did not necessarily tap into deeply held aspirations for poverty reduction and modernity among local people, as was contended by High (2008). As the villagers of both Ban Khuan and Ban Si Boon Hueang repeatedly argued, they were lowland Lao living in stable independent villages with secured paddy fields, access to market and trade connectivity across the Lao-Thai and Lao-Burmese borders. They always had connections to modern economy. Resettlement only disrupts the flow of such economic activities.[16]

The resettlement and negotiation process in Ban Khuan took approximately four years (2007–2011). Contrary to the claim by the investor that resettlement would bring people closer to better services and alleviate poverty, the whole village was relocated far away from the river bank and the centre of the SEZ establishment. Although the company built several new roads that connected the new resettlement site to the Chinese casino town, the villagers did not have access to water and garden produce as in the old village. Long years of struggle have also left the village in conflict and with distrust of one another. A few households in the network of the former village headman, who worked as a mediator for the company, gained the most benefits from the company. The rest of the village had no choice but to accept the new houses and the low compensation for their land and livestock. A villager said in an interview that she did not blame the company for taking her land and property from her, and that she had come to terms with the brutal reality of capitalism. In her opinion, "it was an investment, every capitalist would do that". However, what she was most disheartened about was the fact that the government did not care about its people and that the village representatives did not protect the rights of their village folk.

Ban Khuan consists of 130 households with the total population of 472 people. The company classified the villagers' property into three grades according to the size. On average, a household received between 60,000 Baht and 80,000 Baht[17] (US$ 2,000–2,500) as compensation for their house, depending on the size of the house. A well-off family with grade one and grade two houses, granary, gardens, paddy fields, cattle and grazing land would receive compensation between 800,000 Baht and 1,000,000 Baht (US$ 26,000–34,000). The highest compensation granted to one of the rich landlords in the village was 5 million Baht (US$ 170,000). Well-off families comprise 43 per cent of the village households. They save the compensation money in the bank and use the interest to buy rice and other necessary items. The rest of the households comprise small land holders who received little compensation, ranging from 50,000 Baht (US$ 1,500) to none. Landless families were provided small houses with no cash compensation.

In the initial period of resettlement, in January 2012, people were excited about the new modern houses provided by the Chinese company. The company arranged a grand opening ceremony at the new village, Sam Liam Kham (Golden Triangle), where Zhao Wei proudly announced that the village was ready to live in and that all the villagers had to do was to clean their feet and walk in.[18] But within a few months, the villagers started to realise that the houses were poorly built with low quality materials. The following rainy season brought disaster to the newly resettled households as walls started to crack, flood water got inside the house during heavy rain, and the house roofs leaked. The villagers had to use some of the compensation to repair the houses as they moved in.

As part of the agreement, the company was responsible for bringing development to the resettled village. The KRC introduced a one-year contract for organic farming to the villagers. Vegetable seeds were provided to 20 families who joined the project along with small patches of land to grow organic vegetables. According to the contract, the company was accountable for providing the necessary knowledge and purchasing the produce. But when the vegetables were ripe and harvested, the company was absent and the produce was left to perish. That ended the agricultural extension project promoted by the company. Another project involved a scheme of tourist transportation. Fifty auto rickshaws (tuk-tuk) were provided by the company to the village to be used in transportation service for casino customers. These cars were put in the village fund for any villager to purchase at the price of 100,000 Baht ($US 2,900). Four of these cars were purchased by the villagers, and the money was put in the village fund while the interest was available for loan. However, the tuk-tuk project failed miserably as most tourists opted to use the free transportation provided by the KRC. The failure of this project, as well, ended the development schemes promoted by the SEZ investor.

A significant agreement in the GT SEZ contract was the company's commitment to provide employment to the local population in the zone. The Decree on Special Economic Zones and Specific Economic Zones in Lao PDR No. 443/PM (26 October 2010), Article 2, stipulates that SEZs will receive special promotion privileges and an autonomous economic and financial system. In return, the investor must ensure that people living in the zone can get jobs and participate in the SEZ with sustainable income. During the SEZ establishment, the company often announced that the casino industry would bring employment to all of Lao population.[19] But, in reality, the majority of workers hired by the KRC are migrant Chinese and Burmese. Several villagers applied for jobs at the casino, but only a few were recruited. Those who were slow and inept at learning about gambling services and learning Chinese, as well as the elderly, were often rejected from employment at the company. In 2012, only 25 people were offered jobs as card dealers, all between the ages of 15 and 25, and females were favoured over males. The number has dropped to 20 in 2017 and remained unstable. A young woman who had worked in the casino for a couple of years explained that the working conditions were tiring and unhealthy. Although the salary was decent ($US 180–250), long working hours in a heavy-smoking environment made the job quite arduous.[20] Workers are also required to be flexible with the work schedule and work night shifts. For example, a female Lao card dealer reported that her work schedule changed every 15 days without a standard pattern. The only holiday she had in a year was Chinese New Year's day. As a result, many young people would eventually resign and find other jobs outside the SEZ.

