A large, hand-painted map greets visitors to the rubber-tree nursery just outside Vieng Phoukha, a rural district capital in northwestern Laos. Taking up much of the second-story wall of the nursery’s main building, its title is long and formal: “Land-use map of the 3,000-hectare rubber planting promotion project, Vieng Phoukha District, of Bolisat Ltd., Yunnan Province, People’s Republic of China.”

Despite its size and prominent display, however, the map itself is easy to miss. Aside from its thickly painted title, little else is visible. Its thin black lines and faded yellow patches blend in with the weathered off-white background. The legend, lightly sketched out in the map’s bottom-right corner, has yet to be filled in.

When my Lao colleagues and I first came across this map in 2007, it was barely legible. This was not simply because it was hard to see. Even when the image came into view, it was still impossible to read. Maps make sense because they contain symbols that tie or “index” them to the real world. This map had no visible indices—at least none that our team, a research delegation from Laos’s National Land Management Authority, could make out. The cartography itself gave few visual clues about what the various lines or patches might represent, and no obvious symbols for roads, rivers, villages, or prominent landmarks linked its faintly drawn polygons to the landscape around us. The missing legend didn’t help either. It was as if the whole thing had been drawn to announce the project’s presence without actually giving away anything about its operations.

Our confusion stemmed from the fact that we were seeing this formal geography of rubber plantation “promotion” for the first time. We were from Laos’s national capital, Vientiane, and, for reasons I will get into later, we had few details about either this or other plantation development projects in the
area. For us, the map thus lacked the meaning it carried for local officials and company representatives, who had seen the fleshed-out paper version in the local government Agriculture and Forestry office. They knew two things that we did not: first, that the map’s lines represented the boundaries of local villages and land-use zones derived from an earlier generation of land-use planning maps (which we were not familiar with); and second, that the areas shown faintly in yellow corresponded to the roughly 8,400 hectares that, during this earlier process, had been zoned as agricultural land (*din kasikam*) in the map’s twelve villages.

Because we knew none of this, we were limited to the sorts of inquiries reserved for unprepared visitors: What was the project doing? Where was it working, and with whom? How far along was it? When would the rubber trees mature? Had we understood the map, we might have asked why the project was targeting agriculturally zoned land for conversion to industrial tree crops, a violation of central-government food-security policy designed to prevent the replacement of food crops by industrial tree plantations. We might also have asked how the project was impacting local landholdings since, as we would later learn, the project’s greatest conversions of food-production land to rubber plantations were in the district’s poorest and most socially vulnerable villages. Finally, we might have pushed harder to find out exactly what project planners and local authorities meant by rubber plantation “promotion” (*songserm*), since later we would discover that this term meant different things in different places.

These were the questions that mattered. As it was, however, the map confronted us as an inscrutable black box. Unable to open it, we could only ask the polite questions reserved for visitors.

**Rereading Transnational Land Access**

Over the last decade, the proliferation of transnational land deals like those my colleagues and I had been investigating has become increasingly recognized as a coherent, if complex, phenomenon. Sometimes termed a new “global land grab”—or more properly but less captivatingly, a new global land rush (since only some of the land targeted has actually been acquired)—the linking of individual land deals to a larger pattern of transnational land access entered public consciousness around the time of the 2008 global financial crisis. Embodying a more explicitly interventionist, state-managed model of international cooperation, transnational land deals have generated concerns about land dispossession and foreign land access across the global...
South, as well as more specific questions about the new geopolitics of development aid and infrastructure exemplified by China’s rise. As these concerns have remained current in the post-2008 landscape, they have helped re-center attention to geopolitics in the sense discussed by critical geographers and other scholars: as not just about geostrategic relations among states, but also about how land and the social relations that surround it shape the reconfiguration of political space, both sub- and transnationally.

In the first decade of the 2000s, the economic and institutional linkages between agriculture, property, and finance deepened as sovereign and private wealth increasingly entered the global agribusiness arena. This coincided and overlapped with the emergence of more explicitly state-managed approaches to development, taking different forms in different contexts but, in general, reacting to the social instability created by the dominant market-fundamentalist (or neoliberal) approach of the preceding decades. China figured centrally here, having embraced a more regulated form of state capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s and, with the turn of the millennium, having begun to mobilize its substantial economic power into state-backed foreign investment and development cooperation abroad. This all came together in the buildup to the 2008 financial crisis, as private investors increasingly diversified into commodities as a way to hedge against stock market volatility, and a number of countries—worried about the effects of this hedging on their own commodity imports (both food and otherwise)—began to pursue direct land access abroad. When GRAIN, an organization allied with the global peasant movement La Via Campesina, helped break the “global land grab” story in late 2008, there was a sense among many people I knew in Southeast Asia that the rest of the world was finally starting to catch up with what had already been going on there for a few years.

