

In Between Poppy and Rubber Fields: Experimenting a Trans-border Livelihood among the Akha in the Northwestern Frontier of Laos

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Introduction

Since appearing in the 2000s, rubber plantations have spread widely throughout the areas of Laos and Myanmar which border southwest China. This surge in rubber cultivation activities has been primarily motivated by China's high demand for natural rubber; mainly in support of its expanding automobile industry (FAOCTTP, 2003; Huang, 2007). According to official Chinese discourse, the opening of rubber plantations in Laos and Myanmar close to the Chinese border provides an alternative to the growing of opium poppies in these areas, and in practice such plantations are operated by highly business-oriented state and private enterprises. By 2010, over 180 Chinese companies were engaged in agriculture projects (including rubber, sugarcane, rice and other seasonable cash crops) in the former poppy growing regions of Myanmar and Laos, covering 0.12 million hectares in Myanmar and 0.09 million hectares in Laos (CPGMSECP, 2011).

On the Laos side, the introduction of alternative forms of development by China has been underpinned by the Laotian state's drive to modernise highland populations, halt swidden agriculture, commercialise land resources and, through the eradication of opium production, reshape the nation's identity (Cohen, 2013). Partly motivated by the high price of latex in the global market, in the mid-2000s many smallholders from ethnic groups living in the highlands of Luang Namtha – a northern Lao province – attempted to diversify their livelihoods through the cultivation of rubber. Among these groups, the Akha¹, the largest group in two border districts of Luang Namtha Province: Muang Sing and Muang Long– were heavily influenced by the rubber boom. Coming under pressure to eradicate poppy cultivation, the Lao Akha moved to the crowded lowlands, eking out of an economic niche primarily alongside the Tai Lue and Tai Dam groups, as well as a number of smaller ethnic groups (Lyttleton et al., 2004). In this chapter, the surge in rubber serves as a lens to see how the Lao Akha are constructing a new livelihood in the midst of domestic transition from subsistence to market, from farm to non-farm, and their accelerating regional economic integration.

¹ Akha are scattered in the five nation states of Laos, Vietnam, China, Thailand and Myanmar. In the official ethnic identification of China, Akha are renamed as Aini and subsumed under the Hani as one of the 55 ethnic groups. In this chapter, Hani and Akha are distinguished from each other as Akha is a self-addressed term. Also the terms such as Chinese Akha and Lao Akha are used to specify their nationalities.

These new rubber plantations have drawn the Lao People's Democratic Republic – this small and landlocked country – further into the global resource extraction and commodity production market. At the same time, in academic research fields, frontiers themselves have become a popular trope for conceptualising the changing social and resource space incurred by the intrusion of capital (Fold and Hirsch, 2009). Fold and Hirsch (2009) contend that frontiers are productive 'in-between' spaces that define particular transitions and also represent "an amalgam of spaces of newly emerging social and environmental relations" (2009:96).

The geographical frontier in question belongs to the trans-Himalayan region that has been characterised by regular movements of people and goods, under both pre-modern and other polities (Sturgeon, 2005; Giersch, 2006), since the third century AD (Hill, 1989 and 1998). In the region, mountain dwellers have long maintained multiple and shifting relations with various lowland powers and polities through time and space (Sturgeon, 2005; Giersch, 2006; Michaud, chapter 1). Giersch (2006) uncovers that frontier in the history is a "middle ground" where indigenous and non-indigenous conjoin, negotiate, acculturate and produce a hybridity of governing institutions and cultural dynamics.

My case study of the Lao Akha resonates with the perspectives of Giersch, Fold and Hirsch as I see frontier as a place of incubating new social relations and their consequences which are interwoven and where trans-border capital, human and natural resources converge. Historical opportunism and loosening political strictures of the contemporarily dominant Laotian and Chinese states foster transregional, market-based entrepreneurialism and rework the social space of the frontier, therefore, engendering new livelihoods that are trans-border in nature.

