“The Chinese know the way”: Rubber and modernity along the China Laos-border

Antonella Dianna
Australian National University

Rubber fever in Northern Laos

As the transition from command to market economy takes place at an accelerated pace (Rigg 2005; Xu, Fox, Vogler, Zhang, Fu, Yang, Qian, and Leisz 2005a:9), the path towards modernity in Laos is traced by centrally designed projects and locally devised stratagems. Both trends are crisscrossed by broader global forces and exogenous thrusts from neighbouring countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand and China. Since the early 2000s, a new modernizing wave from China has seized northern Laos in the guise of rubber cultivation. Rubber, in the variety of *Hevea Brasiliensis*, had already appeared on the Northern Lao agricultural scene in the mid 1990s, on the spontaneous initiative of the farmers from a few villages located along the border with China. The crop was introduced through an intense exchange of knowledge, technology and expertise between Lao and Chinese cultivators and, in some limited cases, with farmers from Thailand. Baan Hat Nyao, a Hmong settlement at the outskirts of Nam Tha town, was the most successful village in producing a viable rubber business, based on a cooperative system (Alton, Blum, and Somsouk 2005). Other pioneering villages were less fortunate in the rubber enterprise, loosing most of their plantations from bad management and natural calamity.

After a few years of hiatus, rubber cultivation re-gained momentum between 2004 and 2005. On this second upsurge, *Hevea Brasiliensis* was appropriated by both Lao farmers and the government in a particular moment of profound social and economic transformations. The Lao government officially encouraged rubber planting in the area, in agreement with the Chinese provincial and local administrations of Yunnan, planning the development of the crop on a large scale. The introduction of rubber was conceived by these government bodies to serve a twofold purpose: replace opium cultivation and reduce un-regulated swidden agriculture practices, two longstanding items of the government’s agenda (Lyttleton, Cohen, Houmphanh, Boukham, and Souriyanh 2004:4). The abrupt acceleration in opium eradication pushed by UNDP since 2002 in Nam Tha had created a gap in the livelihoods of the highland peasants which, it was deemed, could be filled by rubber. The Lao authorities presented rubber as the innovative crop that, it was optimistically claimed, will rescue thousand of Lao farmers from poverty. Additionally, rubber was ascribed ethically correct and institutionalized qualities in contrast to the immoral and illegal connotations of opium. Although rubber could not be planted at the same high altitude as opium, it was assumed that a more rationalized organization of cultivated land on the lower slopes could allow the establishment of plantations in Laos as well.

Among the farmers, what spurred the rubber boom was not only the relatively triumphant development of rubber in Ban Hat Nyao, but also the success of latex production and sale in China. Rumours circulated that boosting rubbers demand from the Chinese automobile market and the tempting proposals offered by Chinese small and big investors to local farmers. The wealth generated by the increase in latex price for people across the border, embodied in house renovations, motorbikes and other commodity goods instilled in the Lao farmers new hope for overcoming poverty and pursuing the

Chinese dream of modernity. The “sino-reverie”, that from the economic centres of Shang hai, Guang zhou and Kunming was gradually becoming true at the poorer margins of the Chinese state was to be imported into Laos as well.

This paper explores the ways in which rubber cultivation has been transplanted beyond the border into Baan Samu, a Akha village located on the frontier between Laos and China. I take the rubber establishment as a lens through which to detect the intricate relationship between state agents and borderlanders and conceptualise the role of the former in controlling the periphery. While apparently suggesting a conflicting relationship between the Lao state and its members at the margins, rubber development is in fact expression of the negotiation of the border between its dwellers and the center of power. The contradiction and ambiguity surrounding the rubber dynamics reflect the particular *modus operandi* of the state in these border regions of Southeast Asia, characterized by an *ad hoc* bounding and unbounding of its authority over the border. When the unbounding occurs, it is inscribed in a “state of exception” (Agamben 2003; Agamben (1995) 2000), a suspension of the norm by the state, yet affected by the agency of local dwellers.

The border acts simultaneously as separating and unifying vector. It is a marker of two different degrees of development, separating poor Lao farmers from wealthier Chinese relatives and friends. Yet, the border is also a “corridor of opportunity” (Flynn 1997:311). It is the site where not only modernity is imagined but also the locus where various strategies to reach Chinese modernity are put into practice. The transplanting of rubber from across the border, enacted in the manipulation of cross-border social links with China, is expression of the farmers’ creative negotiation of the socio-economic changes inherent in the process of modernity. It is a way through which the farmers ‘“make” themselves modern [subjects] as opposed to being “made” modern’ (Gaonkar 2001:18) by the State’s standardizing forces.

Baan Samu: a village in an in-between State zone

Baan Samu[1] was one of the first villages in northern Laos to plant rubber before the Lao government institutionalized its introduction. Baan Samu is located in the rugged mountain range at the north-eastern tip of Sing district in Nam Tha province, in north-western Laos, at four kilometres from the border with China. The hamlet counts 80 households, with a population of 330 people. The ethnic make-up of the village is mainly Akha[2], integrated by some Han and Hani Chinese that have recently moved into the community[3]. Following a common pattern found among swidden agriculturalists in the

1 A pseudonym

2 The Akha speak a Tibeto-Burman language. They are considered to have originated in northern Yunnan Province in China. Over the last centuries, the Akha have migrated into southern Yunnan, Laos, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam (Sturgeon 2000:3).

3 Ban Samu social fabric is quite heterogeneous. Some of the inhabitants moved from ‘ban kao’, the old village site, some from two neighboring villages and some others came from China. The population belongs to three of the many sub-groups (called tak khun in Laos) in the big Akha ethnic family: The Jê Jô sub-group, originating from the old village, totals 90% of the population. An additional 3% belongs to the O La A bë clan, which although still a part of the Jê Jô sub-group is considered separate from the latter as its members moved from Burma only 30 years ago to Ban Samu kao (previous village site). The Bo che (also called in Lao Ko pen noi) arrived from a nearby village and make up the 6% of the population. The remaining 1% of the villagers fall under the Pu li sub-group. In accordance with a common Akha custom, social organization in Samu is based on a patrilinear clan system (thi aphia in Akha). Under the Jê Jô sub-group are 8

area, Samu has a long history of re-settlement. About a hundred years ago, the ancestors of today's inhabitants migrated from Burma and settled in early 1900s in the high mountain area near the present village site. From there, they gradually moved to lower elevations due to epidemics, war, and in search for agricultural land suitable for swidden agriculture. Baan Samu has been in its current location since early 1990s. The reason for this last relocation was the need for paddy land ('naa') to reduce or abandon swidden agriculture ('het hai'). Such shift was in line with the broader and longstanding trend across mainland Southeast Asia whereby upland farmers have been moving down slope where paddy provides a basis for higher and more secure production.

