Enclosing Ethnic Minorities and Forests in the Golden Economic Quadrangle

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic minority farmers in the infamous Golden Triangle were first incorporated into the nation states of China, Laos and Thailand, and later into the economic region called the Golden Economic Quadrangle. This article traces policies in each country for minorities, development and the environment, followed by an analysis of agrarian transitions under economic regionalization. Using the framework of powers of exclusion and racialization, our findings show the changes for ethnic minorities who, with the exception of those in the lowlands, face environmental enclosures that dispossess them from lands on which livelihoods are based. Ideological legacies from the Golden Triangle, including ‘backward’ minorities, the fight against drugs, and threats to national security, continue to inform policies and development projects. While some farmers have become entrepreneurs planting cash crops, most face increasing marginalization under deepening regional capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

In mountainous mainland Southeast Asia, the infamous ‘Golden Triangle’ has been recast as the Golden Economic Quadrangle within the larger Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). A few decades ago, these borderlands between China, Burma, Laos and Thailand were considered to be global security concerns, enclaves of ethnic rebel armies and opium production. Central governments viewed the Golden Triangle as a peripheral zone populated by primitive and possibly disloyal ethnic minority peoples. The capitalist regime of Thailand began to pursue modern economic development in its slice of the Golden Triangle in the 1960s. Since the 1980s in China and the 1990s in Laos, socialist regimes have opened up to international influence and investments, including in peripheries, resulting in profound domestic and...
regional transformations. The economic dynamics of the region have shifted from production serving domestic needs to what the Asian Development Bank (ADB) describes as a regional market based on comparative advantages in land use, crops, labour and capital.

To promote trade and labour mobility in the GMS, the ADB funded the construction of infrastructure including a new superhighway that links Kunming (China) to Bangkok (Thailand). At the same time, state and private initiatives have fostered increasing cross-border linkages, bilateral trade agreements, and expectations for a brighter future for this region. Economic development has joined with an international and national focus on this heavily forested mountain region to designate nature reserves, protected watersheds and national parks for environmental conservation. Ethnic minority farmers, meanwhile, have been encouraged to adopt cash crops, often on reduced land areas, to participate in quickening markets. The visible impact on the landscape is that shifting cultivation has rapidly given way to commercial agriculture interspersed with protected areas. Regional integration has brought agrarian transitions to capitalism coupled with expanding environmental initiatives. Agrarian transitions are said to include ‘a transition from agriculture to industry, country to city, and peasant to entrepreneurial farmer or wage worker’ (Li, 2010: 69). There are grounds, though, to question whether farmers in these changing landscapes, who are mostly from ethnic minorities, have benefited or been further marginalized.

In 2007, a conference in Chiang Mai on ‘Critical Transitions in the Mekong Region’ presented diverging views on the question. Analysts looking at a regional scale presented optimistic scenarios of increased regional connections and economic growth. Micro-scale case studies, by contrast, portrayed displacement, land loss, exploitation and increasing poverty. Our three-year study (2005–08) of land-use change in border regions of China, Laos and Thailand positions us between these two views. A meso-scale analysis of landscape transformations enables us to identify differences in outcomes for upland and lowland minority farmers whose prospects range from promising to highly uncertain. One clear finding is that minority farmers are major players in landscape changes and growing trade networks. With or without help from state agents and international advisers, farmers are seeking new crops and trade relationships and some (not all) are forging flexible, creative arrangements for land, labour and capital (Sturgeon, 2010). The formerly distinct boundaries of developmental states have given way in the Golden Economic Quadrangle to cross-border trade, mobility and global connections bringing new markets for some and land loss for others.

Theoretical Context

In an analysis of ADB investments under the GMS from 1993 to 2008, Glassman reports that very little funding or attention was directed to smallholder
farmers, and that ‘cross-border trade’ between Thailand and China did not benefit much from GMS activities. Glassman contends that most funding was targeted at urban industrialization benefiting urban elites with global connections (Glassman, 2010). In particular, he argues that the road linking Kunming and Bangkok was designed to boost urban industries at either end rather than rural producers along the road’s pathway. Our research sought to assess how these farmers had fared.

Recent scholarship on agrarian transitions in Southeast Asia has focused on exclusion in relation to rural land. In their book, Powers of Exclusion, Hall et al. note that ‘exclusion’ is double-edged: any property holder needs to be able to exclude others, but access for some always means exclusion for others (Hall et al., 2011: 8). They define exclusion as an intersection of regulation, force, the market and legitimation (ibid.: 4–5). Regulation refers to rules for access and use, usually set by the state; force means violence or its threat; the market refers to markets for land and commodities; and legitimation adds a moral dimension to all other exclusions. More broadly, Hall et al. (ibid.: 7) define exclusion as ‘the ways in which people are prevented from benefiting from things’. These four powers of exclusion are useful for our analysis, although markets for cash crops are more relevant than land markets. We also think of legitimation as ideologies that keep the social hierarchy in place (Cresswell, 1996). In considering ethnic minorities, we highlight the legitimation based on racialization, or ‘the process by which powerful institutions, such as the state, confer arbitrary racial identities’ (Anderson, 1987: 127). The literature on Southeast Asia (and China) usually avoids the term ‘race’. In regard to ethnicity in Southeast Asia, however, Vandergeest (2003: 21) suggests that ‘racialization can be thought of as including the ways in which ethnic and national differences are naturalized and essentialized’. With respect to land and land uses, Vandergeest highlights the ‘stereotyped versions of environmental impacts of these groups’ (ibid.). Once set, these stereotypes have a ‘depth and tenacity’ (Anderson, 1987: 127) that persist through changes in the markers of inferiority, in our cases from ‘primitive’ to ‘backward’ to ‘forest destroyers’.

Our title refers to enclosing land and peoples, processes that require a number of means of exclusion. Here we use ‘enclosure’ in three senses. The first is enclosure of peoples as ‘minorities’ within the nation states of China, Laos and Thailand and simultaneous ‘racialization’ through formal or informal rankings that are taken as ‘given’, especially through association with particular land uses. In China, Laos and Thailand, for example, upland minorities were defined as backward shifting cultivators in need of control and modernization. Even lowland minorities who cultivated paddy rice were judged as more advanced than uplanders, but inferior to mainstream populations. The second sense of enclosure is the appropriation of ‘land, resources and people [to create a labour force] to work and make capitalist accumulation possible’ (Nevins and Peluso, 2008: 3). Our examples include large agricultural plantations and the appropriation of land by richer
farmers, leaving poorer farmers as landless wage labourers. The third sense of enclosure refers to ‘environmental enclosures’, such as the designation of national parks, state forests and protected areas. This third kind of enclosure is often linked to the first meaning, since ‘racialization’ takes place when upland groups become associated with ‘deforestation, opium cultivation and security’ (Vandergeest, 2003: 27). In our cases, these are the common justifications for states claiming upland forests and excluding upland minorities from their use. Environmental enclosures are also central to the deepening of capitalism (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004), and we note the quickening of environmental protection initiatives as capitalism intensified in all three countries. Environmental enclosures do not ‘free up’ land for capitalist production, but they do reconfigure ‘social relations to nature’ (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004: 279), producing the landscapes of farmers growing cash crops on reduced areas of land.