Contemporary globalisation has led to a renewed recognition of the relationship between states and their citizens. Ong (2006) argues that this has created possibilities for individuals to carve out economic, cultural and religious niches within a more global space. As a result, I draw on Ong's "experiments of freedom" (2006) to conceptualise cross-border operations in the study area in terms of the relationship between the state and the people in this frontier zone. However, these individual experiments are still constrained by the unpredictable "loosening and tightening" of frontier governing mechanisms applied by Laos and China (Diana, 2013). This is not to say that the two states have absolute and seamless control over the flow of goods and people – or even the border crossings – that take place. The area covered by Yunnan and Laos is part of what Michaud refers to as the "Southeast Asian Massif" (Michaud, 2006) and what Smyer Yü has termed "multi-state margins" (Introduction). Experiencing the migration of an array of non-Tai people from what is now China, the study area also served as an area to which people took flight between the 1950s and 1970s, seeking asylum and shelter from state-making projects governed by the nation-building processes undertaken by China and Laos (Cohen, 2002).

From this follows my second idea, one that echoes van Schendel (2002), who reminds us of the importance of looking across geopolitical boundaries to

understand regional contiguity and social closeness. As regional economic integration that thrives on old trade routes gathers force (Giersch, 2010), social networks based on shared ethnic ties, intimacy and cultural and linguistic affinities, are translated into webs of reciprocity and exchange, and as formative steps towards extending commodity chains across physical and cultural borders (Turner, chapter 8; Lyttleton and Li, forthcoming). I will show in this chapter that social networks between the Chinese and the Lao Akha are instrumental in their negotiation over livelihoods while being closely observed by the Laotian state. The particular case of the Lao Akha explored here also shows that ‘Zomia thinking’, a form of “consciousness held by inhabitants of ‘Zomian’ spaces (Shneiderman, 2010:293), is relevant when analysing “transboundary state effects” (Smyer Yü, Introduction) at the intersection between China and Laos, a location in which the social networks in place between the previously partitioned ethnic groups and other diasporic subjects are still at work.

My discussion is informed by a 15-month fieldwork for my PhD study. It was carried out between August 2008 and January 2010 in Luang Namtha Province, Laos. The fieldwork covered 12 Akha villages in Muang Sing and Muang Long District, close to the China-Laos border, with Lao Akha people from different locales and social backgrounds being interviewed by myself in Akha or with the help of Lao Akha research assistants. Conversational interviews in Mandarin Chinese and Yunnanese Chinese with over 60 Chinese trade intermediaries, state and individual rubber investors, subcontractors and extension workers have been completed by myself. The interviews with ethnic Laotians (Laotian state officials and NGO extension staff) have been carried out in Lao with the help of a Lao interpreter or in English alone.

I will refer to the above-mentioned state effect in my discussions of the people and frontier area. My description of the frontier presented here may conjure-up a state of anarchy, but with varying degrees of effective or intentioned state regulation being applied from district to district on the Laos side. For example, Dwyer’s case (2014) offers an example of how the Chinese-invested rubber ventures in Laos facilitate and reinforce the accumulation and population management by the Laotian state. I will focus on the different dimensions of frontier life that exist, attesting to the interpersonal relationships that are the key to understanding the materialisation created by the frontier. Turner, Bonnin and Michaud (2015) have shown that the role of indigenised modernity is pivotal in local people’s livelihood reconstruction as both market and state are entangled in the frontier area. On the one hand, local people’s drive for modernisation manifests a heightened sense of livelihood experimentation or put in another way, “to modernise or to perish” (Michaud, Chapter 1). On the other hand, selectively being modern becomes a creative and pragmatic way to refashion traditions of belief and value. In carrying out my ethnography of this frontier, it is important for me to focus on how the concepts of the indigenisation of modernity (Turner et. al, 2015) and social networks intersect as analytical parameters.