Nowadays, Samu villagers' livelihood relies mainly on irrigated and dry rice farming, corn and vegetables cultivation, integrated by hunting, cattle and buffalo raising, collection of non-timber forest products, and some sugar cane. Farming activities are also combined with legal and illegal trade as well as wage labour to China[4].

A 60 kilometers unpaved and winding road connects Baan Samu to the district center, Muang Sing. The road is accessible during the dry season by vehicle, but almost impassable during the rainy season. The deficient road link and the long distance to Muang Sing cause Baan Samu to depend heavily on China for market and labor outlets, medical assistance, consumption goods supply, and as shown below, for capital and agricultural expertise input.

Many visual aspects in the village evoke the cultural juxtaposition commonly associated with frontier areas (Alvarez 1995; Vila 2000; Vila 2003). Its location in the in-between border zone linking Laos with China engenders that dynamic interpenetration of cultures typical of the interstitial zones of Southeast Asia (Leach 1960: 50). The Chinese cultural influence is strongly present in the village. A manifestation of it can be seen in the architectural style of some of the houses. Apart from the huts of poor families made out of bamboo and covered with a thatched roof, representing the dominant dwelling model in the village, the bigger abodes of the Chaoban ("the ritual" leader"), the Naiban (the "political leader") (Epprecht 1998) and a few well-off families reproduce the architectural style of Akha and Dai houses found in China in material (wood, clay tiles and bricks imported from China), layout and structure.

China's cultural influence is also expressed linguistically. In fact, in addition to Akha and Tai Lue languages, a variant of Chinese-Yunnanese dialect (spoken in Meng La county) is the second most utilized language in the village together with Lao. In general, adult women and elders only speak Akha and some Tai Lue, while 40-50 year old men as well as male and female youngsters speak Lao and Chinese in addition to Akha.

The currency in use in Baan Samu is Chinese Renminbi, while the Lao kip is little utilized. All commodity goods found in the village are purchased at the markets in China in Guofang and Meng Run, or, sometimes, even as far as in the shopping malls of Meng

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clans. The Jê Jô sub-group not only has the largest number of clans, but it also includes the most powerful clans in the village. Bo che (or ko pen noi) sub-group includes two clans. The Pu Li sub-group includes two families belonging to a single clan. Intermarriage between sub-groups is quite common as well as among different clans.

[4] Mika Toyota has illustrated the active and long-standing involvement of the Akha in trade and commerce with neighbouring groups to explode the myth of the Akha as subsistence farmers. (Toyota 2000)

La[5]. If a glance is taken at the rubbish heaps in some of the well-off families' houses, what captures one's attention is the waste packaging of various sorts of consumption goods that only bear Chinese characters on them: instant noodles, mango juice, cookies, strawberry cream pies, cigarettes, batteries, Lancanjiang Beer and can food.

Baan Samu's proximity to the national border has fostered the establishment of long-term socio-economic relations with twin locales in Chinese territory in the township of Meng Run (called Muang Yung in Lao and Tai Lue). In particular, the village is well socially connected to three Akha villages, namely Guofang, He li and Ko Loum, situated near the border[6]. Guofang, the closest village, is only 5 km away from Baan Samu[7]. Close relations are also maintained with a nearby settlement of the unit three of Meng Man State Farm.

Local residents traverse the border on a regular basis both at official and unofficial crossing points where neither custom posts nor border police stations exist. Nevertheless, in this stretch of the frontier, cross-border social and economic exchanges occur mainly via spatial trajectories marked by the borderlanders themselves. Samu villagers have joined their forces to dig a road from their village to the Chinese border. From the border, a narrow passageway through lush vegetation proceeds to Guofang parallel to the official road (*gonglu*) that on top of the mountain separates China from Laos. Through the small road, away from the patrolling of the Chinese troupes, the disconnection between the two countries is abridged.

The introduction of rubber in Ban Samu

At the basis of the introduction of rubber in Baan Samu were trans-border legal and illegal dynamics, intense economic and social links with China along with abrupt shifts in their livelihoods. The initial thrust came from a few villagers who had lived in China as refugees. During the Vietnam War and as a result of the political upheavals following the Issara takeover, many Lao and Vietnamese citizens were offered political asylum in China as part of a refugee program sponsored by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). A few thousand people moved across the border to escape violence, persecution and the Lao government's compulsory recruitment of soldiers. The fugitives were given asylum in refugee camps or incorporated into pre-existing villages in Xishuang banna (in Meng Run, Meng La, Meng Peng and Meng Man). Between the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, a few people from Baan Samu kao (old village) and a nearby village settled in Guofang, He li and Ko Loum, where they were integrated into the local Chinese production system, dominated by rice, sugar cane and rubber

[5] Meng La is located at 30 km from the Mohan-Boten international border crossing point separating China from Laos. As gateway to Southeast Asia, the town has experienced over the last few years a rapid economic growth and has developed into the main economic centre of southern Xishuang banna.

6 The inhabitants of Ko Loum and Guofang mainly belong to the Pu Li sub-group.

7 In Meng Run are located 10 Akha villages (I am giving an essentialised idea of ethnic village), 8 Tai (or Dai if the Chinese designation is used) villages and a few settlements (*dui* in Chinese) of the Meng Man State Farm (Nong Chang) number four and unit five. Akha villages are scattered on mountain slopes among the State Farm settlements and the Tai villages located in the valleys. Among others, the Akha villages located in Meng Yun are: Guofang, He Li, Cha Congban old village, Cha Congban new village, Xiao Xinzhai, Ge Long (or Ban Ko Loum in the Lao-Akha spelling), Ban Pa Sang. State Farms are inhabited largely by Han Chinese, although members of other ethnic groups have recently joined in.

cultivation[8]. It was then that the refugees became familiar with the planting, managing of rubber, and latex tapping techniques. Many were allotted land by the Chinese government and were able to set up their own plantations.

As the Lao political situation started to stabilize in early 1990s, the Chinese Government ordered the repatriation of refugees to Laos, organized in 16 returning waves. The UNHCR, together with the Chinese and the Lao government, supplied 2000 yuan repatriation reimbursement to the returnees. Those who had been formally registered as 'refugees' (*nanmin*) could not oppose their enforced return to Laos, despite their strong will to keep a more comfortable life in China. Between 1992 and 1997, eight families currently living in Baan Samu were repatriated after having lived in China for 10 to 13 years. A few returnees brought their spouses from China, some of whom had been originally Chinese citizens.

