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CONTESTED RESOURCE FRONTIERS IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

An Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Mainland Southeast Asia, the upland regions in particular, has a long history as contested reserve of valuable minerals and forest products. Moving along transregional trade networks—at times bones of contention between competing regional powers—these resources continue to shape present-day economic and political dynamics. While mining and logging remain contested fields of resource extraction, new resource frontiers emerge: Transboundary investments in land or water reserves reveal new tendencies of resource struggles in the region.

This edited volume investigates recent trends and issues of resource extraction in Mainland Southeast Asia and their effect on local economies and social relations. Case studies from different countries analyse the socio-political dimensions of natural and agrarian resources such as

minerals, water, land and cash crops. Some contributions focus on the significance of China's resource hunger for these commodities, and how local communities in the region perceive the opportunities and risks of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, this volume also aims to shift the focus on competing actors of resource extraction and governance within Southeast Asia and the contingent outcomes of (and local responses to) transregional economic dynamics, political entanglements and related socio-ecological transformations.

Contemporary Southeast Asia offers manifold test cases to discuss how local "frontier assemblages" (Cons and Eilenberg 2019a) relate to different (overlapping) resource regimes, corresponding discourses and changing patterns of (hybrid) resource governance (Barney 2009; Dzüvichü and Baruah 2019; Kelly and Peluso 2015; Li 2014; Miller et al. 2020). This volume brings together contributions that (re)examine different local frontier configurations and dynamics across up- and lowland Southeast Asia from various disciplinary vantage points. Providing an impressive breadth and depth of fresh empirical insights from the region, conceptually enriched by an intriguing combination of different disciplines and scales of analysis, this collection importantly highlights the complexity and diversity of actors involved. It foregrounds their intricately linked, often contesting and conflicting but sometimes surprisingly converging, interests in imagining, co-producing or challenging new frontiers of infrastructural development, resource extraction and land commoditization.

This multifaceted attention to complexity is much needed to address the ubiquitously cited rise of China's geopolitical and economic influence in Southeast Asia, most prominently expressed in the BRI (Chong and Pham 2020; Sidaway et al. 2020; Mierzejewski 2021). Going beyond rather one-sided and sensational depictions of Southeast Asia "under Beijing's Shadow" (Hiebert 2020), "in the Dragon's Shadow" (Strangio 2020) or as "China's Backyard" (Morris-Jung 2017), this volume aims to complicate narratives of Chinese economic and geopolitical expansion in Southeast Asia. Consequently, many contributors shift the focus on local agency, indigenous actors as well as marginal Chinese ones (for example, migrant workers, petty traders, or local cross-border entrepreneurs). This collection adds to the emerging scholarly body of more nuanced ethnographic, micro-scale accounts of local engagements and encounters with various forms and actors of a rapidly asserting

China (Saxer and Zhang 2017; Nyíri and Tan 2017; Woodworth and Joniak-Lüthi 2020).

Many chapters thus highlight the relevance of region-specific geographies and histories for understanding new frontier dynamics. While sharing Woodworth and Joniak-Lüthi's (2020, p. 4) overall leading question of "how ... local people navigate the complex institutional and cultural terrains of China's rapidly changing borderlands", this volume further examines how local actors also actively contribute to these moments of rapid change. Closely examining local perceptions of capitalist expansion and corresponding interactions on the ground, the contributions to this volume present different contexts in which local actors are sometimes passive recipients or victims, but sometimes also active agents of frontier development—or even both at the same time.

CONTESTED RESOURCE FRONTIERS: CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

When in 2004 the Asian Development Bank (ADB) described Laos as a "new frontier" of economic opportunities, this reflected the establishment of a "neoliberal-inspired discourse of the Mekong as an untapped resource frontier" that served "as a legitimating ideology for a particular strategy of large-scale resource development and regional integration" (Barney 2009, p. 147). Since then, Laos in particular has undergone an unprecedented land rush (Dwyer and Vongvisouk 2017; Kenney-Lazar 2018; Suhardiman, Keovilignavong, and Kenney-Lazar 2019; for Cambodia, Loughlin and Milne 2020; Chheang, this volume). China has emerged as the dominant economic player in Southeast Asia, with specific ideas of the allegedly "empty", untapped and available frontiers of Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia that reveal a striking resemblance with colonial imaginaries.

Given its variety of frontier contexts (Brown 2018), Laos covers quite some space in this volume. Case studies include land and water (Ponce, Suhardiman and Kramp), cash crops (Cole, Rowedder) and mining (Tappe). Other Southeast Asian frontier contexts presented in this volume include land contestation in Cambodia (Chheang), Chinese investment in northern Myanmar (Htun, Mierzejewski), northern Thailand's rubber boom (Fujita) and hydropower dams in the Greater Mekong Subregion (Thianchai and Middleton). A transboundary dimension marks most case

studies discussed in this volume. Sino-Southeast Asian exchanges are intersected here by multi-layered transnational and translocal dynamics within mainland Southeast Asia.