The setting: Ban Assan, the people and their livelihoods

Ban Asaan² is located on a mountainside at the north-eastern tip of Mom sub-district (*tasseng* in Lao) in Muang Sing District, Luang Namtha Province. It is a few kilometres from the Chinese border and villagers are able to visit a market in Meng³ Run, a nearby Chinese town of Meng La County, Xishuangbanna⁴ Dai Autonomous Prefecture (Hereafter referred as Xishuangbanna Prefecture), Yunnan, and China via two footpaths that become inaccessible during the wet season. Ban Assan is comprised of 95 households, and has a population of 388 people. The ethnic make-up of the village is quite complicated when compared to Akha villages further inside Laos. While Akha is the dominant group, some Han Chinese and Hani have recently moved from China into the community. For a long time, Ban Assan villagers have had ongoing interactions with the Chinese (be it Han Chinese, Dai or Chinese Akha) and the Lao residents (usually Akha but also Tai Lue and other ethnic groups). Most villagers are multilingual, reflecting the ethnic variety of the region.

What Sturgeon (2005) terms “the practice of landscape plasticity” shows the Akha’s complex and malleable ways they organise their trans-border environmental and social space. She contends that Akha’s customary notion of landscape largely corresponds to the ecological habit of their ancestors, which has been divided up by modern nation-states since the mid-twentieth century. However, the Akha continue to retain their kinship bonds in the trans-border fashion (2005:37-41). Referred to as *kha* (Lao and Tai languages, meaning “slave” or “servant”) by the lowland Tai groups, the Lao Akha, at the same time and like many other mid- and upland groups, maintained vassal relation with lowland polities through performance of the corvée and tributary system (Nguyen Duy Thieu, 1993). Some Ban Assan villagers used to barter opium with Chinese Akha and the Dai in China, in exchange for bowls, matches, salt and other daily necessities. These interactions continued even when the border was under the strict control of the Lao Issara Army in the 1960s. During the collectivisation period in China (1958-1978) and during the Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961), Ban Asaan villagers supplied rice to their relatives in China. The village moved to its present site at a lower elevation after the political situation in Laos began to stabilise in the early 1990s. However, few social services were provided by the Laotian Government. As with other Akha villages in Muang Sing, from the mid-1990s Ban Assan began to receive some basic health care, education and other development assistance from the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ), a large German development agency. Practicing slash and burn agriculture mainly to cultivate dry rice, villagers open new plots of land every three to five years, and after that time, could claim ownership of the land they were cultivating. Prior to programs to integrate the Akha into centralised forms of

² *Ban* is the Lao term for village. All the villages’ and people’s names in this paper have been altered to protect their confidentiality.

³ From *muang* in Tai Lue and Lao languages, customarily a small feudal principality.

⁴ From *Sip Song Panna* in Tai Lue language (The Twelve Principalities), the ancient *muang* federating Lue village polities across the China-Lao border.

state governance, this type of customary tenure arrangement enabled them to make their own agricultural production decisions on what to plant and how much they needed to plant to sustain their subsistence-oriented life style (Alting von Geusau 1983; Sturgeon 2005).

Under the “get tough” poppy eradication campaign introduced in 2003, villagers were encouraged to gradually stop their smallholder poppy cultivation activities. The village’s proximity to China offers those living there other livelihood options, as some households rent plots of land at lower elevations to Chinese people from nearby Xishuangbanna Prefecture for them to grow bananas, watermelons and seasonal vegetables. In the mid-1990s, and as promoted by the Laotian government, villagers contracted with a Chinese company from Meng Peng in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, to cultivate sugarcane, but most households abandoned this crop in 2002, as they diverted their labour and land resources towards rubber cultivation instead.

By as early as 1991, smallholder rubber cultivation had been officially identified by the Laotian government as a key part of its poverty alleviation strategy; an instrument to help eradicate shifting cultivation and replace poppy cultivation among the highland ethnic groups. However, its role in terms of transferring planting techniques was limited (Alton et al. 2005). In Ban Assan, eight Akha households established the first rubber plantation between 1996 and 1997 before the Laotian government institutionalised its introduction. During the 1970s and 1980s, these same families sought refuge in Meng La where they were enlisted in the local Chinese production system. Then, in the early 1990s, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Chinese government together with the Laotian government were organising the repatriation of refugees to Laos, these villagers did not return to their natal villages, but instead chose to stay in Ban Assan, hoping to develop their own rubber plantations. Taking advantage of a border agreement⁵, these smallholders transported their rubber latex on motorbikes and sold their freshly harvested product to intermediaries in Meng Run. After these former refugees began earning a reasonable income from their mature rubber trees, in the mid-2000s other villagers followed suit. However, by the time of my first investigations in 2009, incremental rubber cultivation had not yet provided big yields: only twenty households/rubber growers had started to tap their rubber trees.

