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Land grabs and labour: Vietnamese workers on rubber plantations in southern Laos

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Since the early 2000s the Lao government has dramatically increased the number of large-scale land concessions issued for agribusinesses. While studies have documented the social and environmental impacts of land dispossession, the role of Vietnamese labour on these Vietnamese-owned rubber plantations has not previously been investigated. Taking a political ecology approach, we situate this study at the intersection between 'land grabbing' studies and work on 'labour geographies'. Most of the remittances generated from Vietnamese working in Laos are used for non-agricultural purposes, with people purposely choosing to *not* invest in agriculture in Vietnam. Vietnamese labour on Lao plantations still has significant spatial implications, both in Laos and in Vietnam, including through the norms, formal rules and practices introduced at rubber plantations by Vietnamese workers and management, but also through labour regime changes in Vietnam. In Laos, one of the most significant results has been to make certain spaces less welcoming to Lao labour. This study particularly points to the importance of geopolitics, as the close political relationship between Laos and Vietnam, and the fact that Vietnamese companies and managers are involved, is crucial for understanding the particular nature of the labour geographies associated with Vietnamese rubber plantations in Laos.

Keywords: Land concessions, Laos, Vietnam, labour, migration, rubber

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Introduction

The links between land grabbing and labour have so far been understudied. Tania Murray Li (Li, 2011; 2014) has, however, pointed to the importance of labour when considering land grabbing, although she focuses on displaced so-called 'surplus labour' from Sulawesi, Indonesia. As she points out, in Southeast Asia, land is in high demand, although the labour of those who inhabited it may not be (Li, 2011; 2014). Another type of labour entangled with land grabs are workers who cross national borders for employment on large-scale land concessions. Pye *et al.* (2012), for example, conducted research with Indonesian labourers working on Malaysian palm oil plantations, arguing that in order to achieve their aspirations, workers frequently have to be innovative to adapt to or circumvent a precarious labour regime. The topic of precarious labour has also caught the interest of other labour geographers (Coe, 2012; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). In this article, however, our focus differs from those of both Li and Pye and colleagues, as the Vietnamese working on plantations in Laos tend to occupy more senior and influential positions than those

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who Li and Pye wrote about, and the geopolitical circumstances are also quite different. We consider the Vietnamese labour working on large-scale rubber plantation concessions in southern Laos, arguing that it is crucial to study the implications of such transnational labour movements for plantations land concessions, and that to do this it is necessary to consider the contexts under which transnational labour migration occurs. We also demonstrate that one of the key impacts of the creation of Vietnamese plantation spaces is to variously discourage many Lao workers and other Lao people from interacting with these places, which often feel uncomfortable and foreign to them, even though they are inside Laos. In this examination, we adopt a political ecology approach that is attentive to a variety of issues broadly related to political economy and ecology (Forsyth, 2003; Robbins, 2004). We position the paper at the intersection between land grab debates and the emerging field of labour geographies, as we believe that a contextualized labour geographies approach can be useful for conceptualizing the role of labour in how plantation concessions develop.

Vietnamese immigration to Laos has been a contentious issue at least since French colonialists began recruiting Vietnamese labour to work for their government in the 1890s. Even today Vietnamese immigration for work remains controversial in Laos, particularly as large numbers of Vietnamese have immigrated to engage in various kinds of work in Laos, from construction to logging, and from small to large-scale trading. While some research has been conducted on Vietnamese labour in Laos (Nguyễn, 2008; Phạm, 2008; Thipmuntaly, 2008; Lê, 2011), including involvement in logging operations (Baird, 2010b; Forest Trends, 2009), and rubber plantation development more generally (Baird, 2010a; 2011; Baird & Le Billon, 2012; Laungaramsri, 2012: Kenney-Lazar, 2012; Global Witness, 2013), nobody has so far specifically investigated the role of Vietnamese labour in developing plantation land concessions. Nor has anyone interrogated Vietnamese labour in Laos using geographical approaches. Here, we examine Vietnamese labourers working on rubber plantations in Bachiang District, Champasak Province; Thateng District, Xekong Province; and Phou Vong, Xaysettha and Sanxay Districts, Attapeu Province (Figure 1) (Baird & Fox, 2015). Similar to Pye *et al*. (2012), we seek to better understand transnational labour migration to work on plantations through the examination of processes of Vietnamese labourer migration to southern Laos to work on Vietnamese-operated rubber plantations, including how these migrant labourers affect the spaces they work in and come from. We believe that advances can be made through applying a labour geographies framework, as recent conceptualizations of labour geographies have striven to both recognize the agency of labour, but with labour being embedded in broader social processes. Therefore, this study differs considerably from past research conducted regarding labour and land concession plantations in Southeast Asia. Specifically, our framing is particularly useful for considering the cases we are interested in because not only has labour come from a foreign country (Vietnam), but the owners of the plantations are also Vietnamese and are imbedded in important geopolitical circumstances associated with the 'special relationship' between Laos and Vietnam. Indeed, we argue that geopolitics is crucial for understanding the role of labour and the way it is positioned with regards to plantation spaces. Thus, we hope to demonstrate that taking a geopolitically-informed labour geographies approach helps illuminate the ways that concession plantations linked to land grabs are being developed, and how Lao people often feel excluded from these spaces.

