

# Commodifying Sovereignty: Special Economic Zone and the Neoliberalization of the Lao Frontier<sup>1</sup>

Pinkaew Laungamsri<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Laos has followed its Chinese neighbor in creating the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as part of the new economic engine that allows distinctive economic policies and flexible governmental measures conducive to doing business in certain areas of the country. SEZs in Laos operate as one form of “self-imposed extraterritoriality” tailored to foreign investors especially the Chinese. Vast areas of local land have been turned into entertainment and tourist complex. This paper uses the case of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone to examine the paradox between the desire to civilize and the will to survive played out in the border zone of northern Lao PDR. It investigates the means and mechanism that facilitate the process of the civilizing mission by the Chinese investor. Commodifying sovereignty has contributed to the creation of the space of exception necessary for the new economic possibilities to reshape the “wild zone” and its people into a productive resource. Negotiation and reluctance by the Lao villagers to participate in the new economic enterprise has kept them in the state of “abeyance”. The paper also analyzes the role of the Burmese migrant workers as the key actor -- the neo-liberal subjects that help make the Chinese civilizing mission possible.

**Keywords:** Special Economic Zone, commodifying sovereignty, Neoliberalism, abeyance, neoliberal subjects

## INTRODUCTION

*The condition of exception is thus a political liminality, and extraordinary decision to depart from a generalized political normativity, to intervene in the logics of ruling and of being ruled (Aihwa Ong, 2006: 5).*

In *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State*, a best-seller book that topped the 2011 Shanghai Bookfair's list of the most influential new books in China, Zhang Weiwei, a professor of international relations at Fudan University and former interpreter of the late Communist leader Deng Xiaoping, demonstrates how the Chinese economic model is poised to surpass its Western counterparts. According to Zhang, China wave is not the rise of an ordinary country, but the rise of a different type of country, a country sui generis, a civilizational state, a new model of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a larger collaborative research project entitled “ Variegated Dragon: Territorialization and Civilising Mission in Southeast Asia” led by Professor Yos Santasombat. The project was carried out between 2011-2013. The author would like to thank Professor Yos Santasombat the Thailand Research Fund for their support of this research.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

development and a new political discourse that poses questions to many Western assumptions about democracy, good governance and human rights. *The China Wave* argues that two of the primary virtues of the Chinese model – both rooted in Confucianism – are “meritocracy” and “performance legitimacy”. A meritocratic system, the implementation of advancement based upon intellectual talent, ensures that only the most able people are propelled to the top positions in government. Performance legitimacy, on the other hand, is secured through the state’s ability to improve the living standards of hundreds of millions of people. It is no doubt that civilization as an ideology represents the most significant marker of China as a nation and of Chinese identity distinctive from other societies. In the course of Chinese expansion of its economic power, the discourse of civilization represents one of the most powerful tools used to legitimize its appropriation of foreign resources across the globe. Indeed, as Pal Nyiri (2006) points out, the construction of the concept of civilization and the improvement of the quality of the population are among the significant discourses necessary not only for domestic modernization but more importantly for the collaborative effort among various Chinese actors in their global modernizing mission and in the understanding of their position in the world.

This paper examines the paradox between the desire to civilize and the will to survive, which has played out in the border zone of northern Lao PDR. It investigates the means and mechanism that facilitate the process of the civilizing mission by the Chinese and its Lao state counterpart to turn the rural landscape of Lao’s north into a neo-liberal space of tourist economy. Following its Chinese neighbor, the Lao state has used Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as part of the new economic engine that allows exceptional economic policies and flexible governmental measures conducive to doing business that does not exist in the rest of the country. But unlike its Chinese counterpart, which uses SEZs as dual roles of “windows” in developing the foreign-oriented economy, generating foreign exchanges through exporting products and importing advanced technologies in accelerating inland economic development, SEZs in Laos have been created to hasten the “turning resources into capital” process by renting out various border areas at cheap prices for large scale foreign investment with unlimited access to natural resources and long term and renewable concession. Fertile agricultural land has thus been turned into a large gambling complex and tourist facilities.

This process has been called by Chris Lyttleton and Pal Nyiri (2011) “soft extraterritoriality”, the colonial form of control over resources and people while being exempt from the jurisdiction of local law. This term has been used to refer to the expansion of Chinese economic power into the region through large-scale development schemes. Dams, casinos, entertainment complexes, agri-business by Chinese companies have come to replace local settlement and farmland. Massive flow of Chinese capital into this region and other places has been made possible by land concession policy in many countries designed as the key engine for fast-track economic change. Control of vast areas of land from the national territory, the influx of Chinese workers and entrepreneurs, privilege of Chinese currency, language, and other facilities over local and national provisions, and unclear enforcement of legal jurisdiction, all have been carried out in the name of modernization or “the will to improve” the marginal population of the country (Li, 2007) – to pull Laos out of underdevelopment through the helping hand of the big power of China. In fact, what is happening in the case of Laos is rather a form of “self-imposed extraterritoriality”,

a state-capital collaborative project in which the weak state such as Lao PDR has chosen to sacrifice its own sovereign right in exchange of national prosperity.

The use of the concept extraterritoriality to explain economic advancement by contemporary Chinese investments in weaker economic areas raises two important issues. First, it points to an interesting characteristic of the expansion of Chinese investment in the region which involves not only the penetration of market economy but also the alteration of political and judicial practices of its economic counterpart. Second, it demonstrates the post-war collaboration between states and capitalists towards experimentations with flexible sovereignty where different modes of territorialization, authority, and legitimacy are revised and redefined to meet the requirements of economic modernization. The implementation of Special Economic Zones in Laos PDR represents not only the process of self-imposed extraterritoriality but also a form of “commodifying sovereignty” where sovereign rights are commercialized and turned into capital to attract foreign investment. Such practice represents not only the struggle of a weak nation-state to make fast cash and to become economically civilized in the global economy, but also a convenient way to transform the many remote hinterlands into a trans boundary economic gateway. However, the change brought by special economic zone enterprise is drastic and abrupt as it operates through various forms of manipulation and exploitation. While the zone has been turned into a new frontier of the Chinese tycoon who have full rights and power to administrate his territory, influx of Chinese immigrants, massive deprivation of land and livelihood, and narcotic and gambling abuse scandals have come to characterize the new economic border towns of Lao PDR.

This paper also analyzes the different impacts the process of commodifying sovereignty has brought upon various groups of people residing in the zone. While Special Economic Zone has been used by the Lao state as a shortcut to transfer its responsibility of rural modernization to the Chinese patron, the dream of “civilizing the rural subject” has never come to fruition. Being deprived of their land and unable to get access to new resources of livelihood, the Lao people have kept in an “abeyance” -- a state of suspension in between the two worlds of traditional and modern reality in which they neither fully take part. On the other hand, the group of people who have fully engaged in the neo-liberal enterprise of the Chinese are Burmese migrant workers. Despite being exploited, they have arduously managed to seek an opportunity to participate in the labor process fundamental to the building of the new casino empire. These are the agent of neo-liberal subjects that help make the collaborative effort of the Chinese-Lao civilizing mission possible.

### **Situating Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism as a concept has been an exhortation in political and academic debates. While the term itself is impossible to be defined purely theoretically (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005), it is thought of by some scholars as a new paradigm for economic theory and policy-making and a revival of the economic theories of Adam Smith and his intellectual successors in the nineteenth century (Clark, 2005; Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie, <http://folk.uio.no/daget/What%20is%20Neo-Liberalism%20FINAL.pdf>). Emerged as an ideological response to the crisis of the “Keynesian welfare state”, economists have characterized this form of economy based on the core assumption of self-regulating market, efficient allocation of

resource, reassertion of the fundamental beliefs of the liberal political economy, and the retreat of state intervention from national economy (Friedman, 1962; Munck, 2005; Saad-Fiho and Johnston, 2005). It should be noted that the meaning of neoliberalism has changed over time and there is no agreement among authoritative theorists of neoliberalism such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, David Harvey and Noam Chomsky. As Dencik, Redden, Connor and Lekakis (2012) succinctly remark, scholars have come to define neoliberalism from diverse angles -- as political economic program (Hay, 2004; Harvey, 2007 and 2010), as an ideology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001; Giroux, 2008), and as a rationality influencing schemas of thought and processes of analysis (Brown, 2005; Foucault, 2008; Couldry, 2010).

For economists, neo-liberalism is describe as a form of decentralized system of economy where there is minimal state interference and information travels freely and is freely determined at each localized point as demonstrated in the form of free market (Hayek, 1944). The rationale for the self-regulating market and the restriction of the role of the state to certain non-economic spheres such as property right and information asymmetry, according to Friedman is for beneficial consequences (1962). While proponents of neo-liberalism are inclined towards economic utopia produced by the pure and perfect market, which is made possible by financial deregulation, a number of scholars point out the costs of such economic transformation. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, defines neo-liberalism as “a program for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic” (1998). These structures include the nation, work groups, unions, association, cooperatives, or even the family (ibid.). For Bourdieu, powerful laws of the market and de-regulated capital flows come with the dismantling of social structures. As Gilles Châtelet points out, the idea of the social has been replaced by a fixation with the establishment of a fluid, exhilarated and supposedly enlightened capitalism which deploys administrative, institutional, scientific and rational discourses to justify the social cost of economic reforms, the removal of social protection and the acceptance that the price of individual success is the marginalization of large groups of people (Châtelet, 1998 cited in Jutel, 2007: 29).