Compared to areas of Muang Sing further away from the border, Ban Assan’s physical proximity to China has drawn many Chinese investors looking to open agri-businesses since the privatisation of rubber production in Xishuangbanna Prefecture in 1980s (Fujita and Phanilay, 2008; Sturgeon, 2010). At the same time, and as promoted by the village chief, after 2003 two rubber companies owned by Chinese businessmen from Guangdong and Fujian Province were established in Ban Assan, occupying over 134 hectares of land in the village.

⁵ Tax and fees are exempted in line with a border agreement between China and Laos, which allows residents living within twenty kilometres of the border to engage in tax-free trade up to a limit of 3,000 Yuan per transaction.

These investors promised to supply the capital required for preparing the land, and for purchasing rubber seedlings and other plantation materials. Once the trees had reached maturity, any profits were to be divided-up between the company and the villagers: 60% to the investors and 40% to the villagers. Despite opposition from the villagers to this offer, the village chief – from the most powerful family in the village – pressured the villagers into accepting the deal.

Driven by the potential for large profits, since that time the Laotian Army based in the provincial head town of Luang Namtha has also sought partners across the border to help develop rubber plantations (Shi, 2008). Also, a Laotian military-backed Chinese company has opened rubber plantations in several villages of Mom sub-district including Ban Asaan, claiming land (but not a precise amount) within these villages as “defence land”. In this way, since the influx of external investment in rubber cultivation, the villagers have experienced significant land loss, while increasingly feeling the need to compete for the village land that is left.



Insert Figure: Old Forest, New Road and Emerging Rubber Plantation in the upland Laos (Photo author, 2009)

Accessing “state land” in Ban Asaan

As mentioned above, the Akha in Ban Asaan have long maintained close cultural

and socio-economic relations with those on the other side of the border, and the reopening of the border in the 1990s allowed them to resume those ties that had been weakened by decades of nation-building. Since they returned to Laos, former refugees from the village have introduced their friends (Akha: *po guo po seo*), businesspersons and entrepreneurs from Meng La County to Ban Asaan. Endogenous alliance with the Chinese Akha has expanded with quite a few women from Ban Assan marrying Chinese Akha and residing virilocally in adjacent villages in Meng Run. Based on shared ethnicity and historical links through patron-client relationships, the Chinese Akha and the Dai from various locales in Xishuangbanna Prefecture have attempted to approach their ethnic and kinship-based brethren in Laos (Sturgeon, 2012; Sturgeon et al., 2013). Seeing rubber as a lucrative cash crop, Han Chinese investors also have sought to expand their rubber cultivation activities across the border.

Interpersonal relations through gift giving, feasts and favours given for mutual benefit have been newly constructed and reconstructed by the Chinese (including the Akha and the Dai from China), in the form of *guanxi* in Chinese. It is believed by many Chinese that these acts of gift-giving and reciprocity help draw their Laotian counterparts closer to their business interests, as they reduce the social and emotional distance that exists between the two groups and align them in a collective risk sharing venture (Lyttleton and Li, forthcoming). Villagers in Ban Asaan regard these Chinese overtures as instrumental, since the Chinese come with clear intentions; to access land, which as a resource is becoming unobtainable in China. However villagers in Laos enjoy the conveniences and comforts they obtain through their connections with the Chinese. For example, they can borrow money from the Chinese in times of need, visit Chinese doctors and send their children to schools in China. However, at the same time they do feel under pressure to give up their land to the Chinese. These *guanxi* collaborations cultivated through exchange have visible outcomes. According to my 2009 survey, eighty percent of the 95 households in Ban Assan share their cropping activities with the Chinese, and almost half of them have traded (Akha: *aw-eu*) their land with the Chinese. As a result, one elderly male resident of the village lamented to me that: “as long as you have land, the Han Chinese (Akha: *labeu*) will be your relatives (Akha: *a ye a ni*)”.

