Chapter 3
From Land-Locked to Land-Linked?

Laos Within a Continuum of Connectivity in the Mekong Region

1 Introduction

> On November 5, 2017, just after the rainy season and as the dry season was coming, the construction site of the Mekong River Bridge in Luang Prabang, a key project of the China-Laos Railway, was a hive of activity as the builders of China Railway No. 8 Engineering Group Co., Ltd. were taking advantage of the rare golden opportunity and making full use of the time to construct.
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> Laos is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia. Its transportation infrastructure is extremely backward. December 25, 2016 saw the beginning of a new era with the inauguration of the construction of China-Laos Railway, which will be completed and open to traffic by the end of 2021. Connecting the railways of not only China but also Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore in the future, this railway bears Laos' dream of becoming a land-linked country from a land-locked country and will greatly promote its economic and social development.
>
> people.com.cn (2017, November 14).

A map of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) shows a country situated in the northeast-central mainland of Southeast Asia and bordering five other countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, and Myanmar. The Lao PDR's borders generally follow two prominent natural geographical features that define the country's elongated shape, which stretches over 1,700 km from north to south. The northern border with Myanmar and much of the western border with Thailand run along the Mekong River, while the eastern border with Vietnam largely follows the ridgeline of the Annamite Mountain range. This cartography confirms the mainstream depiction of Laos as an isolated "land-locked country," which is deployed by most accounts justifying ongoing regional integration projects that aim to redefine Lao PDR as a "land-linked country," as exemplified by the above People's Daily (2017) coverage on the China-Laos Railway project.

This chapter challenges the dominant narrative of a de-historicized, often linear progression from land-locked to land-linked or from isolation to integration by contextualizing the contemporary imaginations and developments of Laos within the broader social, economic, and political transitions across the Mekong River region

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since nineteenth century European colonialism. In addition to defining boundaries, colonial powers inaugurated an era of (modern) infrastructure planning and construction to consolidate their authority. Rather than connecting the region, however, this colonial infrastructure redefined preexisting patterns of connectivity. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue for an approach to understanding connections that foregrounds such preexisting patterns (p. 8). Understanding "cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference *through* connection" (emphasis in original). For a demonstration of the instrumentality of this conception of connectivity, see landscape planning proposals in *Chapter Five: Infrastructural connectivity and difference.*

"Laos," as portrayed on modern maps, was hardly an historical inevitability and is in fact a recent arrival on the world stage. Present-day Lao territory was part the former Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang (1345–1707), the "Land of a Million Elephants," which included territory on both sides of the Mekong River south of Yunnan. Lancang, the Mekong River's name in Chinese, echoes ancient Lan Xang. The three kingdoms of Lan Xang (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak) were under Siamese suzerainty (1707–1779) by the time France secured control over the lower reaches of the Mekong River. "Laos," formed on the east bank of the Mekong through a series of Franco-Siamese treaties in the last decade of the nineteenth century, arrived during the demise of pre-modern states yet without the defined boundaries that dominated Southeast Asian colonial geopolitics (Stuart-Fox, 1995).

Flowing for 4,300 km from the Tibetan plateau, the Mekong River defines the region's connectivity. As part of the historic Southern Silk Road, various caravan and river-based routes linked southern Yunnan's Sip Song Pan Na (now Xishuangbanna) with Lan Na in northern Siam. These riverside lowland areas were celebrated as regional rice bowls (*Na* means "rice paddies," thus *Sip Song Pan Na* means "the land of twelve thousand rice fields" and *Lan Na* means "the land of a million rice fields") (Beyrer, 1998, p. 75). Prior to the establishment of the French protectorate of Laos in 1893, the Siamese town of Lan Na and the Lao town of Luang Prabang were key centers controlling the regulation of trade in the upper-Mekong borderlands. One of the main trade routes linked Mengla in Sip Song Pan Na, Luang Namtha, Viang Phoukha and Houay Xay in Lan Na. From Houay Xay on the east bank of the Mekong, trading caravans could cross the river to Chiang Khong to trade with Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai in Greater Siam or follow the river directly to Luang Prabang, also known as Mang Luang or "principal city," the capital of the Lao Kingdom and present-day cultural and tourist hub of Lao PDR (p. 75).

While the French colonial government of the protectorate of Laos (1893–1953) denied the existence of the Southern Silk Road, the route continued to operate after the Mekong River was made to form the colonial boundary at the turn of the twentieth century. Existing land- and river-routes connecting the territory east of the Mekong to the Kingdom of Siam across the river were actively delegitimized because they were outside direct colonial control and contradicted the aspiration to incorporate Laos into French Indochina. Nearly a century later, these old trading routes have been romanticized since the 1990s to bolster various economic initiatives advocating the integration of the region surrounding the Mekong, including the Greater Mekong Subregion

(GMS) initiative by the primarily US and Japanese controlled Asian Development Bank and the more recent Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China. The lack of "modern infrastructure," such as roads and railways, once described as an obstacle to colonial rule, is today purported as an obstacle to economic development and integration of the Mekong region.

Natural resource-rich Laos, the only land-locked GMS country, finds itself central in these recent regional integration enterprises. Restrictive regulation and closed borders characterized the decade following the 1975 establishment of the Lao PDR in the aftermath of the Second Indochina War (also known as the Vietnam War). In comparison, the post-Cold War efforts to integrate Laos into the regional market since the late 1980s appear substantial. Seen from a wider historical perspective, however, a remarkable continuity persists in how historical narratives and practices are reproduced to enable and constrain development. In the following historical analysis, we examine the malleable identities of "Laos," "border" and "infrastructure" in the strategic importance of the Mekong River region and the struggles to control and reshape its interconnectivity, especially during the period between colonial-era obscuration and more recent revitalization of the Southern Silk Road. Rather than strictly chronological and comprehensive, this chapter focuses on three loosely defined historical periods: the colonial period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the Cold War period from the mid-twentieth century to the late 1980s, and the post-Cold War period from the late 1980s up to the present day. We ground the distinct histories of these periods in discourses specific to their times and places, each with their own geographic conception of the Mekong River region and particular combination of socio-economic and geopolitical imperatives driving investment in large-scale infrastructure projects.