Much of the initial urgency came from a public intervention by the director general of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Jacques Diouf, in late 2008. A few months earlier, in June, the FAO had hosted a Conference on World Food Security in Rome aimed at addressing the recent spike in global food prices and the associated wave of unrest across the global South. At the time, Diouf had called for “innovative new solutions” to the chronic problem of agricultural underinvestment in the global South, including “partnership or joint-venture agreements” between, “on the one hand, those countries that have the financial resources and on the other, those that possess land, water and human resources.” Summer 2008 had seen the announcement of numerous transnational farmland deals across sub-Saharan Africa and Central, South, and Southeast Asia, mostly involving

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state-linked companies from across Asia, and often in the tens to hundreds of thousands of hectares each.\textsuperscript{13} In October of the same year, in a widely quoted article on “The Food Crisis and the Wrong Solutions,” Diouf used some very blunt language to clarify his earlier remarks. Criticizing these new land deals as “unequal international relations and short-term mercantilist agriculture,” he worried publicly about the creation of “a neocolonial pact” for the provision of raw materials to the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{14}

Diouf’s comments circulated widely. It was one thing for the head of the FAO to advocate increased investment in agricultural development, and quite another to warn of an emerging neocolonial pact targeting poor countries across the global South. Lending official legitimacy to what might have been otherwise dismissed as activist concerns, his comments also helped cement an explicitly geopolitical framing onto the new land rush. Exemplified by headlines invoking “the new farms race” (Toronto \textit{Globe and Mail}), “agricultural imperialism” (\textit{New York Times Magazine}), and a “great land grab to safeguard [rich countries’] food supply” (the \textit{Guardian}),\textsuperscript{15} this discourse reflected the resonance of the new land deals with the land grabs of the late-colonial era. Decrying a new scramble for Africa and beyond,\textsuperscript{16} many Western observers were particularly worried about the global rise of China and other emerging economies like India and Brazil; more than a few preferred to focus their concerns here rather than on the linkages to Wall Street and the 2008 financial crisis that also figured centrally in GRAIN’s initial missive. \textit{The Economist}, for instance, published a piece in May 2009 on “outsourcing’s third wave” that wondered whether farmland might be the next logical step in globalization via comparative advantage. But in the same breath—and highlighting the tension between optimistic and more critical takes on the new land deals—the magazine readily rolled them into what it criticized as “Chinese neocolonialism” in Africa, described in a pointed example as “going down well with Mozambique’s elite.”\textsuperscript{17}

Laos became caught up directly in this discourse. Barely a month after GRAIN’s report and Diouf’s article, the \textit{Guardian} published a multipart feature with the headline, quoted above, about the “great land grab.” This included a map based on GRAIN’s data that purported to show over 7.5 million hectares that had been purchased by governments and private companies from South Korea (which had allegedly bought 2.3 m ha), China (2.1 m ha), Saudi Arabia (1.6 m ha), the United Arab Emirates (1.3 m ha), and Japan (0.3 m ha). The locations of this “world land grab” included Indonesia (1.6 m ha), Madagascar (1.3 m ha), the Philippines (1.24 m ha), Sudan (1.1 m ha), Pakistan (900,000 ha), Laos (700,000 ha), and Mongolia (270,000 ha); Laos’s numbers, given its relatively small size, made it the most “grabbed” country shown.\textsuperscript{18}
The feature also included a feature story from Laos, which was arguably the most important piece of the set since it helped ground the almost unbelievably large numbers shown on the map.\textsuperscript{19} Echoing The Economist’s concern with national elites benefiting from foreign land deals at the expense of local citizens, the Guardian feature implied that Lao officials had abdicated their public duties and were instead giving away land to line their own pockets. “The situation is completely out of control,” it quoted one foreign adviser in Vientiane as saying; “It’s a fire sale. People in power are just desperate to get their hands on the money so they don’t miss out. For the companies coming in it’s a massive land grab.” The feature also quoted a prominent historian of modern Laos, who described the situation as “simply a matter of greed. Officials are grabbing what they can. Companies need land and are prepared to pay well. It all goes under the table.”\textsuperscript{20}

These passages exemplify a common way of talking about transnational land deals. Using what I call an “authority gap” narrative, they examine the interests and motivations of companies and governments that seek land abroad, but focus exclusively on corruption and elite self-interest when trying to explain the actions of host states. The phrase itself comes from a 2010 story in the Asia Times Online, a widely read English-language media outlet in Southeast Asia, that decried what it termed “Chinese expansionism” across northern Laos, in special economic zones, corporate rubber plantations, and the growing (and allegedly underestimated) Chinese population in northern Lao cities. The article bemoaned what it called “the authority gap in a growing number of areas in the country where Vientiane has effectively ceded sovereignty to Beijing.”\textsuperscript{21} In this narrative, as in the other pieces quoted above, local elites and corrupt officials are the ones in charge: foreign land deals and actually governing are framed as mutually incompatible. The authority-gap narrative has a number of variants, including references to “weak governance”—a staple of the development industry—or, in some cases, “anarchic” or “frontier” development.\textsuperscript{22} Whatever the language, the message is the same: “The situation is completely out of control.”