In contrast to the rubber contracts offered by government agencies in Luang Namtha Province at various levels, both formally and informally, non-official/informal contracts have also been agreed upon between Laotian and Chinese (including Akha) in Ban Asaan. The profits generated by these contractual agreements are commonly split 60/40 or 70/30, with the Chinese claiming the larger share since they tend to provide the initial capital investment and technical expertise. The villagers supply the land, and then the labour required to maintain the land. As rubber tapping is a very delicate activity, with rubber trees easily damaged by inadequate work practices, it is normally the Chinese who carry out this task, as they have more experience. As well as rubber sharecropping, it is commonplace for villagers to ‘lease’ land containing rubber

trees to the Chinese, based on either oral or written agreements. To prevent these clandestine operations from being discovered by the state authorities, the villagers under-report their shared rubber planting activities. Instead, they report them as independent activities to the District Agriculture and Forest Office (DAFO).

For the inexperienced rubber growers – meaning most of the Lao Akha villagers in Ban Asaan – their Chinese counterparts play an important role in helping them to understand the different market that exists on the other side of the border. Any business, be it big or small, entails risk, but an illicit business partnership in a foreign country poses particular challenges. From production to circulation, the whole process needs to withstand state scrutiny. Currently, neither the Lao Akha's own nor their shared plantations are ready for tapping, and the villagers and Chinese fear that once their shared plantations are fully developed, the local Laotian authorities might intervene and collect tax on the land and/or on the latex production activities taking place there, since both the people (labourers used for tapping and transportation) and the yields are likely to be conspicuous. Adopting a “thinking ahead” attitude in order to secure their future profits, the Chinese plan to take care of all fees and taxes on the China side, and also advise their Laotian counterparts on how to handle what they regard as the local, predatory Laotian authorities on the Laos side; to avoid being discovered. For instance, the Chinese entrepreneurs have suggested to the Akha farmers in Laos that it is important to develop and maintain good relations with the village chief and other state officials, as they represent the eyes and ears of the Laotian government. Upon the visit of patrol officers, army men or state officials from the district, villagers serve good food and liquor in order to manoeuvre within their random application of law.

During the rubber tapping season, some individual Chinese traders in Meng Run have diverted their latex collection activities over to the Laos side; for example, by setting up mobile latex collection vendors right on the border. Concerned about the increasing level of protectionism and inconsistent quarantine rules applied at the border, the Lao Akha farmers tend to bypass state control by smuggling products and goods along numerous routes used by ethnic groups on both sides of the border to maintain their trade activities, ethnic interactions and ties.

What should be noted is that these land deals between the Chinese and Lao Akha take place within a context in which formal land use and entitlement has not yet been fully established (Vandergeest, 2003a). Despite the fact that the socialist regime in Laos declared in its early days that all the land belonged to the state while the populace had only the right of use (Evans, 1990), it is still in the process of formalising property relations between the state and its citizens (Fujita and Phanvilay, 2008). Lund (2011) contends that this transition of property relations has had a parallel effect in Laos, as, in the process of claiming land, people start to become familiar with the idioms and language used by a wide variety of institutional actors in relation to the state. While on the one hand this familiarity inculcates Laotian “stateness” among the people, on the other it raises

these same people's political awareness. Therefore, Lund argues that through the land reform and resettlement process in Laos, the authority of government institutions is affirmed and reinforced. However, this is not a straightforward process. For example, High (2008) indicates that the Laotian state's dominance is far from complete, the government's enforcement of the law is inefficient and the gap that exists between policies and practice is persistent, giving rural residents room to manoeuvre.

