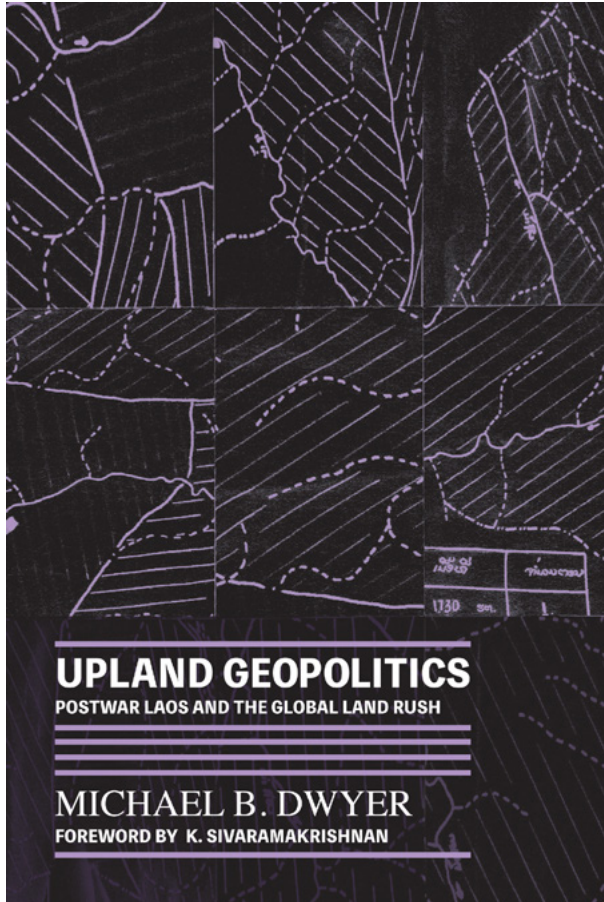




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UPLAND GEOPOLITICS

POSTWAR LAOS AND THE GLOBAL LAND RUSH

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FOREWORD BY K. SIVARAMAKRISHNAN

Postwar Laos and the Global Land Rush: A Conversation with Michael Dwyer

Juliet LU,
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Over the past two decades, Laos has been on the front lines of a global rise in transnational corporate land investments. This has been driven by China's supposedly growing appetite for foreign land and resources, which has featured centrally in coverage of this so-called new global land rush. Mike Dwyer's book *Upland Geopolitics: Postwar Laos and the Global Land Rush* (University of Washington Press, 2022) takes up several major assumptions about the land rush—that mapping of global land investments corresponds to grounded realities, that Chinese and other transnational investors take advantage of weak land governance in developing countries, and that poor countries like Laos and their land-reliant rural communities have stood helplessly by—and turns them on their head. This book exemplifies the power of careful, in-depth, long-term qualitative research. It shows how the microprocesses of political struggle and socioeconomic change in one country, presented in all their complexity, speak to pivotal processes of global environmental and political change far beyond its borders.

Dwyer has a finger on the pulse of two often-ignored sides of the land investment equation, especially when Chinese investors are involved. On the one hand, he has a deep understanding of how the development-aid community, nongovernmental organisations, and academics have perceived the intensification of Chinese economic ties with Laos, and how China's rise has entwined with the global narrative of the 'land grab'. On the other hand, he analyses regulatory processes and decision-making logics within the Lao State to draw important insights into how land governance intersects with processes of Lao state formation and struggles for authority. This type of analysis of host-country dynamics is rare in studies of Chinese overseas investment and yields nuanced observations of global China and the politics of land control and resource extraction.

The story told in this book is rife with categories that have become highly polarised in the current political moment. Dwyer writes about two (post)socialist nations (China and Laos), of tensions between traditional (mostly Western) development-aid organisations and Chinese initiatives, and of narratives of land grabs as neocolonial threats to national sovereignty. By including the legacies of French colonialism and US interventionism during the 'hot' Cold War years, when US military activity turned Laos into the most bombed country in the world, he shows that recent events that are often framed as

sudden or surprising—such as trends in land commodification, dispossession, and intersections between foreign enterprises and state governance—are neither new nor unpredictable. Rather, *Upland Geopolitics* makes the case that today's resource conflicts and political struggles related to land lie on top of long histories of state formation and foreign interventions—market and military—which deserve to be carefully examined in all their entanglements.