Despite their popularity, these explanations miss a lot. First of all, they ignore the significant role of host states in creating both the legal and the economic feasibility for large-scale land deals. By conjuring a weak or absent state, authority-gap narratives ignore the histories of progressively stronger state ownership of rural hinterlands, first during the colonial era and, more recently, by newly independent countries of the global South, whose nationalization of untitled lands during the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s reflected both elite self-interest and the prevailing socialist winds of Third World nationalism.\textsuperscript{23} Authority-gap narratives likewise miss the more recent
policy changes, often from the 1990s, that drastically lowered taxation rates (on land, profits, and commodity exports) and altered national land laws in a bid to attract greater foreign investment to poor countries. While often implemented by Southern governments under pressure from Northern lenders—whether as part of structural adjustment packages or more “voluntary” alternatives—these adjustments imply strategic state action under conditions of structural duress, not the absence of governing per se.

Most importantly, authority-gap narratives ignore the socio-spatial unevenness that transnational land deals invariably manifest. Because they are negative descriptions—accounts of what is missing rather than what is actually going on—authority-gap narratives have little to say about why foreign land deals have been targeted into certain regions with good farmland but not others, or why they achieve large-scale enclosures in some places yet run up against prohibitively strong resistance elsewhere. As researchers have studied the global land rush over the last decade-plus, they have become increasingly convinced that, as one senior scholar put it, “an accelerated process of dispossession is clearly in motion.” Yet as agriculture, energy, and finance merge, and as sovereign wealth becomes an increasingly global force, questions of how and where this “accelerated dispossession” is taking place are increasingly intertwined. If accelerated dispossession is “clearly in motion,” what enables that motion to gain traction on the ground? What makes a land rush into a land grab in some cases, but not others?

GOVERNING ENCLOSURE

Echoing earlier studies of globalization, scholars have been quick to point out that transnational land deals complicate traditional notions of territorial sovereignty, especially when the areas involved—some exceeding tens of thousands of hectares—are large enough that they spill from economic space (property) into political space (territory). The legal scholar Liz Alden Wily, for instance, offers an excellent account of the new land rush’s enabling conditions, from colonial land law to postindependence hinterland nationalization to neoliberal-era structural adjustments of national tax and land policy. Similar ingredients drive anthropologist Pál Nyíri’s theorization of Chinese land deals abroad in the wake of the country’s “Going Out” policy, announced in 2000. Positing a “return of the concession”—a colonial-era model of outsourced political space aimed at stimulating global trade—Nyíri builds on anthropologist Aihwa Ong’s studies of “graduated sovereignty” in the special economic zones created during the 1990s across the global South. Nyíri emphasizes the sharing or blurring of national sovereignty by
large-scale Chinese land deals in sub-Saharan Africa and the Southeast Asian borderlands; the difference now, as compared to the 1990s, is that zonal exceptions, formerly limited in size and number, have become so extensive that they seem to be changing the fabric of “normal” political space itself.

Noting the prevalence of state-linked firms in these “new enclosures,” many scholars have used the Marxian language of primitive accumulation to link land’s removal from the protective arena of national law and regulation to a new round of imperial plunder. The sociologist Saskia Sassen, for instance, sees the new land deals as “contemporary versions of primitive accumulation” and argues that the abandonment of Keynesian commitments to social protection that flourished across the global South during the mid-twentieth century has begun “a systematic repositioning of territory” away from national space and instead as “‘needed’ resources” for the rest of the world. “One brutal way of putting it,” she writes, “is to say that the natural resources of much of [the global South now] count more than the people on those lands count as consumers and as workers.”

Scholars also highlight the rising material stakes of land loss as communities throughout the global South have been excluded from the economic benefits of globalization. As anthropologist James Ferguson points out, during the last few decades “whole regions and populations [have found] that they have no ‘[comparative] advantage’ of any kind and are (in some significant measure) simply left out of the global production regime.” This has had important implications for the so-called agrarian transition, which under traditional modernization theory would have viewed state-managed enclosure and resulting forms of social differentiation as a good thing because they helped move labor off the farm and into better jobs and greater productivity in the city. A half century later, these expectations have given way to the more pessimistic reality of today’s highly uneven global economy. As anthropologist Tania Li notes, land deals threaten to displace rural producers “from their ‘inefficient’ farms” amid this “truncated” agrarian transition, where “the anticipated transition from farm to factory is nowhere on the horizon.” In such a context, Jacques Diouf’s warning in the report quoted above—“you can easily imagine the risk of a social outcry when [farmland] falls into foreign hands”—is not just about the “old” nationalisms of blood and soil. It is also, just as importantly, about the heightened stakes of land dispossession today.