What High points out is helpful for us to understand how the Lao Akha farmers attempt to carve out their own rubber plantations from the state-owned land – an unregulated practice supported by the inflow of Chinese people and capital. At the beginning of 2003, agents from DAFO and Lao-German Cooperation tried to implement an official land use plan that largely prioritised forest conservation to help enforce the land and forest allocation policy in the village (Soulivanh et al., 2004).

However, in response to this imposed, alien land use plan, the villagers simply did not know what to do except align with market demands. Clinging to a customary sense of land ownership, most villagers do not understand why the land they have cultivated for generations suddenly belongs to the Laotian state. Like elsewhere in rural Laos, villagers do not pay attention to the allegedly improved land use promoted by the state and visualised in the land allocation map posted at the village entrance (Lestrelin et al., 2011).

Adding to these unregulated land use practices has been the “land rush” and land competition activities that have taken place due to Chinese investment in agriculture. Since the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism policy in Laos in 1986, laws, decrees and other policies aim to turn land into capital through foreign investment and the Laotian government believes that international agricultural cooperation is the way for this sector to become modern (Agriculture Law, 1998; CPI, 2007; DSLCC, 2009). However, from the perspective of the state regulatory system, establishing rubber plantations with the individual Chinese in Ban Asaan is illegal, as it challenges the designated land zoning system and involves individuals selling “state land,” which is forbidden. DAFO officials have advised Ban Asaan's village chief to terminate any contract farming activities with the Chinese, and threatened to take legal action against him. Meanwhile, on the Chinese side in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, when state agents have become aware of the cross-border rubber transactions taking place in adjacent villages in Laos, they tried to close the border to end this “chaotic” and “disruptive” action; as they assess that it threatens social harmony and good governance (Sturgeon, 2010). However, attempts on both sides to curtail these activities are usually carried out in vain.

The Laotian population is familiarising itself with new mandates via the state and donor agencies, and this process is becoming evident through the growth of various kinds of instrumental rationality (C.f. Lyttleton, 2005). This is particularly true in Ban Asaan, where, while claiming land and undertaking commercial activities, villagers have learned to engage with state authorities in a

number of ways. In the state processes, boundaries between legal/licit and illegal/illicit are shifting and unsettling (van Schendel and Abraham, 2005). In the eyes of the Laotian state, the informal arrangement of cross border shared cropping as well as land deals are illegal because they do not go through district and provincial government channels for official approval. It is at the same time illicit because of the social perception of activities that are defined as 'deviant'. In the region, modern forest knowledge and racialisation of minorities as backward, and threats to social stability and the natural environment contribute to land use restrictions imposed on ethnic minorities (Vandergeest, 2003b; Sturgeon, 2005; Sturgeon et al., 2013).

Sturgeon (2013) argues that on the China side the Akha subvert social hierarchy, likewise in Laos, rubber planting entails similar emotional endeavours as Lao Akha imagine they too might leapfrog social subordination into socially commended economic security (Li, 2013). To make this happen, rather than fleeing to more remote areas which is a classical Zomian response, the villagers in Ban Assan deliberately and consciously turn their trans-border network, traditional border crossing and trade into an advantage for economic benefit.

Therefore, to the villagers, the state is not necessarily an abstract form of power, but is represented by the personal control wielded by state agents (High and Petit, 2013; Ducourtieux, 2013), those to whom they can approach or from whom they can hide. As the case of Ban Assan shows, the recognition of state authority does not produce the optimal outcomes expected by state agents, in fact, in contrast and depending on the level of collaboration taking place with the Chinese, Laotian farmers' increased awareness of government politics and regulations has led to them learning how to engage with state agents in such a way as to gain economically through using informal means.