Before addressing different aspects of specific resource frontiers, we tackle the question of what constitutes a "resource frontier", or what is a "resource" in the first place (and how it is contested and by whom). The term "frontier" carries some ideological baggage since Frederick Jackson Turner (1921) described it as the expansion of civilization or a civilization-to-come. And yet, the concept remains useful as a heuristic tool to explore dynamic and ambiguous spaces of economic and social transformation—"sites of potential" (Li 2014, p. 13)—especially in the sense of an expanding capitalist frontier (Tsing 2003; Joseph 2019; Haug, Grossmann, and Kaartinen 2020). While the "frontier" often denotes remote borderlands such as the Southeast Asian upland margins bordering China (Anderson and Whitmore 2015; Giersch 2006; Scott 2009; Michaud and Forsyth 2011; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015), the concept does not necessarily imply marginality or remoteness (Saxer and Andersson 2019). New resource frontiers are also emerging in urban areas such as Sihanoukville as discussed in Vannarith Chheang's contribution to this volume.

Following Cons and Eilenberg (2019a), this volume focuses on processes of frontier (co-)production—or frontierization—in particular places and moments in time. Their model of "frontier assemblages" includes imaginations of the expansive capitalist frontier and the Turnerian clash between civilization and savagery—a model that highlights the "intertwined materialities, actors, cultural logics, spatial dynamics, ecologies, and political economic processes that produce particular places as resource frontiers" (Cons and Eilenberg 2019b, p. 2). As Rasmussen and Lund point out, the corresponding frontier dynamics "dissolve existing social orders—property systems, political jurisdictions, rights, and social contracts" (Rasmussen and Lund 2018, p. 388). Thus, frontiers imply a liminal or transitional dimension, allowing for disruptions of existing patterns of resource control to make way for new forms of appropriation.

The notion of frontier as expansion and appropriation is a key element of the capitalist *resource frontier* in the sense of enclosure through new institutions and infrastructures that transform landscapes and livelihoods. In contrast to James Scott's (2009, p. 278) idealistic "open

common property frontier" of yore, the capitalist frontier is marked by processes of exclusion and dispossession. People inhabiting such frontier zones often find themselves confronted with extractive industries that negatively affect their social and natural environment. As in the example of ADB's labelling of Laos as "new frontier", imaginaries of resource-rich and allegedly underdeveloped regions fuel the fantasies of entrepreneurs and investors. And yet we must not overlook local agency and strategies within this emerging field of tension: searching for new opportunities, subverting institutional constraints and (re-) producing social networks.

Processes of frontierization go hand in hand with resourcification—the intertwined institutional, material and discursive processes that render a natural resource a valuable resource that invites extraction and accumulation. Timber and minerals are perhaps the most evident examples, even if contested, but also communal land and water, agrarian resources (see Rigg 2020; Ishikawa and Soda 2020) and perhaps even human resources (as labour). National and international laws settle questions of ownership and resource governance, restrict access, and shape frontier dynamics along new infrastructures, trade linkages (as yet another contested resource) and corresponding narratives of development.

Thus, discussing contested resource frontiers seeks to answer the following question: What is a resource? And, in extension, who defines what a resource is? Processes of resourcification "produce" resources (discursively as well as legally) that become open for extraction—but for whom? Such questions imply moral assessments of what is and shall remain an open-access resource, taking into account the economic and/or cultural values and the limits of resourcification or, rather, commoditization. Not surprisingly, those questions are heavily contested between a variety of actors on different scales and contexts, from international and state-level to the local domain.

Our idea of contested resource frontiers explores not only the dialectic between relentless exploitation and dispossession, but also "liminal spaces open for production and inventiveness" (Cons and Eilenberg 2019b, p. 7) that imply (contested) potentiality and creativity. Therefore, we pay attention to local perspectives and individual experiences in such spaces of capitalist expansion and appropriation of "nature". Disruptions may create (temporary) spaces of potentiality and change, with contingent outcomes. How do people perceive the

opportunities and risks emerging from the transformative processes occurring on the frontier?

COMMODITIZATION AND FRONTIER CAPITALISM

Investigating Southeast Asian resource frontiers through the lens of capitalist expansion—from the colonial *mise en valeur* to the Chinese BRI—we need to pay particular attention to processes of commoditization (Taylor 2016). A specific resource or raw material becomes a commodity or, rather, is attached economic value to when successfully moved out of the natural environment. Commodities are further moved and circulated as traded goods (or electricity in the case of hydropower) across multiple scales (from local to transnational).