Similarly, David Harvey sees neoliberalism not as a utopian project “to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism” but a practical political project -- the reconstitution of class power by the global economic elite (Harvey, 2005: 19). The idea of class power underlying the separation between theoretical ideology and practical aspects of neoliberalism is salient in Harvey’s analysis. Thus, whereas free market and minimal state interference constitute the core theoretical idea of neoliberal economics, in practice, state interventions are selectively called upon in various economic crises to protect the benefits of economic elites. Another major argument by Harvey relates to the premise of increasing wealth brought by neoliberalism. Despite the assumption by neoliberal theory that underscores the efficiency of market mechanisms in generating wealth compare to forms of state intervention, Harvey maintains that what is at work is not so much about greater wealth but about economic elite’s upward redistribution of wealth through ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Significant features of accumulation of dispossession include mechanisms such as privatization and commodification, financialization, the management and manipulation of crises, and state redistributions. In essence, what marks neoliberalism as a distinct form of economy is its power to dis-embed the liberal economies from the regulatory framework of

the state. A neoliberal state, according to Harvey, demonstrates an “institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2002: <http://user.chol.com/~moras/DH-neoliberalism.doc>).

Both proponent and antagonist of neoliberalism, despite their distinctive ideology, share a standard model of economic system that can be applied across the global space. The problem with such uniform framework lies in its inability to capture the complex engagement of neoliberalism in a variety of political economic contexts and the diverse outcomes it entails. The critique of such rigid view on a macro-scale or state level is raised by Aihwa Ong who suggests to define neoliberalism differently. According to Ong, neoliberalism should not be viewed as a fixed set of characteristics with expectable outcomes but “as a logic of governing that migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts” (Ong, 2006: 3). Previous formulations of neoliberalism tend to emphasize the aspect of economic management at the level of the state while neglecting other institutions and diverse actors. Ong calls this formulation, Neoliberalism with a big ‘N’ which has with it the shortcoming of collapsing multiple socio-political values into a single measure of structure (ibid.: 4). In taking neoliberalism as a migratory set of practices or mobile technology, neoliberalism with a small ‘n’ is defined by Ong as “a technology of governing ‘free subjects’ that co-exists with other political rationalities” (ibid.). Thus nation-states with different political economic designs might opt to use different strategies of governing and management of populations, which might not necessarily be analogous to the model operated in the West. As Ong points out, neoliberalism in Asia is less interested in taking on norms of efficiency, transparency, accountability, and individual freedom and more about encouraging self-actualizing or self-enterprising subjects in order to create an enterprising subjectivity in elite subjects (ibid.). In socialist states, such as China and elsewhere, while neoliberal logic often works through a new economic mechanism and market reform, it is done so by certain control of the state.

Neoliberalism is therefore not a universal structural condition but a ‘global assemblage’ in which the spread of neoliberalism is articulated in specific situations, or territorialized in new material, collective, and discursive relationship (Ong and Collier, 2005). Therefore, pro-market policies in many authoritarian societies often coexist with repressive laws and the promotion of private entrepreneurial benefits over communal rights and livelihood of local people. In various Asian contexts, neoliberal technologies also invoke forms and space of exception to normal political systems and practices. Special zones and high tech zones in China and Malaysia respectively are examples of the way in which neoliberalism and its differential articulation with certain political configurations have carved out space of exception distinct from general national terrain for selectively educated population targets. While laws and regulations have been made situational to attract educated and enterprising citizens, the subjugation and subjectivization of the individual is no longer located within the confines of the institution and disciplined within its spatial imaginary but is now operated by markets as the new instrument of control (Thierry, 2007). In the case of Laos, neoliberalism as exception has been practiced and made possible through an amalgamation of external and transnational force of the Chinese neoliberal value of self-actualizing and self-enterprising, repressive regime towards political and economic freedom, and the demand towards accelerated-pace of modernity. Over the past decade, the national policy of special

economic zones to attract foreign investors has been developed in many areas throughout the country. Similar to other developing countries in the region, certain laws and regulations have been amended in response to the need of massive investment. The interplay between transnational neoliberal logic and national forces has created a state of exception where “the free co-exist with the unfree, unbridled knowledge flows and yet there are limits on knowledge” (Ong, 2006: 6), which has fragmented national space and its population. Such interaction, as will be demonstrated in this paper, has produced a complex form of governing and subjectification where both abjection and recalibration constitute the new experiences among the marginal people who engage in the Chinese-style neoliberalism.

### **Dreamland and the Desire to Civilize**

In an interview with Zhao Wei by CCTV in 2012 ([http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMjY3MjY2MTI4.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjY3MjY2MTI4.html) accessed 20/12/2012), Zhao Wei, the Chinese tycoon of Kings Roman company reflects on how past experiences, personal nostalgia, and the will to civilize have culminated in the initiation of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone at the northern Lao border:

*Previously, this area was lowland, filled with reed grass. Since last year the level of the land has gradually increased. We have developed this land, adjusting its level and deepening the water level. Now the water is deep enough, underground water has also been found. We have built a[n] island similar to China's Suzhou garden with Chinese civilization. Our goal is to turn the Golden Triangle into a developed economic zone, to become a peaceful development zone. The history will recognize my effort. Human capability will be represented in the prosperity of economy. If this goal is reached, I'll be more than happy[...] The biggest obstacle is that villagers here do not understand us. We have rented all the land and forest. [The Lao government] told us to preserve [the forest], take good care of it. But when we planted forest, they would come to cut it down, burn it down. After having burning it in May, they would go and dig the soil to plant things, without paying any attention to its effect. We can't go around, arrest, beat up, and fine these villagers who burn the forest. If we do so, it will cause ethnic issues here. To deal with this situation, we have to be open-minded. What we have done nowadays are based on two principles, first it must bring good benefit to the Lao people. It should not upset friends around me. Second, it might improve my employees, making the Lao people, the Lao government better. If we can do so, this area is successfully developed[...] The Lao government gives us the sky. In return we will build a beautiful city as a gratitude to the Lao people. When pretty Lao children came to our company, what make us happy and delighted is their smiles. Their smiling faces show happiness. This makes me feel happy, really happy.*

Zhao Wei's expression is by no means new. Indeed, it reflects the 'Imperialist Nostalgia' (Rosaldo, 1989) and the desire to create cultural imitation. For the colonizer, as many scholars have pointed out, to civilize is to mold and subjugate its subjects in the image of the ruler (Rosaldo, 1987; Bhabha, 1994; Ferguson, 2002). The Lao frontier thus represents a nostalgic space of the prosperous China, an

allegory where imitation is made to express the yearning of imperial homesickness. But as Rosaldo argues, imperialist nostalgia develops alongside a certain sense of mission, “the white man’s burden,” where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones (Rosaldo, *ibid.*). As mood of emotion, imperialist nostalgia also has with it, the power to disguise that makes racial domination appear innocent and pure, an idealized fantasy that conceals violence and exploitation. The desire to civilize and to re-invent cultural progress thus constitutes ideological stances that justify colonial and imperial domination.

What the nostalgic rhetoric of the Chinese tycoon fails to reveal is the fact that such civilizing enterprise involves massive transformation/destruction of landscape and livelihood. Established in 2007, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone is located at the triangle between Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar in Bo Keo Province across Chiang Saen District of Chiang Rai Province. Owned by Chinese Kings Romans company, it claims to bring the world of glamour to northern border of Laos by making this Special Economic Zone one of the top international entertainment places in the globe.<sup>3</sup> A large area of 3,000 hectares of land on a 75-year lease has been granted to the company in exchange of a total investment of US\$2 billion. If completed, the development of the Zone will result in resettlements of 9 villages along the Mekong River, while all the farmland, garden, and pasture will be expropriated to pave way for the entertainment complex. Kings Roman claims that on completion of this gigantic project, the whole complex would employ 5,000 workers and an estimated 300 domestic and foreign companies would be operating in this zone. Presently, it has 20 new start-ups, seven hotels and a total casino entertainment center. By 2020, the Zone would have a trade center, a five star hotel, an entertainment center, casino, bank, golf course, school, hospital, airport, harbor and a service center.