A diversity of types of labour implications

Over the last decade or more, serious concerns have been forwarded regarding the granting of large-scale land concessions to foreign investors (Borras *et al*. 2011; De Schutter, 2011; Borras & Franco, 2012; Cotula, 2012; Wolford *et al*., 2013), particularly in the tropics and subtropics, including in Southeast Asia (Hall, 2011; Hall *et al*., 2011). Considerable concern has been generated regarding land relations across space, contributing to an expanding literature about present-day concession-caused land alienation and social and environmental impacts (Borras *et al*., 2011; Peluso & Lund, 2011; White *et al*., 2012; Wolford *et al*., 2013). There is, however, a need to study both labour issues linked to those displaced by plantation development, and also the opportunities and disadvantages associated with people who work on plantations far away from where they live. This is important because labour movements are an important part of plantation development and spatial changes, but have so far not been sufficiently investigated.

Applying ideas associated with the emerging subfield in economic geography of labour geographies for making links between migrant labour and land concessions in mainland Southeast Asia is promising, especially when situated in a broader political ecology framework. The first period of specific study of the geography of labour developed following World War II and continued up until the 1970s. Initially, dominated by neoclassical economists and locational theorists who saw labour as a form of capital (Herod, 2001; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011), it was often assumed that 'spatial economic phenomena could be expressed in an explicitly abstract, formal, and rationalist vocabulary and directly connected to the empirical world' (Yeung & Lin, 2003: 112). Since researchers generally elevated firms in importance, little theorizing was done regarding the role of labour, including its agency, and labour was generally not thought of as playing a major role in producing particular economic geographies. Later, Marxist geographers became interested in class in relation to labour, but tended to see capital as the key element responsible for structuring economies, thus relegating labour to a subordinate level of analysis (Massey, 1995; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011).

Beginning from when Andrew Herod (1997) coined the term 'labour geographies', literature in this field has examined particular economic geographies of capitalism through the lens of labour (Herod, 1997: 3). The literature as a whole conceptualizes workers as active and capable agents (Castree, 2007), although some, such as Glassman (2004: 589), caution that organized labour should not be 'considered as having a kind of autonomy from capitalists, the state, or civil society'. In line with this, Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011: 211) have cautioned that worker strategies must always be assessed in relation to wider social relations, suggesting the need for a 'constrained, variegated notion of labour agency'. Since the 2000s, labour geographies research has been extended to encompass new sectors beyond labour unions, including community organizing; new arenas of action; new modes of organization; and new and more internationalized geographical domains. In addition, ideas about worker agency have been fleshed out and further conceptualized, and also (re)politicized and (re)institutionalized. Worker agency is now seen as being relational to various other factors, thus moving toward a less abstracted approach, one that can more easily accommodate people with different reasons for engaging in the same outward labour struggles, one that can be characterized as viewing agency/structure as *variegated*, and one that considers grounded processes of reworking and resistance (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Coe, 2012). In short, we should be aspiring to the type of holistic understanding of the worker that Castree (2007)

advocated, whereas labourers are recognized as being capable agents, but also as being influenced by those who employ and otherwise interact with them.

More recently, conceptualizations of labour geographies have increasingly become international and cross-border in nature (Pratt, 2012; Herod, 2004; Glassman, 2004). Moreover, labour geographers have been paying increasing attention to social problems, such as those that emerge within families when they are physically separated over long distances during work migration periods (Pratt, 2012). As Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011: 211) put it, '[Labour geographies are] perhaps best encapsulated as a loose grouping of like-minded individuals united by a desire to reveal the multiple geographies that underpin the everyday worlds of work and employment'. This being the case, viewing labourers as active agents, but ones embedded in structures and also wide social processes, makes a labour geographies framework useful for examining Vietnamese labourers working on plantations in Laos. Through this approach, we can more easily identify the ways that labourers are both embedded in structures and social processes, and also actively affecting plantation geographies in Laos and linked landscapes in Vietnam.