However, villagers' decreasing access to land threatens their key livelihood activities – based on swidden rice cultivation – when effective land use entitlement and enforcement is absent (Alton et al. 2005; Shi, 2008; Friis et al., 2016). Under traditional Akha land use arrangements, to be described shortly, the utilisation of land depends on the availability of household labour (Epprecht, 1998; Sturgeon, 2005). While the land use policy legitimated customary rights to communal territory, it is often taken advantage of by the village authorities and powerful families in the village who chip away at the land available to the villagers. It will continue to offer challenges to official manoeuvres that regulate investment and trade. As a consequence, the widespread interest in rubber among a number of stakeholders “makes it difficult for members of DAFO to mediate and resolve conflicts effectively using the existing resource management framework” (Thongmanivong et al., 2009:344). Spatial freedom and market driven mobilities do not always result in the realisation of interstate social and ethnic solidarity but rework the social, economic life and physical space in complex ways. Consequently, social and economic differentiation have become more pronounced and require substantial modification to restore their livelihoods (Sturgeon et al., 2013), what echoes Ong (2006) is the negative freedom that

challenges global common good.

Being Akha on the frontier

A cursory review of the burgeoning literature on Laotian people's livelihood transition would suggest a positive view on their adaptation to the changes introduced by market forces (Rigg, 2005 and 2006; High, 2008; Barney, 2009). While acknowledging the pitfalls of development and change, these authors show that local people do not imagine their future predominantly in terms of preservation and stasis and they often embrace such changes, as they aspire to a better life. Similarly, I want to add to this mounting evidence regarding the importance of aspiration and modernity based on my own ethnographic work among the Lao Akha in Muang Sing and Muang Long in Luang Namtha Province. They expressed their gratitude for the job opportunities provided by various Chinese owned agribusinesses, as they have helped them survive the de-capitalisation incurred by opium eradication programs and the Laotian government's "get tough" poppy eradication program which displaced them from their upland fields (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Lyttleton et al., 2004). One villager said, "If the Chinese had not come to Muang Sing, we would have starved to death". One member of the Lao Akha political elite in Muang Sing shared his aspirations with me in these terms:

The Western mode of development is too complicated to understand, there are too many meetings and little action. Also, we were asked to plant things that did not have a market in Laos. However, *falang* (the Westerners) have brought us water, mosquito nets and medicines. The Lao government knows nothing but to extract from us; the Chinese have wise heads and bad hearts, but if you follow the Chinese you will become rich and smart.

Certain parts of this statement reflect the local reality and the livelihood changes that have taken place in the study area. First, as passive recipients of Western development and aid, the Lao Akha have experimented with sustainable development and the Laotian state's attempts to turn the pre-modern into modern via structural change (C.f. Lyttleton et al., 2004). However, China's rigorous profit-driven modernisation and the market have been important in solidifying the local people's frontier aspirations. Second, even though it is often maligned, the state remains a central reference point for people's lives and interpretations. Rather than seeing the Han entrepreneurs and investors as pure exploiters, the Lao Akha view the Laotian government as being impotent when faced with the actualisation of modernisation and development. Third, by using the word "follow," the Akha man quoted above reveals that to develop highly personalised relations with the Chinese is a pathway to wealth. Although the Chinese,

including the Akha from China, present a morally ambiguous face to the Lao Akha, my interviewee's comments reflect the importance the Chinese have in northern Laos. From the Lao Akha's point of view, the Chinese are relatively rich and have both the money and savvy to handle the Laotian officials who intervene in their trade activities. Through the Chinese businesspersons, the Lao Akha have been able to access the Chinese market, and have been introduced to their business networks. Focused on an entrepreneurial experiment, this Akha man – who is actually illiterate – has been able to send his children to Chinese schools across the border, because “everything in Muang Sing is going to be about China”.