Resettlement in Ban Khuan was a political process, and it has deepened class differentiation among the villagers. The elite class which comprises 10 per cent of the village population or about 13 households gained greatly from the drastic change brought about by the casino company. These people owned larger plots of rice fields (between three and eight hectares), had been settled in the village for a long time, and assumed administrative positions as village head or village committee members. They made use of those advantages to advance their economic status. Having aligned themselves with the Chinese company, they received most benefits. The former village head, for example, used the compensation to buy a new plot of paddy and rent it out to poorer families. Well-connected with the company, he was offered a salaried job at the casino as a reward for his role in the resettlement process even though he did not speak any language other than Lao and there was nothing for him to do at the casino. His daughter also worked as a card dealer there. He also planned to invest his money in new businesses at the casino, such as opening a guesthouse for gamblers. About six families in this group were offered the opportunity to sell food at the food stalls in front of the casino, catering to gambling tourists.

The middle-income families that are small-scale farmers with one to three hectares of land comprise half of the village households. Unlike with well-off households, the compensation they received was sufficient only for saving. Before relocating to the new village, most of these families sustained themselves on seasonal food. Some sold a variety of vegetables at the local market. Rice and corn were sold to middlemen who came to the village and bought from their homes. In the aftermath of the resettlement, most men of the middle-income families turned to wage work such as driving boats that transport tourists from Thailand's Chiang Rai border to the casino. Women, on the other hand, would sell vegetables that they planted in the limited space around the houses at the local market. Pickled bamboo shoot has become a household product made for sale by middle-income and poor families. In adapting to the post-resettlement livelihoods, every member of the family including small children has to work in order to earn income as there is no natural resource to rely on and cash is essential for daily consumption. Although SEZ development has brought modernity and new sources of income to the border area, income generation has also become competitive. A villager explained the dilemma of these changes at length:

> It has become more developed now. We got new roads and other facilities. In the past, transportation was impossible in the rainy season. But we also have to be very hardworking, always looking for jobs and doing odds and ends to make a living. Selling things is not easy nowadays as there are more people selling than buying. People cannot go back to the past anymore. After all these years, their thinking has already changed. All we can do is work harder.[21]

The poor families, landless or owning less than one hectare of farmland, suffered most from resettlement. As latecomers in the village, they used to maintain their livelihoods by practising sharecropping and hiring themselves out for any available jobs. In the old village, poor families used to rely on selling vegetables planted in small gardens surrounding their houses, as well as wild forest products. Resettlement left these households in hardship as the sources of income dramatically diminished. Some teenagers went to work as card dealers in the casino, but aged adults found it difficult to find work in the tourism industry. Many continued to work as sharecroppers in the new farmland owned by well-off families. Women find themselves diversifying livelihood strategies by doing various odd jobs in the new village including babysitting for parents who work in the casino, making grass brooms and weeding in the fields to earn meagre daily incomes. All of these small jobs are unstable compared to the salaried employee work in the casino. Without capital and resources that used to provide food, the daily wage income has become pivotal to the survival of households.

Post-resettlement livelihoods, hybrid abeyance and the enclave of peasantry

Despite the existence of numerous academic studies on resettlement, little has been written on SEZ-induced displacement and post-resettlement livelihoods. The work on post-resettlement recovery within SEZs often focuses on the impact of land loss in rural India where forcible acquisition and transfer of land to corporates led to large-scale unemployment and displacement, especially when a large part of tract remained unutilised (Parwez and Sen 2016; Saumik and Vengadeshvaran 2013; Levien 2012; Rawat, Bhushan, and Surepally 2011). Most studies tend to focus on the welfare effect of optimum compensation while less attention has been given to whether the promised jobs by the state authority and investors are available to the rural households or whether the effects of industrialisation trickle down to their (Saumik and Vengadeshvaran 2013). In the case of the GT SEZ in Lao PDR, although the casino industry has generated a lot of jobs, they have absorbed very few young Lao peasants. None of the jobs lasted more than three years as the youth found difficult to manage inconsistent long working hours and the heavy smoke-filled atmosphere of the gambling house. Furthermore, local negotiations with KRC have continued even after the resettlement, both for the remaining compensation and for better access to economic opportunities provided by the tourism industry. The latter includes bargaining for a channel to receive tourist passengers by local boat drivers and negotiating for space to sell food near the casino by vendors. The most important negotiation is, nonetheless, the right to temporary use of the paddies appropriated by the company.