I had initially been drawn to northwestern Laos because local authorities there seemed to be trying to take this threat seriously. In late 2005 three northwestern provinces—including Luang Namtha, the gateway to China’s
Yunnan province and the location of the Vieng Phoukha district—had made a public commitment to embrace Chinese rubber investment using a contract-farming model. Centering on a smallholder-based business model, this contrasted strongly with the large-scale, long-term concessions of putatively state-owned land that predominate in central and southern Laos as well as throughout the global land rush more generally.39 While hardly a cure for the structural marginality that Laos’s upland farmers faced at the precarious end of global commodity chains, market integration based on local landownership rather than state-assisted enclosure seemed like an alternative worth studying. In the months after our initial visit to the Bolisat Ltd. nursery, however, as my colleagues and I developed a better understanding of the new geography of rubber in the area, what we found was initially hard to classify. Our efforts allowed us to make sense of the map described above, as well as the operations of other rubber plantation schemes across the northwest. What we found was a hybrid that combined the state-managed enclosure of a concession scheme with the regulatory invisibility of the “contract farming” label. Buried under the rhetoric of contract farming and cooperative investment with farmers on their own land was a concession-like model of rubber-planting “promotion” that was all the more insidious because of the mostly invisible—and highly socially uneven—land grabbing it facilitated.

Smallholder rubber had indeed taken root in some areas, but its success was modest at best. Independently owned rubber plantations are expensive to establish and thus remained out of reach for most farmers, while contract farming was not taken up widely because of the poor terms that companies typically offered (see ch. 1). A third type of land deal thus emerged to fill the perceived investment gap. This was a type of rubber plantation “promotion” based on state-managed enclosure and wage labor—a model that, despite being officially labeled as a type of contract farming, was in fact much closer to a concession. This regime relied on coercive land zoning to pry land away from local users and allocate it to Chinese companies, and its invention and proliferation across the northwest gave the lie to the promise of “cooperative” investment based on a smallholder model. This concession-like variant was operating in the area that my colleagues and I had visited, and its existence as a sort of dark twin to the much-heralded smallholder model was the wider context of the map we had encountered. In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that project developers and local authorities had kept their maps vague.

It is this mix of enclosure and invisibility that I find especially compelling. If the scholarship summarized above highlights the potential rescaling
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of political and economic space, as well as the heightened material stakes involved, it also raises the question of how transnational enclosures actually work. While Marx’s work on primitive accumulation remains an important touchstone, Li’s point that alternatives to agriculture are increasingly hard to come by in many corners of the global South suggests that the classic model of forced displacement from (rural) farm to (urban) factory is increasingly out of date. Add to this the often nationalist-tinged resistance that, as Diouf warned, has in fact materialized when transnational land deals are seen to benefit primarily foreign actors. Designers of transnational land deals have thus had to think not just about the material logistics of enclosure—how to gain access to good land, water, labor, and infrastructure, and how to process and market the commodities they produce—but also the wider political optics of signing away land to “foreigners.” The bad old days of colonialism and empire are supposed to be over, after all, and development cooperation is ostensibly based on a promise of mutual benefit. As my colleagues and I discovered, managing these optics—via the social targeting of land deals, the controlled and (at least initially) only partial application of enclosure, and the framing of all of this as pro-poor development—was a key part of the enclosure process itself. This was a far cry from the authority gap of a missing state; it was, by contrast, the governing of enclosure by a variety of state officials and institutions, using a whole set of tactics that spanned the realm of the discursive to the intimately material. It is this set of practices—the governing of enclosure—that demands critical attention and that this book examines in detail.

UPLAND GEOPOLITICS

In the chapters that follow, I describe this governmental dimension of transnational land deals in terms of upland geopolitics. The “uplands” of mainland Southeast Asia, including but not limited to the uplands of Laos, are often characterized as the semifforested hills and mountains that separate the region’s major river basins (the Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Red, and so on) where, historically, intensive wet-rice cultivation supported high population densities and state formation. By contrast, the uplands were the spaces in between, traditionally home to ethnic minority groups who practiced dryland shifting (often called “upland” or “hill”) rice cultivation. The mix of physiographic, ecological, and sociopolitical factors here is deliberate and unavoidable: the uplands are a biophysical and socio-ecological landscape, and like the concept of “landscape” itself, they are at once spaces
themselves and a way of looking at space—typically, in this case, from the state-centric vantage point of the lowlands. Depending on when one is referring to them, Southeast Asia’s uplands have thus been characterized as a collection of nonstate spaces located outside the reach of premodern states, a geopolitical fracture zone produced by Cold War conflict, or a resource space inhabited by socially marginal peoples where modern technologies (from roads to gasoline-powered earthmovers to state-defined property rights) are today enabling what James Scott evocatively terms a “last great enclosure.”