The Colonial period was characterized by efforts to de-link Laos from Greater Siam and incorporate it into French Indochina. Influenced by nineteenth-century Anglo-French geostrategic rivalries in Southeast Asia, the French secured navigation of the Mekong River and drew it as their colonial boundary. The Mekong River, together with the newly established French protectorate of Laos on its east bank, was a strategic opportunity to establish new trade routes linking French Indochina with the fabled wealth and markets of imperial China. However, the narrative of Laos as a "formidable frontier" and "colonial backwater" (Ivarsson, 2008) resurged with each unsuccessful attempt to transplant the rationale and expertise of road and railway development from rural France to mountainous and flood-prone Laos.

The Cold War period was characterized by efforts to de-link Laos and other lower Mekong countries from communist China and North Vietnam and to bring them under greater US influence. Surveys and feasibility studies for the Pa Mong Dam and Mekong Basin Development Plan were carried out from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s as part of a broader US geopolitical and developmental strategy to coerce newly independent states by providing water resource development among more general technical assistance. Although these visions never materialized due to economic, socio-ecological, and political obstacles, the characterization of the Mekong region as natural-resource rich "waiting to be developed" (Sneddon, 2015) has persisted to the present day.

The post-Cold War period has been characterized by market-led and state-directed efforts to integrate Laos into the global market. The French aspiration of establishing trade corridors via road- and railway-building and the American plan to facilitate international cooperation through (mainly) water resource development were reincarnated under neoliberal globalization and its poverty alleviation and sustainable development objectives. The imagined geographies of a "formidable frontier" and "natural resources" have hybridized into a "resource frontier" (Barney, 2009). The Lao authorities and their international development partners deployed concurrent processes of infrastructure-building and land assessment to expedite connectivity and accessibility of the Laos resource frontier. These processes have reshaped the socio-economic and geopolitical landscape of Laos and the Mekong region, resulting in uneven patterns of development.

2 The Colonial Period: Integrating Laos into the Colonial Space of Indochina

> The antique kingdom of Lan Sang [Xang] that became Laos under the French protectorate was until 1926 more or less isolated from the rest of Indochina. Separated from the ports in Tonkin and Annam by the Annamese Cordillera [mountain range] and only linked to the rest of the world by the Mekong, the destiny of this country seemed to be the economic satellite of Siam as the politics seemed to link by railroad the various locations of the Mekong with Bangkok instead of with the French ports, especially Saigon.
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> Marty (1938).

The formation of colonial boundaries along the Mekong River was heavily influenced by nineteenth-century Anglo-French geostrategic rivalries in Southeast Asia. After Louis Napoleon came to power in 1852, France perceived a pressing need to counter British influence in East Asia. French priorities were the consolidation and expansion of French colonial possessions, the containment of Britain's colonization of Upper Burma and the suppression of British economic interference in the Southeast Asian subcontinent (Keay, 2005). French consolidation of Cochinchina (the southern region of modern-day Vietnam) in the early 1860s raised the question of dominance over the Mekong River. French ambitions were to turn Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), the capital of Cochinchina lying immediately to the east of the Mekong Delta, into a successful commercial center. Just as the British controlled Shanghai at the mouth of the Yangtze, the Mekong offered the French a path to the largest potential market in the world, imperial China.

When six French explorers left Saigon in the summer of 1866 in search of a navigable route to south-west China, the Mekong River was largely unknown to modern cartography. The best available maps of the Indochinese region showed few sections of the Mekong with any degree of accuracy, leaving large stretches of the river to the imagination of early cartographers (Osborne, 1975, p. 14). The Mekong Expedition of 1866–1868 unveiled, for the first time, a complete map of the Mekong

river from Saigon in Cochinchina to Dali in Yunnan. However, French hopes that the Mekong would immediately open a great new trade route to China were thwarted by the discovery of impassable rapids and waterfalls and treacherous shoals and sandbanks. Ambitions persisted regardless, and officials repeatedly questioned whether the rapids were really an absolute barrier or the islands of Khone truly impassable (de Carné, 1872, p. 36). Further surveys, military missions and expeditions were carried out throughout the late-nineteenth century, notably in four missions led by colonial civil servant Auguste Pavie (Mission Pavie Indo-Chine 1879–1895). These missions resulted in the production of the first definitive atlas of the Mekong and at least six volumes of observations, noting in particular the political affiliations and strong Siamese influence over Lao principalities on both banks of the Mekong River (Wong, 2010).

Throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the strategic annexation of French protectorates to the east of the Mekong and the adoption of the river as a colonial boundary was informed by these cartographic advances and the persistent hope in the Mekong as a potential trade route linking Saigon and southern China. Following the successful French colonial acquisition of Tonkin and Annam (parts of modern-day Vietnam) in 1884 and the establishment of the Indochinese Union in 1887, Laos and Cambodia became protectorates of French Indochina after the French victory in the Franco-Siamese War of 1893. Under the 1893 Treaty of Bangkok, Siam was obliged to give up its claim to the Shan region of north-eastern Burma to the British and cede the Lao principalities on the east bank of the Mekong to France. The French argued the Mekong was the obvious boundary between the colonial possessions (Walker, 1999, p. 45). The demarcation line was generally established along the deepest sections of the main river channel, and islands in the river were allocated to French Laos such that the French could maintain control over Mekong navigation (p. 8).