The key features of the aspirations voiced above are closely linked to specific notions of modernity. Bashow (2006) proposes that modernity exists in comparison; it is a “relevant” matter associated with Western privilege and domination. According to his analysis, (Western) modernity works in a non-Western setting based on the socio-economic barriers and cultural and racial boundaries that exist there. Therefore, the modernity serves as a paradigm to resolve non-Western people's problems. However, this leaves such people as latecomers to modernity, who then merely mimic the “White man.” Modernity also takes on very specific traits in this part of the world: owning a mobile phone, owning and riding a motorbike, performing wage labour, owning a brick/cement house, listening to Tai music, wearing a Lao skirt; these are all the elements or objects of modernity the Lao Akha desire, but are not necessarily about China or about being Chinese. Likewise, the Chinese path to wealth via planting rubber trees may be the inspiration for the Chinese Akha farmers seeking modernity (Sturgeon, 2013), but what the Lao Akha pursue can hardly be said to be “Chinese”. Following Sahlins' idea of “indigenize[d] modernity” (1999), Turner, Bonnin and Michaud (2015) add agency to the locale. They illustrate how the Hmong living around the Vietnamese frontier have adapted their livelihood portfolios, having been pressured to adapt to market integration and nation-state building processes. They have deftly preserved many elements of their own culture and resorted to covert resistance, while engaging with modern, capitalist expansion in the uplands, creating a vernaculisation of modernity within their life-worlds.

Likewise, the Lao Akha have been able to express their sense of modernity as a type of material acquisition, in which modernity and modernisation are undifferentiatedly conflated, while selectively incorporating specific features and ideas, those they assume will help to advance their lives. For instance, in grappling with modern, Chinese entrepreneurship (which involves taking risks and economic accumulation), and speaking some Chinese, they have been able to adopt Lao etiquette (such as speaking softly and eating slowly) as part of a desired personal transformation. As Turner, Bonnin and Michaud (2015) have shown, materialising what people construe as modern based on a certain path does not make people more “the same;” it actually makes them more differentiated. The Lao Akha's adoption of rubber cultivation activities does not

mean that they now blindly march to the tune of the market economy.

According to present official discourse of Laos, opium represents an embarrassing past, while planting cash crops (including rubber) represents a step toward a modern life. Yet the Lao Akha are trying to maintain a balance between what they want and what others expect from them, as many of the Lao Akha I spoke to still believe that opium comparatively speaking was a lower-risk cash crop in spite of its illegality and the externally perceived embarrassment. They almost all agree that “planting sugarcane is physically taxing but since it is a yearly crop, the economic return is ensured; planting rubber can generate a better income but it is too risky as it takes too long (seven to ten years depending on management practices) to start generating a profit. Also, rubber makes village life complicated.” While the former quotes reflect a level of calculation and decision-making regarding the Lao Akha’s livelihoods, the last quote reveals their reluctance to have village life altered by the influx of external investment. To an outsider with apparent economic sophistication, the Lao Akha may have rushed too fast into the cultivation of rubber, due the erratic nature of the global price for the commodity. But, as the case of Ban Asaan here shows, planting rubber trees reflects one way in which the Lao Akha can lay claim to land; to maintain their livelihoods, and, to reach a more comfortable future.

Conclusion: A continuing frontier experiment

My emphasis in this chapter is placed on the reconstruction of livelihood of peripheral subjects situated in the expansion of rubber cultivation around the Laotian borderlands, as well as the manner in which immaterial dimensions have been crucial to social change in this context. As the Laotian and Chinese states have loosened their grip on flows of people and financial capital, as well as other resources, so have local people gradually expanded their social networks across borders, thus forming webs of economic partnerships. While Fold and Hirsch (2009) see frontier space as human encountering rather than isolating, as shown above these concrete social interactions produce unpredictable outcomes. Taking advantage of highly fragmented and personalised state control over the borderland region (High and Petit, 2013), the Chinese and Lao Akha have developed strategies to maximise their economic ventures within Laos.

The Laotian state has remained of importance in relation to the Lao Akha farmers’ interpretation of livelihood transitions,— as in the past, but so far, and as the cases in this chapter show, the state’s development approach does not bring the type of modern life style for which the Lao Akha are aspiring. While free market, neo-liberal rationality and practices – those that have fostered economic opportunities in the region— are a recent development, the Lao Akha’s livelihood experiments are historically specific, as they are hinged upon the social webs cultivated around the frequent movements of goods and people that have occurred over time. However, the new trans-border livelihood that exists in the Lao frontier presents challenges to the Laotian state’s intent to regulate cross-border investment and trade.

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