



# ASIA MAIOR

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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**viella**

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Elena Valdameri (elena.valdameri@gess.ethz.ch).



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LAOS AND THE GLOBAL LAND RUSH: PRECARIOUS GAINS AND THE ONGOING  
STRIVE FOR STATE-BUILDING

*Marco Zappa*  
Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
*marco.zappa@unive.it*

Michael B. Dwyer, *Upland geopolitics: Postwar Laos and the Global Land Rush*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2022, xvii+232 pp. (ISBN: 9780295750491).

In James Scott's enlightening perspective, the uplands of Southeast Asia have long been *loci* of desertion and opposition to the state. In these natural theaters, characterized by mountainous and forest environments, people have wandered and grown crops, hunted and extracted natural resources such as wood for their own survival, escaping the often tyrannical and homogenizing eye of the state. However influential, Scott's view was molded by his study of premodern interactions between states and non-state peoples in the highland of «Zomia» prelude to the rise of the modern state in the early 20th century [Scott 2009].

By contrast, *Upland Geopolitics* by Michael B. Dwyer aims at updating this debate focusing on north-western Laos against the backdrop of a «global land rush» (2), i.e., the proliferation of transnational land deals across the global South and the rise of China in the political and economic order of the Asia-Pacific region. Dwyer does so by adopting a political ecology perspective apt to show the interrelatedness of nature and politics. Based on decade-long research, the book is articulated in five main chapters each of which focuses on a specific phase in the history of spatial politics in Laos.

As Dwyer points out in the introduction of the volume, «the uplands are a biophysical and socio-ecological landscape» that are «at once spaces themselves and a way of looking at space» (9-10). Particularly, from the state's «lowland» perspective, uplands are remote forested and mountainous areas, home to ethnic minority groups who practice shifting cultivation. In this context, central and local governments, private companies, local power brokers and local dwellers establish «complex relations» as both actors and objects of development initiatives, wealth extraction, political control, and so forth. Contra the so-called «authority gap» explanation, according to which transnational deals leading to land grabs are caused by the lack of good governance in the host nation, Dwyer adopts the concept of micro-geopolitics which effectively subsumes both the global and «enclosed» dimensions of the land grab phenomenon in the context of continental Southeast Asia. This multi-level and multi-dimensional competition for enclosures where to monetize local resources, including workforce, has been undoubt-

edly facilitated by modern technologies (infrastructures and motor vehicles) and the social marginality of upland inhabitants.

Chapter 1 carefully depicts the current state of Lao-Chinese rubber development cooperation against the backdrop of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the light of the relative novelty of the infrastructural development process of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), in the following chapter, Dwyer traces the origin of the enclosure movement in Laos up to the Cold War years. Specifically, the author singles out the role played by US intelligence officials and aid programs in the context of the so-called «Secret War» and confrontation between the loyalist forces and Pathet Lao between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, in shaping Laos path of territorial dis-integration and dis-connectedness. As a result of these events, a sense of «national unreality» still looms in the country's north-western regions (51-53). Particularly, following the French example, US strategists empowered local ethnic leaders to nurture administrative autonomy and recruit anti-Communist fighters in the highlands in what could be termed a «late-colonial military strategy» (61). Running counter to such a plan, in the 1960s and 1970s, the government of the PRC started providing aid to Vientiane to break its isolation and help its government to counterbalance the US and USSR's influences.