Methods

We focused our research on three areas dominated by large-scale rubber plantations (see Figure 1). These include:

1. Three 10 000 ha concessions located (about 30 000 ha in total) in Bachiang District, Champasak Province, and some surrounding parts of Champasak and Salavan Provinces; managed by the Đắc Lắk Company, the Việt-Lào Company, and the Dầu Tiếng Company;
2. An approximately 5000 ha concession in Thateng District, Xekong Province managed by the Việt-Lào Company; and
3. An approximately 40 000 ha of land concessions in Phou Vong, Xaysettha and Sanxay Districts in Attapeu Province managed by the Hoang Anh Gia Lai Group (HAGL).

All these concessions have been implicated in serious negative social and environmental impacts (Obein, 2007; Baird, 2010a; 2011; Laungaramsri, 2012; Lao Biodiversity Association, 2008; Kenney-Lazar, 2012; Global Witness, 2013). These concessions were granted by the Lao central government in the mid-2000s before the first moratorium on new plantation land concessions was issued in May 2007 (Baird, 2010a). However, the expansion of concessions continued well after the moratorium since preexisting concessions were still allowed to develop.

The first author, Ian Baird, has peripherally studied Vietnamese labour on rubber plantations in southern Laos for several years (Baird, 2010a; 2011; Baird & Le Billon, 2012). To learn more about the lives of the Vietnamese labourers and their homes in Vietnam we enlisted, William Noseworthy, a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who is fluent in Vietnamese to conduct field interviews since most Vietnamese rubber workers speak little Lao or English. Noseworthy interviewed approximately ten tappers at each of the three main survey sites, as well as workers in other occupations, ultimately interviewing more than 50 people in total. A dozen interviews were conducted by the first author in Lao with Lao government officials with relations with concessions, and Lao overseers and managers working for the companies. In May 2015, at the beginning of Noseworthy's fieldwork, and in July 2015,