In Southeast Asia, Tania Li argues that agrarian transitions have produced a new round of enclosures that have dispossessed large numbers of farmers without absorbing them into the labour force, rendering them ‘surplus’ to the requirements of capital accumulation (Li, 2010: 67). In Asia, environmental enclosures, which Hall et al. (2011: 10) refer to as land grabs, have often targeted upland minorities, said to be environmental destroyers (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004). Rigg takes a more favourable position on agrarian transitions in Southeast Asia. He points to the growing importance of non-farm activities in farmers’ income portfolios; increased mobility between rural and urban activities, the heightened salience of global labour markets and remittances to rural incomes; and an increase in incomes across the spectrum of farmers from rich to poor (Rigg, 2006; Rigg and Nattapolwa, 2001). Rigg (2006) also argues that access to land, once thought central to farmers’ well-being, is decreasing in importance. His cases of ‘deagrarianization’, however, refer mostly to ethnic majority populations in the lowland breadbaskets of Southeast Asia: East Laguna in the Philippines, West Java in Indonesia, Peninsular Malaysia, and the central plains of Thailand.

We have found that upland farmers in the Golden Economic Quadrangle are squeezed between government promotion of cash crops and state claims on land for environmental goods (Fujita, 2006; Sturgeon 2009; Thomas et al., 2008). Access to land and other resources continues to be central to upland farmers’ livelihoods. For lowland minority farmers, who were either forcibly relocated from the uplands to lowlands, or who moved out of the hills to pursue development, conditions are more favourable. Our findings show lowland ethnic minority farmers on valley lands in China growing rich on rubber trees and extending rubber cultivation to relatives in Laos; some lowland minority farmers in Laos investing in cash crops and hiring others as wage labourers; and minority farmers in Thailand raising a diverse array of cash crops for markets both local and more distant. Markets are important. Access to land continues to be key for both upland and lowland
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ethnic minority farmers, whether as capital investment or for production and nowhere is it entirely secure. Under these conditions, only certain farmers have translated land use into capital formation, allowing them to succeed as entrepreneurs. Even lowland minority farmers have not experienced much ‘deagrarianization’, in part due to racialization. In other words, in uplands and lowlands, powers of exclusion in relation to land dominate the dynamics we explore in this article.

Methods

We are analysing a relatively unique meso-scale, meaning that we chose multiple sites and actors in small portions of three countries potentially benefiting from the new Kunming–Bangkok highway to participate in cash crops and regional markets (see Figure 1). Small teams in each country carried out semi-structured interviews based on common research questions for two to three months each year from 2006 to 2008. Historical information is based on the authors’ previous work, including archival research. In our multi-sited ethnographic work, we sought to identify dynamics within each country, including not only policies and markets that drive land use changes, but also ideologies of ethnicity, development, drug eradication, national security and crisis environmentalism that underpin state plans. We collected narratives of land-use change from state administrators, state farm personnel, researchers, traders and ethnic minority farmers, among others. Our research disclosed the unintended trajectories of state development campaigns, the mixed success of environmental enclosures and the limited number of farmers who have benefited from growing markets. Nonetheless, we point to the increasing importance of those smallholder farmers with diverse and flexible livelihoods to economic and landscape changes in the Mekong region.

In attending to the importance of cash crops, we bear in mind that opium is the cash crop shadowing development efforts in all three countries (plus Burma). In different ways in each country, at times bolstered by international agencies, campaigns to eradicate opium shaped the identification of ethnic minorities and enhanced the state’s ability to control people and territory, establishing the racialized terms of development. Opium eradication projects asserted state authority by replacing opium poppies with other cash crops, and inserting minorities into their proper (inferior) place in the national order. The current image of a Golden Economic Quadrangle suggests a ‘region’ purged of opium and its chaotic past. A resurgence of opium, heroin and amphetamine production in Burma, and drug diffusion to China, Laos and Thailand, show, however, that drugs still unsettle the image of a benign, integrated region.

This article focuses on two time periods to shed light on the intersection of the four powers of exclusion in landscape and land use changes from the
1950s to 2008. For each of the three countries, we first examine the policies and ideologies promoted as they incorporated border landscapes and peoples into emerging nation states. These comprise policies for ethnic minorities, agricultural and forest development (including opium eradication),
and property rights in natural resources. We then trace the enclosures, privatization, commoditization and increasing cross-border and international trade that have generated agrarian transitions to global capitalism. In conclusion, we show the contingent and uncertain outcomes as peripheral peoples and land areas became enclosed first within the countries of China, Laos and Thailand, and later within the region now known as the Golden Economic Quadrangle.

CHINA

Policies and Ideologies

Following the Chinese Revolution in 1949, central authorities made a conscious effort to integrate frontier areas through securing territory and including minority peoples in a project to consolidate China into a socialist nation state (cf. Menzies, 1992). The imperial court had long had relations with southern ‘barbarians’ in Yunnan, but in the 1950s the new regime sent teams of scholars to classify its peoples ‘scientifically’ into ‘minority nationalities’. They identified twelve nationalities in Xishuangbanna, ranked, as elsewhere in China, according to a Stalinist model of social development based on modes of production along a continuum from primitive production through slavery, feudalism and early capitalism (Connor, 1984; Harrell, 1995). All minorities in Xishuangbanna were lodged in order below the Han, with ‘primitive’ shifting cultivators ranked lower than the Tai (Dai in Chinese), who cultivated wet rice (Sturgeon and Menzies, 2006). Processes of racialization linked minorities to particular land uses.