Arguably, the resource frontier "captures an important empirical 'reality' concerning the political economy of rapid and uneven development in the country" (Barney 2009, p. 150). As Edo Andriesse (2014) has pointed out for the example of Lao frontier capitalism (Laungaramsri 2012), the institutional frameworks and general conditions of underdevelopment privilege foreign (state-owned) companies that target different economic sectors in Laos (such as Chinese investors in the mining and plantation economy). This is certainly true as well for Myanmar (Einzenberger 2018; Htun, this volume) and Cambodia (Chheang 2021, this volume). However, institutional and legal ambiguities continue to complicate processes of appropriation and extraction, as Lu and Schönweger (2019) have vividly described with the example of Chinese investors on the Lao plantation frontier.

The emergence of capitalist frontiers does not only reveal institutional and infrastructural ramifications but also affects local economic and socio-cultural configurations. This is particularly true with regard to processes of exclusion and dispossession, questions of ownership and (customary) land use rights. Who declares and claims something a "resource" and how? The state, "the market" or local communities? As Thianchai Surimas and Carl Middleton (this volume) alert us for the case of water, ideas of what is a resource and who is entitled to exploit it might diverge fundamentally along ontological horizons (Götz and Middleton 2020). As the various contributions to this volume show, the question of what "nature" or "natural resources" are, is contested on the ground, based on contrasting ideas and moralities.

Accordingly, frontier capitalism entails a field of tension, marked by contested extractivism, the rapid and widespread removal of resources for exchange in global capitalist markets (Acosta 2013). As Jerry Jacka points out: "Extractivism is the 500-year history, associated with imperialism and colonialism, of a mode of accumulation whereby raw materials were removed from the Americas, Asia, and Africa to enrich the centers of the world economy" (Jacka 2018, p. 62). In our volume, this appears even more complicated as we highlight the south-south dimension of capitalist expansion in Southeast Asia—not only with regard to the BRI but also to the diversity of economic actors hailing from the emerging economies of Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, for example, and "gate-cities" such as Singapore (Breul and Revilla Diez 2021). Here, the expansion of corporations and non-governmental organizations into ever-growing resource frontiers (see Tsing 2005) is perhaps characteristic for expanding extractivism and corresponding frontierization processes in contemporary Southeast Asia.

The history of commoditization of natural resources, and related discourses of open mineral and gemstone frontiers, hark back to colonial ones (Ross 2014)—for example, the persistent cliché of resource-rich Laos as "oriental Klondike" (Deloncle 1930; Tappe this volume). And yet this is also true for the discursive legacy of Chinese frontier imperialism (Giersch 2006; Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). The binary "resource-rich vs resource-hungry" arguably intersects the political economy of Southeast Asia (including the neighbouring Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi). Today as in the (colonial, imperial) past, capitalists aim to extract resources from allegedly "underdeveloped" regions, often negatively affecting local communities and their livelihoods.

Contributions to this volume reflect the ambiguities of livelihood transformation on shifting resource frontiers. As Robert Cole (this volume) demonstrates with his example of Vietnamese investment on the Lao maize frontier—as capitalist expansion beyond Vietnam's own upland frontier—contract farming offers both economic opportunity and precarity for local communities shifting from agricultural subsistence based on upland rice to maize and the corresponding dependency on Vietnamese investors and volatile market prices. Wataru Fujita (this volume) shows how a capitalist resource frontier unfolds in the context of Thailand's agribusiness, and how local communities manoeuvre in this emerging space of opportunity and risk.

Among the risks for the local population on capitalist resource frontiers are certainly the increasing land pressure through generous tax exemptions for agribusiness and extractive industries and related processes of accumulation and dispossession (Rigg 2020; Baird 2011; Harvey 2003). Hydropower dams are perhaps the most blatant examples where displaced communities seem to endure the closure of a frontier—displaced and excluded from any benefits. However, as Floramante Ponce (this volume) indicates, affected people are not necessarily unanimous and united in resistance, but diverse in their criticism and desires for new horizons, between hope and disillusionment.

We thus can identify not only differences between corporate actors but also contestations within groups. Even if a general agreement with political agendas of socio-economic development prevails, debates about the concrete goals of and ways to "improvement" (Li 2007) might differ between individuals. In the tin mines of Laos, while there is no disagreement about the legitimacy of large-scale extraction, we witness contestation about resource access and distribution. As Oliver Tappe shows in his contribution to this volume, local Lao villagers claim customary rights to extract minerals, not in opposition to international mining operations but in the sense of cohabitation (Luning and Pijpers 2017). Ambiguities in the Law on Minerals allow for such arrangements on the Lao frontier (Keovilignavong 2019; Tappe 2021).

However, investors usually eschew legal ambiguities (Lu and Schönweger 2019; Mierzejewski 2021, this issue). Conflicts about rights to access and extract resources are inevitable results. Patterns of compliance may break up and rearrange again in the course of the co-production of the capitalist frontier. Ideologies of extractivism (see below) complement or contradict the variegated patterns of resource use and governance on the ground (Kenney-Lazar and Mark 2021). Su Yin Htun's description (this volume) of resource frontiers in Myanmar illustrates the ambiguities and inherent tensions of emerging capitalist resource frontiers.

