CHAPTER FOUR

Micro-Geopolitics

*Turning Battlefields into Marketplaces, 2000–2018*

Where it happens, war provokes a rearrangement of the ways
territory and people are administered, . . . of the ways resources
are tapped and distributed, of the framework in which disputes
are settled.

—ACHILLE MBEMBE

NESTLED among the government office compounds that sprawl
west from the town’s main road, Luang Namtha’s provincial
museum is easy to miss. A modest building, its single room con-
tains displays that emphasize northwestern Laos’s impressive ethnic diver-
sity. Ornate bronze drums, richly patterned cotton weavings, and
Chinese-style calligraphy line the walls, showcasing the “fine multi-ethnic
traditions” lauded in the Lao PDR’s constitution. Agricultural tools also fea-
ture prominently, highlighting the local diversity of farming traditions,
from the wet-rice lowlands of the provincial capital and the Muang Sing Val-
ley to the surrounding uplands that make up the majority of the province’s
land area.

Museums tell stories, and this one is no exception. As the exhibit winds
its way around the building’s interior, its artifacts narrate a shift from cul-
tural heritage to political history, the mists of time and tradition giving way
to the high drama of the mid-twentieth century. Highlighting the Battle of
Namtha—the five-week campaign in early 1962 when the Pathet Lao drove
the US-backed Royal Lao Army from the provincial capital and southwest
toward the Thai border—the exhibit ends with an array of traditional
weaponry and rusting yet fearsome machine guns. Conjuring a multi-ethnic population defined not just by its heterogeneous traditions but by its unified action, the exhibit is distinctly on message.¹

Yet a closer look raises questions. One of the museum’s most visible displays is a hand-painted wall map that dominates the building’s entryway. On one level, it seems to tell a similar story of unity in diversity, showing the province’s five districts dotted with “ethnic minority villages,” each ethnicity marked by a corresponding color. The map’s categorization and spatial precision exemplifies the legibility of the modern census, telling viewers that Luang Namtha’s population is well inventoried, accounted for not just culturally and historically but politically and administratively as well.² But while many of the villages have a predictable geography—lowland groups like the Tai Lue and Tai Dam line the rivers, while Lao Theung and Akha villages are spread thinly across the uplands—other groups seem distinctly out of place. The “Yao” and “Kui,” for instance, are widely celebrated as skilled hunters and upland farmers, both in the museum and elsewhere; the province’s central massif is marked on old French maps as the Yao Mountains, for instance, while the Kui are famed forest hunters.³ The museum map, in contrast, tells a different story. Yao villages are nowhere near the Yao Mountains, appearing instead as a string of villages on the Muang Sing Plain, outside the district center on the road to the Chinese border. Kui villages, similarly, comprise an enclave on the outskirts of Vieng Phoukha, a line of six gray dots along the road heading north from town (fig. 4.1). Meanwhile, the district’s western region—the area where Kui and Yao villages appear on earlier maps—appears as empty space.

These mismatches are instructive. Even as the museum map simplifies (few villages in Laos are ethnically homogeneous), it hints at the extensive social reorganization that has taken place in the northwestern uplands over the last four decades. Some of this is well understood. Since the 1990s, upland reorganization in general, and involuntary village resettlement and consolidation in particular, have drawn increasing and often critical attention in Laos.⁴ As numerous studies have shown, bringing remote villages closer to infrastructure and rural services, often apparently with a goal of freeing up hinterland forests for state use, has had major negative impacts, from the health consequences of moving highland villages down into warmer malarial zones to the consolidation-driven land loss and associated “new poverty” that geographer Jonathan Rigg has aptly called a “policy-induced Malthusian squeeze.” Yet as the museum map implies, there has been more to this than the corralling of upland populations and the primitive accumulation of forestland—space that is “uninhabited, covered by forest, and
administered by state agencies,” as geographer Peter Vandergeest put it in an early and thoughtful critique.6 As in the central panhandle, the northwest was both a hot spot for antigovernment insurgency and a major center for industrial forestry in the years after the Lao PDR’s establishment. But while territorial affairs there have followed a similar trajectory, combining politico-military and economic rationales, their population management dynamics have been more complex. As some upland groups were cleared out, others were left in place or even brought in.7

Uneven upland reorganization has articulated with the enclosure processes of the rubber boom via what I conceptualize as micro-geopolitics, a term that gestures to the ways that contemporary processes of enclosure have become grounded in and shaped by earlier geopolitical conflicts. Enclosure is an enduring feature of capitalist development, and the differential aspects of enclosure processes—some areas and some populations endure far more than others—are inevitably a function of the interplay of historical and emergent geographies. Consideration of local, place-based histories, rather than international relations per se, is important when analyzing the geopolitical dimensions of transnational land deals, as are the ways that Cold War violence continues to structure state-population relations in former

Figure 4.1 Museum map detail.
battlefield landscapes. Southeast Asia’s transformation of “battlefields into marketplaces” began as an aspiration: a call to move beyond the political fractures of the Cold War toward a more prosperous and shared future. Yet as scholars like Cedric Robinson and Aihwa Ong have shown, preexisting social categories are all too often hitched to processes of differential value—of life, land, labor, rights, and so on—when such social and spatial differences help facilitate capitalist accumulation. Cruelly, ironically, when examined on the ground, the transformation of battlefields into marketplaces appears more like a perpetuation of the Cold War’s uneven human geography. Rather than replacing geopoliticized forms of social difference with modes of citizenship and equality appropriate to peacetime, development processes have capitalized on earlier fractures to facilitate ongoing enclosure and dispossession. This perpetuation, the smuggling of US-style denationalization into present-day Lao land politics, is a form of postwar legacy that demands our attention.

To show how this took place, I follow an approach that is broadly inspired by Michael Perelman’s work on the history of enclosure, albeit with adjustments inspired by additional scholarship in the Marxian and Foucaultian traditions. Perelman examined the logic and tactics of those he called the “primitive accumulationists”—plantation managers, colonial officials, and others who worked at the nexus of state and corporate power—to understand how enclosure practices became “calibrated” to particular historical situations. This is important since, as should be clear from my earlier discussions of population management work, fixity and integration via partial enclosure (rather than displacement via complete enclosure) have often been the aims of state action in the Lao uplands. But if Perelman’s work focuses on the rationalities of those he studied, my interest is more in the emergent forms of territorial power that developed as multiple rationalities collided, competed, and combined. In northwestern Laos, this multiplicity is important: enclosure processes there involved multiple sets of actors—state authorities, rubber companies, development agencies, and upland residents themselves—each of whom had their own powers and liabilities, as well as their own internal differences. Within the state’s horizontal bureaucracy, for example, provincial Agriculture and Forestry officials often tended to champion “3 + 2” rubber schemes, while their counterparts in Planning and Investment departments favored “4 + 1”; each reflected their own institutional interests. At the district level, meanwhile, territorial affairs reflected a range of intersecting concerns about local livelihoods, taxation, natural resource management, and security issues. Inevitably, these played out differently in various locales.
In such a context, some plans come to naught while others are twisted almost unrecognizably as they move from theory into practice. Enclosure is always a struggle—a process—and while it would be foolish to ignore plans and intentions completely, it is the outcomes that ultimately matter. Foucault’s concept of micropolitics is useful here. Echoing Marx’s critique of the “commodity fetish,” Foucault advised against thinking of power like a simple object that can be passed from person to person.10 Power is a social relation and needs to be studied in its native habitat, so to speak, from the ground up. This “ascending” approach to power, Foucault emphasized, differs markedly from a top-down approach focused on “who has power” (“What is going on in his head, this man who has power? What is he trying to do?”),11 which often leads, in my experience, to variants on what I have called the “authority gap” narrative. If one begins only with plans, laws, and regulations, complexity on the ground all too often looks like implementation failure, illegality, even anarchy—terms that appear with some regularity in development discourse.12 On the other hand, studying what Foucault called power’s “infinitesimal mechanisms,” each with “their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics”—and examining how these get “invested, colonized, used, . . . extended, and so on by increasingly general mechanisms” of control13—offers an approach that, while hardly simple, is at least adequate to the complexity at hand.