The people who managed to stay in China were children of refugees who had married Chinese citizens (of Akha or Han ethnicity) and had avoided formal registration in the refugee records. For instance, an old Akha man from Samu, who returned from China after a sixteen years stay in Guofang, had three daughters who remained on the other side of the border. While two of them were married to Akha men in Guofang, one had settled down with a Akha man in Meng Pung. The three of them had Chinese citizenship that they had gained from their marriage.

Other previous Lao citizens were able to bypass the forced return because they had escaped to China outside the legal refugee scheme. Villagers declared it would, at times, be possible to pass as Chinese citizens to the authorities' occasionally loose control in the border region.

While in China, the Lao refugees from Baan Samu started planting rubber in 1986 following the land allocation process enacted by de-collectivization policies of the Chinese government. Each family was entitled to have up to 20 mu of land for rubber cultivation. In 1993, the farmers started tapping the trees, selling latex to the State Farms (unit 3 and 5 of the Meng Man Nong Chang or State Farm). On repatriation, the returnees were asked to return the land where their rubber trees had been planted to the host villages in China. From the profit made on the rubber trees sale, the eight returning families were able to set up new plantations in Baan Samu between 1996 and 1997.

The majority of saplings planted by the returnees died from the severe frost that hit the region in winter between 1999 and 2000. Only a few trees belonging to three families survived. Today, the three families are the only ones in the village tapping latex from the surviving trees.

From across the border, the returnees brought back not only rubber seedlings, but also technical expertise on planting, managing and tapping of rubber. Above all, the new comers became the pivotal actors in propagating rubber in Samu and in inspiring other villagers to follow their example. Nevertheless, at the time the ex refugees came back, Samu farmers did not have sufficient financial means for the establishment of rubber. In fact, like for most of the upland villages found in Muang Sing, the average living standard

[8] Given the prevalently mountainous topography in Meng Run township rubber cultivation started quite early, not only in the State Farms, but also in the villages.

for most Samu people has remained quite low when compared with other villages on the Chinese side of the border or most lowland villages in northern Laos.

Opium was main income-generating crop for the villagers until the drastic eradication of poppy fields occurred in 2002-2003 enforced by the government. Samu was among the Akha villages in the area that produced opium injected into the Chinese market as well as locally consumed in Laos. Except for a few cases of people returning to poppy cultivation since the official suppression, poppy was mostly eliminated in the village. Nevertheless, the obliteration of opium created a void in the livelihoods that farmers tried to fill with the cultivation of other crops, cross-border illegal trade, logging and wage labour to China.

One of the alternative crops to opium was sugar cane. The Lao government had strongly encouraged sugar cane production in agreement with the Chinese authorities. In the late 1990s, a private Chinese company had signed a contract with some households from the village to purchase sugar cane to be manufactured at the ex-state-run sugar factory in Meng Peng, a few kilometres across the border from Samu. The farmers had agreed to sell their crop to the company twice a year for the fixed rate of 100 yuan per ton. Nevertheless, the ambiguous politics adopted by the Chinese *laoban* (businessmen) in terms of quantification, transport and remuneration was not worth the intensive labour involved in the production. As a result, the majority of the villagers were discouraged from pursuing the sugar cane trade, and therefore were left with almost no income generating sources. It is within the vacuum generated by the enforced opium eradication and the drop of the sugar cane business that rubber emerged as an alternative livelihood strategy. The farmers tried to compensate for the lack of immediate capital for the setting up of rubber by using their ethnic, kin and friendship ties intertwined with intricate patronage relations across the border.

The second phase of rubber cultivation

As common in the region, Baan Samu villagers conceptualize the close relationship with people across the border in the use of the same terms adopted to address people with whom they have a close affiliation within Laos. In a way, the same denomination for national and transnational social links seemingly suggests a transcendence of rigid political boundaries that aim at circumscribing social grouping within the national territory.

In Lao language, Akha from China are called *phinong*, a word literally translated as 'brothers', used to indicate blood-related people but often employed to mark a close yet non-consanguineous relationship with individuals of the same ethnic group. Akha, Han Chinese, Tai Lue or any other person with whom exists a ‘companionship or comrade’ type of relationship, are referred to as *hoji loge* in Akha language, or *po seo*, in the case of men, and *mae seo* for women, meaning literally ‘peers’, but often interpreted as drinking partners or ‘playmates’ (as translated in the Chinese language) of the same age group. The terms *po seo* and *mae seo* are borrowed from Tai Lue language and are largely used in China with the same connotation, in alternation with the Chinese synonym *lao gen*, ‘old companion’. The various and multilingual labels convey the idea that cross-border social relations are inherently dynamic and go beyond ethnic categories (Toyota 2000:217).

For some families in Baan Samu, rubber planting was initiated through the multi-ethnic social network of *po seo/hoji loge* and *phinong* from across the border. The farmers skilfully twisted personal social relations into strategic financial, trading, and expertise

channels (Toyota 2000). After loosing most of their trees in the big frost that hit the region between 1999 and 2000, the eight ex-refugees families along with another eight households turned to their *phinong* in China to borrow part of the capital for the re-establishment and establishment (respectively) of rubber plantations. Additional funds for investing in rubber derived from the sale of sugar cane, vegetables, cattle and buffalos to China that occurred always along the track drawn by kin or *posew*. The rubber saplings were bought from some *phinong* in Guofang and the unit three of the Meng Man state farm[9]. The *phinong* not only provided encouragement but also technical advice and assistance on how to plant and graft the saplings or, as the farmers would say "phinong yu Muang Hoo maa bokgan", "phinong from China came to teach the way to do it" (Literally: "came to tell us"). Furthermore, the three families tapping rubber in Samu relied on their *phinong*'s connections to sell latex to Chinese middlemen in Meng Pung or Meng Run. Their relatives helped the Lao farmers identifying the best bidders through informal market channels.

Nevertheless, the undisputed protagonist on the Samu rubber scene was Ertu[10], the Naiban, or the village headman[11]. His charisma and outstanding leadership capabilities earned Ertu this office since 1998, under the decision of the district government in Muang Sing in agreement with the village elders. Echoing the model set by Leach, Ertu would be the paradigmatic man with "a status position in several different social systems at the same time" (Leach 1954:286). Ertu was able to strategically manoeuvre his multi-located social status within and beyond the national border to gain personal benefits. Within the village, he earned not only power for himself but also for his family and his clan members. He was able to appoint one of his younger brothers as vice village headman and another as village veterinary. Someone even suggested that the marriage of Ertu's elder son with the daughter of the Chaoban, the most powerful clan in the village, was not random, but rather an alliance aimed at strengthening the power of the Naiban's clan. His role as mediator between the village, the khet (sub-district) and the district authorities, as well as with other village headmen in the sub-district guaranteed Ertu privileged access to resources.