At the turn of the twentieth century, after securing the Mekong River, which formed the western colonial boundary, the French prioritized road and rail infrastructure projects in Indochina up until World War II, especially in Laos. The colonial government's objective was to de-link Laos from the cultural and economic influence of Greater Siam on the other side of the Mekong River and link it with the rest of French Indochina beyond the Annamite Mountains (Ivarsson, 2008). This rationale was a continuation of the rapid internal integration of France itself since the late nineteenth century, where the consensus was that "there could be no national unity before there were national circulations" (Weber, 1976, p. 218 as quoted in Ivarsson, 2008, p. 95). Infrastructure was an "agent of change" in the modernization and nationalization of rural France and the cementing of the modern French nation-state (Weber, 1976, p. 256). Infrastructural development was considered an effective tool for "spatial and moral rapprochement" (Marty, 1938, p. 72 as quoted in Ivarsson, 2008, p. 100) which not only "makes space manageable but can be linked with movements in time and mind as well" (Ivarsson, 2008, p. 95). Integrating Laos in an Indochina-wide infrastructural network was seen by the French as the only possible means to counter the geographical proximity between the Mekong's east bank and Greater Siam on its west.

Laos was strategically important for connecting southern China and Indochina in its entirety, safeguarding not only the Mekong River route but also a French-favored land route linking the eastern Himalayan foothills extending across Siam, Burma, China and Laos to the Indochinese coast. The French colonial government was well aware of the existence and significance of the Southern Silk Road that linked southern China with Southeast Asia (Walker, 1999, p. 32). Nineteenth-century French Mekong expedition members had noted that Yunnanese muleteers carried Chinese products such as silk, salt, tea, opium, furs and metal goods on their southward journeys, selling them in villages along the route, in the northern-Siamese markets and even as far as the coastal Burma. On their return trip to Yunnan, the muleteers carried local produce as well as British manufactured goods (de Carné, 1872; Garnier, 1885; Pavie, 1906). These observations were useful when demarcating the border between French Laos and China in the late 1890s, as exemplified by the French insistence on incorporating Boten within Lao territory. Known for its numerous salt wells, Boten was an important salt producer and was a well-established caravan stop along a major trade route. The importance of the colonial acquisition of Boten was not territorial; rather, it provided the French access to commercially important areas in southern China (Walker, 1999, p. 57). Preoccupied with Japanese aggression in the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895), China signed an agreement with the French in 1895 handing over control of Boten and granting preferential terms for French goods entering Yunnan (Prescott, 1975, 450). Boten remains of strategic importance today; for an exploration of its continued cultural, ecological and economic significance, see landscape planning proposal "Negotiating with ethno-ecology: Landscape management strategies for northern Laos's ecotourism boom" in *Chapter Seven: Chinese mass nature tourism and ecotourism.*

Once control over the connections between northern Laos and southern China had been secured, the next urgent priority was to link Laos with the rest of Indochina to divert trade with adjacent territories away from Bangkok, the capital of Siam, thereby replacing the China-Laos-Siam-Burma trade route with a China-Laos-Indochina trade route. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, railway development proceeded apace as the French colonial government considered it an effective way to build Indochina's basic infrastructural network. In 1898, a railway network was proposed across Indochina with several east–west lines crossing the Annamite Mountains to link French Laos, the "interior of the colony," with the rest of French Indochina (Demay, 2015, p. 7). These lines were to intersect with a north–south line running along the coast between Saigon and Hanoi. Due to Laos's mountainous terrain, this grand scheme never materialized and only the coastal line was constructed (Ivarsson, 2008, p. 96). After World War I, colonial priorities shifted to the construction of durable roads, in particular construction of the east–west arterial roads linking Laos with the Indochinese coastal areas. Of the numerous roads originally planned across the Annamite Mountains, by the end of the 1920s, only the 280 km Route Coloniale No 8 (1924) and the 330 km Route Coloniale No 9 (1926) were constructed (p. 97). While R.C. 9 was passable all year around, R.C. 8 was prone to monsoon flooding and only passable for trucks in the dry season (p. 97). Consequently, the newly established arterial roads did not lead to a diversion of trade with Bangkok.

Siam's infrastructure developed more rapidly over the same period, and, given easier terrain, territories on the west bank of the Mekong were soon better connected by road and rail to Bangkok (Kakizaki, 2005). By the early 1900s, durable infrastructure already connected Bangkok and the Siamese town of Nong Khai, which overlooked the Mekong, to the Laos colonial capital of Vientiane. A railway linked Bangkok and Khorat, and this was connected to Nong Khai on the west bank of the Mekong by a network of roads and tracks (Ivarsson, 2008, p. 97). Siamese internal connections were further improved when an air service and road were opened between Khorat and Nong Khai in the early 1920s (p. 97). In addition, the long-standing link between Bangkok and the Siamese town of Chiang Khong, overlooking the Mekong at Houay Xay in French Laos, had also been considerably improved by the early 1920s. A railway linked Bangkok and Chiang Mai, which was connected to Chiang Rai and Chiang Khong by road (p. 96). By the early 1930s, Laos's development was oriented more towards Siam than the rest of French Indochina in terms of infrastructure, much to the chagrin of French authorities. Not only did the China-Laos-Siam-Burma trade route still dominate the region, even French citizens returning to France from Vientiane in Laos preferred the 25-days travel via Bangkok over the 50-days via Saigon (p. 97).