THE SCRAMBLE FOR THE LOWER UPLANDS

The district of Vieng Phoukha illustrates the confluence of forces that brought Chinese rubber to northwestern Laos. For Lao leaders rubber exemplified both a vision for the desired upland agrarian transition to “permanent livelihoods” and, via the investment and state subsidies offered by China’s “Going Out” policy, a means to finance it. Channeled through regional infrastructure initiatives like the NEC, and shaped by various regulatory disagreements, Chinese investment became grounded in Laos’s upland interior. Vieng Phoukha, because of its location in the southwestern part of the province, was sufficiently removed from the immediate Lao-China border that local social networks had not already brought rubber to the district when investors’ land-finding efforts began there in the early 2000s. These efforts targeted the lower uplands under 800 meters where rubber was most likely to survive and produce economically, and focused especially on interior regions where rubber was not already established: Vieng Phoukha, Long, and Na Le districts in Luang Namtha, and provinces like
Bokeo, Oudomxai, and Luang Prabang, located respectively to the west and south of Luang Namtha.

While some of these efforts were successful, a number of Chinese companies nonetheless ran afoul of the regulatory struggle described in chapter 1. Vieng Phoukha exemplified this as well. The Sino-Lao Rubber Company, for instance, whose disagreement with provincial authorities led to their ultimately giving up in Luang Namtha and focusing instead on Oudomxai and Luang Prabang, undertook significant surveying and negotiation in Vieng Phoukha in the months leading up to mid-2006. In May of that year, the company reached what it thought was an agreement with district authorities to “cooperate for poverty alleviation” through the development of “about 1,000 hectares” of rubber in six villages in the southwestern part of the district (map 4.1). But reflecting the significant room to maneuver that remained almost a year after the three-province “agreement” on “3+2,” the Sino-Lao plan was amended—fatally, it turns out—by district authorities barely a month after it was signed. The initial agreement had specified a 35–65 percent split between farmers and the company, respectively; this was reversed in June to 65–35 because of what a district-level order described as “a mistake” in the initial MOU. Precisely what kind of mistake this was, however, seems to have been deliberately unspecified. The wording was imprecise and, like many government documents, can be read in different ways. But given the competing versions of bilateral rubber cooperation described in chapter 1, it seems clear that the two versions presented in the initial versus the corrected plans—35–65 versus 65–35 percent splits—represented the very same debate about business models that was at issue at the provincial level (a concession-like “4+1” for the first versus a smallholder-focused “3+2” for the second). When provincial authorities later refused Sino-Lao’s plans to work in Luang Namtha, they were likely reflecting this kind of district-level pushback. And in correcting the earlier “mistake,” Vieng Phoukha authorities in fact seemed to be insisting on a “3+2”-type project: one based largely on farmers’ own land and labor. This would have been a world apart from the tree-division model that Sino-Lao likely thought it had secured with the district.

A second major Chinese company also came up empty after courting Vieng Phoukha authorities in 2006, early 2007, or both. This effort was by the Yunnan Rubber Company, a subsidiary of Yunnan State Farms, and focused on a cluster of villages in the district’s southeast (map 4.1). Like Sino-Lao to the west, the company’s aim was to assemble a large company plantation from territory in multiple adjacent villages, a strategy pursued by
concessionaires across the country. The district technical staffer I spoke to about it, after the plan had already been rejected, described Yunnan’s proposal as an attempt to build on its recent (but at the time already controversial) land concession in Namtha district, which was a multi-hundred-hectare company plantation located south of the provincial capital. Like the Sino-Lao plan, Yunnan’s plan for Vieng Phoukha ran afoul of local authorities because of its insistence on a company plantation rather than a contract-farming scheme. The difference here was that the district rejected the company directly rather than being preempted by the province.
Thus, of the three major Chinese rubber companies with active land-finding activities in 2006 (map 4.1), only Bolisat Ltd. succeeded in developing a business operation. On one level, this was likely a function of pure economic geography. Of the three companies, Bolisat Ltd. had secured what was arguably the best cluster of target villages, since it had much more land under 800 meters in elevation and slightly better road access (via the NEC) to the Chinese border. So it is possible—and judging from Bolisat Ltd.’s operations, described below, it is indeed likely—that Sino-Lao and Yunnan judged the risk of operating in the outer reaches of Vieng Phoukha to be such that only a concession-centered operation made business sense. In fact, Bolisat Ltd. seems to have made that very same judgment: much of its latex supply would ultimately come from company plantations developed in Khet Nam Fa. But here we also need to consider the optics of enclosure. Bolisat Ltd. was constructed discursively as a mix of “3 + 2” and “4 + 1” operations in which the former was the norm, and the latter—taking place in only four of the company’s sixteen (later expanded to twenty-two) target villages—was the exception. In framing itself as a mostly “3 + 2” project, Bolisat Ltd. differed significantly from Sino-Lao and Yunnan. In hindsight, this seems to have been a crucial move in allowing the company to get a foothold in the district.

Looking at the actual geography of enclosure that emerged, however, inverts this narrative; being mostly “3 + 2” may have been a good opening move, but it was not a long-term recipe for economic operations. As explained in chapter 1, the evolution of “contract farming”–based business models in the northwest saw the managed enclosure of the “4 + 1” model (achieved via the division of trees or land rather than latex) emerge as a response to low farmer interest in “3 + 2.” In the case of Bolisat Ltd., this slippage occurred largely between 2005 and 2008, as the company pursued its “promotion” (songserm) efforts across its various target villages at the same time that it was also developing a “demonstration garden” (suan sathit) and various “4 + 1” plantations in the villages immediately surrounding its nursery operation. As the “3 + 2” efforts plateaued well below the 3,000-hectare quota listed in the company’s contract, the latter continued to expand. This process was facilitated as much by local authorities as by the company; as shown in the next section, Bolisat Ltd.’s success in land-finding was largely due to the fact that it—rather than Sino-Lao or Yunnan—happened to get Khet Nam Fa as a target area.

The village heads I spoke to in 2007 and 2008 affirmed that there was relatively low farmer interest in “3 + 2”: often the number of participating households was in the single digits. At the same time, they also described
the parallel development of the larger company plantations in the form of both the demonstration garden near the nursery and the “4 + 1” plantations in the nearby villages of Khet Nam Fa. One especially informative account came from an interview I conducted with a local official and a group of elders in the village where Bolisat Ltd. had its nursery. This took place just up the road from the site of my colleagues’ and my first encounter with the company’s project map, described in the book’s opening sketch; part of our response to that initial bewilderment was to talk more to village-level officials and, often, other residents who happened to be around. These conversations were tricky. As scholars have noted and as I witnessed, village officials are inevitably pulled between the conflicting pressures of downward accountability to their local constituents and upward accountability to state and party officials. Their responses thus tended to alternate between evasive and vague, and brutally candid. Often, prompts from the nonofficials present helped spur the emergence of crucial details.