The new regime established territorial control in Xishuangbanna by reorganizing agricultural production into communes and state rubber farms. State intervention ended opium cultivation by 1954 but upland farmers continued to practise shifting cultivation from the 1950s to the 1970s (Sturgeon, 2005). In the lowlands, while farmers continued to produce paddy rice, by the end of the 1950s households had been incorporated into large communes to implement national plans for agricultural production. During the Korean War, the central government placed strategic importance on rubber production for industrial and military development. Facing a US trade embargo, leaders in Beijing decided to establish rubber in the tropical areas of Hainan and Xishuangbanna (Xu, 2006). Planners viewed rubber as an industrial crop. The industrial mode of production demanded factory-like production and only the Han nationality was considered sufficiently advanced to be workers. Former soldiers from the Korean War as well as Han peasants from Hunan were brought to Xishuangbanna to establish state rubber farms, excluding local minorities from land and state farm work (Sturgeon and Menzies, 2006). Eleven state farms eventually took up much of the valley floor of Xishuangbanna, clearing sections of tropical rainforest formerly
used by Tai farmers, for large monoculture rubber plantations.\textsuperscript{1} The creation of large communes and state rubber farms were drastic ‘reconfigurations of society and nature’ — carried out with the threat of force, as we discovered in interviews, and legitimated by an ideology of national socialist transformation.

The dismantling of communes in 1982 and what came to be called a ‘socialist market economy’ ushered in a dramatic change in state project and property rights (Sturgeon, 2005). Commune land was contracted to farmers in the household responsibility system. Forests were divided into state, collective (village) and household plots for management. These regulations again reconfigured society and nature and were legitimated by state plans for national economic development. Property rights as contracts for farmers were recognized and clear. To increase farmers’ incomes and to generate more latex to meet growing demand, the prefecture government decided to train minority farmers to produce rubber. In campaigns in 1985–87 and the mid-1990s, state farm workers and agricultural extension agents distributed free rubber seedlings and taught minority farmers to plant, manage and tap rubber trees. By 2000, the area of rubber on household land was greater than that on state rubber farms (Sturgeon and Menzies, 2006). Many farmers fared quite well in the 1990s, as they planted more rubber and managed a diversified ‘portfolio’ (Dove, 1999) including wet rice, tea, vegetables, fruit trees and livestock; sale of non-timber forest products; and participation in local wage labour (Sturgeon, 2005).

Extending rubber to farmers also served to supplant shifting cultivation, a goal that aligned Chinese policy with international agencies’ belief that shifting cultivation damaged forests and watersheds (FAO, 1978) despite evidence to the contrary. Forest data from an upland village in 1997, for example, showed forests and regenerating swiddens in good condition, with village-protected forests holding many old-growth species (Sturgeon, 2005: 194–96). Forest area was similar to 1958 (Xu, 1990). Nevertheless, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the growing ideology of environmentalism, in tandem with stereotypes of minority farmers as backward, led the prefecture to claim some of villagers’ best forests to establish nature reserves (Long et al., 1999).

In 1998, severe flooding on the Yangtze River and in Heilongjiang caused over US$ 30 billion in damage (Litzinger, 2004). Leaders in Beijing called the flooding a national environmental catastrophe and implemented policy changes that recentralized state control over natural forests, including those in Xishuangbanna (Sturgeon, 2009). A Natural Forest Protection Plan made it illegal to cultivate land with a slope of 25 degrees or greater (Economy, 2002). Farmers had to plant trees or allow natural forest regeneration on sloping lands. Under a separate programme, the Grain for Green campaign,

\textsuperscript{1} Personal communication with Xu Zaifu who is a senior researcher at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden and witnessed the loss of rainforests to state rubber farms.
farmers received tree seedlings and eight years of grain and cash subsidies if they agreed to return sloping lands to trees (ibid.). For upland farmers, these policies entailed huge losses of land, since the regulations applied to shifting cultivation lands as well as to village and household forests. The ongoing racialization of upland minorities, now as forest destroyers, contributed to these exclusions. Enclosures of forest land made property rights insecure, as household contracts for shifting cultivation lands and for forest plots were overruled by a purported national environmental crisis (Sturgeon, 2009).

Regionalization and Agrarian Transitions

In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Additionally, China and its neighbours entered into bilateral trade agreements to increase trade, transportation and labour flows within the Golden Economic Quadrangle. At the same time, increasing poverty in Xishuangbanna as a result of land loss from forest policies forced prefecture officials to launch poverty alleviation campaigns, especially among upland forest-dependent farmers (Sturgeon, 2009). A 2003 campaign introduced cash crops in an arrangement similar to Grain for Green. Upland farmers received tea seedlings together with a grain and cash subsidy for five years while lowland farmers could apply for Grain for Green certificates to plant rubber on any remaining household sloping lands.

During our research from 2006 to 2008, we discovered that farmers had indeed planted tea in the uplands and rubber in the lowlands, but with unintended outcomes in each case. Upland farmers, many of whose ancestors had cultivated tea for centuries, planted their own pu’er² varieties instead of the cheaper tea provided under the poverty alleviation programme. At the time, a craze for pu’er tea swept across China, Japan, Taiwan and to parts of North America and Europe resulting in dramatic price increases. For farmers, tea that had fetched 4 to 5 yuan per kilo in 1998 could now bring in 40 to 50 yuan per kilo, or even up to 200 yuan per kilo for pu’er tea from the oldest trees. By 2006, upland tea farmers thought they had finally joined China’s booming economic growth. By mid-2007, the price bubble inevitably burst. Pu’er tea that had sold for 200 yuan per kilo was back down to 30 yuan, and tea from newer trees fetched only 15 to 20 yuan per kilo. Ten years earlier farmers had managed a complex portfolio of activities for cultivation and household income. Now their swidden fields and other sloping lands were planted to tea and they were vulnerable to sudden price changes and agricultural pests. Poverty alleviation had put them at risk. The globalization of pu’er tea markets had not

². Pu’er tea, which originated in southern Yunnan, has been highly prized in China for centuries.
excluded farmers from remaining land, but neither had it resolved farmers’ problems.

In the lowlands, meanwhile, farmers had planted rubber in response to state campaigns. Under the forest protection policies, rubber counts as forest cover or ‘economic forest’, so many farmers had planted rubber trees on their designated household and village forest lands. With WTO entry, world markets set the price for Chinese rubber, which escalated sharply beginning in 2003. Farmers who had planted rubber in the 1980s and 1990s saw a dramatic rise in household incomes. Farmers became successful entrepreneurs able to build modern new houses, buy the latest model cars, and send their children through school, including university for some (Sturgeon, 2010). The success, however, was unsettling to prefecture administrators and state farm managers, who continued to see Akha 3 and Tai rubber farmers as ‘backward’ people who managed rubber ‘chaotically’ and who would never achieve the level of production of state rubber farms, showing the ‘depth and tenacity’ of racialized identities. Lowland rubber farmers increasingly relied on rubber for income, leaving them, like upland farmers, vulnerable to price fluctuations and pest infestation. Landscapes were much simpler than ten years earlier, even as household incomes increased beyond their wildest dreams.