French efforts to counter Siam-Laos connections, including Air France making Vientiane a destination in 1935, persisted throughout the 1930s until the outbreak of World War II and, in terms of infrastructure investment, focused on constructing two inter-regional roads. Firstly, the 640 km east–west Route Coloniale No 7 connecting coastal Vinh to Xieng Khuang and Luang Prabang in Laos, and secondly, the 1,650 km north–south Route Coloniale No 13 following the Mekong valley connecting Pakse, Savannakhet, Thakhek, Paksane, Vientiane and Luang Prabang in Laos to Saigon (Ivarsson, 2008, p. 98). R.C. 7 and 13 were hailed for "bringing Laos firmly into the Indochinese family" and "implying a definite break away from Siam" (p. 98). However, there was great disparity between the cartographic representations of these roads and the realities on the ground. Much of R.C. 7 and 13 were impassable for up to half the year due to monsoon flooding. Ultimately, only the Saigon-Thakhek and Paksan-Vientiane sections of R.C. 13 were constructed, and by the end of the 1930s, French Laos remained an economic satellite of Siam rather than an integral part of the colonial economy (p. 98).

Even four decades after the demarcation of the colonial boundary along the Mekong River in the late 1890s, Laos remained a contested space caught between Siam and French Indochina. The geographical reputation of Laos as a "colonial backwater" formed through many attempts at road and rail development, which together embody the complex persistence of the idea, ambition, and discourse versus material reality of infrastructure planning and construction in colonial Laos. French investment and resources consequently failed to reach this mountainous and flood-prone colony (Stuart-Fox, 1995). France began exploiting Indochina's natural resources in order to diversify the colonial government's revenue base in the 1930s, which included transforming Cambodia into a center for rice and pepper production and Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin (together encompassing modern-day Vietnam) into a source of tea, rice, coffee, pepper, coal, zinc and tin (Miller, 1947). Although having

some small-scale timber exploitation, colonial Laos was considered economically unviable, and its socioeconomic development lagged far behind the rest of Indochina. The reimagining and transformation of Laos and the Mekong region entered a new phase during the Cold War, when European colonial rivalries across Southeast Asia were supplanted by the ideological struggle between capitalism and communism. French Indochina ceased to exist once the Kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia proclaimed independence in 1953, and the French evacuated Vietnam following the Geneva Accord of 1954. The colonial plan to integrate the French protectorate of Laos into Indochina was replaced by a capitalist engineering blueprint to re-link Laos with other lower-Mekong countries for the explicit geostrategic purpose of usurping communist power in the region.

3 Cold War Period: Integrating Laos into the US Sphere of Influence

> The task is nothing less than to enrich the hopes and existence of more than a hundred million people. And there is much to be done. The vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority]. The wonders of modern medicine can be spread through villages where thousands die for lack of care. Schools can be established to train people in the skills needed to manage the process of development. And these objectives, and more, are within the reach of a cooperative and determined effort.
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> Johnson (1966).

The 1954 Geneva Conference witnessed France relinquish all claims to territory on the Indochinese peninsula and the start of concerted US involvement in Southeast Asia (Osborne, 2000). The Mekong River was once again center stage on the geopolitical arena, now post-colonial Southeast Asia. In the mid-1950s, 90 years after the French-led Mekong Expedition of 1866–1868, extensive surveys of the Mekong basin resumed, this time including, most notably, a reconnaissance survey carried out by the United States Bureau of Reclamation in early 1956 and an investigation by the United Nation's Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) in 1957. The earlier French expeditions were carried out within nineteenth-century Anglo-French geostrategic rivalries and facilitated the demarcation of colonial boundaries along the Mekong River. By contrast, the US and UN reconnaissance surveys were carried out within the Cold War-era rivalry between capitalism and communism and were intended to facilitate development of the Mekong basin in order to steer the Mekong region's newly independent governments towards "international cooperation" with each other and more importantly the US (Black, 1969; Sneddon, 2015). The French ambition of turning the Mekong into a navigable river was reenacted as a basin-wide development program that included irrigation, power production, flood control, and improved navigation.

After the 1954 Geneva Conference, the US urgently sought to fill the political vacuum, left after conclusion of nearly a century of French influence, to avoid a

Communist takeover of South Vietnam (1955–1975), the Kingdom of Laos (1946–1975), and Cambodia (1953–present). Numerous Southeast Asian specialists advised the US of the importance of steady economic growth and political and social stability in the non-Communist countries in the region (Sneddon, 2015, p. 108). Water resource development became an effective geopolitical tool to modernize Southeast Asia with an orientation toward the US rather than the USSR, thereby hobbling any perceived Communist expansion. As early as 1954, the US government had urged Thai officials to consider regional economic cooperation under the banner of a "Mekong River Authority" and emphasized the huge power and irrigation potential of the Mekong benefitting four Southeast Asia countries (p. 108). The completion of the US 1956 and UN 1957 survey missions, along with other behind-the-scenes lobbying, led to the 1957 creation of the Committee for the Co-ordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin (simply known as the Mekong Committee) (Palumbarit, 2017). Although the Mekong Basin covers parts of six countries, only Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam were member nations of the Mekong Committee and participated this international planning initiative. China was not a member of the United Nations in the early 1950s and Burma was not interested in participating (Mekong Secretariat, 1989).

The United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) spearheaded the ambitious US- and UN-led development venture in the lower Mekong basin. Initially a modest initiative set up in 1902, the USBR was originally charged with constructing infrastructure to irrigate the arid Western US (Pisani, 2002, p. 3). In the 1930s the bureau transformed into a dynamic political player, closely involved in Federal efforts to stimulate domestic economic development through construction of multi-purpose projects in President Roosevelt's New Deal (p. 151). During this period the USBR shifted its attention to comprehensive river basin development programs, including the construction of large-scale hydroelectric dams, and conducted technical analysis and design of many dams under the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) (Billington & Jackson, 2006, p. 12). The USBR's political significance expanded into the global arena when it officially started "foreign activities" in 1950 (Sneddon & Fox, 2011, p. 451). Technical assistance dominated by water resource development was deployed as development aid by the US government to persuade newly independent states to ally with the West during the Cold War. As part of this process, the TVA became a symbol of US overseas development and the USBR was celebrated as the world's preeminent water development agency. The USBR played a central role in hundreds of water resource development programs throughout Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia, promising the creation of "modern" river basins as a means of becoming a "modern" state (p. 451).