Residents of the nursery village had had a front-row seat for Bolisat Ltd.’s operations, but had also managed to dodge the bulk of its worst enclosures. They dated the nursery’s development to 2002–4, just as the NEC was getting off the ground, and the demonstration garden to the two or three years that followed (roughly 2005–8). This “garden” was in fact a large company plantation, a section of which is pictured in chapter 1 (see fig. 1.1). It straddled the boundary with the neighboring village, and in a pattern replicated across the country, it had taken land from both. As compensation for the land lost to both the nursery and part of the demonstration garden, Bolisat Ltd. gave village residents three hundred rubber seedlings per household. For most households that seems to have been as far as it went; some reportedly planted the seedlings, but the active trade in seedlings in the area, coupled with the widespread lack of interest in rubber by poorer farmers (discussed above) meant that many had likely sold them. Six or seven households, in contrast, took additional seedlings from Bolisat Ltd. under the company’s “3 + 2” arrangement, while about three times as many (“about twenty,” I was told) purchased additional seedlings of their own to raise independently. These latter two groups were described to me as wealthier households in the village, matching the pattern of smallholder rubber development described in chapter 1. And even more tellingly for the events that followed, when the company offered the residents of the nursery village its “4 + 1” option—“if the family has only land and the company does the rest”—no one took them up on it.

This story changed significantly as one moved into the neighboring villages of Khet Nam Fa. There the picture of limited enclosure, calculated
compensation, and a degree of voluntary choice gave way to one of “4+1” plantations imposed from outside and much larger loss of land. In fact, both of these regimes reflect the notion of socially available land that I introduced in chapter 1. In the nursery village, land was made available by district authorities for both the nursery and part of the demonstration garden. Much of this land had already been in use; LFA zoning maps produced just a few years before Bolisat Ltd. arrived show the area that became the company’s plantation as a mix of agricultural land—much of which had been sufficiently “improved” to have been demarcated cadastrally into individual farmers’ plots—and, to a lesser extent, forest designated for “local use” (pa somxai).23 When this land was “needed,” district authorities provided it through what I have variously called “state land management” and managed enclosure. However, even while residents of the nursery village had been unable to resist the plantations’ imposition in the first place—one speculated, when I asked why their village had been chosen, that someone in the village “knew someone from the district Agriculture and Forestry office”—the availability of the village’s land was nonetheless fairly limited. Compensation had been provided, residents had had the option to refuse “4+1” plantations, and at the end of the day, the land lost to the company had numbered only in the tens of hectares.

The same was not true in Khet Nam Fa, where enclosures were in the multiple hundreds of hectares, the compensation much less, and the “4+1” model imposed from outside. Before examining this in detail, the next section provides crucial context by examining the history of Vieng Phoukha’s western frontier. This history gave rise to the social relations that would later structure the interactions between Khet Nam Fa’s residents, district authorities, and Bolisat Ltd. As the last two sections of the chapter show, the process of postwar upland reorganization that took place on the district’s western frontier would create a very different model of social land availability in the years when Bolisat Ltd. came looking for land. It would be these social relations that governed the distribution of enclosure during the land-finding of the early and mid-2000s.

THE INTERNAL FRONTIER

As in Laos’s central panhandle (ch. 3), state efforts to manage territory and population after 1975 in western Vieng Phoukha reflected a mix of politico-military and economic concerns. The area sat just east of the old Nam Nyu special zone (ch. 2), and following the creation of Bokeo province in 1982—by essentially splitting the former Houakhong province into southwestern
and northeastern portions—western Vieng Phoukha became a sort of internal frontier space: heavily forested, lightly roaded, and targeted by a mix of pacification and forestry efforts from both sides of the new provincial border. Many of the details of this history remain beyond my reach, especially during the 1980s when the area was a hot spot for what one observer characterized in 1991 as “the continuing low-level insurgency against the present government.” But security remained an issue into the 1990s as well, and events of this period are easier to reconstruct. The spatial dynamics of these events were nonetheless complicated by the involvement of multiple and often competing state actors, as well as by a politically diverse upland population that reflected the earlier geography of war. Unlike the model developed in chapter 3, where population management work focused on upland groups that state authorities saw as both a political and an economic threat, in western Vieng Phoukha it was not simply that forests were developed and populations corralled. Those things happened, but the pressure on forests from rival political jurisdictions, along with the imperatives of supporting the livelihood needs of those citizens who had been on the “right” side of the revolution, introduced added complexity. Security efforts thus juggled not only the problems of a waning insurgency but also the economic pressures to expand and harness the district’s resource base for the benefit of both elites and at least some of its poorer citizens.

In my research, this manifested in different ways described below, but was summarized nicely in a 2007 conversation I had with a district officer I had gotten to know because of his involvement in making LFA zoning maps. We were discussing the Bolisat Ltd. project, and he recounted a recent confrontation with a visiting official from Bokeo who had seen the paper version of the nursery map that I discuss in the book’s opening sketch. The visiting official, with an eye to the timber in the provincial borderlands, had claimed that an unmapped area located just west of the map’s westernmost village was therefore inside Bokeo. On one level, my informant admitted, this was an entirely fair reading of the map. Districts are made up of villages, after all, and a map that showed village territories on the edge of the district thus showed the edge of the district itself. But this is the problem with maps: they show a static version of territory that is, in practice, anything but. Many of the district’s best forest resources, he explained to me, sat outside villages; these were “district forests rather than village forests,” he emphasized. Managed village resettlement offered a way to incorporate these forests into the district, bringing “external” forest officially “in” via the creation of new borderland villages.
Explaining this required my informant to take a step back, since in the Lao context resettlement is often considered in terms of its success (or failure) in improving livelihoods, and frequently involves corralling upland populations into centralized rather than peripheral locations (as in ch. 3). But resettlement here, he explained, also needed to be understood in terms of its role in serving state efforts to manage natural resources, in particular frontier forests. He gave a recent example where Vieng Phoukha had lost a chunk of territory to Na Le district because that district’s governor had mobilized some of his constituents to resettle in a contested border area; this had changed the facts on the ground, so to speak, and strengthened Na Le’s hand in an ongoing boundary negotiation. But this worked both ways. Vieng Phoukha’s governor was, my informant explained, currently in the process of trying to do the very same thing to Long district by convincing residents from one of Vieng Phoukha’s interior villages to move to the district’s northern border area. This would have a twofold benefit, he explained, helping consolidate government control in a rapidly expanding part of the district while also relieving population pressure on the Nam Ha National Protected Area (which straddles much of the province’s interior, covering the “Yao Mountains” mentioned in the opening sketch). With the outcome of that gambit still uncertain, my informant returned to the example of the Bolisat Ltd. map. The governor, he noted with satisfaction, had sent in a detachment of soldiers to help guard the forest against any incursion from Bokeo.

Two villages on Vieng Phoukha’s western edge offer a more detailed view of this intertwining of state territoriality and frontier resettlement; and in doing so, they also bring into focus the often harder-to-see inward displacements linked to pacification and securitization. These twin forms of state-managed resettlement—enrolling trusted populations to settle and even expand the frontier, and sending less trusted populations to the already-settled interior (map 4.2)—manifest the uneven citizenship that will ultimately lead us to Khet Nam Fa, where it will help to explain the uneven enclosures there in Bolisat Ltd.’s “4 + 1” plantation scheme.