The complicity and/or contestation of nation-states and international investors in turning allegedly empty and underdeveloped "land into capital" (Dwyer 2007; Kenney-Lazar, Dwyer and Hett 2018), and how local communities navigate in and contribute to (re)emerging frontier assemblages, constitutes a key focus of this volume. Frontiers of capitalism combine resource frontiers with trade frontiers, as Simon

Rowedder posits (see below and Mierzejewski this volume). From informal local border crossings to the grand transnational routes of the BRI, spatial configurations shift and re-shuffle, thus constantly producing new forms of (im)mobility and territorialization where processes of frontierization unfold.

FRONTIER TERRITORIALITIES

Commodified resource frontiers are embedded in the, often conflictual, entanglement of spatial fixity and mobility. Processes of locating, cultivating and extracting natural resources are first and foremost tied to issues of land and territory. Depending on the respective commodity and environmental conditions—including geological, topographical and climatic factors—different technologies are required to physically move natural resources out of their ecological spatial embeddedness (e.g., on the ground, in the soil, underground, underwater), or to translate movement of natural resources into energy as in the case of hydropower. More importantly, at least for the purposes of this volume, the interplay of spatiality and movement of resource frontiers does not only impact the workings of natural ecosystems, but also often collides with pre-existing human ways of building livelihoods around different usages of land. Operating within complex, at times opaque, legal regimes of land classification and property rights (see Suhardiman and Kramp this volume), resource frontiers thus often lead to the enforced movement and resettlement—spatial dispossession—of local populations. Floramante Ponce's chapter demonstrates for the case of a large-scale hydropower plant in northern Laos how resource frontier-induced relocation programmes create in turn new specific frontier spaces of "resettlement communities" which need to navigate non-rural discourses and notions of development, modernity and convenience.

Causing, and caused by, physical movement, the production of resource frontiers unleashes dynamics of territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization (unmaking and remaking of spatial orders, cf. Rasmussen and Lund 2018), thereby also triggering incisive socio-spatial transformations and related socio-economic hierarchies and inequalities. Relational frontier studies (Barney 2009; Li 2014) point to the wide range of actors on the ground differently involved in producing complex frontier assemblages, importantly not

only including state or corporate agents but also directly affected local villagers and farmers who act out of various pragmatic motivations and aspirations. Aspirations to somehow partake in promises of frontier-based development might even be complicit in processes of state-driven relocation and resettlement, disclosing "the complex, situated and cumulative nature of local social and environmental transformations which reproduce frontier space, inequality and marginality, sometimes in unexpected ways" (Barney 2009, p. 148). Resource frontiers do not only mobilize local communities (across the spectrum of forced or voluntary movement and with local agency ranging from resistance to collaboration) but also induce migration flows from further afar. Examining the rubber boom in northeastern Thailand, Wataru Fujita's chapter demonstrates that rubber aspirations and experimentations of both local peasants and officials have been joined by already experienced rubber investors and cultivators from southern Thailand where rubber had been established much earlier.

Forced out-migration and aspirational in-migration are thus both essential parts of the discursive imagination, material production and actual workings of resource frontiers, fuelling the "frontier myth" of settling open, empty and resource-abundant lands. These two migration dynamics and directions are clearly observable in upland Southeast Asia, for instance. In Laos, upland populations (mostly ethnic minorities) have been resettled downhill to make room for state policies of large-scale resource extraction in the highlands and to become more "settled" within an intensified agriculture in rapidly modernized lowlands (Évrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2007; High 2021; Ponce this volume). In Vietnam, people from highly populated lowlands have been moved uphill to settle and "tame"—to stabilize politically and develop economically—the highlands as part of the state's "New Economic Zone" scheme, established in North Vietnam and extended to the South after reunification in 1975 (Hardy 2003). More recently, different frontier materialities and imaginations across mainland Southeast Asia have lured a wide range of new migrant entrepreneurs, agriculturalists and workers from China. Most visibly in Chinese-backed Special Economic Zones (SEZs), emblematic of frontierized "enclave development" (Chettri and Eilenberg 2021; Laungaramsri 2019; Nyíri 2012, 2017), Chinese newcomers have been following the "call of the frontier" also in more "ordinary" urban and