As part of a broader US geopolitical and developmental vision to globalize river basin planning strategies, Mekong basin development constituted the most ambitious overseas project in the history of the USBR (Biggs, 2006). Because two-thirds of the lower Mekong River and one-third of the total basin area falls within Lao territory, Laos figured prominently in the US blueprints for the region and was dubbed "the TVA of Southeast Asia" (Johnson, 1966). In 1961, the Pa Mong Dam was proposed across the Mekong's main channel at the Thai-Lao border, approximately 20 km

upstream of the Lao capital Vientiane. The project was the linchpin of Comprehensive Mekong River Basin Development Plan (CMRBDP), comprising of eight massive hydroelectric dams on the main channel and numerous ancillary projects on the Mekong's tributaries (Mekong Committee, 1961).[1] The Pa Mong Dam was envisaged as an "impact type" project intended to showcase the US team's experts "in full command of the science of putting water and land to use for economic development" for Mekong countries and for the Thai and Lao governments in particular (Sneddon, 2015, p. 109). A 1960s USBR brochure promoted the Pa Mong Dam as a multi-purpose project, with benefits including improved upstream navigation, additional water provision during drought, "modern irrigation development" for more than one million hectares of farmland in Laos and Thailand, and 4,800–5,400 MW of hydroelectricity annually to power regional industrialization (United States Bureau of Reclamation, 1970).

In 1963, the US State Department granted the USBR the necessary funding to implement a two-phased feasibility study for the Pa Mong scheme on the basis that the studies "will have the value of tagging the Pa Mong site as an American project" (Sneddon, 2015, p. 111). Phase One (1963–1966), aimed to establish the dam's technical feasibility from biophysical and economic standpoints. Although confirmation of the project's feasibility might have seemed a foregone conclusion given its geopolitical significance, an extraordinary amount of information, including stream gaging, rainfall, soil, hydrographic, topographic and land classification, was surveyed and collated (See United States Bureau of Reclamation, 1965). Basic data collection was paramount, as earlier surveys carried out by the US and UN in the mid-1950s had noted that basic data for "orderly development of the basin" was practically non-existent (United States Bureau of Reclamation, 1956). Data collected during Phase One "successfully" demonstrated the feasibility of the Pa Mong Dam, and US President Johnson exclaimed that the "vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own TVA" (Johnson, 1966, p. 397). The optimism conjured in Phase One soon evaporated during Phase Two, as new feasibility studies encountered significant economic, socio-ecological, and political obstacles.

Phase Two, started in late 1966 with an expected duration of five to seven years, was to estimate the costs and benefits of all aspects of the Pa Mong project including irrigation, power production, flood control, improvement of navigation and reduction of estuarine saltwater intrusion (United States Bureau of Reclamation, 1966, p. 4). Estimated at US $600 million, Pa Mong Dam would cost more than 12 times that of the Hoover Dam in the US. Full estimates for the entire project, including transmission lines and irrigation projects, ballooned to $1.1 billion (Sneddon, 2015, p. 120). The project's viability was further questioned given that while construction of the dam and power plants was estimated to take five to ten years, other components, such as transmission lines and irrigation channels, were unlikely to produce the tangible benefits envisioned in the project plan for some 25 years (p. 120). Even USBR staff

[1] The eight dams planned on the main channel are: High Luang Prabang, Sayabouri, Upper Chiang Khan, Pa Mong, Upper Thakhek, Ban Koum, Stung Treng, and Sambor.

began to question the socio-ecological practicability of the project. An estimated 312,000 to 500,000 people would be displaced and 948,000 acres of productive farmland inundated due to the dam. Irrigation development targets were also doubted as experts debated the geological, soil and land classification findings in the Pa Mong region (United States Bureau of Reclamation, 1970).

Aside from apprehension over the project's economic viability and socio-ecological practicability, the region's political dynamics and the US's geopolitical objectives had changed dramatically by the end of the 1960s, leading to the Pa Mong Dam's termination in the early 1970s. By 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were war zones, rendering large-scale water development projects in the lower Mekong basin completely "infeasible." Following US President Nixon's election in 1969, the US government re-focused its foreign policy in Southeast Asia with a view to effectively withdraw military engagement in Vietnam (McMahon, 2010). Phase Two feasibility studies ended abruptly when the Pa Mong Project and CMRBDP were officially shelved in 1973. Nevertheless, vast amounts of data collected in both project phases formed the basis of the 1968 *Atlas of Physical, Economic and Social Resources of The Lower Mekong Basin*. This exhaustive tome included 20 plates covering the biophysical and socioeconomic aspects of the lower Mekong basin including: Geology, Hydrogeology, Population, Education, Industries, Tourism, Telecommunications, Geophysics, Water Resource, Railroads, Hypsometry, Health, Engineering Geology, Construction Materials, Mineral Resources, Rice Lands, Soil Engineering, Land Use, Land Potential, and Electric Power (Mekong Secretariat, 1968).

Although the Pa Mong Dam and the CMRBDP never materialized, the technological and geopolitical expertise gained through promoting these projects and investigating their feasibility set the stage for an imagined geography of the Mekong basin as a "natural resource" capable of being managed, regulated and "developed." The comprehensive data generated throughout the different phases of the investigation from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, together with the USBR map highlighting the most critical engineering projects across the basin, conjured up an imaginary geography of a "developed" Mekong region. That vision survived well beyond the post-Cold War era and was revived under new socio-economic and geopolitical imperatives. The repercussions of US foreign policy changes in Southeast Asia since the Nixon administration (1969–1974) have persisted over the decades. With little resistance to Communist influence, the 1970s saw the Mekong's development repositioned as an engine of "peacetime reconstruction and development of the Indo-China countries" (Sneddon, 2015, p. 121). The direct role of US agencies such as the USBR in the Mekong region was increasingly reduced in favor of various United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and multilateral entities, such as the US-led World Bank (est. 1944) and Japan-led Asian Development Bank (est. 1966). Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the 1980s boasted a more stable Indochinese Peninsula. The USBR's vision of the Kingdom of Laos as the "Tennessee Valley Authority of Southeast Asia" was transformed by the Mekong states and affiliated development agencies into the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the "resource frontier" of Southeast Asia.