The first village, which I will call Ban Deng, is the westernmost village in the Bolisat Ltd. project. As both maps 4.1 and 4.2 show, this village exemplifies the expansive territoriality described by my informant above: its settlement, in 2003, took place after the provincial boundary had been drawn with Bokeo, and its LFA exercise seems to have conveniently extended the village well into Long district to the north, as well as slightly into Bokeo province to the west. Surveyed by district technicians (including my informant above) at over 9,000 hectares, Ban Deng is one of the two largest villages in
the district (by far), rivaled in area only by Ban Oudom, the second frontier village discussed below. By comparison, Vieng Phoukha’s other, interior villages are, like most villages in rural Laos, much smaller, with territories in the range of hundreds to at most a few thousand hectares.\textsuperscript{30}

Of course, lines on the map are one thing; facts on the ground are quite another. When I visited Ban Deng in late 2007, Bolisat Ltd. representatives had actually come just a week or so earlier to assess residents’ interest in its “3 + 2” scheme. On the day of my visit, I spoke to a minor village official who, noting my affiliation with the National Land Management Authority, lamented that villagers were farming wherever they pleased. Little attention was being paid to taking care of the forest, he explained, and villagers’ land use was expanding outward willy-nilly. Rubber exemplified this, with local interest in the crop increasing since a pair of soldiers—Ban Deng housed a large army camp—had planted a few hundred seedlings the year before.\textsuperscript{31} The company’s recent visit was attempting to capitalize on this interest, and

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{map42.png}
\caption{Resettlement trajectories in and out of western Vieng Phoukha. Map by Ben Pease based on author’s data.}
\end{figure}
the clear identification of the “3 + 2” scheme highlighted the lack of state effort to manage where the rubber would be planted.

This apparent disorder was also reflected in a district-government report on the LFA process from two years earlier. Despite detailing numerous aspects of the village’s “progress” since its establishment in 2003, the report noted that “some of the villagers do not yet understand the Land and Forest Allocation process.”32 LFA had been conducted in 2004 and 2005, and district staff had produced a large signboard map that sat prominently in the middle of the village. Residents actually appeared to understand the exercise all too well: they had covered up precisely the pictorial parts of the map—which directed villagers where to farm and where forest was to be conserved—with posters that advocated vaccinating children.33 The official I spoke to addressed this affront to state authority only indirectly. Despite his own misgivings about villagers’ chaotic and unauthorized land use, he explained, enforcing the LFA plan depicted on the signboard was not currently a district priority.

This situation illustrates the micro-geopolitics of upland development in a few ways. The most apparent has to do with the migrants themselves, who were identified in the report mentioned above as not only being from Na Le district, but also as being members of the Khmu Rok ethnic group who had faced land shortages in their previous village.34 These details are significant. As anthropologists Yves Goudineau and Olivier Evrard explain in their foundational work on village resettlement in Laos, the historical geography of the Cold War made the Khmu Rok (a subgroup of Khmu, and thus of the “Lao Theung” villages on display in the provincial-museum map) “a special case.” Summarizing the wartime geography of southern Luang Namtha, they note that “by fighting on the winning side,” the Khmu Rok populations on the east bank of the Namtha River, which runs through Na Le district, had “gained political representation at the provincial and district level,” paddy fields in the provincial capital, “more schools than the right [west] bank and, finally, the chance to refuse to relocate their village[s] if a majority of the population opposed the move.”35

Their account is doubly useful. In a general sense, Goudineau and Evrard anticipate much of the later literature on involuntary resettlement in Laos by explaining both that moving is the norm—when government officials say “move,” most upland communities move—but also that there are exceptions that depend on political context. “Fighting on the winning side” had yielded resources both material and symbolic, and these came together in the power to resettle on communities’ own terms rather than simply at the direction of state officials; put another way, via their role in the revolution, Khmu Rok
communities in eastern Na Le had become part of the state apparatus itself, and they thus had significantly more control over their geography of (re)settlement than a number of other upland groups.

More specifically, Goudineau and Evrard explain that one implication of this ability to resist state-managed resettlement was that population pressure nonetheless accumulated in villages that chose to stay put, and that this was alleviated by periodic rural exoduses facilitated by what they called the Khmu Rok’s “political integration” within the province. Ban Deng appears to have been the product of precisely one such exodus. Another of my informants, who worked in Vieng Phoukha in the late 1990s, described hearing that the then-governor had been transferred to the district from Na Le in order to bring “the right kind of Khmu” to settle there. Another informant, a development worker who was acutely attuned to debates within the international aid community about working in coercively resettled villages, explained that their project had initially refused to work in Ban Deng because of its recent establishment, but had subsequently elected to work there after becoming convinced that the resettlement event that established it had been completely voluntary. The relatively free hand that Ban Deng’s citizens had been given with respect to their extensive village territory reflected this history.

A second dimension of Ban Deng’s situation is harder to see, but underpinned the village’s creation in the first place: the absence of earlier settlements. Ban Deng is located directly on the site of an old CIA landing strip, one of the hundreds of STOL sites that, as described in chapter 2, helped the United States ground its version of upland territoriality in Laos in the 1960s. When US mapmaking stopped in 1975, the last generation of navigational maps created for American pilots (marked “distribution limited—destroy when no longer needed”) showed three villages in the vicinity of what is now Ban Deng, plus the landing site (marked “LS 357”) itself. Labeled “Khas Khouis,” “Ban Mou Sua,” and “Ban Yao” (see map 4.2), these three villages had names directly echoing the labels (“Kui,” “Muser,” “Yao”) used by government officials and development workers today to refer to Lahu and Iu Mien communities. Equally interesting, the number and diversity of villages in the area appear to have increased slightly during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Lao government’s main topographic map series, issued in 1987 and produced with Soviet technical assistance in the years immediately prior, shows roughly twice as many villages in the same vicinity. The same “B. Yao” and “B. Mou Sua” appear from the earlier American map, while the earlier “Khas Khouis” has been replaced by four villages (“B. Kachoxe,” “B. Chavadi,” “B. Chacho,” and “B. Chapa”) whose names
imply Lahu or Akha settlement. Near the old landing site today occupied by Ban Deng appeared the villages of “B. Namkouylave” and, nearby, “B. Kouy.” Elsewhere nearby, additional villages appeared with names like “B. Kouychakhu” as well as Khmuc names like “B. Phangua,” “B. Hai,” and “B. Tonglat,” fleshing out the full spectrum of upland ethnic groups that had comprised the old Nam Nyu maquis (ch. 2). While it is impossible for me to reconstruct the precise histories that led to their abandonment, the absence of all of these earlier villages is a key part of the frontier-settling process that followed during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Traces of this process, however fragmentary, nonetheless appear in various sources and, as I explain below, point to the settling of Khet Nam Fa by at least some of the subpopulations who were displaced from western Vieng Phoukha. One such trace came in an interview I conducted with a development worker who lived in the district during the early 2000s, and whose work in Ban Deng and other western-district villages exposed him to stories about the area’s history. Echoing the history I recounted in chapter 2 and expanding on the above reference to “the right kind of Khmu,” he noted that the district had at least four old American airstrips, and that the insurgency had been active well through the 1980s and possibly into the 1990s. One clarification he added was that the insurgency had hardly been limited to the Lahu—he described it in fact as largely “Khmuc-based”—and that this had led to the forced resettlement of Khmu villages out of the western zone earlier during the 1980s and early 1990s. By comparison, the displacement of the Lahu had begun later, in the late 1990s. My informant thus remained highly skeptical of any actual security threat posed by Lahu communities, but was clear nonetheless in noting its invocation as an official rationale for their repeated displacement.