Above all, Ertu enjoyed very good connections with *phinong* and *laogen* in China. In the cross-border networking he was favoured by his polyglot capabilities that allowed him to easily switch from Akha into Lao, Tai Lue or Chinese dialect according to his interlocutor. It was not unusual to see Ertu talking on his mobile phone on the western corner of the

9 In 2005, 1 rubber sapling was sold for 1,4-1,5 yuan.

10 This is a pseudonym.

11 The Nai ban shares the leadership role within the village with the Chaoban, "the traditional/?? (I do not like this word, help me finding another one) leader" called Dzoema in Akha language (Epprecht, 1998). The Chaoban has ritual, political and judicial authority. The Chao ban office is a hereditary office that is passed on to members of the same clan through patrilineal descent. The clan to which the Chao ban belongs derives its authority from its aristocratic status within the village. Its members enjoy privileges in land appropriation and ownership, besides wide respect from the village community. The Chaoban assisted by the "Council of male elders" have decision-making powers in relation to religious celebrations and are ultimate judges in internal conflicts. The Council of male elders includes 2 deputy Chao ban. The Council of male elders is elected by the villagers. The Nai ban is a 'modern' leader, appointed externally within the Lao national administrative system, after consultation with the villagers. He is in charge of managing political relations with the khet and district authorities, but manages also political and economic affairs internal to the village The Nai ban is assisted by two deputy-Nai ban (Epprecht, 1998).

terrace in his house, by chance the only spot in the village where the China Mobile network was available, concluding a deal with some *laogen* from China. According to the rumours spread in Samu and in the sub-district, the Naiban together with his companions in the village engaged in lucrative wild life and timber smuggling with Chinese from across the border, from which he had gained big revenues. A Muang Sing government agent even insinuated that Ertu had deposited part of the illegal profits in a bank in Meng Run and invested the remainder in a hundred head of cattle. The *laogen* cross-border ties with China were strengthened through a reciprocal exchange of favours, invitations to weddings or lavish feasts.

In 2003, a wealthy old Akha *laogen* from Guofang proposed Ertu to invest in rubber in the village territory. Whereas the Chinese *laoban* (a common Chinese expression meaning literally 'boss', but used in reference to 'businessman') was appealed by the wide land availability in Laos and by the cheap labor provided by the Akha farmers, the Naiban was attracted by the possibility to gain capital for him and his villagers to set up extensive rubber planting. The *laoban* obtained a land concession through an oral agreement with the village elders and Ertu. Only afterwards, under the pressure of the authorities, a contract, written in Lao and Chinese was ratified by the fingerprints of the villagers and the signature of Muang Sing district government officials. Between 2004 and 2005, two investors from Meng Run (one Hani from Mojiang and one Han Chinese) and a Akha from Guofang joined the 'big laoban' in the investment. This time, the deal was handled among the business partners without being formalized by the Lao authorities. The villagers verbally endorsed it on the principle of trust between *poseo*, although, in fact, they were not informed about the terms of the quota entitled to each business partner.

According to the contract, Samu villagers 'leased' land to the investor for 40 years. The laoban agreed to plant rubber for the extension of 3500 mu (about 233 hectares)[12] of land in the village territory. He committed to supply capital for digging the soil, paying labor for clearing the land, purchasing rubber seedlings and barbed wire, setting up a rubber nursery in the village and paying labor for grafting the saplings. The investment would cover the expenses for the set up and management of the entire extension of the plantation, until the trees would reach a mature age for tapping (7-8 years after they have been planted). Once the trees would be ready for tapping the plantation would be split into two parts: 60% would be given to the laoban and 40% to the farmers. After the land bipartition, each of the two parties would look after their own plantation. However, in case trees died from natural causes such as diseases, frost or wind, the laoban guaranteed to fund the replacement. Additionally, the laoban promised to buy latex from the farmers at the current price as it is on the market in China[13].

12 The mu is the Chinese land unit of measurement. Fifteen mu make one hectare.

13 A comparison of the research findings from Meng Man Township in China and Muang Mom in Laos has revealed that the terms for the contracts of rubber investments are the same on both sides of the border. The dominant pattern of land share is 40% for the investor and 60% for the farmers. Only in some early contracts signed in Laos in 2004 between Chinese investors and Lao farmers the share rate was 50%-50%. In the case of big concession type investment or lease of rubber plantations to a third party the ratio is 70% for the investor and 30% for the land user. These facts should make re-consider stereotypical statements about Chinese exploitation of Lao farmers; rather contextualize the Lao situation in the regional economic trends.

At the time of my investigation, land had not been divided to the farmers yet and the farmers were not aware of the share-per family they would be given. Twelve families were involved in the investment, among which the Naiban and his brothers, plus a few households who did not have financial means to set up their own plantations. A minority of the ex-refugees to China had also joined the contract.

Between 2003 and 2005 the investors planted the rubber saplings. Labour was hired from Baan Samu on a wage of 12 yuan/1mu for digging, clearing and weeding the land. Initially, rubber saplings were brought directly from China. Later on, given that some saplings would die once transplanted into the Lao soil, and exposed to different climate conditions, in 2004 a nursery was set up in Samu. Skilled workers hired from China bred seedlings (mostly GT1 and 600 varieties[14]) imported from China and trained the villagers in transplanting and grafting techniques. The Chinese workers were Akha and Han ethnic respectively from Guofang, Hou li, unit number three of the State Farm, and other Han settlements in Meng Run. In November 2005, at least twenty people in the village had developed good grafting skills and had set up nurseries on their own.

In 2005, Ertu was made another investment offer, this time larger in scope. A “big laoban” (*da laoban* in Chinese) from Guangdong, China, intended to plant 6,000 mu of rubber by 2006, in the territory of Baan Samu, and other neighbouring Akha villages in the area, being the latter two still untouched by rubber. Ertu and the villagers initially had concealed the issue from me. Being accompanied by development agents and a man from the Department of Agriculture and Forestry Office, in their eyes I was somehow a representative of the government’s regulatory power, to whom the truth had to be disguised.

It was only when a broker of the “big laoban”, a Han man from Meng Run came to visit Ertu with the excuse of “lai wanr” (come to have fun, come to play), that I became acquainted with the new deal. The man had been coming to Baan Samu in the last few months of 2005 to 'court' the Naiban, hoping to pave the way for the project on behalf of his boss. Ertu confessed me that he had met the man in Guofang, through a common friend who had invited him to “he jiu”, ‘have a drink’. The Han man had become part of the *po seo* circle from across the border 'helping' (“banmang”) the villagers in the rubber business. By accident, the Han *laogen* had a rubber plantation right adjacent to the borderline, which he would have liked to expand on the Lao side of the border if the deal of his boss would become viable.