Juliet Lu: Your research contributes a unique and important perspective on the changing politics of land control globally. A key backdrop to your work is the debate about the global land grab or, perhaps more accurately, the new global land *rush*. Why is Chinese transnational land investment an important lens through which to view the global land rush and the trajectories of change in the commodification of land over the past two decades?

Michael Dwyer: Global China provides an important window into the global land rush/land grab in at least two ways. First, there is the issue of timing. Chinese investment in Southeast Asia, like Chinese investment across the Global South, peaked a few years before the global land rush was recognised as a coherent phenomenon in late 2008 and 2009. Others have pointed out that, from a foreign policy perspective, Beijing realised, quite correctly, that perceptions of neocolonialism, especially when projects involved land acquisition, could pose a threat to investments' ability to get off the ground in the first place or, once started, to continue operations. In the book, the peak in what I call *land-finding* efforts in Laos—specifically by Chinese rubber companies—happened around 2005–2006, significantly before the global land grab frame emerged (see, for instance, GRAIN 2008). This peak was the result of a boom in investment activity triggered by the resolution of a regulatory struggle that took place between 2000 and 2004. During this time, a stalemate arose between Chinese rubber companies and Lao authorities who had managed to counter the Politburo-level enthusiasm for bilateral rubber cooperation (on both sides of the border) by advocating against large-scale land concessions and in favour of so-called alternative or more 'cooperative' approaches to rubber development, like contract farming.

In some ways, my window into this process was limited. I was unable to see, for example, how Chinese central government authorities communicated with the firms that, throughout the early and mid 2000s, pushed for land access in Laos in ways that were much more aggressive than the geopolitical restraint exercised by Beijing a few years later in the wake of the global food and financial crises. However, I did see the Lao side, where the objections by officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry made their way into the regulatory actions of local Lao governments in key borderland regions (I talk about this in Chapters 1 and 4: the former focuses on the provincial-level struggle, and the latter zooms in on a single district). This all took place from 2004 to 2007 and highlights what I call the *conjunctural nature of the global*

land rush: as a coherent phenomenon, it came together in the geopolitically inflected language ('global land grab', 'farms race', 'new scramble for Africa', etcetera) in 2008, but a lot of it involved processes that were already in motion and that operated on different temporal scales.

In the book, I describe these phenomena through three overlapping processes that reach progressively further back in time: first, the regional economic 'corridor'-based integration of the upper Mekong region that began in the 1990s and took off in the early 2000s; second, Laos's legal geography specifically related to land, which stretched back to the 1980s and comprised an effort to lay out a map of formal property rights in the wake of the 1975 revolution (more on this below); and third, the Cold War period of the 1960s to the 1980s, when the uneven citizenship that came to dominate the social geography of property in the absence of a complete cadastre originated in the localised geography of who was on which side of the war, and which was reanimated by the state-managed resettlement process that followed in the 1990s and 2000s.

A second point highlights the important distinction between the *land rush* and the *land grab* frames by examining the geography of actual land acquisition by Chinese companies. One of the things I spend a lot of time on in the book is explaining why enclosure in Laos happens *where* it does. This has a few dimensions, but one starting place is the incomplete cadastre, especially in rural areas. This does not mean that property rights in rural Laos are completely informal or customary and/or that the state owns all the land—although you often hear both these assertions. Rather, it means that the way that property rights have been brought under the formal protection of law is both partial and decentralised, and that property in practice is the result of many things, only some of them legal. Let's put it like this: if you were to look at the cadastral map of the economic 'corridor' that my book centres—a swathe of northwestern Laos that follows an old caravan trade route between Yunnan in China and Chiang Rai in Thailand and that was turned into a paved highway about 2005—you would not find anything; the map would be empty, since the area is essentially untitled by the central government land office. And if you were to look for the same thing at the local district government level, depending on how you asked for it, either you would get nothing (if you asked for a single cadastral map) or you would find a collection of village-scale zoning maps that show cadastral parcels in certain areas but not others. So, when Chinese companies went looking for 'available' land, they had to go out into the field and do a mix of searching and negotiating; they could not simply consult government maps to locate available land.