rural localities. Their small-scale entrepreneurial experimentations have not been paid much attention to in scholarship. Further fine-grained studies on everyday encounters and social relations between Chinese (small-scale) migrant entrepreneurs and local residents are needed to uncover newly emerging social infrastructures of conviviality, possibly forming specific social configurations of "frontier cultures" (Tsing 2005)—entailing "the intrinsic ambivalence of living together across local differences" (Marsden and Reeves 2019, p. 758), which Chinese-induced frontier development brings along on the ground. Looking at the rubber frontier, expanding from China across the border into northern Laos, Chris Lyttleton and Yunxia Li (2017) examine personal and intimate relations between Chinese rubber investors and Lao (mainly Akha) rubber plantation workers. Certainly not without its problems, they conclude that "the influx of Chinese people and goods into Laos has created a spectrum of opportunities based on proliferating personal connections" (Lyttleton and Li 2017, p. 323). Their case of "rubber's affective economies" across the China-Laos border points to yet another aspect of underlying mobility: resource frontiers do not only entail, or induce, various forms of movement; they are themselves moving within and across national borders and across time. Previous successful experiences with rubber are subsequently duplicated elsewhere: from Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in the tropical south of China's southwestern Yunnan province to adjacent regions in northern Laos, or from southern Thailand to northeastern Thailand (see Wataru Fujita, this volume).

FRONTIER MOBILITIES

Similar to the entanglement of mobility and fixity, the multi-layered—top-down and bottom-up—political, economic and social production of spatially and temporally shifting resource frontiers is rooted in the tension of ideological projections of endless opportunities (flexibility) and complex realities of regulation and governance (rigidity). Importantly, both frontier imagination/ideology and frontier governance are not articulated and enacted merely by state and corporate actors but also by various local stakeholders. They disclose frontier micropolitics on the ground which contain dynamics of resistance and conflict, as well as of (possibly surprising) alliances and collaborations. Regarding

the latter, Andrew Walker (1999, pp. 111–12) writes in his seminal work on the borderlands of Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and China of "collaborative borders" that reveal "complex and subtle collaborations between local initiative and state power". Key to these co-productions of border regimes is regulation as an underlying social practice historically shared by a multitude of borderland actors. While Walker's observations are primarily related to cross-border trade networks and regimes, the co-productive aspect across the state-society divide also applies to resource frontiers.

After all, trade is essential for the proper working of commodified resource frontiers, guaranteeing access to the market, whose generated (anticipated or at times simply imagined) demand justifies the making of resource frontiers in the first place. As Robert Cole's chapter exemplarily demonstrates, Vietnamese traders are the key drivers of the maize frontier expanding across the borderlands of Vietnam and Laos, fuelling a maize boom within the general intensive development of various crop booms in Southeast Asia (Hall 2011; Hurni and Fox 2018). Generally, crop booms, as particular temporal moments and patterns of resource frontier dynamics, constitute venues where the interplay of trade-oriented and agrarian frontier livelihoods becomes visible. Simon Rowedder's contribution to this volume illustrates how fruit cultivators in Thailand and mobile small-scale traders in adjacent Laos both fully align their livelihoods to, and consequently facilitate and sustain, the China-driven fresh fruit boom. Their flexibility and creativity are rooted in local arrangements of regulating and coordinating—*governing*—their frontier resources of village-level fruit orchards and cross-border mobility (production of local trade regimes combining formal and informal channels).

Often imagined top-down as empty and ungoverned spaces suitable for capitalist extraction and exploitation, resource frontiers are on the ground often highly governed assemblages of various local actors and interests. Thus, territorial (re)configuration and governance is not only the tool of high-level state-corporate frontier projects, but also key to local translations of and reactions to (newly emerging) frontier dynamics, possibly resulting in land grabs and accumulation "from below" (Chettri 2020; Woods 2020). Regarding the rubber boom in northeastern Thailand, Wataru Fujita demonstrates fascinatingly how different actors, with otherwise conflicting interests, all act in some

form or another towards further enabling, and not necessarily resisting, large-scale rubber planting despite possible negative ecological and socio-economic consequences—at times acting against legal norms and, more importantly, modifying customary rights and establishing new legal-territorial regimes at the village-level.

The local aspirational embracing of the monetarily promising rubber frontier does not fully exclude alternative, subsistence-oriented livelihood strategies such as paddy fields or communal forests that still might exist along and within (albeit in different scope) the shifting frontier patterns. Thus, the local translation, and in turn (re)production, of state-driven neoliberal discourse and policies of frontier development is a contingent, multi-directional, self-governing, and oftentimes seemingly self-contradictory process. These locally produced, smallholder-driven crop booms (Junquera and Gret-Regamey 2019; Hall 2011) illustrate the temporality and volatility of resource frontiers. Embedded in dynamic, often unpredictable, boom-bust cycles, they provide instant cash income and prosperity for some, but often with devastating long-term environmental and socio-economic consequences, especially in regard to indebtedness. Thus, cash crop frontiers exemplify, and potentially exacerbate, political, social and economic vulnerabilities and precariousness on the ground (Zuo et al. 2021). Local precariousness is even more pronounced in frontier configurations where there is no room for smallholders' active participation in and co-production of frontier capitalism, namely when facing large-scale plantations and infrastructural megaprojects.