Golden Triangle SEZ, as claimed by Zhao Wei, is the hub that would connect the three countries of Laos, Thailand, and China together and to facilitate the flow of investment and tourism in this region. It is also expected that through this project, it will increase the number of Chinese tourists into Laos and Thailand. With the new policy of border crossing, border pass will be used to replace visa application. Of all the SEZs in Lao PDR, the Golden Triangle SEZ represents one of the most favorable enterprises in the eyes of the Lao government. Despite the constant rumor of drug and gambling abuse within the casino, the Lao government continues to praise this SEZ as the most successful model of economic development in the border area. In the Evaluation Report of Socio-Economic Development and management of Special Economic Zone in 2000-2011, Boonpen Munphosai, the Minister of Government Office and Vice Chair of National Committee of Special Economic Zone states, SEZ development has been well-taken off by developers, especially the infra-structure development in the far remote area. The construction of roads and buildings in Golden Triangle and Boten-dankham SEZs have been successful beyond expectation of what has been planned. It has brought a new feature to the rural area. The transportation is now convenient. The zone has created a number of new job

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<sup>3</sup> In the website of Kings Romans, various foreign business sectors were listed as joint ventures in the SEZ including the rice company from China, the Lao Development Bank, the Cambodian casino enterprise, the Chinese transportation company, the Chong Ching construction, Kings Romans, Bangkok Bank of Thailand, Dong Men agri-business group, the Yunnan agricultural company, and the horticultural company, etc. In reality, these enterprises have never physically existed in the zone.

opportunities for local people. The developers have delivered tax and other revenues to the government according to the contract. They have also turned the messy swamp area into a new modern city.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Local Emperor, the Casino Empire, and the Making of Neo-liberal Space**

Chinese comprises the major investors in Lao SEZ who contribute the highest value of investment. For the Lao government, they are perceived as serious investors who “really have money” (*Mee Ngern Thae Thae*) and have an intension to invest. Although the SEZ in Laos started at Savan-seno with the Thai investment, the development has been unsuccessful. Compare to the Chinese, the Lao government see Thai businessmen as speculators, if not brokers who did not have a serious intention for investment. It is believed that the Chinese are the one who help make SEZ materialized. As a result, the Lao government has put its highest hope and faith in China to help bring progress into SEZ, making it the express way to turn Laos towards economic prosperity. Of all the ten approved Special and Specific Economic Zones, five have been operating by Chinese companies. The Golden Triangle Economic Zone has been branded by the Lao government as the model Special Economic Zone that has been made successful by the “committed” Chinese investor such as Zhao Wei. Over the course of five years since the initiation of the Golden Economic Zone in 2007, not only has Zhao Wei become the most trusted foreign investors in Laos, but his famous Zone has been the most popular sites of visit by high ranking Lao government officials.

Originally from Heilongjiang, in Harbin province of the cold north of Dong Bei, Zhao Wei built up his fame and economic success from illicit business of casino in Meng La, the border town between China and Myanmar. Since gambling is considered an illegal business in China, the Chinese government used every method to squeeze his luxurious casino enterprise, ranging from cutting off electricity and water supplies to prohibiting the Chinese to cross into his area.<sup>5</sup> Under such pressure, Zhao Wei and his family fled to Ton Phueng, and built up another casino empire where the land is cheap and the state is flexible. The business this time is no longer underground but is formalized. His casino complex has received a warm welcome and strong support from the Lao government. Zhao registered his new company under the name Jin Moo Mian or Kings Romans in Hong Kong (known as Dok Ngiw Kham in Lao). The plan to rebuild his casino complex is ambitious, Golden Triangle Casino is impressively larger than the Lan Tu casino in Meng La, and more fanciful in terms of entertainment facilities. Many high ranking official of Lao government are excited by this gigantic enterprise. They came for visits several times and returned with huge amount of pocket money. With his massive investment, Zhao promises to turn the “unused” hinterland of Ton Phueng into a new metropole that would link Thailand, Laos, and China together. In his own words, “I come to help the poor farmers of Laos out of poverty, and drug problem, by turning this area into a tourist city” (Asian Commerce Magazine, 2003: 13). It is

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<sup>4</sup> Boonpen Munphosai, Minister of Government Office, Vice Chair of NCSEZ, October 18, 2011. The idea “new modern city” (*nawa nakorn*) has become the state slogan that is used to describe the future of the Ton Phueng border district. It should be noted that the term “*nakorn*” or city is currently used only for Vientiane, the capital of the country.

<sup>5</sup> See also, Pal Nyiri, “The Enclave of Improvement”.

announced by Zhao that in the year 2020, Ton Phueng will become a flower city (Mu Mian/Kapok Flower) with zero pollution and resided by 200,000 people.

Entering into the King Romans Empire was a remarkable experience. Although Ton Phueng is a Lao border area, it is no longer a Lao region. Zhao Wei has turned the 800 hectare of once fertile land of agriculture into a casino town with Chinese shops, restaurants, apartments, hotels, supermarkets massage parlors, and two large marketplaces. A plan to build an international airport is underway to link China's Shen Du and Ton Phueng together. The majority of the residents of the Zone are Chinese with a number of Burmese laborers and Lao residents. The language of communication is Chinese. People live in China time, which is one hour ahead of that of Lao. The SEZ has its own rules and regulations (taxation, rent, fee, punishment) with Zhao Wei as the head of the town. Indeed Zhao Wei is often referred to by the Chinese residents here as *Tǔ Huangdi* -- the local tyrant/emperor, and *Shān Gāo Huangdi Yuǎn* -- the powerful lord in the area unreachable by the emperor.<sup>6</sup>

In "The Chinese Axis: Zoning Technologies and Variegated Sovereignty" (2004), Aiwah Ong argues that zoning technologies represent an effective strategy of re-territorialization that create zones of political exceptions to normalized Chinese rules generating conditions of what she calls 'variegated sovereignty' that expand economic networks and promote political integration. In their endeavor to compete in the global economy, many states in East and Southeast Asia make "exceptions" to their usual practices of governing. Special Economic Zones (SEZ) represents an example of this strategy. The new economic geographies areas are largely separated from the rest of the society, free from government control, and within which the market is given more or less free reign. Such national geography has been re-territorialized and turned into a zone of exception, a neoliberal space governed by the logic of market. While neo-liberalism creates a space of exception exempt from sovereign control of the state, its flexible process of regulation has also allowed several types of neo-liberal subject to thrive. These are people who have been primarily driven by the neoliberal/market force, escape the power/control of the state by connecting themselves to multiple prospective places, and engage in multiple forms of citizenship that often time transcend and challenge the sovereignty of the state. Unlike diaspora, they did not develop their identity and community through the idea of homeland or desire to return to homeland, though such rhetoric is often used as a strategy of appropriation. The lives of these people are characterized by constant travelling and moving towards a more potential economic arena. The zone of exception allows them to make use of their multiple identities and networks to gain access to resources and maximize available benefits.

Zhao Wei represents the good example of the neo-liberal subject who attempts to negotiate his national identity in neo-liberal terms. For him, being Chinese means being a good patron whose good image is important for economic advancement. As he puts it, "Living in a foreign country, I have to be careful about what I speak and what I do. At the same time, I have taught my King Romans employees to be careful too. We have to pay attention to our personalities, showing

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the reputation of Zhao Wei as the powerful lord of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, it is known that the one behind this gigantic business is his wife. Zhao's wife is Taiwanese, who plays a major role in managing the Casino and its related business in Jin Moo Mien SEZ. It is said that the wife is the real investor in this zone and is the most powerful figure who controls the economic system in the SEZ. Zhao Wei, however, deals mostly with the Lao government. In addition, Zhao's daughter runs most of the computer and internet shops in the SEZ.

good personalities to people. That way we can save the image of the Chinese” ([http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMjY3MjY2MTI4.html/](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjY3MjY2MTI4.html/) accessed 20/12/2012). Other Chinese who entered into the Special Economic Zone came from a variety of places and with different backgrounds. Most of the time, these are not individuals but entered into the special economic zone through several kinds of networks. The majority of the Chinese who migrated into the Zone came through the so-called Dong Bei network, the home region of Zhao Wei. Some of these Chinese have close connection with the Zhao family. Other Dong Bei families established major business enterprises fundamental to the casino economy such as hotel, restaurant, and entertainment facilities. The Dong Bei people have more privileges than the other Chinese in this zone and are influential groups. Most of them learned about the new economic opportunity along the Lao border through the advertisements by the Kings Roman company in Chinese media.

The owner of the supermarket next to the hotel where I stayed during my field visit has opened her store for almost half a year. Her son used to work in the casino in Boten and moved here to work as an employee in the casino. She and her husband, former farmers from Harbin, Dong Bei, followed their son to seek economic prospect in this faraway land. It was their first time to travel across the country. Most of the products in her store are from Xishuanbanna where her husband transports them across the Boten-Mohan borders once every 2-3 months. Even though they have to pay customs duty on both sides of the Chinese-Lao border, they are not required to pay any income tax in this zone within the period of three years. The average income of 5,000-10,000 yuan is good enough compared with the economic life in Dong Bei. There are also people from other regions such as Sichuan Shěng, Yunnan, Kwang Dong, and Kwan Si. These people open restaurants, hotels, and entertainment businesses. Most Chinese in this area show trust and respect for Zhao Wei and his ability to make this area prosper. It should be noted that the movement of Chinese from Dong Bei, Sichuan, and Yunnan is made possible through networks. The family network represents the fundamental characteristic of this flow of the mainland Chinese towards search for new economic opportunity outside their hometown. These people did not intend to settle down permanently in Ton Phueng but planned to earn some income for a couple of years before returning to China. The second type of Chinese in this area is overland Chinese. Most of these people are second-generation Chinese from various places such as Chiang Rai's Doi Mae Salong, and Shan State's La Shio. Often times, these Chinese are the minority, living at the edge of the nation-state. Border development in the form of SEZ has offered these minorities an economic opportunity and space for trans-border experiences. Living in the interstices has made an acquisition of multiple identities, multilingual, and flexible citizenship necessary. Although this qualification is often deprecated by the state, it is found valuable at the SEZ. Several people working at Kings Roman are of this type of border minority.