More traces appear in a second village, which I will call Ban Oudom, which complements the example of Ban Deng above by showing in detail how the resettlement of mistrusted groups like the Lahu intertwined with those of trusted groups like the Khmu Rok who were brought in from elsewhere. Ban Oudom has also appeared above in map 4.1 (although not by name) as the westernmost village in the planned-but-canceled Sino-Lao project. Like Ban Deng, Ban Oudom was also settled by Khmu families, as detailed below, and it seems to exemplify the timber-oriented territoriality described by my informant above. The village sits on the site of a contested “provincial production forest,” and its LFA map shows a large swath of “production forest” (pa phalit) mapped at over 4,000 hectares—again, an incredibly large area for a single Lao village, let alone a single contiguous forest zone in a single village—and stretching well into Bokeo province.
These circumstances suggest a possible reason why district authorities insisted on the “3 + 2” model for Sino-Lao and were willing to scrap the deal if they could not get it. As in Ban Deng, they were attempting to use the migrants for their own territorial ends. This would have been undercut substantially if they had turned around and started giving away the village’s land to a Chinese rubber company.

I first became aware of Ban Oudom in 2007, when a district official told me that I would not be allowed to go there without special permission. I did not push it; the Sino-Lao deal had already been canceled, and I focused my fieldwork elsewhere. As the district’s second focal site, however, Ban Oudom nonetheless remained on my radar. Various accounts date the village’s establishment to 1999 or 2000, beginning with the arrival of a group of Khmu families from an unspecified area along the main road. Troubling these accounts, however, is the presence of a group of approximately forty Lahu families that had lived in the same village site for at least ten years already (one source dates their arrival to 1986, another to 1990). In my research with state officials and sources, Lahu settlement came up repeatedly as a problem. I was told multiple times by district staff-people that “Kui people don’t like to live in villages,” that they “prefer to go live in the forest,” and that they grow opium and resist development in general. A bit like the museum map in the opening sketch, Ban Oudom highlights the ambiguity and problematic nature of Lahu settlement in western Vieng Phoukha. The official establishment of the village, right around the turn of the millennium, took place despite the fact that a large group of Lahu families had already been living there for the better part of a decade.

One reason for this may have been that the Lahu presence was seen as transient. A 2004 report that I collected contains an aside that in 2001, the Lahu families that had been living there had moved “to the mountaintops in the area” but then moved back (whether voluntarily or not is unspecified) to their earlier village site later that same year, around the time the group of Khmu families mentioned above also arrived. Two years later the Lahu families moved again, this time much farther—to Sing district, in the northern part of the province—and this time clearly as part of a forced resettlement effort connected to a wider anti-opium campaign being conducted at the time across the north. The 2004 report, commissioned by a donor organization that was considering funding a rural development project in Ban Oudom and was thus especially interested in issues of local food security and village relocation, noted the confluence of the removal to Sing district with the arrival of a second group of Khmu families, this time from Na Le:
Lahu people originally inhabited the area. But in December of 2003 they were moved to Muang Sing. They remained there until May of 2004 and then returned to Vieng Phoukha. In Muang Sing they had no drinking water and not enough land to plant rice. . . . They returned in two groups, one by vehicle and one walking 10 days through the mountains. Upon their return however, they found that 40+ Khmu [families] had been moved into their old site from Muang Nale in what may have been a case of ethnic nepotism. One group [of returning Lahu families] settled north of the Khmu (20–25 minutes’ walk) and the other south . . . on the main road into the village. . . . A third group . . . have also settled very close to the Khmu on the east side of the village.48

In addition to its reference to “ethnic nepotism” of the same type elaborated above for Ban Deng, the report is notable for exemplifying the way that the micro-geopolitics of Cold War violence often haunt development reports, unacknowledged and unelaborated on the one hand but unavoidably present on the other. In describing the Lahu families’ history, the report included the detail that they had moved in 1986 from an area in Bokeo called Nam Jomh, which is just south of what was, at the time, the Nam Nyu special zone. As a large group of Lahu families who had left a village cluster on the edge of a special military zone in the mid-1980s, and had moved to a remote location in the borderlands of Bokeo and Luang Namtha, these families would have been subject to the same sorts of suspicion that led to the Iu Mien’s displacement to Sing district (see opening sketch), and that I elaborate below for the Lahu of Khet Nam Fa. This suspicion appears only fleetingly in the report, but it is present in both explanations of why the Lahu families were split up into three groups when they returned from the unsuccessful resettlement to Sing district. The report first references an unnamed informant who asserted, without elaboration, that “the Lahu did not want to form a large village as it may threaten the government.” Later the report explains the same situation differently, claiming that upon their return to Ban Oudom, the Lahu families “did not stay together because the government said they would not accept a large ‘new’ Lahu village.” Whatever the actual reason(s), the report illustrates the official anxiety around settlement that marked subpopulations like the Lahu, slating them for displacement from areas where frontier-making depended on more trusted members of the population.
If western Vieng Phoukha illustrated a light-touch variety of population management work based on political trust and minimal enclosure, the area I have been calling Khet Nam Fa exemplified almost the polar opposite. A focal site established in the mid- to late 1990s, largely as a destination for the Lahu communities resettled from the western frontier, the Khet Nam Fa area would receive the bulk of Bolisat Ltd.’s plantations as the company’s “4 + 1” operations took off in the mid- to late 2000s. By 2018 Khet Nam Fa’s residents had been largely excluded from the potential forms of livelihood associated with the company’s operation, whether paid rubber tapping, contract farming, or both (see ch. 1). It is thus worth examining the details of how Khet Nam Fa’s land base was made available to Bolisat Ltd., since in the transition from its earlier to later years there is a noticeable shift from population management work that was aimed at incorporating Khet Nam Fa’s residents into a form of permanent livelihood (however paternalistic and coercive) to a simpler, more outright land grab. Managed enclosure figures centrally throughout, but it is important to chart this shift since many of the details get lost in the blurry statistical picture of land deals that appears from farther away.

Khet Nam Fa is the official name for the group of villages that comprise the “Kui” cluster shown on the provincial-museum map. Like the Lao word muang, khet is a geographic term whose historical meaning—a localized area or zone, often within a muang—has been adapted to current use; khet refers today to a cluster of villages at the subdistrict level, where taxation and other official business is often conducted. Khet Nam Fa thus refers to a group of villages located near a stretch of the Nam Fa River, which is itself a tributary of the Mekong that flows roughly northwest from Vieng Phoukha’s southern uplands; then through the district capital, the villages of Khet Nam Fa and Ban Deng; and finally to its confluence with the Mekong in Long district to the northwest (see map 4.2). Khet Nam Fa, located just outside the district capital in the river’s middle reach where it descends from the higher to the lower uplands, was attractive to Bolisat Ltd. for a few different reasons.

One reason is immediately apparent from map 4.1. From simply an economic-geography perspective, Bolisat Ltd.’s target region was arguably the best of the three Chinese companies that, as late as 2006, were still vying for land in the district. Combining an abundance of land under 800 meters in elevation with a proximity to the NEC via the presence of newly built feeder roads, Khet Nam Fa’s location made it a good candidate for a
large-scale rubber operation whose eventual output was destined for overland export to China. Khet Nam Fa thus exemplified the hinterland geography described in chapter 1: located just outside the NEC’s roadside mitigation zone where land-tax certificates were issued as a nod to the risk of land grabbing, the villages of Khet Nam Fa were nonetheless well within the project’s area of commercial impact. As one of the new investment projects catalyzed by the NEC road upgrade, the Bolisat Ltd. operation was precisely the sort of “subregional economic development” that regional planners and boosters were hoping for.