Simon Rowedder's chapter illustrates the uncertainties among small-scale fruit cultivators and traders in the face of China's rapidly expanding large-scale plantation frontier encroaching upon northern Laos as well as northern Thailand, which might override the previous small-scale agrarian-cum-trade frontier constellation of skilfully satisfying China's demand for tropical fruits. China might be able to appease its growing fruit appetite by itself, by experimenting with tropical fruit cultivation in southern China and in extraterritorial plantations in northern Laos and beyond. This concomitant large-scale frontier exploitation or "closure" is furthermore observable in processes of fully "infrastructuring" the frontier through megaprojects such as dams (Htun, Ponce, Thianchai and Middleton), mines (Htun, Tappe), oil and gas pipelines (Htun), maritime and river ports (Chheang), and roads or railways (Rowedder),

or in dynamics of exclusionary zoning of frontiers in form of Special Economic Zones or cross-border trade zones (Mierzejewski).

FRONTIER TEMPORALITIES

Large-scale plantations, infrastructures and development zones can be all understood as tools or manifestations of different levels of state governance—in terms of territoriality, sovereignty, security and finance. Mierzejewski's chapter shows how China's southwestern border province of Yunnan has been aggressively pushing for establishing a comprehensive system of cross-border governance, including cross-border infrastructures of transport connectivity, energy supply (oil and gas), political exchanges and security dialogue, trade zones, nodes and corridors, and financial integration and interdependence (internationalization of the Chinese RMB). China's (and Yunnan's) underlying ultimate motive, or claim, to secure an economically, politically and ethnically stable border is based on the overall discursive representation of the Yunnan-Myanmar frontier as backward and less civilized. Although Chinese central and local officials complain about uncertainties and fragmented sovereignty across the border, the latter might in some contexts even further enable, and not hinder, Chinese efforts to "pacify" or "tame" this "unruly" frontier. Thus, Chinese stakeholders might skilfully utilize competing and conflicting central and local entanglements of political elites and corporate interests within Myanmar.

Frictions and ruptures—as "'open moments' when opportunities and risks multiply, when the scope of outcomes widens, and when new structural scaffolding is erected" (Lund 2016, p. 1202)—are essential ingredients of long-term frontierization processes. The latter are in their emergence and workings never linear, teleological, absolute, finite or finished, although they are often officially represented and praised as such (Haug, Grossmann, and Kaartinen 2020). As with cash crops outlined before, frontier capitalism in general often develops in volatile boom-bust cycles. The lifespan of frontiers is longer than its single projects. Failure, discontinuation or suspension of frontier projects can lay the ground for new imaginaries and materializations of frontier-making, giving way to new actors and trajectories. This is especially manifest in infrastructure projects and development zones.

Akhil Gupta (2018, p. 62) calls for a dynamic conceptualization of infrastructure "as a process, not a thing: a thing-in-motion, ephemeral, shifting, elusive, decaying, degrading, becoming a ruin but for the routines of repair, replacement, and restoration (or in spite of them)." Once an infrastructure project officially starts construction, its trajectory is, despite meticulous future-oriented planning, open-ended, with different possible temporalities at play. For Gupta (2018, pp. 68–72), "suspension" constitutes a central modality of infrastructural time. More than merely the in-between time within the teleological timeline of working towards finishing a project, Gupta (2018, p. 70) sees suspension "as a condition in its own right", as a central and open progress of (non) construction through which one can better grasp the actual material and social life of infrastructure.

Similarly, Alessandro Rippa (2021) sees suspension as an essential part of the overall trajectory of the Boten Special Economic Zone at the China-Laos border. There, longer periods of decay, abandonment and incipient ruination, following the enforced shutdown of its booming, but increasingly scandalous and criminal, casino landscape in 2011, laid the foundation for its subsequent sanitized re-branding as "Boten Beautiful Land Specific Zone" by new Chinese state-backed investors in 2015, then officially endorsed as a central transportation and logistics hub of China's BRI (see also Rowedder 2020). Thus, ruins of the past are at the same time productive sites of future development. Frontiers "emerge at particular conjunctures and disappear at others. They have lifecycles, deaths, and occasionally, particular rebirths" (Cons and Eilenberg 2019b, p. 11). In the case of temporarily abandoned Boten, development re-emerges through practices of "waiting" with patience and boredom as key elements (Rippa 2021, p. 235).