Farmers in Meng La County in eastern Xishuangbanna had long moved easily across the border to maintain ties with relatives and friends in Sing district in northern Laos. Beginning in the 1990s, ethnic minority farmers initiated cross-border trade in grain and cash crops, as well as labour exchanges between households. Informal exchanges became paid transactions when farmers in Xishuangbanna bought tractors and charged their kin and friends across the border 100 yuan per day to open fields. Farmers from Laos were paid low wages to open wet rice fields, weed and harvest the rice (Sturgeon, 2010).

Beginning in the early 2000s, farmers from China initiated share-cropping arrangements with farmers in Sing to plant rubber. Xishuangbanna farmers supplied the seedlings, technology and capital, with farmers from Laos providing the land and labour. Income from rubber was split 70/30 or 60/40, with farmers on the China side getting the larger share, since they provided the capital. Farmers in China benefited more, but farmers in Laos realized that no other crop could match the income from rubber once tapping began, usually in seven years (Sturgeon, 2010). These arrangements relied on farmers’ property rights in Laos. In spite of land and forest allocations (see section on Laos, below), these property rights were not particularly secure, but farmers on both sides of the border hoped that planting rubber would strengthen land claims in Laos, an informal bid for legitimation. Without government support in either China or Laos, and at times in defiance of both

3. Subsumed within the Hani minority nationality in China, they call themselves Akha, the name used here.
governments’ opposition to cross-border rubber, farmer-to-farmer rubber arrangements spread rapidly. In 2008, the Xishuangbanna government closed the informal borders to farmers’ rubber trade, based on an alleged threat to social stability.

An unintended consequence of expanding cross-border trade, movement of people and the growth of a consumer economy in China has been the re-emergence of illicit drugs, including opium, heroin and amphetamines produced in Burma and flown into China, accompanied by the spread of HIV/AIDS as a result of needle sharing and increased prostitution (Hyde, 2007; Qian et al., 2006). In spite of the elimination of poppies in 1954, the shadow crop of opium in the Golden Economic Quadrangle has not disappeared.

As of 2010, Xishuangbanna was densely planted in commercial crops, a landscape characterized by fewer kinds of crops and less biodiversity than sixty years earlier. There was no land left to open up and its residents had become entrepreneurs although they had not escaped their racialized identity as ‘backward’ minority nationalities. Property rights for farmers continued to be contingent on state ideologies, increasingly one of environmental crisis that portrayed minority farmers, especially in the uplands, as environmental destroyers who hold back China’s growth.

In terms of powers of exclusion, state regulation of access to land and forests was definitive through communes and state rubber farms, the household responsibility system, and later environmental enclosures. These allocations were legitimated by national agendas for growth, security and environmental protection. Land markets were unimportant, as commodity markets for tea and rubber drove landscape changes. Regulation and legitimation of restrictions on land use were underpinned by racialization of minorities as backward, threats to social stability and environmental destroyers.

LAOS

Muang Sing, our research site in northern Laos, has been a crossroads for regional trade for centuries (Walker, 1999). By the late nineteenth century, when the region came under British and French colonial rule, trade involved merchants from China, Siam and Burma as well as local traders. Although the first census of Muang Sing in 1888 only records a Tai population in the valley, western missionaries, scholars and explorers wrote about upland ethnic people in market places and active in trade.

Oral histories from across Muang Sing describe a fluid population during the period from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s when northern Laos found itself at the frontline of the Cold War. Pathet Lao forces aided by the Soviet Union clashed in Luang Namtha with the royalists backed by the US. The fall of Namtha to the Pathet Lao in 1962 triggered a massive exodus, as
lowland and upland villagers fled the country (see also Evrard and Goudineau, 2004). Political turbulence in Laos coincided with the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–76), during which Tai farmers from Xishuangbanna fled to join relatives in Muang Sing. Violence was the main cause of exclusion from land in both uplands and lowlands.

National Policies to Integrate the Periphery

After 1975, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) made a conscious effort to unify the culturally diverse population and to incorporate upland ethnic minority people by institutionalizing the terms Upland Lao (Lao Sung), Highland Lao (Lao Theung) and Lowland Lao (Lao Lum) (Ireson and Ireson, 1991: 926). Although less rigid than comparable rankings in China, the categories imply a hierarchy in terms of progress towards modernization, and constitute racialization in association with particular altitudes and land uses.

Tai Lue lowland residents began to return to their old villages in Muang Sing after 1975. To consolidate border regions and to increase paddy rice production, the government relocated upland ethnic groups downslope. In 1978, the government relocated a group of Yao from northwestern Luang Namtha and gave fields to twenty-seven families, despite the fact that none of them had previously cultivated paddy rice. During the same period, some Akha farmers in Muang Sing also gained access to lowland paddy fields. Many Yao and Akha farmers continued to practise shifting cultivation in the uplands, however, to supplement the low yields from paddy fields and to produce upland commodities such as opium and livestock. Implementation of state regulation was relatively weak.

During the post-war period, state control of forests was seen as a way to reconstruct the national economy, and forest management targeted resource extraction and timber export. To enforce its claim to natural resources, the new regime appointed the Directorate of Forestry in 1975 and deployed the familiar argument that shifting cultivation by upland farmers is a primitive form of agriculture that destroys forests (Fujita, 2004), a racialization linking people, place and land use. In associating shifting cultivation with upland farmers, the state legitimated limiting upland farmers’ land use and an ideological project to ‘modernize’ agriculture and increase food production, especially rice, laying the groundwork for state territorialization and increased regulation in remote areas (Vanderveest, 1996; Vanderveest and Peluso, 1995).

5. Author interview, September 2005.
Regionalization and Agrarian Transition

In the mid-1980s, rural landscapes and livelihoods in Muang Sing began to change as political tensions with China eased. Chinese entrepreneurs arrived to engage in commercial agriculture and border trade in rice, watermelons, sugarcane, maize and rubber. The Chinese and Lao governments implemented measures to support border trade. Both governments agreed to exempt local farmers from export–import taxes at the border while China recognized two regional border checkpoints in Muang Sing and improved the road to Xishuangbanna. Other factors that accelerated the agrarian transition in Muang Sing included the return of upland refugees, development interventions and state policies for upland agriculture.