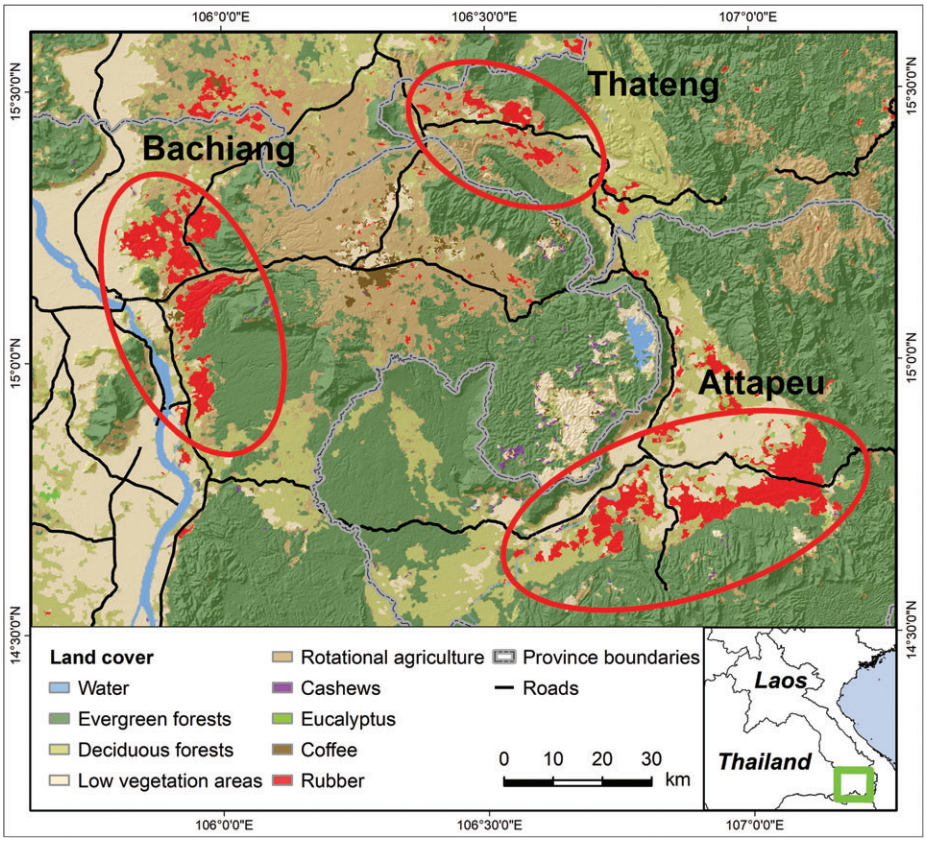

Figure 1. *Map indicating places in Southeast Asia discussed in article.*
Source: **Produced for this article by Kasper Hurni.**

November 2016, February 2017, and June 2017, the first author visited all the field sites in southern Laos to observe circumstances in the field and interview Lao speakers.

In 2016, Le Thu Ha, who is from Vietnam and is a native speaker of Vietnamese, conducted interviews with 10 people in Vietnam that have family members working for Vietnamese rubber plantations in Laos. These interviews were carried out in several villages in Gio Châu Commune in Gio Linh District, Quảng Trị Province, and in Hòa Vang Village, Lộc Bổn Commune, Phú Lộc District, Huế City (see Figure 2). The interviewees were asked questions about the nature of their relatives' work in Laos, remittances, and how remittance income was utilized in Vietnam.

A brief history of Vietnamese labour in Laos and geopolitics

There have been interactions between the Lao and Vietnamese for thousands of years, but in the modern era, the French colonials first recruited large numbers of Vietnamese labourers to work in Laos during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They also encouraged Vietnamese to move to Laos to engage in commerce (Dương Bích Hạnh, 2014). The Lao Prince Chao Phetxarath Ratanavongsa, from the Luang Phrabang Royal House, was especially critical of Vietnamese immigration to Laos, and unsuccessfully tried to replace Vietnamese civil servants with citizens of Laos in the