As the book describes, this relative dearth of legal geography does not mean that all the unmapped land was available. Rather, much rural land was under various forms of use, but it could be *made* available for development in certain circumstances, although not in others. I describe this in the book in the language of land's 'social availability' to highlight the unevenness of these processes, and to highlight the need to look closer to the ground ethnographically. So the guts of the book really span the three periods

mentioned above: the 1960s, when the seeds of fractured upland citizenship emerged in the territoriality of US Cold War intervention in upland Laos; the 1980s, when these fractures were carried over into the new ‘revolutionary’ regime of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR); and the 2000s, when they were put to use in the land-finding process by local officials in the northwest who were trying to figure out the ‘right’ places for Chinese companies to put their various plantations. Some of these were company-owned and managed plantations, while others were outgrower schemes that left farmers on their own land growing rubber under contract.

This multitemporality—the ‘conjuncture’ mentioned above—means that recent enclosures depend on layers of existing social relations. This is important because it also explains why the biggest company plantations end up where they do—namely, in areas into which ‘security risk’ populations have been settled. In the book, I frame this as a question of why the global land *rush* (a *search* for land by corporate and state actors from abroad) ended up as a land *grab* (an *achievement* of that search) in some places but not in others.

The China story is exemplary because the case I examine in northern Laos mirrors the geopolitical restraint mentioned above: the Chinese rubber company that ends up getting a major enclosure is successful not because it pushes and pushes for plantation land, but because it frames its push in the inclusive language of ‘development cooperation’ and contract farming—a key way to overcome nationalist-tinged objections to ‘giving land away to foreigners’—and because it is willing to settle for a series of enclosures that are limited in space (although they are still fairly large). This, however, is not just about the companies; it is also about local officials and, in this sense, the geopolitical restraint is not just about ‘China’ or ‘Beijing’; it is also about the way that Lao officials hedged their bets and limited the enclosures to areas where active citizenship was weak. As I put it in the text (p. 127):

[T]he management of enclosure’s social distribution proved crucial. Targeting [company plantations] into [specific areas] showed a certain hedging on the part of Lao officials: a hopeful optimism, perhaps, that Chinese rubber development could be used to finance permanent livelihood creation where earlier efforts had failed, but also a pragmatic limiting of the negative fallout (when such efforts of incorporation ultimately failed and produced merely a land grab) to subpopulations with limited political capital.

Capitalising on the unevenness of the local social terrain to create and sustain enclosure—what I call the ‘micro-geopolitics’ that shape the grounding of the standard (‘macro’/international relations) geopolitics—is ultimately a key reason the book is useful for understanding the land rush. It helps illustrate the key difference between the global land rush in general and land grabs on the ground.



JL: My understanding of your point about ‘socially available’ land and the uneven micro-geopolitics of Chinese land investments in Laos is that they counter what the term ‘land grab’ suggests: that large, contiguous swathes are unilaterally taken over by Chinese firms. Instead, there is a highly involved and contingent process of negotiation and engagement between actors to find parcels of land for companies. This process means that some areas are left alone by local state actors for some reason and others are targeted; some villages have had no recourse after losing land, while others have refused plantation investments successfully. Is this an accurate reading?

New Plantations

Newly planted rubber plantation in northwestern Laos, c. 2008. Source: Mike Dwyer.