Interestingly, the “big laoban” had never made it to the village, nor was his name known to the villagers. All that was known was that to counterbalance the negotiations at the local level, the Guangdong laoban had been discussing the project feasibility with the highest state authorities in Vientiane[15]. Despite the enthusiastic attitude of the Han broker and Ertu in describing the project, time and terms of the investment were still indefinite to both of them and its implementation was shrouded in mystery. Although the Naiban assertively claimed that the whole village would be involved in the project, he

[14] RIM 600 is a high yield variety of seedling but less resistant to disease and cold, while GT1 is a more resistant even though lower yield variety. GT1 is the most spread variety in Xishuang banna and in northern Laos.

15 According to the new regulations applied by the Lao government, investments bigger than 1000 mu have to be ratified by the central government, and, while investments between 100 mu and 1000 mu can be authorized by the Provincial authorities, investments inferior to 100 mu can be authorized at the district level.

could not spell out the criteria to be used for allocating land to the families. The villagers seemed not to be involved in the decision making process of this bigger investment. Yet, the farmers' longing for modernity prevailed over the ambiguity surrounding the means to pursue it.

The "exceptions" of rubber: State, patrons and subjects at the border

Alvarez conceptualises the "borderland as a region and set of practices defined and determined by [the] border that are characterized by conflict and contradiction, material and ideational" (Alvarez 1995:448). The development of rubber in Baan Samu reflects such nuanced and contradictory nature often associated with international frontiers. It further mirrors the intricate and problematic interaction between the State and its peripheral subjects in the particular border context of this region in mainland Southeast Asia. The "rebellious" and "unruly" reputation of the Akha among government officials in both Laos and China contributes to create such image of conflict and resistance.

From the perspective of the State regulatory system, the rubber establishment in Samu took place in the field of illegality. This was manifested in the villagers' reluctance to address the rubber issue openly with outsiders, both because of the arbitrary nature of their initiative to engage in the *laoban*'s investments and because of fear of legal repercussions. Ertu was hesitant to disclose the correct amount of rubber planted in the village to the officials of the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) and was misleading when pointing out the number of families involved in the business with the Meng Run laoban. One of the Han Chinese men who had moved to Samu with his Akha wife was also afraid of revealing the exact area of rubber he had planted. He was concerned that providing the government with precise figures, would result in a tax on land or on latex production in the years to come, which would further reduce his potential for wealth accumulation.

The relationship between the village headman, his villagers and the State was further complicated by the clash between the farmers' land use practices and the government's regulatory scheme. At the beginning of 2003, agents from the District Agriculture and Forestry Offices (DAFO) and a German development organization, the Lao-German Program Rural Development in Mountainous Areas of Northern Lao PDR (RDMA), had tried to implement the official land use plan in the village, which restricted rubber cultivation to "agricultural land" and "use/production forest" zones[16]. The DAFO and RDMA team had drawn a map of Samu's land zones with the participation of Ertu, the

16 According to the official classification, village forest land in Laos is divided into 5 categories:

1. Conservation/Reserve Forest (paa sanguan) (untouchable forest)
2. Protection Forest (paa ponggan) (untouchable forest)
3. Use/Production Forest (paa somsai) (forest used for the collection of non-timber products)
4. Regeneration Forest (paa feunfuu) (forest used for firewood collection and wood)
5. Cemetery Forest (paasaa/paheeo/pakham) (forest used as cemetery)

Agricultural land (din kasikam) is divided into 3 categories:

1. Paddy (naa)
2. Upland rice (hai)
3. Garden (suan)

village committee and other village members. At that time, only the ex-refugees from China had started rubber cultivation in the village. Subscribing to the official rule, rubber was planted on “agricultural land” along the road to the border.

However, the investment started by the Meng Run 'laoban' in the village at the end of the same year, was sufficient to disrupt the scheme outlined by the authorities. Rubber saplings were planted on the remaining agriculture land and in most of the forest land areas. Even families that had independently planted rubber trees in the following two years utilized land zones completely disregarding the ones officially designated. In November 2005, DAFO officials had estimated that rubber covered the whole village territory land except for 70% of the Conservation Forest. Two months after I had left the village, one of my Lao friends who visited me in China informed me that in Baan Samu rubber had taken over the entire village territory, even without the implementation of the investment by the “big laoban” from Guangdong. The DAFO officials were furious at Ertu and threatened to start a legal action against him.

How to make sense of the frictions and ambiguities surrounding the relationship between the State and its subjects in this frontier region? At a first glance, the rubber dynamics could be explained as a consequence of the weakening of state power at the periphery and of a regained porosity of the borders in the globalised era of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. The well-knit *posew-phinong* cross-border networks, the illegal marriages between Lao and Chinese citizens, along with the refugees’ phenomenon stemming at the basis of the transplanting of rubber could be accounted as centrifugal forces thwarting state structures. The uncontrolled trans-border stream of commodities and of rubber as such, could substantiate the assumption that fixed state borders are becoming increasingly obsolete (Donnan 1998) in the face of globalisation. Is, then, the dream of a borderless Greater Mekong Sub-region becoming true?

I would argue that the dream is still far from being fulfilled. Instead, to shed light on such an apparently new liberalization we should frame the situation within the specific historical context of the region yet in relation to the broader framework of globalisation. In fact, the “repertory of interpersonal relationships” that Ertu and his villagers draw upon and elaborate (Alvarez 1995:612) 612 is not exclusively a new phenomenon spurred by a globalised world. Rather, the wide repertories of interpersonal relationships are ‘age old’ (Walker 2000:138) mechanisms that have characterized social interaction in these “zones of mutual interest” (Leach) of Asia for centuries. Flow of goods and resources across the border have occurred in the past and continue to occur, although at a dissimilar intensity, in the present. Some scholars have demonstrated how upland dwellers in these remote areas of Southeast Asia have been part of a globalised opium market for more than a century. Indeed, the highlanders were the first ring in the chain that brought heroin and opium in the houses of consumers from Beijing to New York via Marseille and London (Tapp 1989). Simultaneously, we should admit that even this small Akha hamlet at the periphery of the Lao state has lately been indirectly affected by a time-space compression (Harvey 1990) embodied in an intensified mobility of commodities (if not of people) linked to the transnational market. Rubber, as substitute for opium, is therefore part of that long-standing commodity flow in the region, embedded in the dialectical process of national homogenisation, historical and local differentiation characterising globalisation in the contemporary era. In such process, State’s regulatory power, and the border as its immediate manifestation, has not been eroded, but rather adjusted to the changing socio-economic conditions.