The person who arranged transportation to cross the Mekong to the casino for my research assistants and me is one good example. When I asked about his name, he responded that it was Jirayut, a Thai name. He spoke Chinese to my assistants with a Yunnanese accent. When I asked him where he is from, he replied that he was from around here, which implies that he is Thai. But to my Chinese researchers, he said he is also Chinese. While waiting for someone to process our border crossing documents, he was reading Thairath, a Thai newspaper. Another border person we met was a hotel manager near the casino complex. This person is

a young woman who speaks fluently in both Thai and Chinese languages and who identifies herself as a Thai citizen from Doi Mae Salong. One of the hotel staff is also from the border area. Arriving at the Special Economic Zone from Tha Chi Lek, the border between Myanmar and Thailand, this woman speaks good Chinese and communicates well in Thai. Indeed, as a zone of exception, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone has attracted a number of the border people who found themselves fitting well in this “out of state” place. Flexible as it is, there is no need for these people to declare their national ID card, which some of them might not have, and there is no problem for them to cross the border back and forth between Laos, Myanmar, and China. The advent of Special Economic Zone has thus turned the border into a neo-liberal space where sovereignty has given way to the force of market. However, such a process is not without its costs. The paradox of this “zone of exception” lies in the fact that while the market force has claimed to redefine the idea of sovereignty and right in neoliberal term (economic freedom and flexible sovereignty), the process of such redefining is often coercive, politically repressive, and operated through state machinery.

### **Commodifying Sovereignty and Discourse Coalition: “We will Turn the Wild Frontier into a Modern City”**

*Some opinions posit that special economic zones will create unequal economic balance due to the implementation of different policies towards investors within and outside the zones. This kind of opinion might be right in the short term. But in the long run, if we have an appropriate mechanism and administration, special economic zone development will be the key engine to accelerate development, connecting [Laos] with regional and international economy, creating employments, and bring poverty eradication into a wider scope (Boonpen Munphosai, Minister of Government Office, Vice Chair of NCSEZ, October 18, 2011).*

In making extraterritoriality possible in the postcolonial period, both Lao state and developers have joined hands to create their collaborative justification. Narratives about how poor and backward it is in the border area of Lao have been constructed, shared, and made legitimate to support the necessities of SEZ. For the Lao government, it is the area beyond their economic capacity to make any change. As Kheungkham Keonuchan, Director of Planning and Evaluation Division, the Secretariat to NCSEZ puts it, “The reasons we granted right[s] to develop the golden triangle into SEZ are twofold: it is a far remote area and it is precarious to drug problem[s]. When development gets in there, people will be better off, they will be protected”.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese came as an economic savior who promised to help bring Laos out of underdevelopment, to rescue them from a state of lagging behind, and to fulfill the dream towards modernity initiated by the founder of the modern Lao country, Kaisone Phomvihane. Even though it is an unequal deal, it is the only solution as far as the Lao state sees it. It is believed that SEZ is the second best investment strategy suitable for this poor country that has very limited economic capacity for infrastructure development. As Kheungkham argues, “there are good results, but we can’t deny that there will also be some impacts. But this is all with

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, December 15, 2011.

good intention. After all, everyone will mutually benefit from this kind of development [...] [T]he government doesn't have sufficient capital. That's why we have lower bargaining power. But we have tried our best to protect the interest of people. At the same time, we need investment. This is the reason why we have to have a special policy".<sup>8</sup>

As a process of transformation by which goods, services, or other entities are assigned economic value, commodification has become the strategic tool in the Lao path towards modernization. Commodifying sovereignty is a process by which the right to rule is given an economic value and thus allows market to function to replace other social or political values. It is therefore not only a transformation of commodity, but a modification of relationship where state-citizen-territory relationship is now tainted by commercial value. In an unequal power relation between Laos and China, the Lao state has no choice but to turn their sovereignty into commodity by granting full rights of economic exploitation of resources to the Chinese investors while depriving the right of its own citizens. The differentiated treatment of citizens is defined by anthropologist Aiwah Ong as 'gradated sovereignty' (2008). Discursive practice about backwardness, the need for development, poverty are thus the significant mechanism that help make the process of commodifying sovereignty in the form of Special Economic Zone justifiable. For Chinese investors, it is their mission to turn the backward hinterland into a prosperous country, a civilizing mission the Lao themselves cannot pursue. It is a dream that Zhao Wei, the key developer of Golden Triangle SEZ, states in various interviews as, "Laos really lags behind. The country is poor. The people are conservative. They have seen [the] fruit[s] of development in China. They thought China has many SEZs and would like to follow suit. When I first arrived here, it was a poor region. There were *kapok* flowers blooming everywhere. Lao people are kind and welcoming [to] me. But they are poor. There was nothing here. You had to sleep on a mat. In [the] summer season, it was so dry. I came to work here, staying with villagers, thinking about how to develop this place. [...] I wanted to help them out of poverty. One day when I get old and look back here [sic]. It has become the famous SEZ well known throughout the world".

Zhao Wei's statement about Laos and its people are typical. It resonates the perception among the Chinese officials towards the underdeveloped Lao population. As the statement in the North Plan by the Yunnan Province Development and Reform Commission clearly states: "The mentalities of most people are still at the starting stage of agricultural economic development, which is unsuitable for development of market economy and economic globalization. Their awareness of development, competition, openness and self-reliance and hard working still need to be improved" (Northern Laos Industrial Economic Development and Cooperation Planning Preparation Group, 2008: 15). The idea that the GMS people possess backward mentalities while their homelands are poor and need to be transformed is central to the discourse of development in China. This type of attitude is also endorsed by the Lao government. The discourse coalition co-produced by both the developer and the one being developed reinforces the image of the Lao hinterland as a desolate and stagnant area disconnected from any type of market economy. For the Lao state, it is the sign of backwardness incompatible with- and obstructing the dream for a new modern Lao country. Yet, for the Chinese, it is a challenging

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, December 15, 2011.

civilizing mission, an exciting enterprise on how to turn the unknown wild frontier of Laos' north into a famous and profitable region. The mission itself is even thought of as sacred. As Zhao Wei puts it, "Doing business is like making merit. Business-society, they grow together". Although the drives towards civilization are different, both parties share the same dream of re-structuring the frontier towards modernity. In the words of Zhao Wei:

*Golden Triangle is not far away from Cheng Du. I am quite interested in tourist resources in Cheng Du. We can develop this zone into a tourist center that both send[s] tourists to Cheng Du and attract[s] international tourists into this area. At the same time, I also hope that Cheng Du would be interested in tourism in northern Thailand. We can help link all the tourist industries together. Next year (2012), the main objectives of the zone are to build an international airport and two 18-hole golf courses, to develop an entertainment and recreation centers on the Moo Mien Island. These development schemes require collaborations from a number of investors. My dream and my goal are [sic] to develop this zone into a big city, the second largest to Vientiane. When I am old and it is inconvenient to travel, I would be able to envisage—every time people see the Kapok flowers, they will think about this zone.*

### **The Civilizing Mechanism: Deception, Coercion, and Abeyance**

The dream constructed by the Chinese developer and the Lao state is, however, not necessarily shared by local people living at the golden triangle border who are defined as development target. Nor does the picture of poor borderland correspond with the actual reality of the community. On the contrary, what has been portrayed as the wild frontier, Ton Phueng, is one of the most fertile agricultural areas along the Mekong river. Prior to the approval of the government to turn this whole town into a Special Economic Zone, the Lao Ministry of Culture also wanted to join hand with Thailand to propose to the UNESCO a joint world heritage site of Suvannakhomkham and Chiang Saen -- the Trans-boundary Archaeological Urban Complex of Chiang Saen and Suvannakhomkham. It is known that both Chiang Saen and Suvannakhomkham share a 500-600 years of ancient history across the Mekong river. Also known as "Nakhone Chianglao" and "Nakhone Ngern Yang" the city is believed to originally be established during the first millennium CE, possibly by the Mon. The present remains are, however, vestiges of the 16th century city, which was established on the earlier site by King Sai Setthathirat (1550-1571) of Lan Xang. Most villages along the Mekong river have been long established and wealthy. They are lowland agricultural communities who have engaged in rice farming, cattle ranching, river trade, and various kinds of employment for more than two centuries. More importantly, they have never seen themselves as being poor or backward. In contrast to Zhao Wei's dream of wonderland, the civilizing mission at the Golden Triangle border was bitterly fought by local people. This is not because they did not want modernization, but simply because they did not see their livelihoods in any way lagging behind civilization as claimed by the Chinese developer. Similar to another project before this one, the struggle went all in vain. The change was imperative. Negotiation is not a term recognized by the state once the project has been approved.