Another dimension of Khet Nam Fa’s appeal—in this case for local officials—was its taxation potential. As noted above, some of Vieng Phoukha’s agricultural lands had been cadastrally mapped before the company’s arrival as part of the LFA process; these areas included lowland paddy fields, as might be expected, as well as various other forms of “improved” farmland such as fields used for annual cash crops like maize or sugarcane, or for tree crops like cardamom. But these were the exceptions that proved the rule: most of the district’s land base, including the land in Khet Nam Fa, lay outside the cadastral map.

Tax officials in Vieng Phoukha divided the district’s villages into those that had finance committees capable of calculating and collecting land taxes on an area basis and those that did not. Khet Nam Fa’s villages all fell into the latter category. Contrary to assertions that upland areas in Laos are completely untaxed, this meant that Khet Nam Fa’s agricultural lands were taxed indirectly by counting adults of working age, whom tax officials saw as a reasonable proxy for upland fields that were too difficult to locate, map, and measure.51 While thus not entirely untaxed, the land base of villages like those in Khet Nam Fa was seen as underproductive when it came to taxation; residents were among the poorest in the district, and the per-head tax rate was indeed quite low.52 Large-scale rubber plantations offered the opposite, in the form of both a fixed and legible crop, and a producer with the capacity to pay much more. In December 2006 Luang Namtha’s provincial governor issued a rubber-tax policy that aimed to capitalize on precisely this: upon coming into production, rubber plantations over five hectares in size would be taxed six renminbi per tree per year; smaller plantations would be taxed less.53 During my fieldwork in 2006–8, Bolisat Ltd.’s plantations in Khet Nam Fa already numbered at least a few hundred hectares, and they continued to grow through the end of the decade.54 With their multiple hundreds of rubber trees per hectare, these plantations offered a potential tax windfall in the hundreds of thousands of dollars—far more than anything that had ever come off this land.55
Even still, Khet Nam Fa was hardly the only part of the district with these characteristics. A third and final piece of its “suitability” thus came via the particular sort of social land availability created by the frontier micro-géopolitics examined above. In one sense, this was a more extreme version of the land availability on display in the nursery village. As they had there, state authorities deemed the land in Khet Nam Fa to be “needed for development,” and they made it available accordingly. This proceeded via a suite of practices aimed at de facto rather than legal enclosure of village lands. Following a common interpretation of Lao land law, district officials maintained that the land in Khet Nam Fa upon which Bolisat Ltd. developed its plantations “still belonged to the villages,” but that since it had not been developed yet, this ownership was collective rather than individual, and was thus in need of what Laos’s land laws have long referred to as “state land management.” This phrase appeared in the “3 + 2” policy, where it qualified the policy’s apparent embrace of smallholder landownership (ch. 1). In Khet Nam Fa this qualification was even stronger, severing outright the link between villagers’ power to make decisions about how their land was used on the one hand, and their formal legal ownership of it on the other. By eclipsing the former while preserving the latter in a way that was technically true yet merely formal, “state land management” created the conditions of possibility for Bolisat Ltd.’s “4 + 1” operation. Classifying Khet Nam Fa’s former shifting-cultivation land as collective, village agricultural land, officials assigned this land to be the company’s target plantation area.

In another sense, however, Khet Nam Fa’s land base was not made available to Bolisat Ltd. despite the presence of local residents but because of them. Their relatively recent resettlement from the district’s western frontier meant that Khet Nam Fa’s residents were treated as de facto wards of the state to whom government officials and technical staff had a special obligation—however self-interested and paternalistic—when it came to livelihood development. Paternalism features widely in many development contexts, both in and out of Laos. In Khet Nam Fa this took an especially exaggerated form. If residents’ displacement from the frontier had been in the interest of wider security concerns, keeping them in Khet Nam Fa was seen to be part of the same suite of objectives. The managed enclosures created there were thus aimed, at least initially, at not just making land available to Bolisat Ltd., but at bringing much-needed capital to an ongoing sedentarization and livelihood (re)construction effort.

In my interviews with local officials, it quickly became clear that this effort was a fraught one. Taking land from communities that were already seen to be among the, if not the, poorest of the poor was both an outcome
and an impression that local officials were keen to avoid. In our conversations, district agriculture and forestry officials thus echoed the “3 + 2” policy rhetoric in noting their general preference for contract farming over concessions, and they took great care to explain the “4 + 1” plantations in Khet Nam Fa as something other than the latter. In multiple accounts, their emphasis was not on land being taken but on the financial and technical resources that rubber investment was bringing to a landscape where villagers’ attachment to land was already tenuous at best. One district official thus insisted to me that “rubber is helping the Kui people because it’s giving them 30 percent [of the new plantation] by developing land they won’t use again anyway. They go to the forest, cut a new swidden, make a new house, plant and harvest the rice, and then move on and do it all again the next year.” Another official explained the situation similarly, linking the land allocation to Bolisat Ltd. to the special challenges confronting the effort to establish permanent livelihoods in Khet Nam Fa: “The reason for ‘4 + 1’ [here, as opposed to ‘3 + 2’ elsewhere] is because these villages are minority ethnic groups without permanent settlement—they shift from place to place, depending on their swidden farming. So according to [central] government policy and district policy to help this group have consistent villages and permanent houses, state officials asked the company to invest in these villages, specifically to plant rubber because rubber is permanent [youn-yong] farming.”

It was hard to have a land grab, the rationale seemed to be, if the social link between village and land was missing in the first place.

This was certainly spin, but it was not merely that. Just as Lahu settlement had been tenuous and ambiguous on the western frontier, so it remained in Khet Nam Fa. The museum map from the chapter’s opening sketch depicted Khet Nam Fa as a series of eight Lahu (“Kui”) villages, all in a line and clustered closely together. Although cartographically incorrect—the cluster contains only four villages (not eight), and they are arranged around a T-junction (not a single road)—the museum map contained an important truth. Unlike the district’s more widely dispersed villages of Lao Theung, Akha, and other ethnic groups, the Lahu settlements of Khet Nam Fa comprise a focal site of the sort discussed in chapter 3. As should be clear from the example of Ban Oudom above, focal sites vary significantly. Khet Nam Fa was closer to the Muang Houng variety, exemplifying the extreme structural poverty for which “focal site development” in Laos has become rightly infamous. Established in the latter half of the 1990s, Khet Nam Fa was the product of resettlement efforts that, as one development worker explained in 2007, had occurred “without the full consent” of those involved and had resulted in high levels of post-resettlement mortality (with “up to
20 percent of villagers dying within the first couple of years after the move, old people and children suffering most of all”). Resettlement here, the same informant continued, was a multitemporal process, “pursued now with an avowed ‘development’ rationale but in the past seemingly associated more with issues of national security.” This was echoed in other accounts as well, such as one that described Khet Nam Fa’s origins in the 1996 government effort to resettle groups of Lahu who had returned to the western frontier after the initial, earlier resettlement efforts “after the war didn’t last.”

Another of my informants, a rural development consultant with long-term experience in the area, captured this dynamic in describing one of Khet Nam Fa’s settlements as “a failing village”: “People don’t stay there,” he told me, trying to explain the extreme poverty in a part of the country that was already very poor: “They sell the rice land they receive from development projects, and they don’t know how to raise the livestock [these projects] give them. The army periodically goes out to the forest, rounds them up, brings them back, and leaves—after which they trickle out again.”