MD: I do not think the term land grabbing inherently has a scale to it; its analytic punch is in the issue of legitimacy, not size. In an earlier piece (Dwyer 2013), I set out a sort of typology of land grabbing that highlighted both the legal and the non-legal forms of plantation-concession enclosures, as well as the ways that concessions figured in intrastate resource politics, allowing one set of authorities to ‘grab’ resources from others. If you look at the size of the land grabs in Laos, they vary significantly—although in terms of the contiguous field areas, that has not been adequately

accounted for yet. In the areas I was studying, the big land grabs tended to be in the tens to hundreds of hectares, which is much smaller than many of the numbers that circulated globally (see, for instance, the annex to the 2008 GRAIN report); I think this is what you were getting at. Your description here is generally right, as long as it is clear that the ‘highly involved and contingent process of negotiation and engagement between actors to find parcels of land for companies’ does not always include the users of that land; often the ‘actors’ are local officials acting allegedly on behalf of the current users of that land. And that is where it gets tricky, as I elaborate on in Chapter 4.

JL: A common theme in *Upland Geopolitics* is the gap between narratives of the phenomenon you document (the influx of Chinese land investment, the role of Lao state officials in facilitating those investments, and how the Lao State governs the people and lands of northern Laos) and realities on the ground. I find your approach—what you call ‘an ethnography of upland government’, in which you draw on the longer-term histories of land control, development, and state formation to contextualise your ethnographic material—to be a novel and effective way of getting at these tensions between narratives and realities and showing how those misfitting narratives nevertheless shape actions and outcomes. I would contrast this with a tendency in mainstream development and academic research circles alike to equate the terms ‘evidence’ or ‘data’ with information collected and analysed through quantitative methods and the rush to compile global databases in an era of big data and data science. Can you point to vital realisations you had that could only have resulted from the approach you took? And are there certain questions or contexts for which you see this approach being particularly valuable?

MD: One of my biggest realisations took place in the wider context of the experience I recount in the book’s opening sketch. In it, I describe the run-around some colleagues and I experienced in 2006 when we were trying to ground-truth the investment inventory process that had been started a few months earlier by Laos’s National Land Management Authority. In the sketch, I describe not having any documents—maps, contracts, proposals, anything—the first time we visited the rubber plantation whose story I built the book around. The realisation that there was something structural to this experience of being ‘lost in the field’ even with the government’s own regulators came gradually, once I started to see the maps and documents that had been made during the companies’ land-finding efforts but that were repeatedly glossed in mainstream (for example, newspaper) reports as not existing at all. When central government officials spoke of insufficient care being taken in the process of allocating land for plantation investments, they often spoke of the lack of maps in ways that implied that the maps were not being made at all. This was a dodge, although it was often taken in stride by development professionals (both foreign and domestic) who saw this as ‘a capacity issue’. Once we started seeing the maps, it became increasingly clear that it was not that the

maps were not being made; they *were*—they just were not being *shared*. This was the ‘aha’ moment that gave the book its two-part argument: not just about micro-geopolitics as a way to explain the uneven distribution of enclosure, but also about ongoing state formation, or bureaucratic turf politics, as a way to explain why these micro-geopolitical processes so often remained hidden. This pointed me to the ways in which *intrastate* politics get in the way of the regulatory process.

Thinking more broadly, these dynamics are likely present to some degree everywhere: as critical scholars of transparency have pointed out, transparency as a process is always partial. Highlighting a process through one set of numbers (or maps or whatever) inevitably obscures other processes and other sets. Transparency always has a politics, which is why disclosure processes are so frequently problematic and contested. In Laos and Cambodia, where I have also worked on this, my sense is that these sorts of things were especially obvious due to the presence of what scholars call *legal pluralism*: contexts where multiple sets of norms (that is, not just laws) govern the ownership of and access to land and resources. There is often a tendency to start with law or policy and try to look ‘downward’ at the flow of power or authority into a single location (‘Who owns the land here?’, etcetera). In the contexts I have studied, this approach is an immediate dead end when there is no cadastre to begin with, and where the zoning maps that are posted at the edge of the village do not match the way the land is used. Almost immediately you have to ask what else is going on. But this sort of internal politics is likely to be relevant elsewhere as well—you just have to look a little harder for it.