Ban Kwan village, the first target of resettlement carried the name “Sridonsak” during the French colonization before changing to Ban Kwan after the end of the Indo-China war. The villagers were Yuan and Yong who migrated from Lampon, northern Thailand due to land shortage and the oppression by the Burmese and Lanna states. After Laos gained independence in 1975, many people left the village, only ten households remained. Between 1982 and 1989, the second wave of migration of about twenty-five families of the Lue moved in from Sayyabouly Province. Apart from the Yuan, Yong and Lue, there are also other ethnic groups living in Ban Kwan including the Tai dam, Lao loum, and Khmu. The resettlement scheme was received by the villagers with shocking surprise. It was unexpected that a long, well-established lowland village would have to be relocated in order to pave way for the casino. The targeted area of resettlement covers 9 villages including Ban Phonhome, Ban Don Moon, Ban Viengsavang, Ban Phieng Ngam, Ban Mokkaok, Ban Longkhone, Ban Kwan, Ban Sibounhueang, and Ban Mounghkham, within the total area of 3,000 hectares. Ban Kwan was the first that have lost its farmland. It should be noted that the Chinese civilizing mission is made possible through the help of the Lao state counterpart. There are at least two significant mechanisms that facilitate the process of land appropriation for the Chinese which help sail the project through without much difficulty: the Lao state coercive apparatus and the role of the village mediator/broker. Deception, coercion, and abeyance, are three devices that have transformed the first targeted village and its people, Ban Kwan, into the Chinese-designed dreamland.

## **Deception**

On January 24th, 2007, representatives from the Ton Phueng district officials came to Ban Kwan declaring the new government project of Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Three hundred and twenty villagers who attended the meeting had no clue about what this project meant and how it would affect their lives. According to the district officer, villagers would only have to move a few hundred meters away from their settlement. Within this short distance, villagers would still be able to come back to their garden and farmland to collect their fruits, vegetables, and other products. Based on this claim which portrays no major impact, villagers agreed to comply with the government policy. A few months later, government officials from Vientiane capital and district officers along with representative from the King Romans company came to the village again. This time the information is different. It turns out that the area along the Mekong River and all the farmland belonging to eight villages in Ton Phueng districts have been leased out to the King Romans company. In order to build a tourist center, 827.65 hectares of land will be needed. In the first period, village land including settlement area and farmland in Ban Kwan and Ban Sribunhueng will be handed to the company. According to the government officials, the resettlement site is 10 kilometer away from the actual village and the company forbids any new house construction from the year 2007 onwards. The new information prompted villagers at Ban Kwan to petition to the Lao government. Money was collected and two representatives were sent to Vientiane capital to ask for a reconsideration of the resettlement scheme. The petition written by the villagers requests that the government reconsider the policy to establish the special economic zone in Ban Kwan area or otherwise delineate the village and farmlands of Ban Kwan out of development of tourist industry project.

Villagers also made a plea to the government for a fair compensation on the grazing land and garden already taken away by the company. Such petition is a rare incident in a socialist country such as Lao PDR where development-induced resettlement is an ordinary practice and protests are considered illegal. To no avail, the petition never reached the prime minister. When villagers arrived at the Prime Minister Office, the staff there informed them that there was nothing they could do since the project had already been approved by the government.

### Coercion and Mediation

Chinese special economic zone at Ton Phueng is regarded as a government project legalized by the SEZ law. It is therefore imperative that Lao citizens must obey. For some people at Ban Kwan, resettlement is not something unfamiliar, as many of the residents have been moved by other projects prior to this one. As an ethnically mixed village, the views towards resettlement are divergent. Some were willing to move while others wished to protest. With no one leading a strong opposition against the project and with the coercive persuasion from provincial and district officials, most villagers ended up accepting compensation. The company built 116 houses for the villagers in the area far from the river and casino and named it “Ban Sam Liam Kham” or Golden Triangle Village . Between 2008-2012, villagers struggled bitterly for fair compensation on their houses, garden, fruit trees, barns, and grazing land. While the compensation rate for land and houses was extremely low, paddies and farmlands that are taken away for road construction are not compensated. On average, one household would receive approximately 60,000-80,000 baht (\$US 2,000-2,500) for the house compensation. A family with a secure house, rice barn, garden, paddies, cattle, grazing land would receive a compensation in the approximate amount between 800,000-1,000,000 baht (\$US 26,000-34,000). There were five households that refused to accept compensation due to its very low rate and inaccurate land measurement. They also complained that the village head took advantage of this unfair deal by siding with the company instead of negotiating for a better rate of compensation. As one villager puts it, “they don’t help their own folk” (*khon kan eng bo chuay kan*).

It should be noted that throughout the process of land appropriation and compensation negotiation, Lao government officials and village brokers are the ones who took the active role in forcing people out of their land and negotiating for a low price of land and properties. This effective strategy helps reduce/shift the potential confrontation between the company and local villagers. In the process of negotiating for a fair compensation, some villagers protested by refusing to move out of their property:

*It's not that I wanted to go against the party or the government. When the committee informed me about the compensation, they said it was eight hundred thousand baht. But when I went to collect the money, it was only three hundred thousand baht. I asked them why it turns out this way. The people there said there was a miscalculation. When I looked at the list, it did not include the barn. My barn is the largest in the village. But it was not in there. They did not compensate for the well. The fence was reduced from 171 meters to 51 meters. They claimed that the company already provided a new housing. I was therefore thinking, if they give me this amount of compensation, I will not move*

*out. What will be wrong if a Lao person wants to live on the Lao soil? I pay tax for my land every year. I did not live on a state land or other people's land. I did not sell my house. It is still my house. It would be another story, had I already sold it to the Chinese. This is what I told them. They then said let's talk again. Later, they added more compensation (Nang Khwan, interview November 9th, 2012).*

On January 28th, 2012, 114 households of Ban Kwan moved to a new village named by the company "Sam Liam Kham village" (Golden Triangle village). The negotiation between the five families and the company did not reach any new result. Eventually, they had to accept the company's unfair offer and moved to join their Lao counterparts in the new village. In his comment about the Ban Kwan situation, village head of Ban Sribunhueng, the next village designated to be resettled by the company notes, "Ban Kwan villagers are disunited". According to the Sribunhueng headman, this is due to the fact that the villagers there are from diverse origins and for this reason, it was difficult to develop solidarity and fight to keep their land from the Chinese company. Since the beginning of the SEZ dispute, villagers were divided into two groups, those who agreed with the project, and those who did not want to move. Although the first group was less in terms of number, they are the powerful elite in the village. The village head has been the strongest proponent of the project and acted as mediator between villagers, and the company and government agency. He was also in the village committee appointed by the district official to act as negotiator between villagers and the company. In return, the company paid him and others of the village committee 200 baht per day for helping the company communicate with villagers, and collaborating with relevant agencies to measure the farmland and house area. This group of village elites benefited the most from the resettlement scheme, receiving high compensation, and getting the nicest location of the new houses. They are also the first in the list to be hired to work with the Chinese company. The mediating role of local power of the village elite is thus significant in making the coercive process of land appropriation effective.

## **Abeyance**

"Marginality can be defined as the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic)[...]"