In fact, rubber circulation and the contradictory legal dynamics in which it is embedded is an expression of the particular *modus operandi* recently adopted by the States in these border regions of Southeast Asia. There, the Lao State, like its neighbouring allies, rules through a regime of deliberate loosening and tightening of its control over its members. It exerts its sovereignty through an alternation of bounding and unbounding, allowing an *ad hoc* regulated mobility combined with enclosure (Cunningham and Heyman 2004). Whenever the unbounding takes place, it is explicable with what Agamben (Agamben 2003; Agamben (1995) 2000; Cunningham and Heyman 2004) paraphrasing Carl Schmitt (1922), calls "state of exception". The state of exception is the legal prerogative of the ruler to suspend the norm (Agamben (1995) 2000), e.g. the entire juridical order (Schmitt 1921: 18, in (Agamben 2003:45). In this paradoxical definition of sovereignty, exception is defined as

> "…one type of exclusion. It is a single case, excluded from the general norm. Yet what properly characterizes exception is that what is excluded is not…by all means separated from the norm; on the contrary, this [exception] is maintained in relation with it [the norm] in the form of suspension. *The norm applies to the exception by dis-applying itself, redrawing from it*" (original emphasis)…It is not the exception that evades the norm, but the norm that, being suspended, creates the exception, and only in this way establishes itself as rule, being in relation with the exception" (Agamben (1995) 2000:21-22)[17].

Exception and norm are not two mutually exclusive modes of operating; rather they are intertwined and interdependent. The state of exception is not therefore to be identified with the chaos, anarchy, or anomy often associated with border regions (add reference), where, it is assumed, local forces take advantage of the lack of State control or resist State order. Rather, the "state of exception" operates within order and it is a suspension of it by the State.

Nevertheless, while Agamben and Schmitt adopt the idea of the "state of exception" from a top-down perspective to explain the intimate relationship between democracy and totalitarianism (Agamben (1995) 2000:15) alienating the subjects from governance, I embrace it from the vantage of the margins. I maintain that in this stretch of the border between Laos and China, the "state of exception" is generated through the negotiation of power between the State and its subjects, rather than through a mere "normalisation" of authority as Gramsci, Foucault and others would have defined it. Border dwellers not only are excluded from, but become active participants in the exertion of power. Yet, such "interfered exception" does not always occur in harmonious marriage between the State and its members; it often involves friction and contestation.

As illustrated in the first part of the chapter, even after the clear theretical demarcation of boundaries by colonial powers and China, borderlanders continued, at shifting degrees, to span national territories negotiating the border and its crossings with modern states. The contemporary dynamics of rubber development perpetuate such State-margin's interaction, defying the classical notion of "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1985), that envisions power as unilaterally irradiated from the centre out to the periphery. Similarly, it discards the idea of the State exclusively as a "bounding, enclosing, and restricting" entity

[17] My translation from the original Italian text.

(Ohmae 1995 quoted in Walker 2000:139). Rather, from the rubber establishment in Samu it can be deduced that power is equally distributed at the centre and the periphery (Walker 1999).

The above-mentioned concept of "negotiated exception" explains the friction surrounding State territorialising and borderlanders' counter-territorialising thrusts tied up with the establishment of rubber. Although some have argued that the borderland is "an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:18), the case of Baan Samu demonstrates how territorialisation[18] is still a necessary mechanism needed by the State to defend its sovereignty. The borderland is the place where State territoriality is mostly at stake. Borders are the tools to secure those territories "valuable to the [the State] because of their human or natural resources" and because of their strategic or symbolic importance (Donnan 1998:9)9. Territorialisation at the margins is a project of 'major sovereignty' still necessary to the State to incorporate resources and people into more centralized control.

Rubber development in the northern border region of the country is particularly related to the Lao government's concern about its territorial sovereignty in front of the political might of China. In early 1990s, some Chinese farmers had illegally set up a rubber plantation in Laos territory not far from Baan Samu, right adjacent to the borderline, provoking a dispute over the demarcation of the national territory. Such arbitrary spatial appropriation was perceived by the Lao government as undermining its territorial dominion. In fact, it was against the bilateral agreement stipulated with China according to which rubber plantations must be situated at least 1 km away from the borderline. Ironically, to avoid perpetuating the clashes with one of its main economic allies, the Lao government in the last year had to turn rubber from an obstacle to its sovereignty into a means to secure its national boundaries. While I was in the field, a rumour went in Muang Sing that the Lao Army had confiscated some land from a few villages along the borderline to plant rubber. Arranged in regularly spaced rows, rubber trees could make the landscape more legible (Scott 1998) so as to secure the control over the border and the national territory, preventing the Chinese from illegally setting up other plantations.

The official land use planning and mapping, limiting utilization of space by Samu farmers is a further expression of the State's spatial defence of the margins as much as it is the government agents' anxiety about the agreements "illegally" stipulated between the Chinese investors and the Lao farmers.

Border dwellers have responded to the State planning with "a project of minor sovereignty" (Feuchtwang 2004:17), that took the form of a counter-territorialisation. By counter-territorialisation, I mean that process by which local people mitigate the territorialisation tendencies of the State through a variety of stratagems aiming at appropriating space by exerting physical control over it and imbuing it with meaning other that the one attributed by the State (Rigg 2005:109). Yet, rather than regarding counter-territorialisation as a form of borderlanders' resistance to State structures, I interpret it as the outcome of that conscious un-bounding of State authority, the

[18] By territorialisation I mean what Jonathan Rigg defines as: "[the] means and process by which the state extends its control over space, the population who inhabit that space, and the natural resources found there. People are counted, land is measured and resources are allocated, and this is given authority through the 'scientific' approach adopted and the legal structures that underpin the process' (Rigg 2005:109).

suspension of the norm within order, which is nevertheless pressured by the agency of local dwellers.

Samu villagers' counter-territorialisation was enacted through their planting rubber in land zones prohibited by the official land use planning, stretching the plantations up to the borderline; through the acceptance of the ambiguous terms of the investments by both the "smaller" and 'bigger' laoban, disregarding the regulations on foreign investments imposed by the Lao State. A further manifestation of such power counterbalance was the farmers' interchanging the words 'sao' (to rent, to lease) and 'khai' (to sell) to describe the way land use rights were transferred to Chinese investors. For Akha cultivators, who have practiced swidden agriculture for decades, moving across the territory and using land in a more flexible mode, the use of land was separated from land property. Therefore, distinguishing between leasing and selling land seemed not to be significant. To the Lao government, instead, the 'ambiguous' form of land lease was a threat that could result in future claims over the territory by the Chinese and a subsequent loss of land use rights for the Lao farmers.