JL: Just as Chinese investment could be an important lens into the global land rush, the Lao uplands seem to offer an important lens into development in post-socialist, postcolonial contexts. You show how widely used apolitical development terms like ‘poverty alleviation’, ‘land tenure security’, and ‘access to markets and government services’ overlie processes of state formation and struggles for authority over territory. Building on the question of gaps between narratives and on-the-ground realities, can you comment on how you conceptualise the Lao uplands and why they have inspired such interest among colonisers, imperial powers, domestic state actors, and foreign development workers?

MD: A partial answer to this, based on my case, hinges on ‘the uplands’ as a conception of space whose meaning built on expectations of available natural resources: timber, water, energy, minerals, forest products, land, or whatever. It is hard not to think of the work of Nancy Peluso, Tania Li, and Anna Tsing on the way that upland landscapes in Indonesia (and Southeast Asia more generally) have been imagined as ‘political forests’ dating back to at least colonial era, although Thongchai Winichakul’s (2000) essay ‘The Others Within’ really helped me see how this sort of lowland-centric optic of hilly areas was not limited to Western colonialism.



Laos

Laos's 'Northern
Economic Corridor.'
Source: Mike Dwyer.

In the book, I talk about how these resource politics establish a field of contestation between communities and extractive forces (state, corporate, often both), but how they also are inevitably overlaid with and shaped by other forces as well. I use Michael Perelman's (2007) language of 'calibrating the model of primitive accumulation' to look at how processes of enclosure play out, and the book looks to two main historical periods to examine this on the ground. I mentioned these periods briefly above. The first was the 1960s to early 1970s, when US intervention in pre-1975 Laos created a form of upland territoriality that capitalised on remoteness. This created a series of sociopolitical fractures that permeated much of the country's upland landscape. This story is relatively well known in northeastern Laos in terms of its effects on Hmong communities, the legacy of unexploded ordnance, the links to the Vietnam War, and so on. Much less is known in the northwest, which was more closely linked to China's 'theatre' of the Cold War—and here I drew heavily on the work of Al McCoy, Leif Jonsson, and others.

The second period on which I focus is the 1980s, when these earlier fractures made their way into the post-1975 Government of the Lao PDR via a mix of ongoing rural insurgencies and corresponding tactics developed by the government and its international aid partners for pursuing industrial forestry. In both cases, the security politics animated the resource politics in very specific ways that led to a general model of state-managed resettlement, which I develop in Chapter 3 and then complicate in Chapter 4. The story of how enclosure was created during the boom decade of the 2000s—the so-called global land rush—depends on these inevitably local and regional dynamics. But the methodology of looking at how historical geographies of political conflict underlie and ‘calibrate’ the resource politics of the present has a general utility and could certainly be applied elsewhere. Indeed, it already has been—just look at the work of Megan Ybarra, Kevin Woods, Jean-Christophe Diepart, and Teo Balve, among others.

JL: What you unlocked for me by rooting recent land politics in longer histories was insight into the complex power dynamics at play—power dynamics that only this kind of careful qualitative approach can uncover. We see throughout the book (and through time) the same groups of actors divided, engaged in similar struggles to control each other and to control key spaces and resources. Most prominently, we see a parade of actors—from colonial officials to Lao state actors to foreign corporations—talking of uplanders as backward, entrenched in poverty, remote, and disconnected. Over time, the tools and discourses at play change, but the groups using them, and the resources struggled over, remain relatively consistent. This helps us see higher-level logics of control and processes of state formation driving programs like resettlement, land investment, and even infrastructure development broadly. Without putting words in your mouth, I wonder whether you would say your approach of ‘ethnography of upland government’ is an especially apt, maybe even necessary, way to approach places with histories and power dynamics as complicated (and often misunderstood) as those in the Lao uplands?