Bolisat Ltd.’s efforts thus fit, at least initially, within a population management scheme aimed at keeping Khet Nam Fa’s residents anchored in place through a mix of wage work, the provision of rubber seedlings, and a long-term plan to allocate them 30 percent (by area) of the company’s plantation lands under the “4+1” model. This mix of land partition and wage work exemplified the “concession-like” nature of the scheme, contrasting with the “3+2” model in ways that exemplified my provincial informant’s concern in chapter 1 that “4+1” was “not actually contract farming.” But “4+1” also differed from the concession model, occupying an intermediate position on the enclosure spectrum between contract farming and concessions because of its planned land partition. This partial enclosure was a key piece of why tree/land division was attractive to Lao authorities throughout the northwest: it enticed companies to invest and provided wage work in the short term (like concessions); but it also offered the promise of a transition to a smallholder contract-farming model once the partition took place. Accounts of “4+1” that I collected in 2006–8 contained all of these elements: wage work, the provision of rubber seedlings to villagers to experiment with on their own, and the plan (still a few years away at the time) to divide the plantations into company- and villager-owned portions. While not necessarily popular—one village official complained to me at the time that “if the company is going to help the villagers, they should provide the inputs for free and villagers should get all of the proceeds from selling the product to the company”—the plantation-partition plan was well understood among village officials in Khet Nam Fa. When I returned in 2018, although much had changed (see
next section), this initial plan to use rubber to keep villagers in place had not been forgotten. Even as the promise of rubber-based livelihoods had all but evaporated, one village head I spoke to recalled that Bolisat Ltd. had been part of the district’s opium-eradication plan, with seedlings provided “only to families who had agreed to stay in the village.” He summarized the argument that villagers had heard at the time from district officials and company representatives: “If you come out of the forest and stop growing opium, you will have better livelihood options.”

**PREVAILING INTERESTS**

When I returned to Khet Nam Fa in 2018 it did not take long to see that while the so-called “4 + 1” scheme had succeeded in creating available land for Bolisat Ltd., it had not forged the working partnership between company and villagers conjured a decade earlier in so much of the development rhetoric. The enclosures begun in 2004 or so had indeed continued to expand, and what had previously been a few hundred hectares—the figures are approximate for reasons examined in chapter 5—had perhaps doubled. Lining both sides of the road through much of Khet Nam Fa, Bolisat Ltd.’s plantations consisted of the large demonstration garden described above, as well as the even larger main plantation complex near the workers’ dormitory mentioned in chapter 1’s opening sketch. Having matured from the terraced, newly planted hillsides shown in figure 1.1 to full-grown plantations where tapping had already begun (fig. 4.2), the operation exemplified the land’s transition from shifting cultivation and subsistence farming to fixed crop and global commodity.

Yet the aspect of population management work had essentially failed. Although the land itself had been transitioned from upland rice to rubber plantation, the putative targets of the scheme—the residents of Khet Nam Fa—had been excluded from this transition rather than brought along with it. The partitions that had figured so centrally in the narration of the “4 + 1” scheme a decade earlier were nowhere in the accounts of Bolisat Ltd. that I collected in 2018. Instead, much like the “concept note” about rubber value chains mentioned at the end of chapter 1, local narratives had shifted from the nuance of a workable, best-of-both-worlds hybrid between concessions and contract farming to the simple binary of the two. District staff-people I spoke with described Bolisat Ltd.’s operation as “concession and promotion” (*sampathan kap songserm*) and clarified that Khet Nam Fa was “entirely concession” (*sampathan leui*)—a far cry from the partial enclosures conjured by earlier descriptions of “4 + 1.”

Similarly, one of the village officials I spoke
with in Khet Nam Fa ignored the partition plans of old and instead lamented the loss of land to the company (ch. 1, opening sketch). Another, interestingly, reinterpreted the seedlings that the company had distributed a decade earlier to residents who promised to stay in the village. Rather than describe this in the terms recounted above (wage labor in the short term, plantation partition and smallholder production in the medium to long term), he recounted Bolisat Ltd.’s plantation as the result of a land sale (of seventy-plus hectares, a gross underestimate) that had been paid for with rubber seedlings. The only time a plantation partition came up was in a counterfactual, describing events that took place in a village outside Khet Nam Fa where Bolisat Ltd. had developed a “4 + 1” plantation in the years after my initial fieldwork ended. There, village residents had decided that they did not want their share of the plantation after all; two years in, and fully a year before the partition was supposed to take place, residents there had decided to sell their portion to the company.\footnote{66}

A similar trajectory of alienation (rather than incorporation) appeared in the accounts of wage work. A decade earlier, Khet Nam Fa residents had worked for the company extensively as part of the plantation-establishment process. Back in 2008, the same village official who complained about the project’s lack of actual help had described his constituents’ relationship to
the company in language that evoked the silent compulsion of labor that had already lost its means of subsistence. Noting villagers’ lack of permanent jobs, he explained that their work digging holes, planting seedlings, and weeding the new plantations entailed “working by morning to eat at night” (*ha sao kin kham*), a description that, while hardly favorable, testified to the close relationship at the time.67

A decade later much of this work had disappeared, seemingly because (at least in part) of a labor dispute that I was unable to get the full details of.68 (My follow-up trip was a brief one, and since many of my best informants had left the area, my ethnographic access was not what it had been a decade earlier.) Although Khet Nam Fa residents reported still doing the occasional weeding work for Bolisat Ltd., mostly the work had gone to outsiders—the migrants who lived in the new labor dormitory mentioned above. Rather than incorporation into a new plantation regime, the major effect of the Bolisat Ltd. operation had been the further erosion of a land base that was already squeezed by a mix of resettlement, demographic change, and piecemeal land sales (on the latter, see ch. 1). Much as it had when Bolisat Ltd. arrived, upland shifting cultivation remained the precarious core of Khet Nam Fa’s rural livelihoods (see fig. 4.2, horizon)—only this time with even less land.

Given this trajectory, it is essential to view Bolisat Ltd.’s activities in Khet Nam Fa not only within the state-territorial logic of trying to secure a precarious villagization, but also within the (in this case, competing) economic logic of trying to develop a viable business. Even if the company’s trajectory was hardly straightforward, Bolisat Ltd. managed to address the land-access challenges that confronted Chinese companies more broadly across northwestern Laos and elsewhere.69 In large part, this success was achieved by capitalizing on a form of social land availability that sat at the conjuncture of both a general policy preference to “stabilize” upland shifting cultivation using fixed plantation crops like rubber and, more importantly, the specific history of localized, postwar state territorialization described above. The regulatory pushback against Chinese rubber concessions meant that however tempting it may be to see the end result of company-owned plantations as simply the outcome of some initial plan, the history of actual events tells a more complex and dynamic story. Even if the “4 + 1” scheme appears in hindsight as just so much conjuring work—useful for opening the door to managed enclosure but actually unused for anything else once the land had been taken—the failure of projects like Bolisat Ltd.’s to live up to the cooperative rhetoric of the early and mid-2000s still demands explanation.
While my evidence only goes so far—I know far more about how enclosure occurred than what took place subsequently, after my main fieldwork ended—a key piece of the story involves the Chinese government’s handling of opium-replacement subsidies (see ch. 1). This program is sometimes viewed as a mere sop to Chinese agribusiness, and from such a perspective, actually working with upland farmers in Laos and Myanmar was, despite the rhetoric, never really part of the plan. I am less cynical, for two reasons. First, some skepticism about the Chinese opium-replacement program proceeds from the apparent ecological mismatch between rubber and opium: the former grows best below about 800 meters, as noted above, while the latter is typically a “highland” crop grown above 1,000 meters. The problem with this, however, is exemplified by the case I have described above: it focuses on land rather than labor, when in fact many of the populations targeted initially by poppy-replacement projects (like the residents of Khet Nam Fa) have come from highland areas to what I have called the lower uplands. It is clear that even if resettlement was not part of the Bolisat Ltd. operations per se, local officials still very much saw the project as part of their own ongoing efforts to make a precarious resettlement work.70