The figure of Ertu, the village headman, is a further example of that "negotiated exception" intertwined with the equal distribution of power between the centre and the margins. Sturgeon (Sturgeon 2004; Sturgeon 2000) has pointed out in the context of interstitial zones between Thailand, China and Burma, that Akha leaders of contemporary times "operate as…small border chief[s]" (Sturgeon 2000), much like "the lord[s] of…pre-modern Southeast Asian small border power[s]" (Sturgeon 2000:158). Such modern chiefs "continue to mediate and indeed constitute the border into the" early 21st century (Sturgeon 2000:162).

While on one hand Ertu seemed to be operating outside the norm, evading State regulatory system, his legitimacy paradoxically drew on the State. He was appointed by the central bureaucratic apparatus as political mediator between the village community and the local government. Ertu attended regularly meetings in Muang Sing during which he was instructed about central, provincial or district government policies and economic planning to be implemented in the village. At his house, a set of posters in Lao language designed in Vientiane promoting disease prevention covered the wall of the veranda. One of the posters also advertised the national census that had been held in March 2005, as to include Samu into the State mechanism of incorporation. Ertu was the conveyer of that ramified control from the core out to the centre. At the same time, he befitted as small border arbiter (Sturgeon 2000:157) between China and Laos empowered to defend the border on behalf of the Lao State. He was conferred the exceptional power to control opium trafficking in the past as well as cross-border illegitimate operations in the present.

Paradoxically, it is in his role as "protector" of the border for the State, that he engaged in cross-border logging and smuggling (Sturgeon 2000:161). He took advantage of the "state of exception", usually prerogative of the larger State, by suspending the norm to gain benefits for himself and his village. Endowed with multiple languages and keeping multiple personal relationships of patronage across the border, he took advantage (need a synonym) of that superior status to accumulate resources and guarantee capital to his villagers to grow rubber. To supplement the picture, Ertu was at times assisted in his smuggling by conniving local government officials from both sides of the border that would enact the suspension of the norm in exchange for a few thousand *renminbi*. In this zone of mutual interest (Leach 1960), the image of a monolithic and overarching State

separated from its members dissolved into a fragmented reality of men procuring benefits for each other.

Rubber as enticement to modernity: pursuing the Chinese dream

Ethnographic accounts of the US-Mexican border describe the conflicting character of border dynamics as inscribed in a cycle of ineluctably unequal power relations between the first and the third world economies. The picture often presented is that of the first world projecting itself into the third to exploit cheap labour and taking advantage of lax pollution regulations (Vila 2003). An alternative image is that of the third world extending itself into the first (Alvarez 1995) to pursue economic and social advancement. In the second case, the American dream is the pole of attraction of a south-north unidirectional migratory vector of labourers from "underdeveloped" Mexico to the United States. Yet, the rigidity of geopolitical borders succeeds in marginalizing local residents, in regulating and constraining their movement. Despite *fronterizos* endowed with trans-national hybrid identities and enacting an "ever-shifting behaviour" (Alvarez 1995:451) strive to resist and, at times, manage to transcend the impenetrable boundary, they nevertheless remain caught up in the economic asymmetry with the wealthy first world. The border, with its innumerable check-points and monitoring technologies acts a as a marker of exclusion and separation. It functions as a barrier limiting the longing for wealth and improvement (Flynn 1997:313).

On this stretch of the Lao-China frontier, instead, the "underdeveloped" third world (Laos) and a "developing"/wealthier third world interpenetrate each other. The two worlds come together following a bidirectional path, one taking advantage of the other in an idiosyncrasy of contestation, negotiation, friction and manipulation. As seen earlier, local border dwellers from both sides manoeuvre resources, capital and social networks to gain economic, social and political benefits. Yet, the border and its crossings do not elide the unequal power relations between the two countries. Separation and mutual interdependence are, in fact, the two contradictory features that characterize life at the juncture of the Lao and Chinese nations. The border remains a dividing line of two different degrees of modernisation, creating two distinct temporalities of development. At the same time, it acts as a gluing element between individuals from two nation-states, and as a "bridge" linking them in reciprocal social and economic inter-reliance (Flynn 1997:311). The *bianmin* (border dwellers) have manipulated the border and transformed it into a "corridor" of modern opportunities (Flynn 1997).

Indeed, the frontier is the site where not only modernity is imagined but also the locus where various strategies to pursue Chinese modernity are put into practice. Rubber, transported across the border through patronage relations, kin and friends' cross-border networks is the symbol of both that imagined and actual modernity. Simultaneously, rubber becomes the *means* to make the Chinese dream viable.

To the Lao farmers in Baan Samu, China offers the prospects of a tangible modernity that the Lao State is unable to provide. Perpetuating a nineteenth century version of modernity embedded in a discourse of rationalisation and standardisation (e.g. 'modernism'), the Lao State and its local agents insist on clear border demarcation, regulated land use patterns, and transparent investment contracts. Modernity is perceived by the authorities as "a "goal" to be reached" (Oakes 1998:7), through progressive stages of economic development in which the State acts as main regulator. The big development projects being implemented across the country, in the form of

dams, highways, casinos and other infrastructures drawing on foreign aid funds, is the manifestation of a modernity of “spectacle” and “ostentatiousness” (Oakes 1998:8), through which the Lao central government strives to disentangle itself from the condition of underdevelopment before the international community.

Yet, to the Lao farmers along the border with China, State-brand rationalisations seem to be unsuitable with their aspirations. And while allured by the monumentality of the State spectacularising version of modernity, they perceive it out of their reach. Rather than being a *goal* to be achieved with the assistance of the State and whose achievement is associated with a remote future, modernity is a *contingent process* through which border dwellers “confront and negotiate the socio-economic changes” (Oakes 1998:7) occurring in the present. The importing and adopting of rubber as a new strategy of livelihood is expression of such negotiation. It is the outcome of the farmers’ creative adaptation to the insecurity, flux and precariousness of the world in motion. It is a way through which the farmers ‘“make” themselves modern [subjects] as opposed to being “made” modern’ (Gaonkar 2001:18) by the State’s standardizing forces.