4 Post-Cold War Period: Integrating Laos into Global Markets

> 'The Economic Quadrangle' is now the focus of Asia. ... Investors, businessmen and manufacturers who are intent to expand their trading, and investment can aim at increasing their benefits. We are ready for those investors, who are aiming for success, and profits, by cooperating with the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This is a golden opportunity in doing business, in the area full of natural resources and labour with lower wages. Therefore we can assure you of stability and achievement in business.
>
> The Economic Quadrangle Joint Development Corporation (1996).

As regional tensions relaxed with the end of the Cold War, the Mekong region witnessed a burgeoning of overlapping inter-state cooperative ventures supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and multilateral development banks (MDBs) such as the World Bank. Three main vehicles of development were established in the first half of the 1990s. The first, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), was established after Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam signed the Mekong River Sustainable Development Cooperation Agreement in 1995 (Jacobs, 2002). A reincarnation of the Mekong Committee formed in 1957, the MRC focuses on water resource development including commercial shipping and energy generation. The second, the Greater Mekong Subregion economic cooperation program (GMS Program), was established with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992 and has actively involved all six Mekong countries. Focusing on identifying and implementing projects across diverse sectors, the GMS Program coalesced around a transnational network of "North–South" and "East–West" trade corridors after the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Chen, 2005, p. 195). The third, the Golden Economic Quadrangle (GEQ), encompasses the upper-Mekong borderlands, and membership consists of Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Yunnan. Instigated by Thailand in 1992, the "Golden Quadrangle" was to supersede the infamous Golden Triangle of an earlier era (Walker, 2000, p. 123). With the geographical proximity of four international borders and the existence of old trade routes, GEQ advocates argued these would lead to fruitful economic cooperation in an increasingly integrated market under the GMS Program.

The unbuilt road and rail trade corridors of French Indochina and the American blueprints for international cooperation through basin-wide water resource development coalesced in the plans and programs of Southeast Asia's new inter-state cooperative development mechanisms. These mechanisms no longer operate explicitly as colonial domination nor to contain the rising tide of Communism; rather, they operate in the name of neoliberal sustainable development and poverty alleviation. The Mekong and its basin as "resource" are central to discourses of regional integration rooted in visions of economic connectivity (Glassman, 2010; Hirsch, 2001). In neoliberal discourses, the Mekong region is described as the "last resource frontier" of the Global South, while Laos, land-locked at the region's geographic center and surrounded by five GMS-member countries, is further positioned by state agencies, companies, development banks, the MRC, GMS, and the GEQ as an "untapped

space." Military conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s and the post-conflict isolationism imposed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in the 1970s and early 1980s has kept Laos outside the reach of most international capital. The rhetoric of frontiers is today "a legitimating ideology" for new forms of capitalist exploitation (Barney, 2009, p. 147).

The idea of Laos as a "resource frontier" formed from the ideal conditions following the Cold War together with the Lao PDR's failed attempt at socialist reconstruction. After 1975, Laos was one of the world's 49 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), measured in terms of its low per capita GDP, weak human-resource base and high level of economic vulnerability (Rigg, 2005, p. 20). However, Laos was also situated within one of the world's most economically dynamic regions, sharing borders with Thailand and China, two of the rising economic powers of Asia. In the 1980s, Thailand was shifting its foreign policy towards former Indochina to turn the region's "battlefields into market places" (*ao sanam lop pen sanam kan kha*). In the early 1990s, China's ambition to make Yunnan "a grand passageway to Southeast Asia" was a significant about-turn for a government that had seen its southern border as a security threat for most of the years since WWII. There was a growing consensus that opportunities for economic growth and development would be created if adjoining countries were encouraged to exploit their complementarities, with Myanmar and Laos aided by Thailand and China's increasing capital, technology and infrastructure (Walker, 2000, p. 125).

The increasing demand for natural resources from its neighbors coincided with the Lao government's need to find other sources of revenue after Soviet aid dried up in the mid-1980s (Lestrelin et al., 2012). The way to tackle Laos's "underdevelopment" and a collapsing domestic economy was through a national strategy of radical economic reforms encapsulated in the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) or "New Thinking" (*chintanakan mai*) introduced in 1986. Abandoning central planning in favor of opening the economy to trade and investments, the NEM adhered closely to the principles established by the neoliberal Washington consensus of the World Bank, the IMF and the US Treasury (Rigg, 2005, p. 22). To an extent, the economic reform of Laos was indeed a response to pressure from the country's main creditors. The World Bank and the ADB promoted the NEM as a way for the Lao government to effectively gain access to new funding, loans and revenue from international finance institutions and foreign investors (Stuart-Fox, 2005). Since then, harnessing the country's natural resources has been touted a significant driver of economic growth, and various business-friendly "untapped frontier" narratives have been devised to help the Lao government recruit investors. In the post-reform era since 1986, the export-oriented resource sectors, including large-scale hydropower, mining, forestry and agri-business, are considered by key Lao and international agencies to be the mainstays of the country's developmental future as the nation seeks to graduate from its LDC status by 2020 (Government of Lao PDR, 2003).