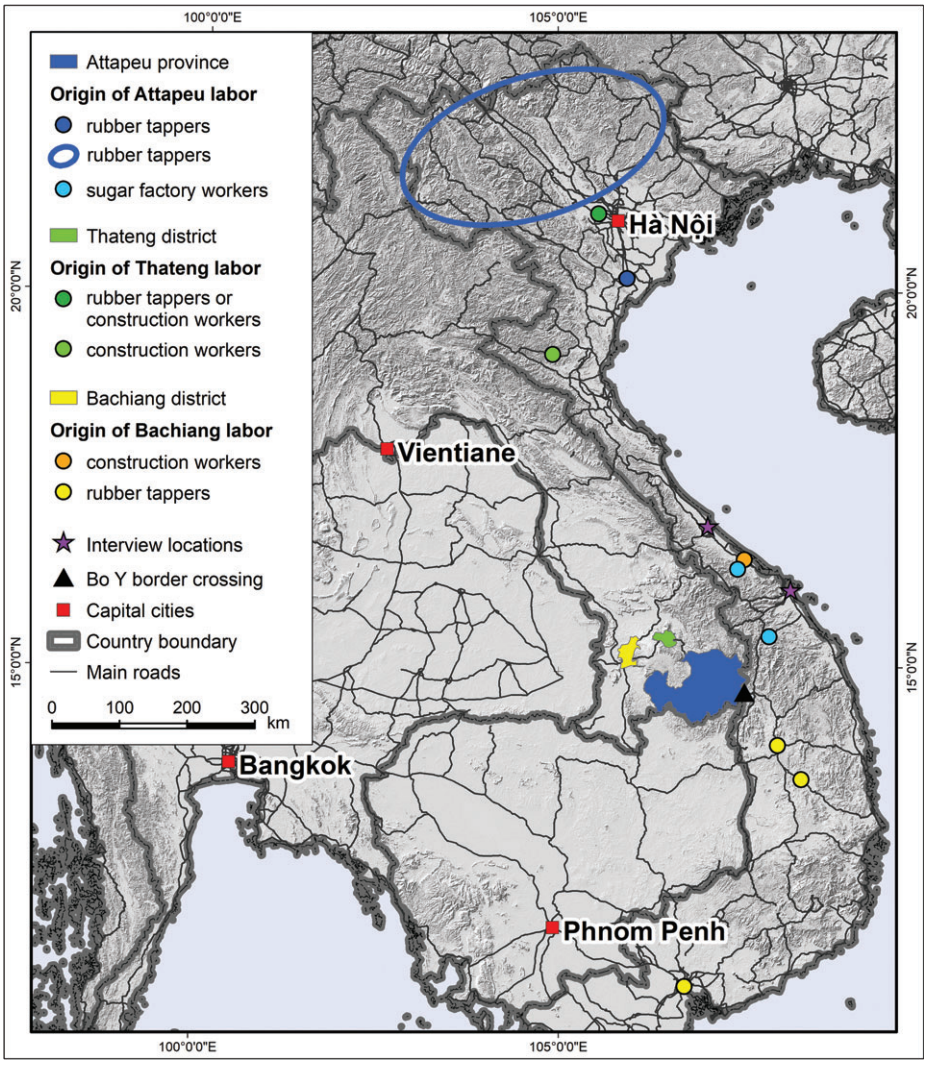

Figure 2. *Major Vietnamese rubber concessions in southern Laos where research was conducted for this article.*
Source: **Produced for this article by Kasper Hurni.**

1930s (Dommen, 2001). After World War II, many Viet Minh followers of Ho Chi Minh fought in Laos in support of the overall communist movement to oust the French colonialists from Indochina. Others fled from Vietnam to Laos and Thailand after coming into conflict with the French.

After the French were decisively defeated at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ (1954), large numbers of Vietnamese became established in Laos' northern provinces of Phongsaly and Houaphanh, where they supported the Pathet Lao (Goscha, 2005). Even after the Second Geneva Accords (1962) established Laos as a 'neutral' country—with no foreign soldiers to be based there—tens of thousands of soldiers from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam remained in Laos, where they fought against the Royal Lao Army and the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-supported Special Guerilla

Units (SGUs) whose American advisors were also stationed illegally in the country (Conboy, 1995). After the Pathet Lao took control of the government in 1975, they called upon Vietnamese troops to fight a growing anti-communist insurgency, especially after the July 1977 Special Friendship Agreement between Laos and Vietnam (Chanda, 1986; Evans, 2002), an agreement that is extremely important for understanding the geopolitics associated with rubber plantation development in Laos today. After 1975, there was a steady flow of Vietnamese migrants to Laos, many of whom initially worked on development cooperation efforts between the two countries. They included soldiers, advisors, construction workers, and other labourers, who often worked on short term assignments or contracts, although some stayed longer. Some settled in Laos after marrying Lao nationals. Since the 1990s, there have been large numbers of Vietnamese labourers doing temporary work in Laos, particularly in the logging and construction sectors (Phạm, 2008; *VN Express*, 2013).

One of the key lessons that comes out of this research is that this history is crucial for understanding rubber plantation labour geographies in Laos. Indeed, geopolitics informed by history have been crucial for facilitating Vietnamese plantation investments in Laos, and for ensuring that Vietnamese companies receive sufficient support from different levels of Lao government (see Kenney-Lazar, 2016; Baird & Le Billon 2012; Baird, 2010a). This makes it relatively easy for Vietnamese companies to operate in Laos, and for Vietnamese to work there, either legally, grey-legally or illegally (see Baird, 2010a). The atmosphere that politically elevates Vietnam in Laos is crucial for raising the confidence of Vietnamese to work in Laos, as we were told by various Vietnamese labourers working in Laos that these circumstances makes them much less fearful of Lao authorities. It also reduces the type of precarity that is often associated with transnational labour in Southeast Asia (Pye *et al.*, 2012), since Vietnamese workers in Laos generally feel less vulnerable. For example, many grey-legal Vietnamese enter Laos legally, but do not have the required permits but are still within the grace period of the approval window. Others may have had proper documents in the past but have overstayed their visas. These labourers are unlikely to be intensely scrutinized by Lao authorities because of the special relation between Laos and Vietnam. Thus many maintain a quasi-legal status supported through geopolitics.

This does not mean, however, that the Lao government does not at times have important impacts on Vietnamese labour. For example, beginning in 2016, the Lao government began enforcing labour laws more rigorously, apparently as part of the new Prime Minister's (Thongloun Sisoulith), efforts to professionalize and systematize the government system in Laos. One Lao citizen who works for HAGL reported that HAGL's business model was partially based on the assumption that they would be able to circumvent many Lao laws, including those related to labour. But following the President of the Lao PDR's (2007) decree on the amended Labour Law, and the Lao PDR government's decree 03, regarding foreign labour in Laos, which came into effect in 2011 (*Vientiane Times*, 2012), stricter rules have been increasingly enforced. Now HAGL must buy health insurance for all its workers, which costs about USD 30 per month for each worker. Moreover, while previously only about half of the Vietnamese working for HAGL had proper paperwork, now the company is being pressured to ensure that all workers have completed paperwork. This enforcement of previously unenforced or poorly enforced regulations is unexpectedly increasing the costs of doing business in Laos.