In such a context, upland geopolitics refers to the complex relations, both within and among states, that target the uplands, their resources, and their inhabitants as objects of development, extraction, improvement, and control. That the uplands form what geographers call a governable space is reflected in local terminology as well. “Upland geopolitics” is thus a contemporary riff on the Lao word for “politics” (kan-muang), which literally means “the affairs of the muang”—historically, the fundamental unit of political space in lowland Southeast Asia. Today, muang carries both wider and more bounded connotations than it did in precolonial times, but still means something very much like “territory” or “realm.” The difference is that it now also encompasses the upland spaces that were formerly defined in physical, political, and cultural opposition to the lowlands. In contemporary Lao usage, for instance, muang refers both to local administrative districts (e.g., Muang Vieng Phoukha) and to the country as a whole (Muang Lao).

In my usage, this local dimension is especially important because of the ways that politics and economics intersect in hinterland spaces like the uplands. It is not simply that the governing of land, population, and socioeconomic affairs in a given area is inherently political owing to questions of resource allocation—although it certainly is. Today, even as scholars have largely moved beyond the authority-gap narrative and its variants, the explanatory focus, whether one is looking at the global land rush or more recent variants such as “global China,” often remains at the national scale. Without discounting the role of national laws or international relations, or the dilemmas that central-level authorities face when pursuing economic development and national sovereignty simultaneously, my focus is on the ways that local authorities influence and manage transnational land access because of their administrative proximity to putatively “available” upland areas. These on-the-ground workings of transnational land deals are, as we will see, crucial to determining the social distribution of enclosure, as well
as to mediating the relationships between land deals and a range of other state-territorial processes.

Micro-Geopolitics

A central aim of this book is to help explain the uneven geography of transnational land access by showing how legacies of geopolitical conflict can help facilitate enclosure. Transnational land deals often pull in opposite directions at the same time: they are seen as desirable for host states charged with creating economic development; yet they can easily turn politically volatile if the optics work out wrong. The case study at the heart of this book shows how the history of US intervention in the Lao uplands during the Cold War continues to haunt contemporary Lao-Chinese development cooperation, weighing most heavily on those who are not only among the most vulnerable to land loss today but who were also on the losing end of earlier “win-win” strategic cooperation schemes. Given the extensive reach of American intervention abroad, these sorts of multi-decadal legacies are worth taking seriously.

Development projects traffic in the complex and inevitably negotiated politics of force and consent, and transnational land deals in particular incite struggles over enclosure, dispossession, and compensation that wrestle as much with questions of sociopolitical legitimacy as with those of formal law and policy. The terms of engagement for all of these turn on citizenship in practice: the ability to choose a livelihood, to select between competing risks, to have a voice in defining what improvement itself looks like. Property is always a social relation, and especially in legal-pluralist contexts like Laos where multiple factors shape the control over land, land conflicts are never solely about land; the ability to resist or negotiate the terms of development often depends on the capacity—whether individual or collective—to articulate one’s role as a worthy citizen. Conversely, when nationalist-tinged aspersions articulate with long-standing prejudices against certain forms of land use, the enclosure process can operate that much more easily.

Attention to this sort of historically sedimented, place-based “micro-geopolitics” has begun to emerge in recent scholarship, but it remains in short supply. By adding an extended case to the literature, my hope is to help push both popular and scholarly understandings of transnational land politics beyond negative explanations like weak governance or the “authority gap,” and beyond national-level explanations like authoritarian governments or (post)socialist property systems. As a growing literature on resistance in authoritarian contexts shows, the politics of dispossession are
invariably more local and contingent. This book examines the long historical dimension of these contingencies, drawing on scholars of empire, property, and postcoloniality to examine the ways that place-based politics can span multiple eras of transnationality. As the following chapters show, the remnants of American empire’s reach into the Southeast Asian uplands—and indeed into the very concept of “the uplands” themselves—have helped create powerful tools for managing dispossession. If the repositioning of territory is key to making space for land deals today, it is important to see how this process accumulates over decades. Especially at a moment when American empire’s more recent forays seem to be on the wane (in Iraq and, most recently, Afghanistan, for example), the longer-term perspective offered by the case of Laos has potentially wide-reaching application.

Methodologically, I have been inspired by the work of economist Michael Perelman, who highlights what can be gained by examining the logic and practices of those he calls “primitive accumulationists”: the planners and administrators who sit at the nexus of state and corporate power. One of many scholars who, in tracing capitalism beyond Europe and into the global South, have emphasized the overtly coercive dimension of accumulation as not just fundamental to initial inequality but as an ongoing process that keeps people poor, Perelman is especially interested in land. These interests go hand in hand. Especially in the global South, land is a key means through which economically marginal people access and mobilize wealth. Yet Adam Smith’s retrograde explanation for why some are rich and others poor—Marx summarized it as the narrative of the “diligent, frugal elite” versus the “lazy rascals who spend their substance, and more, in riotous living”—still appears with startling regularity among both policymakers and development professionals. Seeing how the coercive redistribution of wealth continues to operate at a structural level provides an important corrective.