In *Regulating Society: Marginality and Social Control in Historical Perspective*, Ephraim Mizruchi uses the term 'abeyance', which literally means suspension to describe the containment mechanism created to absorb and control the potentially dissident in the society (1983). As he contends:

*Societies for the most part tend toward an orderly flow of people from one place to the next and from one social organization to another. When that flow becomes disorderly or is impeded—notably, when there is a surplus population that cannot be absorbed by the social structures operative at a given movement in a particular society—supplementary organizations must be created that can contain for shorter or longer periods of time, the marginal populations, keep it in 'Abeyance (Mizruchi cited in Harper 1994:44-45, emphasis original).*

Examples of sites of abeyance are shelter, prison, and brothel, etc., where unemployed, homeless, demobilized workers, and other unwanted subjects are absorbed and kept in check. Resettlement site at the SEZ represents one form of abeyance where surplus Lao population is kept suspended. Since the SEZ law of Lao PDR stipulates a condition that people who have lived in the area must not be moved out of the zone but be incorporated into the SEZ development, the resettlement site, Ban Sam Liam Kam, is thus used by the Chinese investor as a handy way to handle the surplus Lao population. The newly built houses is a relatively cheap cost for the Chinese company, traded for the precious land gained from the Lao residents. From the external outlook, the houses seem modern and clean. In reality, all of the houses are made from low quality materials. The wall started to crack even before people moved in. Flood waters get inside the house when there is heavy rain. The house roofs also leak. Villagers have to spend their compensation received from the company to repair the houses even though they just moved in. One villager describes the poor quality of the house construction:

*The houses are in bad shape. Even before we moved in, many things are broken, the bathrooms are cracked. At first, the committee hired the Thai to build six houses. But they heavily criticized the construction work. The Thai workers then ran away. They then hired the Chinese, who were even worse. They did not even lay the concrete beam, just built things on the ground. It was agreed that there would be an inspection by a committee. But this never happened. No one consulted with villagers. Some houses are too high. The others are too low. Those who live in the upper area got mudslide when there was heavy rain. Before the house moving, there was no meeting. No one checked whether the houses are in the good condition. Some houses did not have a bathroom yet. The villagers had to build the bathrooms themselves (Nang Khai, interviewed Nov 9th 2012).*

Prior to the resettlement, the company made a promise of employment. In reality, those who were accepted to work with the casino are some young people who are willing to work odd hours at the gambling complex. Therefore, there is less than one third of the village population who are allowed to join the company. Meanwhile, living in a house where there is no job but everything needs to be bought including food and drinking water makes it very difficult for poor households. Some of them try to make use of very limited space for planting. Others try to participate in the tourist industry, using the vehicle provided by the company, hoping to gain some money from transporting the tourists who visit the casino. But since the company also has its own transportation and did not share any tourists with the Lao drivers, this prospective job came to an end right when it started. And the vehicles are left unused at the houses. Several other projects ended with the same fate. This includes the organic farming enterprise that the company energetically promoted to the villagers. Seeds were distributed to various households to plant in their paddies. Initially, there were many households participating in the project. But after the vegetables were grown and ripe for collecting, there was no market and the company offered no assistance as to how to sell the products. As a result, most villagers decided to not waste any more time in any of the company's projects. Living in suspension, some villagers have managed to work harder hours in their limited rice paddies left by the company. Some continue to grow rice to earn meager income. Some who are still young are able to find their way into the new livelihood.

This includes Kiang Khai, a 26-year-old married Lao woman who chose to work at the casino to secure some money for her house construction:

*I've worked in the casino for three years now. I'm the only person in the family who works there. The casino work is OK. But it is insecure. I might work there for another year or two and will quit. The smoking there is terrible. Chinese people smoke a lot. I'm really fed up with it. It is also a hard work. Working on a night shift, I have to be cautious all the time. If I made a mistake, my boss will severely reprimand me. Most the Lao who work there are card dealer. The Burmese do the cleaning job. The Chinese and Burmese get higher payment than the Lao. Some people explained that because they are not local. In the old village we used to earn more than 200,000 baht per year. We only had to pay for clothing and meat. The rest we can find from the forests. Approximately, the monthly expenses would cost us around 2,000 baht. But living here the cost of living is higher than 3,000 baht (Nang Kiang Khai).*

For those whose lives have been robbed by the economy they cannot be a part of, living in suspension is nothing but miserable. In the words of Nang Khai, the last person who moved out of the old village:

*I did not say that the Chinese stole our occupation. I once thought that their occupation is one thing, ours is another. But the fact that they took our land, the land we used to grow corn, it means that they came to take away our job. This makes us upset. But now our properties are left idle. They didn't make use of them, just let them all covered with grass. If we continue to live this way, our country will fail. Look at the people now. Living at the new houses, we can't even raise chicken and ducks. In the old village, even though we didn't feed the chicken for ten days, they can survive on their own. If somebody comes for a visit, we can cook a chicken meal to welcome them. It's our rural way of life. We don't need to buy anything. If we have plenty of them (chicken), we can sell them, one hundred fifty baht per kilogram. Now we can't raise any (Nang Khai).*

Abeyance reflects an interesting paradox in the process of the Chinese neoliberalization of the Lao frontier. On the one hand, the zoning strategies of SEZ allows a new form of flexible and graduated sovereignty (Ong, 2000) that effectively encourages flow of capital and labor necessary for the establishment of the SEZ. On the other hand, such neoliberal space can be disruptive and uneven as resettlement inevitably produces a group of marginal population, a surplus with a potential of dissidence. Abeyance organization and its properties are thus invented to absorb, control and remove potentially dissident elements from circulation. It is a system of flow regulating to temporarily retain possible challengers to the existing status quo and thereby reducing threats to the larger social system (Mizuchi, 1983:17). The resettlement site of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone can thus be seen as a strategy of abeyance -- a tactic of social control and a contradictory feature of the neo-liberal logic significant to the maintenance of social order and the management of the "unwanted population".

## More Civilizing Mission

The completion of resettlement in Ban Kwan marks only the beginning of the Chinese civilizing project at the Lao border. To turn the so-called Lao hinterland into a new city, all the resources must be domesticated and transformed. This again, cannot be accomplished without an assistance from the Lao state counterpart. In March 2012, the head of the Provincial Land Department of Bo Keo province, along with Ton Phueng district officers came to Ban Si Boon Hueng village, the community adjacent to Ban Kwan. This visit carried an important message to the villagers that all the paddies must be handed over to the company to pave way for an international airport and a 36-hole golf course. The second phase of resettlement includes an even larger area, covering paddy fields of three villages: Ban Kwan, Si Boon Hueng, and Ban Muang Kham. The government officers suggested that villagers change their occupation as rice cultivation has no future and is considered underdeveloped. They also attempted to gather data relating to land and property ownership and to measure the land. However, such attempt was strongly opposed by villagers who refused to cooperate with the government officials. Several visits by government officials failed to achieve any agreement. The last visit was therefore accompanied by force. As the village head of Ban Si Boon Hueng recounts:

*Villagers did not conform [to the government official demand for land demarcation]. They went to gather in the paddy fields and lined up in a row, blocking the officials to come in for land measuring. The district then brought police and soldiers in. Villagers then decided to sit on the paddy-field ridges. But the soldiers would not retreat but marched in. We then pushed them by the chests. Villagers who came to join us are mostly from Ban Si Boon Hueng and Ban Muang Kham. The Ban Kwan villagers didn't join but said they would support our decision. The government officials came so many times. Villagers propose the compensation price of no less than 1 million baht per rai (1.6 hectare). If they agree, we will allow them to measure the land. But if not, we will not allow them to come in. We have already learned the lesson from Ban Kwan (Village headman of Ban Si Boon Hueng, interviewed 10 November 2012).*

In response to the question about the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and its claim to improve people's livelihood, the village head of Ban Si Boon Hueng rebuts:

*Local people have got more confusion since the establishment of the SEZ. There is a house break-in every day from Ban Mom to Ton Pheung. It never happens before. This is because people got addicted to gambling. So many strangers come to our villages. Life has become worse since the casino's arrived. They said they would create jobs for us. But this is not true. Four or five of our children went to work with them. But it was so hard that they could not do it. You have to work eight hours a day, any time [day and night]. No rest, no weekend. If you take a day off, the payment will be cut, 7 hundreds baht per day. If they feel that your leave is not reasonable, they will cut another 3 hundred baht. The Chinese get the highest salary. Then the Burmese. The Lao gets the lowest. The company explains that both the Chinese and the Burmese need to pay for visa entry and passport. They also claim that the Lao are local here and don't need to pay for rent. If the salary continues to be this low, I don't think anyone will be able to do it. In my opinion, this SEZ will not sustain in the long run. They said we will have*

*new occupation. But in reality, they forced us out and replace us with the Burmese (Si Boon Hueng village head, interviewed November 10th, 2012).*

Unlike the village head of Ban Kwan who acts as the mediator between the company and the villagers, the Ban Si Boon Hueng village head is clear about his position to protect the villagers' benefits. For him, the first response is resistance. But if this is not possible, he will try to bargain for the fairest rate of compensation. Like other villagers, the village head noticed the drastic change of the village atmosphere. Villagers used to have abundant cattle grazing land and corn fields. But many of these lands are now occupied by the Chinese who replace corns with other crops. Since corn does not provide much benefit, some villagers decided to rent their land to the Chinese for growing the export-oriented fruit such as bananas. He also felt that the compensation provided to the Ban Kwan people is unjust. But the villager's negotiation was weak and not successful due to the lack of unity among villagers. According to the Si Boon Hueng leader, this might have to do with the fact that members of the Ban Kwan village came from various backgrounds, e.g., the Lue from Ban Chieng Hon, Chieng Lom, and the Yuan. This is different from Ban Si Boon Hueng where villagers are of Yuan origin and village organization is quite strong. Villagers have learned a good lesson from the Ban Kwan tragedy and are in unison to refuse to cooperate with either the company or the Lao government officials who act as an agent of the Chinese investor.