But even with this more nuanced understanding, it is still crucial that these rubber plantation companies are Vietnamese, as it is widely believed that Vietnamese

companies have much more freedom to operate in Laos than companies from other countries. The geopolitical circumstances allow them to spatially organize their plantations with less interference from Lao officials.

Vietnamese migration to Laos for plantation work

Citizens of Vietnam have been working on rubber plantations in southern Laos since the mid-2000s, when Vietnamese companies were first granted land concessions in Bachiang District, Champasak Province. The concessions were immediately of considerable concern to local populations that were dispossessed of their farm lands and common forests (Obein, 2007; Baird, 2010a; 2011; Laungaramsri, 2012). At first, Vietnamese worked in management and training positions, while small numbers of skilled labourers migrated to operate bulldozers and other equipment needed to clear the land before planting (Baird, 2010a). More recently, as rubber trees planted in the 2000s have matured enough to tap,[1] Vietnamese labourers have shifted positions. Now they are managers, tappers, truck drivers transporting liquid rubber for processing, and rubber processing factory workers.

Most Vietnamese workers we interviewed were recruited through corresponding offices of the Vietnam Rubber Group (Việt-Lào Company) or HAGL corporations in Vietnam, the two rubber developing companies of interest here. Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) and Coe (2012) have emphasized the importance of these types of intermediaries when investigating labour geographies. In these cases, the companies practice 'open call recruiting', where they make public announcements to recruit unemployed labourers. However, the labourers themselves do a fair amount of recruiting through their own extended kinship networks, marriages and peer-networks.

At the Dầu Tiếng concession in Bachiang District, Champasak Province we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 low level construction workers who were recruited to work on projects associated with a new rubber processing plant completed in 2015. These construction workers were recruited through extended family and peer-networks. They grew up in the same neighbourhood nearby the Phú Bài airport in Huế, Central Vietnam. Many had previously worked together, and they were all 25 to 30 years old. One man reported that they were originally employed by different companies, but were hired and relocated to Laos one by one, but in rapid succession. Then, when the most recent construction contract came, they agreed to sign as a team. They desired secure work and there were few job prospects near Huế.

The Lao government legally limits the number of foreign workers permitted to work for foreign investment projects to 10 per cent of the workforce, arguing that this will increase employment opportunities for Lao citizens (Baird, 2010a; 2011). In fact, the number of Vietnamese working for plantation concessions is higher, sometimes much higher. For example, *Vietnam Rubber Magazine* reported in April 2015 that over 17 per cent of the people working for Việt-Lào Company in Bachiang District are Vietnamese (Tây Ninh Rubber Company, 2015). In another example, a Lao senior manager for HAGL in Attapeu Province informed us that HAGL initially negotiated with the Lao government to have 30 per cent Vietnamese workers. If a company can make an argument that there is a skilled labour shortage in Laos, the exceptions can be expanded. Hence, the same HAGL manager reported that in 2015, a staggering 93 per cent of the employees (both skilled and not skilled) at their Attapeu plantation concessions were Vietnamese. Some Vietnamese managers and labourers reported that Lao citizens were unreliable and unwilling to work consistently, making it necessary to hire more

Vietnamese to fill required positions. This impression may exist because local people in the area have not yet been socialized to work consistently over long periods as labourers. In any case, this argument was brought to the Lao government, which subsequently approved the request. Although it is not clear how these exceptions are negotiated, we suggest that the privileged positions of Vietnamese companies play a role in their ability to circumvent stated policy.

A significant number of Vietnamese have worked illegally on rubber plantations in Laos (Baird, 2010a). In 2013, for example, it was revealed that 5000 of 7000 foreign workers surveyed in Laos were working illegally. Most were from Vietnam and China (KPL, 2015). Additionally, it seems likely that many foreigners working in Laos were not included in the study. Furthermore, even as the Lao government became concerned about illegal labour in Laos (KPL, 2015; *Vientiane Times*, 2012), in November 2016, a senior HAGL employee in Attapeu claimed that there were still many Vietnamese working for them illegally, meaning without finalized or up-to-date formal permission paperwork. Although Vietnamese labour has been especially important for the HAGL concession in Attapeu Province—probably because there is less local labour there, and Attapeu is closer to Vietnam—we suggest that Vietnamese labour has had an integral role in the development of the concession, as well as those in Thateng District, Xekong Province and Bachiang District in Champasak Province.