In the early 1990s, the government repatriated from Thailand and China Yao, Hmong and Akha refugees who had fled Laos during the civil war. On arriving in Muang Sing, the refugees mostly worked as agricultural labourers, later purchasing land and applying the knowledge of commodity crops they had gained while outside the country.6 By the mid-1990s, some of these repatriated farmers were among the pioneers planting rubber in Muang Sing.

State and international development agencies became active in Muang Sing during the 1990s. The German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) began operations in 1994. From 1994–97, GTZ provided food relief to upland communities through a food-for-work scheme under which, as a condition for receiving rice, upland villagers built and improved rural roads and some relocated closer to the road to access education and health services. Between 1997 and 2000, GTZ focused on controlling opium production and consumption and achieving food security in rural communities. The agency adopted a participatory development process using community mapping and ‘bottom-up’ land use planning to develop village resource management plans that largely prioritized forest conservation to help implement the land and forest allocation policy (Soulivanh et al., 2004). While the policy legitimated customary rights to communal territory, it excluded farmers’ access to forest land for swidden agriculture.

In the 1990s, under pressure from aid agencies including the UN Office of Drug Control (UNODC), the Lao Government announced its intention to eradicate opium as part of a worldwide war on drugs, with Northern Laos as a focal area. In Muang Sing, GTZ encouraged upland farmers to plant alternative cash crops including sugarcane, pineapple and coffee. These new cash crops did little, however, to stop farmers from cultivating the far more lucrative opium. In 2002, the government intensified efforts to terminate opium production by its target date of 2005. In August, the Muang Sing district chief gathered all village heads to explain the policy and to establish

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6. Yao refugees learned to grow fruit trees and rubber trees in Thailand, while Akha and Hmong refugees who went to China learned how to manage rubber trees.
a district committee to eliminate opium poppies. Village inspections began in October 2002, when teams burned opium fields and detained village leaders, excluding people from land by force. Officially, this campaign, like the one to end swidden agriculture, was legitimated by the national goal of eradicating rural poverty.

These policies yielded unfortunate results, excluding farmers from land, forests and other resources through regulation and force based on racialized notions of uplanders. Rural households’ access to upland swiddens and fallow forest was significantly reduced. Land and forest allocation forced upland farmers to shorten their swidden cultivation cycle, with some Akha farmers reducing the fallow period from eighteen or twenty years to just three or four years. The short fallow period resulted in low upland rice productivity causing food shortages and further impoverishing upland farmers. Restrictions on swiddens and fallow forests also meant that upland farmers lost grazing land for livestock. Phanvilay (2010) claims that the majority of poor upland households had derived up to 40 per cent of their income from the sale of non-timber forest products collected from fallow forests, land now lost to them. Loss of land, grain and pasture forced upland farmers to relocate, although moving to the lowlands caused new suffering, as people faced severe health problems, especially from malaria, with some villages losing up to 30 per cent of their population (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004: 948). As a result, instead of alleviating rural poverty, the policies brutally impoverished upland farmers, some of whom claimed they had not previously been poor (Baird and Shoemaker, 2007: 868–69). Ironically, migration to the lowlands did not necessarily end opium use and in some instances increased consumption of amphetamines produced in Burma (Lyttleton, 2004).

A final important factor accelerating the agrarian transition in Muang Sing was the increase in exchanges between people living near the border between China and Laos. At the beginning of the 1990s, when the border was officially re-opened, farmers in the lowlands began to rekindle old family connections and develop new market linkages with traders in China. Tai Lue, who had long occupied the lowlands and dominated the local administration in Muang Sing (Cohen, 2000), reopened connections with their Chinese relatives, gaining access to agricultural inputs, credit and markets. Tai Lue farmers in Laos could buy Chinese phone cards and communicate with their relatives using the superior Chinese mobile phone network. Farmers could call relatives for social occasions, such as weddings, funerals and Buddhist ceremonies; to check agricultural prices; and to arrange purchase of agricultural commodities. Similarly, re-opening the border was important for Akha in Laos. Their relatives in China worked in government departments, allowing Lao Akha to communicate in their own language for business and

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7. This was supported by the UN Office of Drug Control and the US Agency for International Development.
to access various services in China. Cross-border links increased access and productivity, enabling lowland minorities to become entrepreneurs.

The official bilateral relationship between Laos and China boosted regional exchanges of goods and people and opened new economic opportunities in the borderland, often through informal channels. It reconnected people who shared a turbulent regional history and established new business connections. Trans-boundary connections allowed Lao farmers to access financial resources and agricultural inputs such as high-yielding varieties, fertilizer and pesticides that were otherwise difficult to obtain in Muang Sing. Lao farmers who already had access to land, labour and capital found it easy to increase their investment in commercial agriculture, capturing new business opportunities, often without the assistance of the local government or development agencies. Among them were the upland ethnic minority families who had learned about commercial crops as refugees during the war and had been resettled in Muang Sing. By the late 1990s, Muang Sing had become a centre of commercial agriculture for crops sold to China. Lowland farmers grew crops such as shallots and watermelons on their paddy fields after the rice harvest. They also cultivated sugarcane and rubber on the sloping lands adjacent to lowland paddy fields. With the arrival of new entrepreneurs and farmers migrating from the uplands, however, competition for agricultural land became fierce (Thongmanivong et al., 2009).

As commercial agriculture expanded in the lowlands and surrounding hillsides, demand for agricultural wage-labour increased, enlisting upland farmers who had migrated to the lowlands but could find no available land. During 2003–04, in particular, there was an influx — described as ‘uncontrollable’ by the authorities — of upland Akha villagers, due to intensified controls on opium and shifting cultivation (Thongmanivong et al., 2009). A ‘proletarianization’ (Cohen, 2009: 425) and a new form of impoverishment were taking place as part of the agrarian transition. Akha migrants to the lowlands were hired by Tai-Lue or better-off Akha who had settled the lower slopes earlier. Having lost access to their old agricultural land, and with no means to gain new land, low-paid agricultural wage labour had become their only means of survival.

The sudden out-migration of upland villagers did not result in forest regeneration in the hills, however, as the government had hoped. Instead, swidden and fallow forest fields on lower slopes were rapidly converted into monocultures of rubber. Competition for land also moved quickly beyond easily accessible lower-slope land, as farmers and other private investors with capital rushed to make land claims at higher elevations (Phanvilay, 2010). Capital was needed to invest in rubber rather than to buy land. The pressure to convert forest into permanent agricultural land affected even those communities with a village resource management plan. Since the government did not issue land titles for communal land, any farmer or investor could make de facto claims by clearing forest and planting rubber trees. Exclusions from land based on investments in cash crops were stronger than
state regulation. State attempts to curtail cross-border rubber arrangements, legitimated by feared loss of forest land, were also largely ineffective.