Two major concurrent processes, infrastructure construction and land assessment, each rationalized through discourses on neoliberal sustainable development and poverty alleviation, have enhanced the "accessibility" of Laos as a resource frontier over the last three decades. The first process, infrastructure construction, focuses on

improving physical accessibility across Laos's challenging terrain. Echoing earlier French colonial campaigns, road planning and construction has often usurped traditional patterns of connectivity, such as those preferred by upland communities, to make way for the taxation and property regimes enabled by road construction (Scott, 2009, p. 198). Yet, unlike the colonial rationale of competing against Siam's influence, modern roads are to battle poverty. Neoliberal development discourse considers "inaccessibility" by infrastructure a proxy for poverty in rural developing economies. Moreover, quality of life is believed to depend on the degree populations are linked to or isolated from markets (van de Walle, 2002; Hentschel & Waters, 2002). In such narratives, poor infrastructure is a problem requiring development intervention, because it erodes the terms of trade for rural communities by raising the costs of inputs and lowering the value of outputs, thereby undermining livelihoods. Lao state agencies and development banks prescribe to infrastructure development as a panacea that can alleviate poverty, boost incomes and raise living standards. In fact, the Lao government had tried to improve accessibility during the pre-reform era, but due to an enduring lack of investment capacity, achieved little beyond the relocation of remote populations to more accessible areas along existing roads (Rigg, 2005, p. 16). Construction and upgrading of infrastructure gathered pace in the 1990s through trade corridors promoted by the ADB under its GMS Program.

As previously mentioned, the GMS Program prioritized transport projects over other sectors following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. While facilitating some improvements to regional airports and air services, the GMS Program has mainly promoted economic corridor-based connectivity: road-based integration, cross-border trade, and growth-oriented prosperity (Sturgeon et al., 2013; Su, 2012). This connectivity is a patchwork of new transportation projects and strategic upgrades, coupling cross-border sub-regional projects with national development plans. The East–West Economic Corridor (EWEC) and North–South Economic Corridor (NSEC) are the two main arteries linking Laos to its neighbors. The EWEC stretches 1,450 km from Mawlamyine in Myanmar through Thailand and Laos to Da Nang in Vietnam. The NSEC runs 1,750 km from Bangkok via either Luang Namtha in Laos or Keng Tung in Myanmar to Kunming in Yunnan. The NSEC, promoted as a revitalized ancient trading route now linking the region's largest national markets (China and Thailand), incorporates roads through Laos and Myanmar connecting Xishuangbanna and Chiang Rai, both centers of the Golden Economic Quadrangle. When constructed, these infrastructures improve Laos's physical accessibility and transform it from a land-locked to land-linked country. In an advertisement calling for international investment, the Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Thongloun Sisoulith pitched Laos as a "New Frontier of Opportunity" with supportive, confidence-building investment policies and "an expanding volume of intra-regional trade made possible through infrastructure upgrades" (Fortune, 2007 as quoted in Barney, 2009, p. 147).

The second process, land assessment, has facilitated the legal "accessibility" of Laos's natural resources most central to the livelihoods of much of the population. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Lao authorities, with the support of its development partners, carried out country-wide assessments of its natural resources and

agro-ecological potential, which together constitute the foundation of the nation's socioeconomic development. Like the US-led surveys and feasibility studies of the lower Mekong carried out in the 1950s and 1960s, the Lao government's land assessments were, through the discourse of neoliberal sustainable development, ultimately political-economic calculations carried out to render territory measurable and developable. Unlike the US attempt to legitimize its presence in a region facing perceived Communist expansion, these assessments of Lao land define "qualities of territory" to legitimize the exclusion of existing forms of land use considered "unsustainable" and "unproductive" according to neoliberal market ideology (Goldman, 2005, p. 184). Shifting agriculture, for example, is the target of a yet ongoing exclusion process, despite being the dominant mode of agricultural production in the Lao uplands that constitute some 80% of the country's land area (Hodgdon, 2010). Lao state planners and their multilateral development bank backers face serious challenges because the on-the-ground land use often contradicts their imagined geography of Laos as an empty landscape ready for commodity extraction and production. Development agencies identify Laos, ranked among the world's poorest economies but with great ecological wealth, as a potential hotspot for a "poverty-environment nexus," where poverty and the environment are caught in a mutually reinforcing spiral of degradation. The discourse of "poverty-environment nexus" further legitimizes the process of freeing up land and forest resources for capitalization (Dasgupta et al., 2005; World Bank, 2006). The simplistic chain of degradation narrative, whereby shifting cultivation is equated with poverty and land degradation, is routinely applied in mainstream development discourse (Lestrelin & Giordano, 2007).

In post-reform Laos, foreign consultants employed by international development agencies (IDAs) have helped promote and codify numerous decrees and laws relating to property rights and natural resource management (Goldman, 2005; Barney, 2009). They map and legitimize new state-sponsored land use definitions, while traditional property systems are unmapped and delegitimized. Eco-rationality and market forces have both intensified this phenomenon. The first decade of the post-reform era was dominated by scientific expertise that rationalized land use to balance development and conservation objectives. For example, the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP), one of the first joint projects initiated by the Lao government and major IDAs, was launched after the first national forestry conference was held in 1989. The TFAP recommendations included forest conservation and tree plantation measures covering over 70% of Laos's land area and the planned resettlement of around 170,000 households, constituting two thirds of the population engaged in shifting cultivation at that time (Evrard & Goudineau, 2004). Since the late 1990s, the national strategy of "Turning Land into Capital" (*kan han thi din pen theun*) in the name of sustainable development has promoted the identification of "empty" space suitable for large scale mining, hydropower, plantation and other agribusiness concessions. For example, the National Land Titling Programme (NLTP), established in 1997 with help from the World Bank and AusAID, provided incentives for landholders to invest in productive and market-oriented land uses (Lestrelin et al., 2012). By allocating swidden land to companies able to invest in modern and more productive technologies, the NLTP

was deemed an effective tool to improve the productivity of supposedly unutilized or underutilized land.