The cyclical, open-ended, contingent, multi-layered modality of "frontier time" (Cons and Eilenberg 2019b, p. 12) is also evident in Oliver Tappe's chapter on tin mining in Laos. Abandoned large-scale mines—ruins of previous extractive booms—become venues for future-oriented local livelihoods of artisanal and small-scale miners. Following economic aspirations or simply trying to survive amidst an increasingly marketized local economy and mining-induced environmental degradation, local miners eventually reproduce the inherent inequality of frontier development, accepting and thus sustaining precarious and hazardous working conditions. Tappe's historically informed focus on

the continuity, or persistence, of precarious labour relations throughout different configurations of Laos's mining frontier reminds of C. Patterson Giersch's (2006, p. 9) notion of "persistent frontiers" in his Qing history of the Yunnan-Southeast Asian borderlands where "it is impossible to identify first contacts, and it is equally difficult to settle on an era for the decisive closure of the frontier." Giersch eventually sees the frontier largely closed from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, amidst rapid processes of nation-building and -consolidation. However, the underlying frontier topos of economically and politically utilizing, or imagining, non-occupied, open, empty yet resource-rich spaces slated for "development" (see also section below) has been, and will be, living on. As James Anderson and John Whitmore (2015, p. 46) put it in their long-term history of the Sino-Southeast Asian land frontier, "[a]t any particular moment, the frontier continues in the internal/external overlapping conceptions of its territory, as the variety of actors work to enact their particular views of the territory." In this connection, in mainland Southeast Asia, the focus of this book, long-term "frontier continuities" can be seen for the Mekong River as both a geo-strategic routeway and energy supplier, extraction of minerals, and railway aspirations, which all now have again found their way into China's recent BRI formulations.

FRONTIER IMAGINARIES

Apart from their spatial, material and temporal aspects, resource frontiers are marked by multi-layered discursive and affective dimensions. The idea of the "empty" and "undeveloped" frontier, open for appropriation and extraction, is perhaps the most obvious and influential frontier imaginary. Different frontier imaginaries may be contested between a variety of actors (nation-states, public/private companies, international investors, NGOs, and different local actors), thus contributing to the formation of dynamic frontier assemblages. Investigating frontier discourses and imaginaries that overlap, complement, or contrast with each other, helps to understand relational conceptualizations of frontier contexts.

As Tania Murray Li (2014, p. 13) puts it, frontiers constitute "coveted places, envisaged by various actors as sites of potential". They are future-oriented, constituting a nexus of (contesting) hopes and aspirations, "a

space of desire" (Tsing 2005, p. 32). This affective dimension highlights the limitations of a mere focus on technical framings of capitalist "development" frontiers (Ferguson 1994). "Scientific" discourses of "underdevelopment" underpinned by economic data are certainly important for understanding frontier processes (see e.g. the contributions by Mierzejewksi, and Suhardiman and Kramp). However, the way local communities perceive such discourses and link them with their own specific frontier imaginaries and corresponding aspirations provides a crucial lens to explore the contingent co-production of shifting frontier assemblages.

In his contribution to this volume, Wataru Fujita offers a longitudinal perspective on rubber aspirations in the context of agrarian change in northern Thailand, including its counter-movements. He points at the hopes and contestations of different agents that contribute to the evolution of frontier regimes and corresponding discourses of rights to access and control agrarian resources. Simon Rowedder (this volume) stresses the imaginative aspects of the fruit frontier in discussing the search for opportunities of local actors that share an experimental ethic (High 2013) and co-produce the resource frontier along with states and public enterprises. Exploring the (fruit) frontier of opportunity from the ground, Rowedder illustrates the everyday practices and tactics of transnational small-scale traders who manoeuvre the physical and discursive spaces shaped by frontierization processes in the Lao-Sino-Thai borderlands (see as well Cole's contribution on the Lao-Vietnamese maize frontier).

As noted before, the concept of resource frontier is linked to the phenomenon of extractivism as a form of (colonial) accumulation through the commoditization of any natural resources aiming at enriching world economic centres (Jacka 2018). Part and parcel of extractivism is an ideological mindset of removing resources under the guise of "development" (benefitting mainly wealthy countries). Investors in Southeast Asia justify extractive practices with claims on allegedly "underdeveloped" regions and thus create the discursive precondition of extractivism. Official Chinese views of the Southeast Asian frontier as an extension of the "deficient" margins of China (discussed by Dominik Mierzejewski in his contribution to this volume) are a case in point.

This is only one side of the imaginary dimension of frontierization, though. A variety of local actors engage in the multi-scalar and co-

productive processes of frontier making. They bring in their specific ontologies of nature and environment that either foster or limit natural resource extraction. As Thianchai Surimas and Carl Middleton show in their contribution to this volume, naturalist/"scientific" notions of natural resources co-exist with indigenous ways of conceptualizing resources and questions of access and control. Their example of the Mekong River highlights the contested nature—and corresponding imaginaries—of resources such as water. Adding a socio-cosmological dimension to the question of river water use, Thianchai and Middleton complicate the frontier assemblages by including non-human beings such as fish and ghosts (see also Johnson 2020) that are often overlooked in studies of contested resource frontiers.