Our multi-sited ethnographic study in Muang Sing highlights the unexpected outcomes and uneven process of ‘development’ and agrarian transition in the borderlands. The environmental enclosures that had been enforced to protect forests resulted in forest loss and degradation. Meanwhile, development interventions implemented by government and international development agencies excluded upland farmers from access to land despite their stated goal of improving farmers’ economic conditions. Upland farmers who lost their land survived the penetration of a market economy by selling their labour in the lowlands. Unlike lowland farmers who benefited from improved market access, recent Akha migrants lost the land and resources that had sustained their livelihoods, and were caught in a new form of poverty. This cluster of outcomes derives mainly from racialized state exclusions in the uplands and market exclusions in the lowlands. Legitimation by promoting modernization and environmental protection largely backfired, except for those lowland minority farmers who made use of more open borders to forge their own development.

THAILAND

Policies and Ideologies

The Thai case study differs from the others as a result of Thailand’s adoption of capitalist modernization in the 1960s, and its dramatic swings in policy between Bangkok-centred industrial growth and attention to rural areas. The themes of racialized enclosure and exclusion of minorities, however, are similar to those in China and Laos.

The Thai state began consolidating and modernizing during the nineteenth century as a defence against the threat of British and French colonial rule. But until the Cold War era after World War II, efforts to strengthen state claims in ‘Lao’ territories of northern Thailand focused mainly on revenues from state teak concessions and an opium monopoly. Our case study sites, Mae Wang and Mae Chaem, like most upper tributary water-sheds of the Ping River Basin, remained a remote unit of Chiang Mai province during the 1950s. There were no roads for vehicles, no reserved or protected forest areas, and no official land classification or tenure documents. Remaining old growth teak was still being logged using elephants by mostly international companies with state concessions, and new concessions and logging trails were being made for Thai-owned companies to log non-teak timber species.

While Lawa are believed to have settled in Mae Chaem before other groups, by the 1950s Northern Thai (Khon Muang) were concentrated in villages around the district town where they established lowland paddy fields. Karen and Lawa had small areas of paddy in lower tributary valleys
supplemented by crops produced by rotating forest fallow cultivation in the hills. Other subsistence needs were met by permanent and regenerating forest areas in village lands. Some Hmong had arrived in highland areas where rice production was difficult but opium was quite productive. Indeed, while village livelihoods were mainly subsistence-oriented, some members of all ethnic groups produced opium legally for sale to the state opium monopoly. Access to land was legitimated by customary claims.

After Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat rose to power in 1957–58, an urban-focused ideology of development (phattana) emerged among the national elite that emphasized infrastructure and industrialization under national five-year development plans that began in 1962 (Pongpaichit and Baker, 1997; Unakul, 1988; Wyatt, 2003). Campaigns promoted the righteousness of development, with participation showing allegiance to King, Nation and Religion (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005), a discourse reinforced by an anti-communist military alliance with the US. Thailand aligned itself with international institutions in outlawing opium, and in endorsing an economic development study (World Bank, 1959) that recommended a focus on watershed protection in the northern region since most valuable timber had already been logged. Building on the 1954 Land Code, legislation provided the basis for national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and rapid expansion of national reserved forests. Land-use zoning simplified landscapes to make land-use patterns more legible for state agencies (Scott, 1998), while also providing tools for stronger territorialization of remote areas (Vandergeest, 1996; Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995). These moves marked the beginning of environmental enclosures that reconfigured relations between minorities and nature by excluding minorities from national forests and other protected areas based on racialized associations with backwardness and shifting cultivation.

These Bangkok-centred policies induced change even in remote locations like Mae Chaem. Areas bordering Burma were declared national forest reserves in 1963–64 (TEI, 1996). In 1966, the first road connected Mae Chaem district town with the outside world, and by 1968 forest reserves were extended to southern parts of the valley and to the east of the Chiang Mai Valley, including our Mae Wang study area. As Mae Chaem became surrounded by state forest reserves, a ‘Royal Project’ was established in 1969 to promote opium crop substitution, with two extension stations in Mae Chaem and the declaration of a national park on Inthanon mountain in 1972. The pace of environmental enclosures quickened and by 1974 virtually all of Mae Chaem district was reserved forest land, bringing it under Forest Department regulation.

With support from a US$ 10 million grant from USAID, the Mae Chaem Watershed Development Project (MCWDP) was launched in 1980 to address concerns about opium production, national security and rural poverty, reflecting the racialization of ‘hill tribes’ (Vandergeest, 2003). The project sought to effect a shift from poppy cultivation to rice, to promote villager
self-sufficiency and commercial crop production in paddies and permanent terraced fields, a vision that included legal recognition of mountain minorities and their land-use rights. Following state development (*phattana*) ideology, the initial emphasis was on upgrading road access, expanding the activities of the Royal Irrigation Department and the Royal Forest Department (RFD) in Mae Chaem, and the expansion of the Royal Project in the northernmost sub-district. Agricultural efforts were mostly in eastern Mae Chaem, where the project aimed to improve lowland irrigated systems and to transform rotational forest fallow upland systems (shifting cultivation) into fixed field agriculture referred to as the ‘Thai model’. The project built feeder roads and water resource structures, as well as bench terraces associated with conditional land use certificates issued to households. State regulation replaced customary access. Project extension services provided technology, production inputs and credit aimed mainly at increasing rice production. Since rice was primarily for subsistence, the project also supported cash crops, the most successful being upland soybeans, while maize production for animal feed also expanded in areas near the district town. In the few highland Hmong villages, the Royal Project was the model for intensive cash crop development. Beyond the agricultural fields, the Forest Department helped villages to establish small community forests that included both forest and fruit trees, while each RFD watershed conservation unit was planting some 60 to 100 hectares of forest trees per year into upper slope former fields and forest fallows they claimed to be unsuitable for agriculture (Roth et al., 1987). With no legal basis for recognition of rights to land or trees outside of legally recognized household land holdings, however, any villager rights in these areas remained ‘informal’ and at risk.

Opium cultivation in Thailand fell from an estimated nearly 18,000 hectares in the mid-1960s to 6,000 hectares at the start of MCWDP in 1981, and about 2,000 to 3,000 hectares after the government began eradicating poppy fields in 1984 (Renard, 2001). While Mae Chaem had produced substantial opium, by 1987 just over 600 hectares remained and by 1989 only 270 hectares. The project viewed this as a success, and claimed that national security was improved through better communication between villagers and state officials and more road access to remote mountain areas. Although initial security concerns appear to have been overstated, the government still saw overall improvement since ‘development’ and ‘Thai-ness’ were brought to mountain minority people (Renard, 2001), again reflecting a racialization of minorities who were seen as ‘not Thai’ (Sturgeon, 2005).