Apart from its «border shifting» effects that were reported in US Congressional reports in the early 1970s (69), it was on these routes that dozens of Lao refugees crossed to Yunnan and learnt about rubber tapping, eventually bringing key know-how back to their country in the late 1980s and 1990s (24-25). Ultimately, this knowledge provided the grounds upon which the Lao national and provincial governments moved to eliciting rubber farming as a key to establishing permanent livelihoods in north-western border regions. In this regard, chapter 3, dedicated to the issue of population management and relocations, is particularly worth discussing as the consequences of the Pathet Lao regime's technocratic schemes vis-a-vis political capital-poor ethnic populations emerge. Borrowing from colonial and US techniques, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Lao authorities implemented enclosure and people resettlement policies aimed at creating «focal development» sites that besides developmental considerations, Dwyer argues, had a specific security rationale. The diffusion of state-managed agroforestry systems, whereby local dwellers were granted the temporary use of plots of land under the supervision of state-owned forestry companies, infrastructure development, and resettlement programs targeting Hmong communities in particular, served, on the one hand, to promote local development and, on the other, to reduce the economic base of target communities, hence curbing possible sources of «security problems» and pushing fractions of these to relocate in lowland areas. As demonstrated by the Muang Huong focal site and elsewhere, this strategy was instrumental in the state's advance into the inner upland.



Particularly interesting in this discussion is the role of European advisors (particularly Swedish) working with the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) government officials to develop the country's forestry. In a report widely cited in the chapter, at one point, it is suggested that «to speed up out-migration of the high mountains [...] even stronger efforts than hitherto are made to favour education of the children among the hill tribes», as to alleviate the demographic pressure on the state's forestry operations (93).

On top of these facts, the decision by the Lao PDR to embrace market-oriented reforms in the late 1980s under the motto «turning battlefields into marketplaces» played a crucial role in further supporting uneven zoning initiatives in the northern regions. As the author points out, «For Lao leaders rubber exemplified both a vision for the desired upland agrarian transition to “permanent livelihoods” and, via the investment and state subsidies offered by China's “Going Out” policy, a means to finance it» (102). Nevertheless, Chinese investments in the region only added up to historically consolidated layers of complexity and unevenness. The cases presented in chapter 4 poignantly demonstrate this point. Despite promises of stability and prosperity for resettled and displaced communities in focal sites through land concessions to foreign investors, state's programs for land management and control failed, causing fractions of the target sub-populations to go back to slash and burn agriculture on a reduced land area. Dwyer details forms of deception and evasion from state's directives (such as altering maps) and workings of contemporary capitalism and aid regimes (such as smallholder rubber production) that are reminiscent of the «hidden transcripts» so cogently described again by Scott [1990].

Instead of illustrating a win-win strategy, the book digs deeper into a fluid and dynamic situation where only partial and precarious gains are possible. On the one hand, transnational land deals have helped Chinese authorities to achieve several targets such as (a) partially tackling domestic problems such as heroin consumption by way of opium-replacement subsidies to Golden triangle nations (including Laos); (b) supporting Chinese companies' business expansion abroad; and (c) establishing new political and economic asymmetries with neighbours for diplomatic leverage [see on this Han 2019]. On the other, however, they urged Chinese companies to manage the «social» aspects of land availability, i.e., its exposure to particular interests on the ground, long standing patron-client networks relying on the agency of provincial, district and village-level administrators, which require additional investments in capital and workforce. As detailed in chapter 5 of the book, foreign businesses' as well as the central government's aspirations and policies to enhance one locale's legibility often clash with historically determined fractures exposing an ongoing process of state formation.

Considering the above, the book sheds light on the outstanding complexity of transnational land deals focusing on an often-neglected case such

as that of Laos. Dense and rich in details, the result of the extensive ethnographic work conducted by the author, the book may result in an arduous reading for non-specialists. However, the use of maps, photos, and narrative sketches at the opening of each chapter, and summaries at their ends, help the reader to navigate the text more easily. At any rate, the book offers a timely analysis of several issues of global significance as it clearly stresses the importance of zoning strategies for Laos and other governments in the so-called «global South», but, most importantly, in continental Southeast Asia. With an innovative methodology which accepts complexity rather than obliterating it, *Upland Geopolitics* epitomizes the difficulties and the struggles that state administrators face in their strive to project state power on a territory over which they proclaim sovereignty. Despite the increased availability of modern technology and, thus, state capacities, diversity of economic models and lifestyles can still survive through engagement and negotiation though in an increasingly compressed space.

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