MD: We often hear (or at least read) that property is a social relation, but it is so tempting to go straight to what the law says or what the title documents say—in the Lao case, the lack of titling, the reversion to ‘state land’ after three years of ‘non-use’, etcetera. What is harder—but, given the unevenness of the enclosure process, necessary—is to figure out how to capture the numerous and historically sedimented social relations that property comprises as a social institution in a particular context. This is what took me, methodologically, first to Michael Perelman, and ultimately to Foucault.

Perelman pointed me towards the utility of taking an ethnographic approach to primitive accumulation—that is, to study property in-the-making by following the people he calls ‘primitive accumulationists’ and asking what they are trying to accomplish and how they go about it. In his work on colonial-era capitalism, he points out that one way to think about enclosure is as a variation on a standard model where the

details of that model's 'calibration' to a particular context really matter and emerge from historical context as well. Perelman's examination of the colonial plantation-manager types pointed in this general direction and focused on the need to examine the strategic dimensions of various details of enclosure. What I took especially was his insistence that partial enclosure poses a question of strategy, since it is sometimes functional to the maintenance of the social reproduction of labour.

From Foucault, I took the need to complicate this strategic sort of analysis by looking at the competition between the multiple sets of 'primitive accumulationists' who are active in the sphere of upland property-making. In my case, that meant interpreting what I was seeing ethnographically as the outcome of competition between Chinese companies and a few different sets of state officials, each of which was advocating for slightly different modes of enclosure: more complete forms by the companies, more partial forms by local officials, and other sorts of resource access by the more distant state officials, which created a regulatory conflict that made those first two modes all the harder to see. Ultimately, it was this clash between what you might call competing modes of primitive accumulation—competing governmentalities, in a sense—that came out of the mix when I tried to study enclosure from the ground up (what Foucault calls an 'ascending approach' to power relations). While I owe Philippe Le Billon a debt for suggesting the term *micro-geopolitics* to me, it was this ascending approach that put the 'micro' in micropolitics in the first place.

That said, the nuance I would add to your question is that part of the complexity in the story comes from the fact that the nature of the 'resource' itself changed at a key point in the story. Even if both French colonial administrators in the past and Chinese companies (as well as local governments) today are going after land as an economic resource (for plantations, timber, etcetera), the Cold War interlude shows land as a political resource that functioned in a very different way. Here the resource was not land in a property sense, but remoteness in a territorial one, which produced the form of 'denationalised' upland territoriality that I focus in Chapter 2. This was all about extrapolating the fractures and failures of French colonial 'development'—things like the *lack* of infrastructure, the sparsity of settlement, etcetera. So, yes, while there is certainly continuity in terms of the discourses of upland marginality, underdevelopment, poverty, etcetera, territorialities shift over time in ways that are ultimately combined to facilitate contemporary practices of enclosure.

JL: To conclude, your book provides a nuanced view of Global China from a host country's perspective—a host country that is wary even when welcoming. You wade into the ways host countries might see welcoming Chinese investment as a risk, and many reasons offered by critics from different corners of the world of why they should fear China's rise more broadly. But Chinese and Lao actors alike often portray the two countries as partners; I have heard many refer to them as socialist brothers or just neighbours with a lot of joint interests. You offer the idea of 'peaceful evolution',

which is, interestingly, a Cold War–era term from the United States that you quote an American in Laos using to explain the Lao Government’s mixed promotion and control of Chinese investment. This to me was an excellent way of complicating the good–bad binary through which China is often viewed, of the balancing act the Lao State performs between the many foreign forces (including but not limited to Chinese land investors), and how that drives population control efforts. Not to mention the poetry in your use of a term from such a distant but weirdly resonant time (the Cold War) and context. I would encourage readers of *Global China Pulse* to read your book to learn more about that concept, why it fits the China-in-Laos situation, and how the Lao Government sought to harness Chinese investment for its own ends while trying to avoid allowing rubber plantations and other foreign investments to constitute the seeds of peaceful evolution. It is a balancing act the country’s leaders continue to navigate and one that complicates the flows of Chinese capital beyond its own borders. ●