Perelman is an especially useful theorist of what we might call partial enclosure. Through his studies of colonial plantation systems, Perelman noted that the model of primitive accumulation described by Marx for England—the full enclosure of land and resulting displacement of the rural population to the city (factory, poorhouse, slum, etc.)—did not occur in situations where, for various reasons, colonial officials and plantation managers preferred to keep rural populations in place. For Perelman, the calculus was one of profit: leaving rural workers enough land for self-provisioning would allow them to survive on lower pay. In the context of transnational land deals, I have found that a similar method—studying the state and corporate planners who calibrate land deals to specific contexts in order to make
them work—helps explain the uneven geography of enclosure. By targeting the greatest enclosures at those communities and landscapes least able to resist them, and by keeping the resulting enclosures partial and out of the way, contemporary “primitive accumulationists” in the Lao-China borderlands seem to have found a winning formula for making transnational land access work.

This “working,” however, looks very different from the vision of permanent livelihoods—spatially fixed, market-integrated production that is accountable to the state both economically and politically—that initially inspired the development schemes examined below. My account of the micro-geopolitics that ultimately made transnational land deals work is thus not just about space, but also about change over time. This operates on two temporal scales, first in the transition from the pre-1975 upland territoriality of American Cold War intervention to the Lao (postrevolution) government’s management of upland territorial affairs during the 1980s’ geopolitical turmoil; and second, during the 2000s, in the slippage from the rhetoric of “win-win” development cooperation with Chinese rubber companies to the realities of managed enclosure. Rather than being a “triple win” for upland farmers, Chinese companies, and Lao authorities, the working of transnational land deals has turned out to be one of cheap land access created and sustained through sociopolitical marginality—a version of the racialized accumulation that underpinned colonial capitalism and, as elsewhere, has been carried forward by postcolonial regimes to do political-economic work in the present. In this case, that work is not only the cheapening of land access but doing so in a way that minimizes potential nationalist-tinged objections about “giving land away” to “the Chinese.”

Illegibility

The politics of spatial information within the state figure centrally here. Exploiting historical legacy to manage land grabbing is a double exploitation, not just of the communities involved but also of a whole country’s tragic past. While there are important nuances and ambiguities, I would like to believe that the managed land grabs I describe below would not have survived close scrutiny by higher-level authorities, especially given the official smallholder-favoring policy rhetoric at the time. So a second issue this book takes up is how and why transnational land deals remain largely out of the view of even the regulators tasked with monitoring them on behalf of national governments. This gets back to the opening sketch above, where my colleagues and I found ourselves lost in the field, so to speak, because we had yet to break through the various barriers that had been quietly erected.
to avoid revealing too many details—even to the central government. These barriers turned on a wider political economy of how land is allocated for “development,” and in particular on the control of forests and potential timber rents. This struggle within the state over land-based value remains alive and well across much of the world and plays a key role in maintaining the opacity that continues to surround many transnational land deals.

As with the place-based politics of enclosure, these internal politics of transnational land access have not been as fully examined as they need to be. Much attention has deservedly gone to critiquing the land-deal inventory efforts that have emerged at a global scale during the first few years of the global land rush. But the subnational, domestic politics of land-deal information are a key reason why global inventory efforts were so fraught in the first place: many states did not know where their own land deals were. Part of the way states achieve what geographer Matthew Hannah calls “the mastery of territory” is through the creation and maintenance of institutions that collect, amalgamate, compare, and analyze statistics about land and its inhabitants. These “statistics”—literally the knowledge of the state—are tools for governing from afar, and their quality and reliability determine in large part the extent to which the everyday work of governing can be centrally managed versus ceded to local authorities. The situation in Laos is thus not an abdication of sovereignty to some foreign power like “Beijing,” but rather a field of struggle within the state over issues like timber rents, land taxes, and the right to regulate business. Central-level authorities sometimes prevail in these struggles. But in other cases, including the Chinese rubber deals in northwestern Laos, the state authority that is present is far more localized and the power of the center much more attenuated.