Relegated to the periphery of a country where the internal low production of consumption goods generates a significant reliance on products imported from neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and China, Samu people draw from the latter material and symbolic artefacts of consumption through which modernity is more perceptibly experienced. The Naiban and his family act as conveyors and mediators of this cross-border appropriation of modernity. On their regular trips to China, they often hire DVDs of Chinese films and music to bring back to Samu. At night, the house of Ertu, the only in the village that owns a TV and a karaoke set operated by a power generator, turns into a rudimental cinema. Contributing a few Renminbi for the viewing, villagers come to experience pieces of that Chinese tangible modernity by watching episodes of soap operas about Shaolin monks, Chinese historical characters from the Tang dynasty or the Communist War of Resistance period. As part of this “kula” ring of modern objects (Davis 1999) circulated across the border are also DVDs of Akha music produced in China. Perhaps reinforcing an idea of cross-border pan-Akha community, the music and the lyrics sung in a language intelligible to the one spoken by Samu people also fosters the desire to abridge the distance between them and their wealthier ethnic fellows.

The economic superiority of their *posew* and *phinong* from across the border was a common topic in the villagers’ conversations. Their misery and backwardness was constantly compared with China’s augmented wealth. In the last two years, the increase in the price of latex impressively raised the living standards of Chinese on the other side of the border. Before then, a similar temporality of “underdevelopment” dominated both sides of the national boundary. When I illegally crossed the border with the Naibaan’s son, I visited the house of a Akha family in Guofang. The host was a widow, mother of two daughters and a son. To my comment about the rapid modernisation process occurring in the village, the woman responded by pointing out that such prosperity was quite a new phenomenon. Only until two years before, when the latex price was low, she lamented to have faced profound misery and hardship, having to pay for education for her two daughters in Kunming and eking out a living for herself in the village. The signs of today’s economic improvement were manifested in the way her large wooden house on stilts had been renovated. A functional bathroom with shower and running water, only two years earlier a rare luxury in the area, had been built next to the kitchen. Tuned with the fashion spread in Xishuang banna, in between the flashy white tiles was set a glazed

picture of a blonde Western woman posing with her breasts uncovered. I had learned elsewhere that such images were symbols of the Western “kaifang”, “open minded”, and “xiandaihua”, “modern” taste that had arrived from urban areas of China. To crown the new modern apparatus were the solar panels on the bathroom roof. The Akha woman showed clear signs of satisfaction with such modern metamorphosis of her house.

In Guofang, motorbikes, mobile phones, TV and VCD sets, cars, packaged processed food and made in Kunming clothes are commodities now affordable for a larger number of people. For Baan Samu villagers, such material manifestation of modernity seemed unreachable until rubber made its appearance in the village. To them, rubber is the tool for that affordability. One of the farmers lamented to me: “Our living conditions are too backward now. In our village there is nothing of what you see in China”. And with a big smile on his face he continued: “When you come back to the village in six years-time we will have started tapping rubber. Then we will be rich, we will have cars, nice houses and eat better food, like in China".

To Baan Samu villagers, rubber is the not the development path set out by the Lao state. Rather, in their imagery, rubber is the only path to escape poverty, the antidote against unhappiness and misery. Rubber is the tool to reach social and economic emancipation enabling the farmers to integrate into what they see as the successful Chinese model of modernity. Often the farmers commented: "The Chinese know the way (Khun Hoo huu witii)”, and we want to do the way the Chinese do…China’s economy is growing very fast…and wealth is based on rubber. We want to follow that example."

Undoubtedly, the Chinese model of modernity identified with capitalist consumerism that Samu villagers aspire to, may also be thought as a *goal* to attain. Some may argue that these Akha people are far from achieving that *goal*. To the farmers themselves, the full attainment of that modernity still represents a dream. Yet, while the Lao State is unable to provide the conditions for the dream to be fulfilled, China with its advanced farming system and technologies offers the tools for at least believe in the viability of that modern dream. Cross-border social ties, rather than standardized land use practices, are conducive of new ideas and knowledge. It is through the *posew* and *phinong’*s support that the dream is deemed to become true.

Nevertheless, what is significant is not much *whether* the farmers will ever achieve that type of modernity or not. Rather, it is important to emphasise *how* Samu villagers construct themselves as modern subjects. What is relevant is the *process* whereby they carve a space for their modern existence in the midst of the present’s contingencies (Oakes 1998:223), where the forced State-devised disruption of old agricultural practices based on opium cultivation is leading them towards the integration into the market economy. Being “modern” is simultaneously embedded in the ‘desire to be (“modern)”’, in the reflexive recognition of the disadvantaged condition they dwell in as well as in the struggle they engage in to escape from the trap of poverty (Oakes 1998:7) (7). Samu villagers are modern in the way they dream of but also in the way they invent alternative opportunities to adjust to the abrupt changes occurring in their lives.

Some development advisers in Laos and overzealous government officials in Nam Tha have vehemently disapproved rubber development in Northern Laos. One side of the critique regards the negative consequences of rubber cultivation on the environment. It is deemed that rubber has a destructive effect on the watersheds and causes soil erosion. Another aspect of the critique is informed by an anti-modernist discourse that

maintains that “[r]ubber plantations [erode] not only customary boundaries and resource management institutions but also the capacity of farmers to manage ecologically diverse landscapes and to participate in market networks” (Xu, Ma, Tashi, Fu, Lu, and Melick 2005a:13). Rubber is therefore considered as one of the noxious outcomes of modernity that eradicates farmers’ traditional knowledge and generates precarious forms of livelihood. This view condemns the destabilising impermanence of the modern project in the present to romanticise the past as a place to seek stability provided by an alleged harmonious relationship between man and nature. Yet, such nostalgic perspective seems to underestimate the desire of the farmers to become modern. It also precludes them from the possibility to emancipate themselves in the ineluctable process of change.

Furthermore, in the discourse of development agents, rubber is stigmatized as a symbol of Chinese cultural and economic colonialism in northern Laos. Rubber is deemed to be entrenched in the expansion of China’s ‘soft power’ in Southeast Asia through massive investments, legal and illegal migration, land and labour exploitation. What is perceived as Lao people’s incapability to create their own alternative livelihood strategies will cause them to increasingly rely on Chinese imported capital and technical expertise. As result, Lao people will be devoured by the Chinese economic might and exploited by it. Some pessimists have even predicted that Muang Sing, in a few years, will be taken over by Chinese small and big investors and will be embraced into the Chinese cultural dominion.

However, perhaps the fact that the Chinese “way” towards modernity is the one preferred and pursued by the farmers should not be equated with economic and cultural exploitation. In fact, in Ban Samu, the import of Chinese modernity does not occur through a mechanical reproduction of its categories. Rather, it takes place through an active appropriation of its symbols by the farmers. While internalising its symbols, new meanings are attributed to them. It is precisely in such meaning-making process that the farmers become modern subjects and craft alternative ways to exist in an ever-changing world.

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