Infrastructure construction and land assessment continuously reshape Laos's physical and legal landscapes, transforming an imagined geography into a "resource frontier" reality for global capital. Improved road networks are turning "land-locked" Laos into a land-linked "land bridge" providing the most direct overland routes to its seaboard neighbors. Land classification and other forms of ecological differentiation enable the identification of abundant tracts of supposedly unoccupied degraded land for ecological improvement or economic development. However, these very processes carried out in the name of sustainable development and poverty alleviation are generating new forms of poverty and ecological degradation due to the sudden disruption of preexisting modes of connectivity and the routine delegitimization of livelihoods by neoliberal notions of market value and optimal resource allocation. Inadequate allocation of time and resources to establish viable alternative development models during large-scale, fast-tracked human resettlement and dramatic landscape change is devastating for an overwhelmingly rural population heavily reliant on mixed subsistence and semi-subsistence agriculture. Many scholars have pointed out that the ongoing debasement of subsistence production in favor of the demands of the regional and global market have compromised the livelihoods of the rural poor, especially vulnerable upland communities. Increasing Chinese state and business engagement in Laos and the wider Mekong region since the launch of Belt and Road Initiative in 2014 has accelerated foreign capital inflows and regional integration.

5 Conclusion

Even during the dry season, the Mekong is a truly immense river, flowing slowly but inexorably through the surrounding sunbaked brown rice fields. With the advent of the monsoon rains the waters of the Mekong swell, inundating hundreds of hectares of scorched land transforming it into a seemingly endless patchwork of ponds and lakes. This vast natural spectacle has inspired geographical imaginations and infrastructural ambitions since at least the nineteenth century when mainland Southeast Asia was increasingly subject to European colonialism.

When the French secured control of Cochinchina in the Mekong delta in the mid-nineteenth century, the region's geography of connectivity was defined by preexisting trails across and along a largely uncharted Mekong River. Various overland caravan routes and river-based routes in the upper Mekong combined to form an important part of the Southern Silk Road, a major trading link between China and Southeast Asia by which Chinese merchants from Sichuan and even the central plains traded a wide variety of products with their Indian, Burmese and Siamese counterparts. French colonial ambitions and American postwar aspirations gave rise to new geographical imaginations, reconfiguring regional and geopolitical connectivity. Surveys were conducted, data collected, and plans created in support of the French effort to de-link Laos from Greater Siam and incorporate it into French Indochina, and later American

ambitions to de-link Laos and other lower Mekong countries from communist China and North Vietnam in order to bring them under the umbrella of US influence.

While most of the physical infrastructure proposed in both historical periods failed to materialize, it collectively established a way of perceiving Laos, the Mekong River, and the Mekong basin that would persist to the present day. Colonial maps charting long stretches of the Mekong River helped establish a gestalt for the French protectorate of Laos on the river's east bank, while unsuccessful attempts to develop roads and railways generated a narrative describing Laos as a "formidable frontier" and "colonial backwater." US and UN maps identified the upper and lower Mekong basin as two separate socio-economic entities, and data collected through technical surveys and feasibility studies of the Mekong basin development plan generated a narrative of Laos and the larger Mekong region as an area of untapped "natural resources." The imagined "formidable frontier" and "natural resources" geographies have hybridized into a perceived "resource frontier" in the post-Cold War period. In the name of sustainable development and poverty alleviation, the Lao authorities and their international development partners have deployed the concurrent processes of infrastructure construction and land assessment to expedite the accessibility and connectivity of the Laos resource frontier.

The ambitious transportation networks that largely failed to materialize during the colonial era have been gradually realized over the last three decades. Today the geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia has been transformed, even though the territorial and infrastructural configurations shared by these two periods have remained largely unchanged for over a century. French ambitions of travelling through Laos to reach the markets of imperial China, then by far the world's most populous country, have been replaced by today's Chinese southward-looking vision of reaching into Laos and the other lower Mekong countries with their resource-abundant economies and market over 320 million people strong. Whereas past colonial governments sought to obscure the Southern Silk Road and establish their own substitutes, multinational development banks and Mekong region governments now seek to revitalize the Southern Silk Road with modern infrastructure. The traditional Southern Silk Road was never a single fixed route but rather a shifting network of routes used by caravans of heavily laden oxen and mules. Now reincarnated under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a "Modern Silk Road," it comprises numerous planned tarmac roads and the 3,000 km Pan-Asian Railway planned to connect Yunnan's Kunming with Singapore. Three railway lines are planned to link Kunming with Bangkok: one through Myanmar, one through Laos, and one through Vietnam and Cambodia. From Bangkok the railway is planned to run the length of Peninsula Malaysia to Singapore. The 414 km Laos section of the Pan-Asian Railway, known as the China-Laos Railway, spearheads this project, with construction commencing in 2016 and due for completion at the end of 2021.

Understanding how contemporary developments are enabled and constrained by past perceptions and activities allows us to evaluate them through a wide conceptual lens and critique them with historical depth. This chapter details the machinations by various parties to control and reshape the Mekong region's connectivity and challenges the dominant narrative of a linear progression from land-locked to land-linked

and from isolation to integration, by focusing on three loosely defined historic periods between the mid-nineteenth century and the present. Challenging the characterization of Laos as a land-locked country isolated from modernity, this chapter highlights its journey along a continuum of contingent transnational flows of ideologies, technologies and capital since the nineteenth century. The pursuit of more equitable forms of development requires a more inclusive socio-environmental valuation system than has yet been imposed, supported by critical, sustained investigation of the spatial, temporal, and discursive dimensions of development models, whether "sustainable," Chinese or yet to be devised.

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