Second, despite the opium-replacement program’s management by provincial officials in Yunnan, who clearly acted with a probusiness logic, a number of scholars and practitioners have pointed out its origins in real public-health concerns about heroin use in China, and thus the plausibility that it would enable Chinese companies to manage the business risks and logistical challenges of working with poor borderland smallholders.71 Given the program’s size—between 2005 and 2015, estimates of subsidy values range in the tens of millions of dollars for both Laos and Myanmar72—if managed effectively, the program could conceivably have allowed the companies that received its financing, tax breaks, and import quotas to operate in ways that bent significantly to local economic needs and policy demands.73 At a macro scale, this might have allowed for accommodations like minimum-price guarantees for latex produced under the “3 + 2” scheme, and even a more attractive version of “3 + 2” that would have taken pressure off Lao officials to find land under the “4 + 1” model. In Khet Nam Fa, a better use of subsidies might have allowed for more training and similar efforts focused on community inclusion; ongoing wage and price supports to workers and smallholders to make that inclusion more attractive; and some type of welfare provisions for food security during the period when plantations were maturing and the canopy closing over areas formerly used for upland rice.
These are, of course, hypotheticals. Even as the opium-replacement subsidies remain difficult to trace at the firm level, the enduring hardships faced by upland communities—both those like Khet Nam Fa that lost land and those (elsewhere) where contract farmers were forced to bear the full weight of low global rubber prices beginning in 2011—suggest that the program’s benefits remained with the companies. (Anecdotal and official reports of resurgent opium production in the region point in a similar direction.)

Instead, the case of Bolisat Ltd. illustrates how micro-geopolitics created essentially one more subsidy. To the range of policy supports from the Chinese side of the border, postwar territoriality in Laos added cheap land as well.

One morning in January 2007, on a stretch of road just south of Luang Namtha’s provincial capital, Sompawn Khantisouk disappeared. Khantisouk was the Lao co-owner of an internationally famous eco-lodge and trekking business. An accomplished river guide and motocross rider, he was athletic, confident, attractive: an established businessman and, though still young, an emerging civic presence. The time and place of his disappearance were publicized in the days that followed, a circular posted in shops around the provincial capital requesting the assistance of “anyone with any knowledge” of the situation. Although the flyer made no mention of how or why Khantisouk had disappeared, many people around town and, as word spread, throughout the region concluded that he had been abducted, and that his disappearance had been sanctioned, if not actually conducted, by state authorities.

Half a decade before another civic leader, Sombath Somphone, was abducted in Vientiane under similar circumstances, Khantisouk’s disappearance was widely read as a sort of referendum on Chinese investment and its governance in Luang Namtha. Some observers speculated that he had been “mobilizing local villagers against Chinese-sponsored rubber plantations,” as one journalist put it in an article about Chinese “expansionism” in the region. This was perhaps a tempting conclusion, given the widespread and often critical attention to Chinese rubber investment in the area, as well as more specific concerns in ecotourism circles about whether Luang Namtha could maintain its brand, centered on the province’s reputation for untouched forests and authentic “hill tribe” culture, if the rubber boom continued. As one of the most visible faces of Luang Namtha’s small but robust ecotourism industry, Khantisouk and his American business partner were widely assumed to be against Chinese rubber development.
Yet in a pointed and public response to the journalist who framed Khantisouk’s disappearance as a result of his upland organizing, his business partner Bill Tuffin insisted that Khantisouk “was absolutely not involved in ‘mobilizing’ villages against the rubber plantations.” Tuffin wrote that the two of them had in fact developed a very measured position on rubber: that it “could help local farmers if it was properly planned and forest lands could be converted to rubber plantations if other forest lands were properly preserved.” Instead, Tuffin argued that Khantisouk’s disappearance was part of a larger process of Lao-government efforts to rein in what, in the context of this chapter, might be called active citizenship. “Sompawn’s disappearance,” he wrote, “coincided with a general purge of Americans and Christians in Northern Laos” during 2006 and 2007, when “close to 26 expatriates were forced to leave the area” and “several Lao [people] with close associations with Americans or Christians disappeared or were given threats they would be abducted.”

Tuffin’s explanation for this clampdown reached into the depths of the Cold War: “The Lao People’s Revolutionary Party fears peaceful evolution—the overthrow of the socialist system by peaceful means. All of the foreigners purged from Luang Namtha, Bokeo and Udomxai provinces were working with marginalized communities to give them a voice in determining their own economic future. The fact that these foreigners were giving people choices and were becoming more influential than the local governments in the economic livelihoods of these communities was the threat.”

This explanation is notable not just for the larger picture it paints about the wave of expulsions and disappearances, which had not been widely reported. It is also striking for the historical link it conjures between the mid-2000s and half a century earlier. The concept of “peaceful evolution” was formulated by John Foster Dulles in the 1950s, initially as a critique of the US policy of militarized containment, which had been a pillar of the so-called Truman Doctrine since the late 1940s. While Dulles himself was a chief implementer of containment under President Eisenhower, he developed the idea of a “peaceful transition” or “evolution” as a more practical way to defeat communism in places like China and the Soviet Union where the United States had no intention of going to war. Dulles was confident that “Russian and Chinese Communists [were] not working for the welfare of their people” and that US support for the rule of law abroad could speed up the inevitable collapse of communism under its own weight. This theory of peaceful evolution so worried Chinese leaders in the early 1960s that Bo Yibo, a top Chinese official at the time, implicated it directly in China’s split with the Soviet Union over close ties with the West, as well as with Mao’s
decision to launch the Cultural Revolution in 1966. It is perhaps unsurprising that Lao leaders’ calls for “heightened vigilance . . . on the battle- field where no gunfire can be heard” from the late 1980s (ch. 3) echo Mao’s earlier calls for “heightened vigilance” against capitalist infiltration and revisionism, given that they came precisely at the moment when Lao leaders felt vulnerable to outside threats from the Western world. What is notable, however, is that two decades later these types of concerns were still visibly present.

Yet Chinese state-capitalist development has indeed brought its own forms of threat to the social stability of the Lao uplands. As the cooperative (“win-win”) development envisioned by “3 + 2” rhetoric gave way to actually existing “3 + 2” projects, whose poor terms forced concession-like “4 + 1” projects to take up the slack, the management of enclosure’s social distribution proved crucial. Targeting projects like Bolisat Ltd. into landscapes like Khet Nam Fa showed a certain hedging on the part of Lao officials: a hopeful optimism, perhaps, that Chinese rubber development could be used to finance permanent livelihood creation where earlier efforts had failed, but also a pragmatic limiting of the negative fallout (when such efforts of incorporation ultimately failed and produced merely a land grab) to subpopulations with limited political capital. Such a calculus is arguably the essence of government in a place and time like contemporary Laos, which exemplifies Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden’s riff on Marx that “states make their own territories, not under circumstances they have chosen, but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are confronted.” Littered with the remnants of American upland territoriality, and incorporated into a mode of development cooperation over which state officials have only limited control, northwestern Laos is best seen not as a space of ceded sovereignty—an anarchic space where the authority gap reigns—but as one of intense territorial politics where the legacies of Cold War violence remain all too close to the surface.