It is interesting to note that almost half of the farmland appropriated by the company has been left idle as have been the village houses. The problem of underutilised land within SEZs has long been observed, especially in India. According to Parwez and Sen (2016), of all the total land area of 47,803.77 hectares, granted to the central government-owned SEZs across the country, 21,310.03 hectares, or up to 44.57 per cent of the land, were reported vacant. Underutilisation of acquired land has raised not only the question of land acquisition policy, but of fair allocation of resources between agricultural and industrial sectors. In Ban Khuan, half of the paddy fields have been left idle since land appropriation. The villagers therefore negotiated with the KRC for a temporary usufruct right over the farmland. There are 80 households, or 70 per cent of the whole village, mostly from the well-off and the middle-income families, that plant rice and other commercial crops such as corn in the fields that used to belong to them. The poor either did not have much land or lost them to the casino. Some well-off families rent their paddies to poor village members and, thus, continue the sharecropping once practised in the old village. Rice cultivated in the company's paddies has been the means of securing basic food needs with regard to post-resettlement livelihoods.

The Chinese company, however, allows temporal use of land for cultivation without charge. There has never been any formal contract or agreement about this type of land use between the company and the villagers. The tacit approval of agricultural practice by the local villagers can be interpreted as a way the company deals with the failure to transform the "traditional" villager into the industrial worker. The Lao, as the Chinese traders in the zone often claimed, did not endure hard work/hardship as well as Burmese migrants. As a result, Lao people represent a very small portion of the labour force in the Chinese business. Unable to incorporate the readily available Lao labour into the casino industry, the Chinese granted permission for the Lao to return to agricultural economy as a temporary quick-fix solution to the unemployment caused by the establishment of the SEZ. In effect, the failure of proletarianisation led to the reverse outcome: the re-peasantisation of landless farmers and the emergence of the SEZ peasantry. These are the same peasants who were once told that traditional farming was a sign of underdevelopment and were made landless. The return to rice cultivation has created an enclave of traditional livelihoods by suspended peasants who are locked in between the traditional and the modern worlds within a larger SEZ enclave. Suspension of the SEZ peasantry in the temporal zone of the agricultural pocket has thus been a mode of regulating the surplus population that is unable to become the ideal model of industrious proletariat wanted by the capitalist. In Asia, such phenomenon has been on the rise as a result of rapid rural dispossession by capitalist enclosure and low absorption of labour (Li 2009).

Surplus population can also become a problem for private investors, especially when their proclaimed mission to bring everyone on board the bandwagon of economic prosperity fails. In an effort to deal with the methods of regulating social groups, Mizruchi (1983) introduced the concept of "abeyance" to explain the situation in which groups of people are held back from the normal processes of participation in the society. Various hybrid institutions such as workhouses, asylums and police stations are created in order to take in the excess capacity from the labour market and to monitor unengaged workforce. Abeyance is defined as "a holding process that occurs within and between social organisations" (Mizruchi 1983, 1). It is a form of social control designed to regulate undesirable or surplus population through the processes of expansion of an existing organisation, or by establishing new ones to accommodate those excluded from declining or fully extended organisations. Abeyance functions to solve the problem of imbalance between the number of available social positions and the number of people available to fill them; to prevent the surplus of masses, to divert marginal people from their inclination for dissident behaviour; and to ensure social order and social change. At the same time, abeyance and social control can be unplanned or latent.

Re-peasantisation in Ban Khuan can be seen as one form of "hybrid abeyance" – the resurfacing of the traditional institution of subsistence economy alongside the casino industry which involves a mixture of spatial restraining and livelihood sustaining for the purpose of social control. In this sense, it is not only an alternative livelihood for former peasants who were unable to convert themselves into the industrious workers needed by the new casino industry, but also a safety valve, a developer's tool that serves to relieve the pressure of unemployment which might pose a threat to the social order. As a development scheme, the GT SEZ, as it turned out, operated on a selective basis in which only a small portion of "suitable labour" was selected for the gambling industry market. The "unfit" majority of the displaced population became suspended between the traditional and the modern worlds of the Chinese enclave.

Conclusion

In recent decades, China's rise has significantly reconfigured modes of engagement, especially in the economically weaker region. As development is no longer the exclusive purview of state planners but is now exercised in an array of new domains, especially by the new agent – the Chinese capitalist – it has engendered new asymmetries of ethnic and class relations. In the new "Chinatown" created by the GT SEZ, the Lao, despite being the largest population group, has become "the minority" – the subordinate population. On the other hand, the Chinese, albeit being newcomers and small in number, have become the "majority" – an increasingly economically preeminent group.