### **The Neo-liberal Subjects**

In producing the discourse of frontier civilization, both the Chinese tycoon and the Lao state promote a similar idea of turning the 'out of the way place' (Tsing, 1992) and its people into a profit-making agent. To achieve that end, the old, traditional space and way of life need to be refurbished into a new, modern entity. SEZ can thus be viewed as one form of neo-liberal project as it aims to reshape resources and people out of the hands of traditional bond and state regulation, and to produce 'passive workers' with enough skills to render them useful to the demands of capital. Throughout the years of 'civilizing mission', local Lao people have been told repeatedly by both the state agencies and the investor to change their 'backward' way of life and embrace a new lifestyle and occupation. But if neoliberalism demands a certain kind of subject who is able to tolerate precarity, evince flexibility, revise traditions on the fly and so on, the Lao people of Ton Phueng have proved to be the wrong target. Not only because these people refuse to leave traditional ideology without breaking down so much they can't work, but more importantly because they reject the new work ethics of efficiency and economic value of productivity necessary for the advancement of the capitalist world. The resistance by local villagers to move out of the traditional village and to be incorporated as full labor represents the failure of the Chinese civilizing attempt to bring the frontier population into the new order of neoliberalism. For the Lao villagers, the lack of self-motivation to produce and to regard themselves as a creative personal brand that generates economic value through the practices of everyday life as well as whatever wage they can secure have suspended them in between the two worlds of vanishing traditional livelihood and the neo-liberal sphere designed by the Chinese.

Interestingly, the key engine that drives the economic force of the SEZ is the Burmese. These are the true laborers who entirely submit themselves to the economic order of the Chinese world, the ideal neoliberal subjects needed by most capitalists. The Burmese population in the Golden Triangle SEZ are mostly from the lower part of Myanmar below Myeittla or Mandalay region, which they call Auh-Pyae (below the country). In 2008, the first group of Burmese arrived at the Lao border when there was a need for labor work on forest and land clearing and construction. Most of these people heard the news of recruitment through the Chinese network in Tachileik and in their hometowns. Travelling to the worksite was also not difficult. The easiest way to reach Tachileik is to get a taxi or a bus to the Luang-pong immigration office on the Burmese border, then cross the Mekong river and get a taxi to Ton Pheung. The total cost from Tachileik to Ton Pheung is around 400-500 baht. Currently, the population has expanded to approximately 700 households or 10,000 people living four separate areas. These are the Bamar-Ywar (or Burman village, once called Rakhine-Ywar),<sup>9</sup> the Taung-chyae-Ywar (or Mountain Foothills village), the old Lao village and the Casino A-saung (dormitory). Two thirds of the Burmese population live in the Bamar-Ywar, which constitutes the largest residential site. The Taung-chyae-Ywar is populated by approximately 100 hundred households of more skillful workers. This residential site has been set up by the Chinese Worker Administrative Department of the Kings Roman Company. Workers who live here work on higher skilled jobs such as cement making, machine controlling and repairing, etc. The third place is the old Lao village of Ban Kwan. These are workers whose work is paid on a contract basis (Poh-pyait). In the Casino Asaung, the company provides beds and food as well as other entertainment such as movie and playground inside the dormitory. Most workers who live there are of young age and have been trained to work at the casino. A small number of casino employees reside in the Casino A-saung. The migration pattern of the Burmese to the SEZ often starts by men travelling through agents to work or find jobs and later on these men would bring along their families to join them. Some of the wives might set up food stalls, VCD shops or groceries to earn extra incomes for the families. Others might take care of young kids while husbands are at work. Most Burmese hardly go back home in order to save money from travelling cost. With the availability of telephones, it is easy to contact their family members or relatives back in Myanmar.

### **Living the Life of Neo-liberal Subject**

In *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006), Richard Sennett examines the ways that contemporary capitalism is reshaping workers' career and political choices. As he explains, contemporary capitalist organizations -- with their short-lived teams, and emphasis on change and flexibility -- demand a new type of worker. This ideal man or woman must be willing to work with temporary connections, unattached to the past, and focused on talent, not skill or achievement. Unlike the old corporate structures in which individuals knew their place and are able to plan their futures, modern corporations provide no long-term stability, benefits, social

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<sup>9</sup> The Chinese manager once put the Rakhine workers together in one place due to their protest against unfair payments in the early year of employment. This has then been known by the Burmese as the Rakhine village before other Burmese workers were allowed to also live there.

capital, or interpersonal trust. As a result, life of employee/worker has become more insecure and less free, while the knowledge and usefulness has been devalued. The new flexible institutions cause workers to lose any sense of agency, leading individuals to appear to themselves as passive victims of senseless or uncontested forces. As a transnational and deterritorialized enterprise, the Chinese Kings Roman Company is one type of modern capitalism that shows no responsibility to any nation or citizen. It knows no fidelity to any nation-state and is willing to embrace any neo-liberal subject who is ready to work hard with no social protection or welfare to understand uncertainty and insecurity, and has talent to solve problems by him/herself. Burmese men are recruited into the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone with the hope to find work and earn more income which is not available inside Myanmar. Upon arrival, they are put into one of the three worksites: construction site, casino, or joker site. The construction site has the largest demand for labor that would be classified into skilled and unskilled labor. The first type works mainly with machines or other technical task, while the A-Kjian (hard work) is mainly labor intensive such as carrying stone and sand. The salary ranges from between 4,000-6,000 baht to 9,000-10,000 baht depending on the type of work. No official contract is made. A reasonable leave of absence is acceptable with prior notification but the wage for those absent work days will be deducted from the total salary. At this site, the Chinese hire a translator-cum-mediator called by the Burmese, the “in-charge”. These are mostly Kokang Chinese who are responsible for each group of workers at the worksite. This position earns the highest salary among the Burmese workers. Relationship with the “in-charge” is significant as they are the ones who communicate with the Chinese supervisors in the worksite. Wrong translation can be disastrous especially in terms of work. Making mistakes in work can mean getting fired without pay. Without written contract and a language barrier, the Burmese workers have no negotiating power against their Chinese supervisors. Unfair payment and abusive treatment towards workers is considered normal situation, which can be found on a daily basis.

Countless stories are told by the workers. Such as, “People get fired not because they made mistake or they don’t qualify for the job. Some time, if they [the Chinese supervisor] do not like one person, he can be fired without being given any explanation. They many say *khaing-ma-kaung-loh* [did not work as we said]. So we are like cattle. Some time, the “in charges” did not give wages to workers. They ran away” (Interview with Worker I, November 9th, 2012).

“At few days ago, I was at the port and one worker had to carry something from the ship. Maybe he made a mistake, or did it the wrong way. He got kicked out of his job and verbally abuse by the Chinese in front of many people. It’s a public area. I can tell that how humiliate he must have felt. But this is pretty much normal here” (Interview with Worker II, November 9th, 2012).

The casino is the second worksite where a number of Burmese youths have been recruited. Of all the 2,000 employees, which include the Chinese, Burmese, and Lao, the Burmese comprise two-third of the population. Burmese workers are in all the various sections inside the casino: such as the *Mee-line*, which is the cleaning and kitchen work, *Soe-phat-won* or the card collecting team, card dealers, and waiters. Working conditions seem to be better than the construction site especially in terms of salary and security. But this has to be traded off with unusual working hours (8:00am - 4pm, 4:00pm - noon, and noon - 8:00am), and a smoky environment. Most of the staff receive training (a period during which they are called interns) before

they are allowed to work. The highest paid position is card dealer with a salary of 13,000 baht. The second level is monitoring staff, observing each table and keeping an eye on cards and chips and repair machines and so on. The salary for this position is between 7,000-8,000 baht. The lowest position is cleaner. Most of the Burmese employees in the casino have Chinese language competency. In the beginning they will be trained and provided with a card. With that card, although they have not yet received salary, they can have meals. After passing an internship examination, they will be assigned certain jobs that is most suited to their talents. For example, a card dealer needs to be fluent in passing cards and chips and are careful about money. A young boy who is the son of a family who runs a food shop from Myeittila and who has worked in the casino for more than a year explains the process of working at the casino as follows:

*School education is not important at the casino, even useless. As long as someone is clever on cards, there is a certain chance to get a job, I mean salary. Talking about work category in Casino, as I mentioned, there are classified into many places such as card place, kitchen place, security, training, cleaning etc. At first, you submit the form which is written in Chinese, then, if you are sent to a certain desk. After 3-5 days; you are called as "king's man". This "king's man" is known as an intern and the internship takes 15 days. After that, they give you a kind of Identity Card (ID) which carries some of your information. With that card, you can eat food, watch movie, and get a place to stay in the dormitory. The advantage of having this ID card is you are more or less "in" this place. During the period of 3 months, you will get 1,500 Baht for your work. At the end of the third month, you are then registered as staff. You will get 7,000-8,000 Baht for salary, but they will deduct some amount for su-kyae in order to save your money [in Burmese, a gift]. If you get fired before 1 year, you will not get back this sukyae. If you manage to work till the second year, you will get the exact amount you have saved. If you've worked for three years, you will get your su-kyae plus another extra half of your su-kyae (Burmese worker, interviewed November 9th, 2012).*

The last worksite is known to the Burmese as the "Joker site". People who work at this site have no specific job entitlement. Workers have to seek jobs by themselves and receive the very low salary of 3,500 baht, the lowest rate in the SEZ. It is also the most insecure and abusive working condition as workers can be cheated or fired without any protection. As the biggest site of employment where the majority of Burmese workers come to look for work, the oversupply of labor means that the workers must conform with whatever condition set by the Chinese supervisors in order to hold on tight to their jobs.