Bringing these politics of legibility into the story helps resolve one of the long-standing questions about the global land rush: Why has it been so hard to quantify? As soon as GRAIN began publishing maps and statistics about the “global land grab” back in 2008, a debate began—quietly at first, and then more loudly in the sessions and hallways of conferences and the pages of academic journals, white papers, and online databases. These exchanges highlighted the poor quality of the numerical data about transnational land deals, while also converging on a general consensus that the global land rush was a clear and present danger. But what has always been just out of reach is a compelling explanation of why quantitative and cartographic data about the new enclosures is so consistently hard to get. Examining the role of spatial-data politics in ongoing state formation, I show how the paucity of good spatial data is an effect of internal territorial politics within host states like Laos, and is thus part of the global land-rush story rather than simply a
introduction

The global land grab began as a numbers story: a million hectares here, tens or hundreds of thousands of hectares there. One key advance made by scholars such as those involved in the Land Deal Politics Initiative was to help move the debate past the numbers alone, so that critical, engaged research would remain primary when statistics inevitably became destabilized by closer scrutiny. This book takes up this challenge, not as a way to “get past” the numbers, but to locate them within the wider field of social and political struggle within which land deals occur.

The stakes of this struggle matter because even as the “land rush” has itself subsided, transnational land-deal details remain important, whether in the aftermath of earlier land deals or as highlighted in recent scholarship on agrarian change (on contract farming and the “broader forms of dispossession”) or on “global China,” among others. Across the global South, middle-income countries have begun to experiment with redistributive (“neo-welfare”) policies like direct cash transfers as a way to correct the mismatch between the social need for high employment and the much lower demands for labor in today’s global economy. Poor countries like Laos have, thus far, resisted these policies and, in essence, tried to make transnational land deals do the same work of generating rural employment while also maintaining economic growth. If this sounds like wishful thinking—especially in light of the outcomes so far—it is worth noting that the active presence of sovereign wealth in many of the new land deals makes them somewhat different from the resource concessions that have featured in development schemes since the colonial era. While this explicit state role has generated perhaps overly optimistic accounts of “inclusive development” (e.g., in China’s Belt and Road Initiative), it is also a key finding of more critical scholarship, such as the sociologist Ching Kwan Lee’s study of Chinese state capital in Zambia. In the rubber deals of northwestern Laos, what Lee calls the “socially encompassing” flexibility of Chinese state capital (“in contrast to the profit-maximizing logic of private capital”) is represented by a generous Chinese government-subsidy program aimed at replacing opium with licit crops like rubber in the uplands of Myanmar and Laos. While the plantation “promotion” schemes examined below have thus far failed to generate the sorts of social inclusiveness hoped for by both Lao and Chinese policymakers, this stemmed in part from the relatively opaque forms of internal legibility on both sides of the border. In the current era of development cooperation, the more active turn toward the state seems to be here to stay. This means that the sort of legibility politics examined in the latter half of this book will remain key to future debates, even as the specifics of transnational land access continue to change.
ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This book draws on research conducted in Laos and the United States between 2004 and 2018. It began, as many projects do, with questions that have remained even as the locations where I went looking for answers changed. As a doctoral researcher interested in the political ecology of Western development, I initially became interested in Laos thanks to the World Bank placing the country in its global crosshairs with the Nam Theun 2 hydropower project, the first large dam to receive World Bank financing after the late-1990s reform efforts of the World Commission on Dams. My interest then shifted to northwestern Laos during 2005 and 2006, as land politics became a topic of extensive domestic debate and as it became increasingly clear that Chinese development financing was giving Western donors and lenders a run for their money. As the idea of a Beijing rival to the Washington Consensus began to coalesce, northern Laos offered as good a place as any to see if there was indeed a “there” there.

Northwestern Laos drew my attention because of the confluence of two processes there. The first was the rubber boom sketched out above, which resonated with many of my informants not just because it involved China, but also because rubber had become something of a metonym for foreign investment and development cooperation more broadly across rural Laos. With Vietnamese companies in the south, Thai companies in the central provinces, and Chinese companies up north, conversations about rubber had a way of turning into reflections on development more generally, including all of the complexity that the term implies. Rubber was a way to talk about, among other things, the risks and opportunities of modernization, Laos’s place in an increasingly global Mekong region, and the livelihood implications of maps whose legal status was highly ambiguous.

The second process that drew me to the northwest was the building of the Northern Economic Corridor, a road project connecting China’s Yunnan province to Thailand’s Chiang Rai province through the uplands of northern Laos. Built in the early to mid-2000s, this piece of infrastructure helped channel new investment in rubber plantations to places like Vieng Phoukha and exemplified the vision of economic connectivity and regional cooperation embodied in spatial imaginaries like the Greater Mekong Subregion and the Golden Quadrangle. I made a preliminary visit to the northwest in 2005 and eight additional trips there during 2006, 2007, and 2008, during which I observed the corridor’s development and the rubber boom, and assisted Laos’s National Land Management Authority (NLMA) in its effort to get a better inventory of investment projects (both foreign and
domestic) in the area. This period comprised the bulk of my fieldwork in the north. Additionally, I made brief follow-up visits in 2013 and 2018, although only the latter generated sufficient ethnographic data to be included here.