Southeast Asian frontier assemblages are marked by power asymmetries and corresponding discursive formations as many chapters of this book reveal. Developmentalist imaginaries such as "Cambodia-China Community of Shared Future" (discussed by Vannarith Chheang in his contribution to this volume) on the national level pave the way to dispossession and exploitation on the ground, benefiting mainly investors and corrupt elites to the detriment of local communities and creating social tension and disillusionment. The same is true for Laos where local communities generally accept the developmentalist agenda of the government but sense an increasing discrepancy between the promise of prosperity and modernity and the everyday experiences of socioeconomic marginalization (see Ponce's discussion of hydropower-induced displacement in this volume). Hegemonial discourses of extractivism that privilege capitalist accumulation in Southeast Asia are confronted with individual aspirations and alternative future-making, resulting in the typical contradictions and ambiguities of frontier spaces.

People's imaginations and aspirations are certainly drivers of frontierization processes. Frontier-making from below complements top-down processes of capitalist expansion and accumulation. Linking these two perspectives offers a more detailed picture of resource capitalism in Southeast Asia. The question of how locals perceive—and agree or disagree with—the "will to improve" (Li 2007) of external developers, calls for meticulous empirical inquiry on the ground. The ethnographic examples in this volume illustrate this co-productive dimension of frontierization.

CONCLUSION

This volume investigates the multi-layered co-production and contestations of resource frontiers in mainland Southeast Asia and the various actors and factors at stake. It considers not only the perspective of investors and venturers but also the stakeholders on the ground such as local communities and NGOs. The transdisciplinary contributions to this volume address the question of how capitalist frontier visions correspond with the hopes and aspirations, as well as anxieties, of communities living in and with capitalist resource frontiers.

Despite the huge diversity of actors that practically and discursively co-produce and shape Southeast Asian resource frontiers, China certainly remains the big elephant in the room. Frontier politics envisaged in Beijing or Kunming, and the corresponding large-scale infrastructure projects (such as BRI), have a profound impact on frontierization processes in mainland Southeast Asia—including both economic and geopolitical dimensions. And yet we should not underestimate the complicity and contestations by domestic actors that result in the contingent outcomes of frontier capitalism and its contradictions as analysed in many contributions to this volume.

That said, our aim to shift the focus away from "China in Southeast Asia" was perhaps only a vain attempt to add more nuances to the *longue durée* of frontierization processes in China-Southeast Asian borderlands. From the Qing era to the present, social and political dynamics in China certainly triggered transformations and disruptions on its southern fringes. However, only focusing on Chinese "encroachment" would not do justice to the manifold complicity and contestations on the ground—the agency of frontier populations in manoeuvring the opportunities and risks of shifting frontier assemblages.

Thus, this volume is perhaps only a selected taking stock of a specific frontier moment in the long history of contested resource frontiers in mainland Southeast Asia. It is arguably marked by livelihood transformation and dispossession, by new (transboundary) regimes of resource governance, increasing investment and debt traps, and environmental risks. New economic opportunities contrast with precariousness and uncertainties. It remains to be seen how the current COVID-19 pandemic disrupts or exacerbates these frontier processes in one way or the other.

At the present moment, the COVID-19 pandemic provokes questions about the future of the frontierization processes discussed in this volume. Limited mobility, new border regimes and economic downturns have certainly affected the transboundary frontier dynamics and livelihoods in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, after initial setbacks, interruptions and down-scaling of several BRI projects due to the emerging pandemic, analysts still see a bright future for the BRI in the long run, already gathering pace along China's post-pandemic economic recovery, especially in Southeast Asia amidst economic pressure and infrastructural demand exacerbated by the pandemic (Liu, Tan, and Lim 2021, pp. 13–16; Ye 2021; Yu 2021). The flagship project of the China-Laos railway opened on 2 December 2021, just in time for the Lao National Day. China was quick to package the BRI as a remedy for the pandemic recession in Southeast Asia and beyond. It has also served as a channel of its COVID-19 health diplomacy, thereby reactivating and intensifying the "Health Silk Road" scheme already formulated in 2015 (Jiahan 2020). Consequently, in the case of geopolitically significant Chinese energy investment in Myanmar, the pressing concern is not so much the pandemic, but recent political unrest and uncertainty following the military coup in February 2021. However, the expectation that "Myanmar will likely remain a long-term destination for Chinese investment, particularly in the energy, mining and infrastructure sectors" (Yu 2021, p. 6), only attests again to the long-term character of continual frontierization, interspersed with specific periods or moments of rupture, remodelling and intensification. Regarding the latter, the COVID-19 pandemic has boosted another inherent feature of frontier constellations: illicit economies, especially cross-border drug trade (Ghosh 2021).

While the still unfolding pandemic with all its uncertainty and volatility confounds any serious attempt at a prognosis of future resource frontier developments in the region, a historically informed, longitudinal—and not episodic—understanding of many-faceted frontier continuities and ruptures might be a good start to make sense of, and to anticipate, processes of both production and disruption of resource frontiers in mainland Southeast Asia.

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