In *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (2006), Aihwa Ong argues that neo-liberalism should not simply be viewed as an economic doctrine that seeks to limit the scope of government, but should be considered as a form of predatory capitalism that take up malleable modes of governmentality. As she suggests, neoliberalism as exception articulates sovereign rule and regimes of citizenship, formulating a constellation of mutually constitutive relationships that are not reducible to one or the other. A variety of neoliberal strategies of governing re-engineers political spaces and populations, exercising different technologies of subjectivity and subjections in order to differentially regulate populations for optimal productivity. In this new regime of regulation, the

idea of citizenship and subjectivity is/must be redefined. In transforming the economic landscape of the northern Lao border, the Chinese SEZ enterprise, like other neo-liberal projects, demands an exception to the usual practices of governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territory. To be a neo-liberal subject in the dreamland of the Chinese tycoon, one must abandon the idea of citizenship and citizen's rights, which is bound to and protected by the nation-state. As a non-political, non-ideological free and naked subject, the only thing left for the neo-liberal worker under the Chinese regulatory regime is to totally submit him/herself as a profitable commodified subject for the advancement of Chinese enterprise. As a neo-liberal subject, who is unprotected by any state, the Burmese migrant workers do not have much choice. Although most of the workers feel that the working condition at the SEZ is destructively exploitative and unfair, it is better than living in their own country where no job can be secured. Some workers also have an expectation that the Chinese project at the Lao border will continue for another 20 years. In this scenario, it promises a dream of an income source for the marginal Burmese which is not available in their homeland. As a neo-slave in the Chinese world of neo-liberalism, betting with uncertainty and losing one's sense of agency has become a reality of workers' livelihoods.

### **Negotiating Neo-liberal Modernity and Modern Subjects**

David Harvey once remarked that modernity brought by neoliberalism is a modernity in which dispossession plays a large part and where the capital class is gaining power at the expense of the labor class (2003). Yet, such critique does not seem to be sufficient to understand the selective reception of modernity among different groups of people in their encounter with the neoliberal logic. Differential engagement among different ethnic groups in Laos and elsewhere with Chinese-style modernity/modernization deserves a closer investigation. It has become clear that not only different forms and interventions of neoliberalism have produced differential effects among different groups of people, but the same class of people might respond to such economic engagement in diverse ways. In some areas of Laos especially in the northwestern border, the advent of the Chinese modernization project through cash crops such as rubber has been warmly embraced by the Akha and Hmong in various communities (Dianna 2007, Alton, Blum, and Somsouk 2005, Luangmany and Kanneko 2013). Strategies such as manipulation of cross-border social links and multi-ethnic social networks across the border have been mobilized by ethnic farmers in financial, trading, and expertise channels towards rubber development. In such border areas, ethnic minorities negotiate their own term of modernity and subvert the state's control of border by creatively building their economic network across the national territory. Similarly, in his study of the Hmong in Vietnam and China, Jean Michaud cautions the tendency to romanticize resistance by scholars to understand the complex relation between ethnic minorities and modernity. As Michaud suggests, while the impact of modernity should be analyzed from an agentive perspective, agency and power to act evolves in context. Thus, ethnic interaction with modernity must be studied in relation to the specific circumstances that have formed the acting subjects (Michaud 2012). In response to the state-induced socio-economic change, the upland Hmong of northern Vietnam on the Chinese border are tactically selective about modernity. Instead of being passively turned modern, the Hmong have chosen to make themselves modern

subjects with a range of reactions from acceptance, reluctant compliance, to diverse forms of everyday resistance. Michaud calls this process the “indigenization of modernity”, a term he borrows from Sahlins (*ibid.*).

In order to understand why particular rural populations have opted to adapt to Chinese-style modernity, while others refuse, I suggest that, following Michaud, the particular form of modernity, the specific contexts it is implemented in, and the degree of agency and risk should be critically investigated. In the northern border of Laos, modernity brought by the trans-border Chinese cash crop symbolizes a dual-track of political and economic opportunities that has enabled ethnic minorities to simultaneously escape the state’s forceful opium eradication program as well as to move economically upward toward agrarian entrepreneurship. In other words, it represents alternative livelihood strategies that allows farmers to pursue a new possibility of agrarian enterprise. By contrast, Chinese-imposed modernity in the northwest border of Laos proceeds through the process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) in which wealth and power have been centralized in the hands of a few Chinese elites by dispossessing the rural Lao peasants of their land. Unlike the local collaborative modernity in the rubber enterprise outside state control in northern Laos, accumulation by dispossession in the form of special economic zones in Laos’ northwest require the state’s role of wealth redistribution to transfer the right to local resources to the ruling class of capitalists from rural peasants. As a result and without realizing it, rural villagers have been forced into the process of de-peasantization. At the same time and without consent, they have also inevitably been forced into waged labor—the situation to which many villagers have found it hard for recalibration and have thus refused to comply with.

Unlike their Lao counterpart, Burmese migrant workers have found their way into the “enclave of improvement” without much difficulty. While most studies of Chinese-led special economic zones point to the peculiar characteristic of Chinese-style modernization, its technology of governing, and the astounding impacts it has entailed, none pays attention to the differential mode of subjectification and the complex labor process (Nyiri 2012, Lyttleton and Nyiri 2011, Tan 2012). Being mobile and de-territorialized, detached from permanent social fabric and safety net, this group of people is ready to take risk and to take any available opportunity. As Reid succinctly argues, the neoliberal subject is not a subject which “can conceive the possibility of securing itself from its dangers, but one which believes in the necessity of life as a permanently [sic] struggle of adaptation to dangers” (Reid 2012: 149). To be a neoliberal subject for the Burmese is to be able to embrace the Chinese-style modernity with precarity. Having had been exposed to danger and ambient insecurity in various locations prior to entering into the special economic zones, these ethnic workers have realized the necessity of living a resilient life in which risk, exploitation, self-discipline as intrinsic to the survival of a modern labor subject. While neoliberal modernity thrives on the very disruptions it curates, it has produced different modes of subjectification. For the Lao peasant, abrupt de-peasantization and sudden transformation has created a vacuum of livelihood and a state of abjection from the society they once lived in. In contrast to the abject, the Burmese migrant workers—the unintended target, whose lives have been characterized by constant transformation, have assumed an active position of risk-taking and disciplinarian deployment and management of labor intensities in their engagement with the Chinese neoliberal project. It is this paradox that subject

making and the civilizing mission have come to characterize the contemporary special economics in northwestern Lao PDR.

## CONCLUSION

In “The Yellow Man’s Burden: Chinese Migrants on a Civilizing Mission” (2006), Pal Nyiri analyzes the close connection between Chinese flows abroad and migration both domestically and internationally. Nyiri suggests that the idea of a civilizing mission is being exported across the borders concurrently and alongside the domestic project (p.103). Driven by the strive upwards in the hierarchies of global development, China believes that with its unique endowments of flexibility and efficiency supported by a strong modernizing state, it is up to the country to lead the world to a new, improved version of modernity and capitalism (p.105). The Chinese version of modernity links together the significance of the cultural idea of being “civilized” and a “good quality” population. I have shown in this paper the complex processes by which the civilizing mission of the Chinese enterprise has been carried out in the name of Special Economic Zone in the northern border of Laos. Interestingly, the Chinese plan to export abroad their version of civilization as culture writ large fits perfectly with the desire of the recipient state such as Lao PDR. Indeed, without the active role and collaborative act of the Lao state, the dream to civilize would not be possible to materialize. I have also demonstrated the clash between the Chinese civilizing mission and local experiences of such mission. Local refusal to be turned into ‘a good quality population’ designed by the Chinese and endorsed by the Lao state reflects the unsettling/contesting ideas about civilization between the powerful developer and the Lao villagers. Such reluctance to fully take part in the new world of capitalist enterprise led by the Chinese investor has left the majority of the Lao residents no choice but to be locked in abeyance. If the core idea of Chinese civilizing model (whether meritocracy or performance legitimacy) targets people and their improved quality, the neo-liberal project at the SEZ failed significantly. Not only are the Lao rural unwilling to leave behind the so-called traditional way of life, but also they do not necessarily share the idea that their ‘traditional livelihood’ are ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’. The main engine of the Chinese mission to transform the frontier landscape of northern Laos however is the Burmese migrant workers. As a de-nationalized worker turned neoliberal subject participating in the de-territorialized zone of the transnational empire, they are forced to accept any vulnerable and insecure-employment conditions provided to them. Similar to the Lao ‘surplus’ other, these laborers have little negotiating power both in their workplace and their freedom to define their subjectivity.

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