This article has shown how neoliberal restructuring in the form of border SEZs and the transition from developmental to broker state of Laos have contributed to the facilitation of the Chinese-led development regime which in turn reshaped the relationship between the state, the Chinese capitalist and the local population. The implications of state withdrawal from the developmental role in SEZs are twofold. First, the Chinese private investor has been granted full rights to decide which development project should be implemented and to carry out all the projects within the zone without state's intervention. Unlike China's Shenzhen model, where both central and provincial states co-ordinated with the zone investors in developing economic linkages with local industries, the GT SEZ has become a stand-alone business, monopolised by the KRC without any connection to the domestic economy.

Second, while state intervention is often seen as crucial to inclusive growth and regulatory control of development quality, the GT SEZ represents the absence of such mechanism. Low employment of local labour has gone unchecked. Despite the claim by the Chinese tycoon about the success of the "civilising mission" in the remote borderland of the Golden Triangle, post-resettlement livelihoods of local villagers have continued to be precarious. For local people, life after resettlement is both an acute transformation into a cash-driven economy and an everyday negotiation – for fair compensation, more space for participation in the new industry and temporary usufruct right to unutilised resources. Re-peasantisation thus represents an attempt by the locals at livelihood restoration and post-resettlement recovery amidst capitalist development that has excluded them. Ironically, the afterlives of the Chinese development have inextricably involved the co-existence of the emerging Chinese economy and the peasanthood that the private developer has painstakingly sought to eradicate. It is, therefore, the reluctance to bid farewell to agrarian lives among local villagers that has simultaneously contested and unsettled the prospect of change brought by the GT SEZ.

Notes

1. Interview with Kheungkham Keonuchan, Director General, Secretariat Office of Lao National Committee for Special Economic Zone, December 15, 2011.
2. This is the government funded project with technical assistance supported by JICA and ADB.
3. Four special economic zones and eight specific economic zones have been completed, covering an area of almost 20,000 hectares. The Lao government aims to increase the number of SEZs up to 58 in 2020. http://www.nationmultimedia.com/asean&beyon/Investment-grows-at-SEZs-in-Laos-30295702.html. See also http://www.laoembassy.com/Laos%20to%20build%2041%20special%20economic%20zones.pdf. Accessed October 10, 2017.
4. See Laungaramsri 2015.
5. Most of the SEZs in Laos are developed in border areas and remote parts of the country. See http://www.laoembassy.com/Laos%20to%20build%2041%20special%20economic%20zones.pdf. Accessed June 4, 2016.
6. Such activities are condemned by the US government. On January 30 2018, the US Treasury Department declared the Kings Romans network operating in Laos a transnational criminal organisation and freezed the company's assets in the US while prohibiting Americans from entering the zone. The Lao government, however, did not respond to the sanction but left the sole responsibility to the Kings Romans company who publicly denied such accusations from the US.
7. Prior to the KRC, the Lao government approached a Thai company (PP Group LDT, Co.) for investment in the Ton Phueng area. But the project never came to fruition.
8. Interview with Kheungkham Keonuchan, December 15, 2011. See also Government Office of Laos 2012, 15.
9. Personal communication with a Lao NGO worker, August 12, 2015.
10. See the case of Ban Si Boon Hueang at http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/landgrab-01222014215351.html. Accessed October 4, 2016.
11. See also Levien 2013. In Laos, the SEZ administration comprises two separate but coordinating bodies – the Economic Board with the investor as chair and the Management Committee with the governor as chair. The former, often called the "developer", has full authority in economic and financial management. The latter is responsible for supporting the developer in legal matters such as VISA application, crime prevention and property protection.
12. See also Laungaramsri 2015.
13. A native tree of Ton Phueng.
14. Kapok, or "Jin Moo Mien" in Chinese, is another name of the company. Using Kapok as the symbol of the company as well as the city of GT SEZ, Zhao Wei advocates for the idea to replace the old image of the "evil drug zone" of poppy/opium with Kapok flower. Kapok, as he puts it, is warm and symbolises dedication (http://fangtan.china.com.cn/2011-05/04/content_22492727.htm. Accessed May 6, 2014).
15. See also Nyíri 2006.
16. Since 2012, Si Boon Hueang villagers have begun renovating their houses with new materials. According to the villagers, this "modernisation" initiative is a strategy local people use to rebut the claim by the SEZ developer that they are poor and to resist resettlement.

17. The company first offered compensation in Chinese yuan. But villagers negotiated for Thai baht instead since it was the currency normally used among people living along Lao and Thai borders.
18. Interview with a villager, October 10, 2016.
19. See CCTV News, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eU6IpSyQ4M. Accessed May 4, 2013.
20. Interview, October 11, 2016.
21. Interview, October 11, 2016.

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Notes on contributors

Pinkaew Laungaramsri is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

Souksamone Sengchan is Lecturer at the Programme in Tourism Management, Faculty of Economics, Souphanouvong University.

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