Thailand announced its first national forest policy in 1985. It also introduced a national watershed classification system with five categories based mainly on elevation and slope ranging from areas limited to natural forest cover (class 1) to areas with virtually no land-use restrictions (class 5). About 98 per cent of the total land area of Mae Chaem fell under the highly restrictive classes 1 and 2, including 97 per cent of the land along its western slopes. The expansion by 1995 of this system to the entire country represented a
major extension of environmental enclosure, regulating and legalizing the exclusion of upland people from lands they had managed.

Severe flooding and landslides in 1989 created a climate of environmental crisis reorienting state forest management toward conservation. Logging concessions in all national forests were revoked (Hirsch, 1997), and watershed classification became the most important tool in planning. By 1992 forest agencies had surveyed all forest lands and drawn up plans to put about 6.4 million hectares of ‘suitable’ reserved forest land into the land reform programme, while protected forest areas would be expanded in remaining forest reserves, especially in class 1 and 2 watershed zones. The Ob Luang National Park was declared in 1991 in southeastern Mae Chaem near Inthanon National Park and by 1994 demarcation surveys revealed plans for new national parks in the Mae Tho area of southern Mae Chaem, as well as areas in Mae Wang north of Inthanon. State policies legitimated by concerns about national security, drug control and the environment thus sought to bring mountain minorities into society by making them more ‘Thai’ and withholding recognition of ‘primitive’ traditional land use claims, while zoning lands to preclude local ownership but mandating state control and management. These outcomes clearly show the intersection of racialization, environmental enclosures, and state legitimation based on drugs, environmental protection, and national security.

Agrarian Transitions to Global Capitalism

During the late 1980s Thailand’s national economy boomed, creating the ‘bubble economy’ of the 1990s and ending with the 1997 Asian economic crisis that began in Thailand. The boom was based on national development policies promoting production for export markets and integration into a globalizing economy. While early exports centred on timber and farm commodities, infrastructure and investments spurred far more rapid growth in the industrial and commercial sectors and induced a demographic shift as the role of agriculture declined relative to urban-based industrial and service sectors, supporting Glassman’s contentions about urban-centred funding in GMS (Glassman, 2010).

The impacts of these policies in rural areas of the north like Mae Chaem and Mae Wang were substantial. In Mae Chaem there was a cascade effect in off-farm employment as Northern Thais left for work in urban and industrial areas, and ethnic minorities began filling lower-paying local jobs, a partial ‘deagrarianization’ (Rigg and Nattapolwat, 2001). Minorities without citizenship would not legally be able to leave their designated areas. Commercial cropping expanded in Mae Chaem spurred by low costs of fertilizer and chemical inputs. After the end of MCWDP in 1989, many project ideas to further expand land tenure and improve administration quickly faded along with project assistance and subsidies for extension, credit and other
services. But in this economic climate the private sector in Mae Chaem thrived. Production of upland soybeans, maize and other crops flourished in the lowlands and mid-slopes, while production of cabbage, carrots and other vegetables grew rapidly in the highlands driven by the business skills and capitalization of Hmong communities. Initiatives by farmers and merchants, rather than government or project support, drove this expansion.

Within a few years, commercial agriculture and conservation seemed to be on a collision course in Mae Chaem. Foresters were concerned as they watched soybeans expand up slopes above the district town. As a result, the Queen Sirikit Forest Development Project (Suan Pah Sirikit) was established in the mid-1990s. In coordination with the army, the project was managed through forestry watershed conservation units to promote conservation while trying to recognize basic livelihood needs of the people.

Thailand’s economic bubble ended with the Asian economic crisis of 1997, when the value of the Thai currency plummeted and credit virtually stopped. The impacts were soon felt in Mae Chaem as the costs of agricultural inputs increased and off-farm labour opportunities and wages fell rapidly. Illicit drug use also grew, as labs producing heroin and especially methamphetamines, based largely in Burma, targeted villages in Thailand. In addition to economic crisis, 1997 also brought a new national ‘people’s’ constitution, which provided a basis for more meaningful development of local governance institutions (Arghiros, 2001). Provisions included the rights and responsibilities of local governments and people to manage natural resources and the environment. Changes advanced slowly, however, as the government focused on economic recovery. Areas like Mae Chaem and Mae Wang had been at the mercy of government agencies claiming ‘ownership’ of virtually all their land and implementing their definition of ‘development’. Since it was unclear how much authority local government would have, and whether local elites would capture the new institutions, villagers remained sceptical. Informal local networks formed in Mae Chaem, and some began to build linkages with NGO networks at provincial, regional and national levels.

In 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister, promising further reforms and a new era of grassroots local government and development. Local governments and institutions began to be more assertive. In Mae Wang, informal networks mobilized broad participation in a 2001 protest that forced forest agencies to retreat from annexing large areas into a new national park. In Mae Chaem, the Suan Pah Sirikit Project strengthened links with academic, NGO and international partners to work more closely with villagers, agencies and district and local officials to use participatory mapping and land-use planning. Nevertheless, communications between officials and villagers, especially in ethnic minority communities, were still constrained by different perceptions of local land-use practices. This became clear in negotiations to delineate boundaries for the new Mae Tho National Park (Roth, 2004). When the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF) joined
forces with the Suan Pah Sirikit Project and the Raks Thai Foundation to assist villagers to conduct participatory mapping of land-use zones, villagers identified some 140,000 hectares, including western and eastern slopes of Mae Chaem (Thomas et al., 2004). Growing tensions over conservation initiatives that local communities perceived as unfair led to a 2002 Cabinet resolution to halt park boundary declaration until these issues were resolved (Badenoch, 2006). By 2008, delineation of tentative boundaries of new national parks in both Mae Chaem and Mae Wang had been revised to exclude major high-conflict areas.

By 2002, the national economy had recovered from the economic crisis (Warr, 2005). The government continued to expand international trade relations, negotiating a number of free trade agreements. Thailand and China signed an ‘early implementation’ agreement in 2003 to eliminate tariffs on many agricultural products in advance of provisions under an expected ASEAN–China agreement. While Thai agricultural exports were much greater than imports, these national-level agreements were based primarily on concerns related to larger urban-based sectors, in line with Glassman’s argument (2010).