During all of these visits, I focused my research efforts on processes linked to what scholars call the agrarian question: What happens to traditional land use when capitalism arrives? In this case, “capitalism” meant the Northern Economic Corridor, the Chinese rubber boom, and various state efforts to manage their interaction. These efforts produced maps like the one that initially eluded my NLMA colleagues and me, as well as various planning and property-formalization programs for land use that had preceded both the road and the rubber boom, but were also aimed at making land more accessible to economic development. This broader work of studying the multiple formal geographies of land management led me to three additional “research sites” that gave this book its ultimate form. The first two of these were sites for me in the archives only, while the third was both my home base and, as it turned out, a crucial field site, too.

The first is an area called Nam Nyu, located in a remote corner of Laos’s northwestern Bokeo province. The site of a clandestine base built and used by the US Central Intelligence Agency between 1961 and 1972, Nam Nyu sat outside my fieldwork area but its influence drove the historical-legacy angle of my northwestern case study. Various trajectories of human movement connected the uplands of Vieng Phoukha to Nam Nyu and its surroundings during the base’s heyday in the 1960s, as well as during the post-1975 period when the security-oriented resettlement of upland communities occupied the military and civilian agencies of the newly created Lao People’s Democratic Republic. During my fieldwork, I was able to reconstruct some of these resettlement trajectories using interviews and document sources; I later complemented these with historical sources, many of which were available in the secondary literature thanks to a wealth of scholarship on Laos’s “secret war.”

Tracing these various upland trajectories provided key linkages between the remnants of Nam Nyu and the uneven enclosures of the contemporary era.

This project also detours through a second historical landscape, located in the uplands of Bolikhamxai province, in Laos’s central panhandle. Between the eras of US and Chinese cooperation that bracket my study, a third development partner made a key imprint on the upland geopolitics of rural Laos: Sweden. The Lao-Swedish Forestry Project, active in the forested areas east of the national capital between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, provides a crucial missing link between the upland geopolitics of the “hot” Cold War—America’s secret war in Laos, which ended in the early
1970s—and the techniques of differential and managed enclosure that animate the contemporary rubber boom in the northwest. Focusing on an area called Muang Houng, I use archival sources collected in Laos and the United States to chart the emergence of a suite of techniques that, following the discourse of Lao officials in the late 1980s, I refer to collectively as “population management work.” Spanning the gray areas between coercion and consent, these methods ranged from village relocation and consolidation for purposes of securitization and service delivery, to land-use zoning, property formalization, and agricultural extension. My focus on Muang Houng and its surroundings stems from convenience and access—I am aware of no other area with a comparable public archival record. Despite the challenges inherent in archival sources, the Muang Houng landscape illustrates a crucial dimension of what I call “postwar Laos” by showing how population management work arose in a period of national insecurity and was then repurposed, beginning in the late 1980s, for economic development. Tellingly, Lao leaders at the time referred to this era of transition as “a new battlefield where no gunfire can be heard.” They meant it literally.

Third and finally, Laos’s capital Vientiane provided me with an important gateway to both archival sources and the urban milieu of development professionals, bureaucratic politics, and land and natural resource policy. My archival work there provided access to most of the policy documents examined in the chapters that follow, as well as to various development project documents that drew me toward more detailed historical research after I returned to the United States. My time in Vientiane also yielded contacts in the development community without whom this research would have been impossible. These included staff at international organizations, donor and lender offices; government staff in various ministries and other offices; private-sector consultants; and members of Lao civil society. In addition to providing institutional support for my fieldwork, my time in Vientiane alerted me to, and then steeped me in, the regulatory struggle within the Lao state. These struggles, almost as much as those on the ground, are central to the analysis that follows.

This book constitutes what I think is best called an ethnography of upland government. I use this phrase to distinguish my efforts from an impressive body of ethnographic work that uses long-term fieldwork with single or multiple communities to bring local, often indigenous, perspectives into more public view. My project is somewhat different. For both practical and ethical reasons, I chose not to get too close to the communities that populate my field site, many of which were on the losing end of the land deals I studied. While some of their experiences and perspectives come through—as

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they must, in order to convey the processes of land grabbing that occurred—my ethnographic attention is directed more upward than downward: to the practices of governing that form the nexus of interaction between land, local populations, and the state. My work thus fits more directly into a long line of research on “studying up” to examine the workings of power in practice, although in my case that means looking at multiple actors whose power interlocks and often competes: initially, provincial Lao authorities in the northwest, development bank planners, and Chinese policymakers; and then later, by turns, American Cold War strategists, foreign and domestic advisers to state forestry operations, Lao district authorities, Chinese companies, and central-level Lao authorities. Together, these examinations add up to a study of contemporary “primitive accumulationists,” actors whose efforts—whether in concert or in competition with one another—produce the uneven enclosures and complex geopolitics that comprise the recent land rush. I begin this examination on the ground: where the rubber meets the road.