In Mae Chaem, economic recovery brought increasing production of industrial crops with a shift toward maize for animal feed, as well as market-oriented intensive production of highland and lowland vegetables. By 2003, village leaders reported that about 80 per cent of households were accessing village revolving funds for credit, while more than 1,600 households had members engaged in local wage labour and 50 per cent of all villages had households engaged in employment beyond their sub-district, mostly within Chiang Mai province (Thomas, 2005). At the same time, growing networks of local groups engaged in informal activities in response to embryonic river basin management programmes at the Mae Chaem sub-basin level.

Analyses of satellite data by staff at Chiang Mai University and ICRAF indicate that in 2007, forest cover in both Mae Chaem and the Mae Win sub-district of Mae Wang was well over 80 per cent of total land area, a figure that compares favourably with air photo data from the 1950s. While changes may have taken place, including possible shifts in the quality of forest cover, these data challenge the legitimation based on ‘environmental crisis’ used by government agencies and environmental groups to deny the land-use claims of local communities and to justify the expansion or intensification of state land claims.

The 2006 military coup d’état and the violence in May 2010 suggest efforts by Thailand’s elite to slow down, halt or reverse many of the programmes of the previous decade, ranging from international agreements on free trade, to ‘populist’ domestic programmes, to decentralization and devolution of governance and natural resource management. Opposing factions have exacerbated the deep divisions in Thai society, vilifying their opponents and entrenching an unwillingness to reconcile or even allow opposing views. Communities even in remote areas like Mae Chaem and Mae Wang
are watching to see what differences there will be between rhetoric and the actual directions of change. So far, roles and budgets of elected local governments have been cut in favour of appointed local officials, central agencies and the military. Other programmes related to economic development and more transparent and accountable natural resource management in areas like Mae Chaem and Mae Wang remain on hold and uncertain. Bangkok’s distrust of the provinces is likely to prevent support for stronger local government or natural resource management.

In Thailand, state regulation of access referred mainly to reserve forests and areas of environmental protection, eclipsing minority farmers’ informal land claims. Market booms and busts for cash crops paralleled the ups and downs of government support. With state land claims supported by latent threats of violence and legitimated by concerns about national security, drugs and forest loss, environmental enclosures were all grounded in racialization of upland minority farmers. Even minorities in the lowlands were excluded by lack of legal land title, and in some cases lack of citizenship.

CONCLUSION

We have sought to capture processes of enclosure and the powers of exclusion as the Golden Triangle became incorporated into peripheries of China, Laos and Thailand, and with the emergence of the Golden Economic Quadrangle as a region. The three country studies show that national policies have created somewhat different outcomes for the territory and people in China, Laos and Thailand. In all three countries, however, the enclosure of peripheral peoples, our first meaning of enclosure, was marked by processes of racialization, linking essentialized notions of backwardness and particular land uses to minority peoples. As a result, environmental enclosures have led to the exclusion of upland minorities from forests and lands they have used for decades or centuries. There are only a few examples of our second use of enclosure which refers to ‘freeing up’ land and labour for industry and commercial agriculture, which marks the emergence of capitalism. Successful agrarian transitions include lowland minority rubber farmers in China and lowland minority cash crop farmers in Laos. State-regulated land allocations had granted them relatively secure property rights, stronger in China than in Laos. Minority farmers in Thailand, with limited legal property rights and few exceptions, were not able to accumulate capital from cash crops to expand or invest in new ventures and were vulnerable to intimidation by state and local actors competing for use of land and water. Our third sense of enclosure refers to the environment and especially ‘crisis environmentalism’, which legitimated a rapid expansion of environmental enclosures, strictures on upland land uses, and state injunctions to plant cash crops that may or may not generate much income. As Blaikie and Muldavin (2004) note, governments that see upland farmers as lacking in environmental
awareness perceive them as threats to lowland people of majority ethnicity, and indeed, as threats to the nation. In practice, evidence from research in all three sites shows either that forest conditions under ethnic minority management have been good (Thailand and China) or that environmental enclosures have resulted in forest loss and degradation (Laos). The evidence calls into question the rationale for creating environmental enclosures, revealing instead the ideology of racialization that excludes minority farmers from land, resources and cash crop opportunities. Environmental enclosures serve to uphold social hierarchies, relegating upland minorities to less and less national space.

In all three countries, the state encouraged markets and infrastructure development, promoting a deepening of capitalism in the region. The limited number of success stories, however, involve instances where farmers’ location in or near the lowlands, in addition to state promotion of cash crops, allowed cultivation of crops, especially rubber, that generated capital for further investment. In none of these cases did the state play a strong direct role, and in fact, state agents in Xishuangbanna and Muang Sing tried to end farmer-to-farmer trans-border rubber collaboration. Farmers themselves drove their own success. The superhighway linking Kunming and Bangkok, for example, did not help farmers, who used informal border crossings that were later closed by the Xishuangbanna government.

In contrast to the micro-level case studies mentioned in the introduction, which portrayed only land loss and increasing poverty, our meso-scale analysis over relatively long time periods shows the somewhat favourable outcomes. This includes successful rubber farmers in China and Laos; variable outcomes for tea farmers in China and for animal feed crop farmers and highland vegetable farmers in Thailand; and modest successes in Thailand owing to vacillations in markets and national policies. As a counter to Tania Li’s portrayal of enclosures creating landless people who are ‘surplus’ to capitalist labour, we found cases of farmers expanding their rubber cultivation as a result of capital formation that allowed for further investment. In contrast to Rigg, our stories reveal racialization of minorities as a continuing theme underlying environmental enclosures, state land-use plans, forced relocations and a lack of ‘deagrarianization’. Our studies trace agrarian transitions that reconfigured relations between ‘society and nature’ in profound ways, producing landscapes of increasing numbers of protected areas with farmers producing cash crops on less and less land. We conclude that the dynamics are not driven by capitalism per se, but by transitions to capitalism as they articulated with policies and projects driven by racialized images of ‘backward’ minorities on the periphery.

State legitimation and regulation based on concerns about national security, drugs, backward people and environmental destruction reflect long-standing government concerns about the Golden Triangle — alleged dangers that have not abated through decades of state and international development projects and environmental protection initiatives. The image of ‘backward’
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and unequently incorporated minority peoples, resurgent drug problems and an uneasy sense of threat, this time from environmental crises, have justified decades of processes of enclosure of forests and exclusion of minority peoples. The Golden Economic Quadrangle as an economic region is up and running, but — with some notable exceptions — minority farmers on national peripheries continue to be deprived of their land, ensuring their ongoing marginalization as economic regionalization deepens.

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Enclosing Ethnic Minorities


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