The Việt-Lào Company was the first to cultivate rubber in southern Laos in the early 2000s, beginning in Bachiang District, Champasak Province (Obein, 2007; Baird, 2010a) and soon after in Thateng District, Xekong Province (Lao Biodiversity Association, 2008) (Figure 1). In 2015, there were 2978 people working for the Việt-Lào Company in Bachiang District: 2453 were Lao and 525 were Vietnamese. The company claims to cover health costs and health insurance for all employees (Ngọc Câm, 2015). They also built 22 'settlement huts' for workers, with 110 rooms, costing USD 1.25 million, as well as 50 wooden housing units with multiple levels, upgraded the general village settlement roads, and invested USD 1.2 million in small damming projects to support irrigation.[2] Việt-Lào Company developed the first rubber processing factory in Bachiang in 2011–2. The average worker's monthly gross income (including housing, food, and health care) was reportedly USD 298 in 2014. In the first quarter of 2015, company reports suggest, however, that it declined to USD 200 per person per month (Ngọc Câm, 2015), probably due to declines in rubber prices, or an increase in the relative number of labour positions to management positions.

HAGL's holdings in Attapeu (Figure 1) are more diverse than Việt-Lào's. They include large areas of rubber, but also oil palm, special fodder grasses for raising beef cattle, fruit, and until recently, corn and sugar cane. As of 2015, HAGL had over 3000 workers in Attapeu Province, which accounted for more than 50 per cent of the known Vietnamese labourers in Laos (*Saigon Times*, 2014). They have also built substantial accommodations for workers in Attapeu.

So why have so many Vietnamese opted to work on rubber plantations in southern Laos? The main explanation is that they earn more in Laos than they do conducting equivalent work in Vietnam. Illustrative of this, the Tây Ninh Rubber Company, one of the Vietnam Rubber Group's companies in Vietnam, reported an average salary of just USD 178 per person per month in Vietnam in April 2015 (Tây Ninh Rubber Company, 2015), which is less than the USD 200 per person per month mentioned above for Laos. Moreover, in 2015, at least 15 Vietnamese rubber tappers from rural areas in northern Vietnam worked for HAGL in Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province, which also employed 40 Lao tappers. Most of the Vietnamese had previously worked as

rubber tappers in Vietnam. Crucially, all reported that the price that they received for rubber in Vietnam was less than what they were paid in Laos, and that this is what attracted them to work in Attapeu. Reported prices for latex were as low as USD 0.22 to 0.28 per litre (Vietnam), compared to USD 0.37 to 0.50 per litre (Laos). This is important, as tappers in both countries are typically paid based on the amount of latex harvested and the price being paid by the company for the latex. Although the evidence suggests that Vietnamese tappers, on average, earn less in Vietnam than they do in Laos, incomes do vary. At one rubber collection point in Xaysettha District, we met 40 rubber tappers. Only four or five were Lao, the rest were Vietnamese. The Vietnamese claimed that they could make USD 375 to 500 per month tapping in the dry season, and about USD 250 per month in the rainy season, due to water contamination and lost tapping days resulting from rain. These tappers generally expressed satisfaction with the wages.

Nevertheless, Lao citizens in Bachiang told us that there were previously more Vietnamese working for the rubber companies, but that since the prices of rubber began declining in 2011 (*Vientiane Times*, 2014a; 2014b), it has become less lucrative to tap rubber, thus leading many Vietnamese tappers to either take on more supplemental work, or to return to Vietnam. However, Vietnamese in higher positions have fixed salaries and have not left their positions as frequently as have rubber tappers. As the price of rubber has declined, so have employee benefits. For example, in July 2015 some tappers reported having previously received bonuses of USD 2.50 for working on Sundays, but those bonuses disappeared when rubber prices declined. We also heard that in 2013, tappers received annual bonuses of USD 100, but that in 2014, the bonus declined to USD 37.50, and in 2015 they did not receive any bonus.

The role of Vietnamese management and labour in producing rubber plantation spaces in southern Laos

Vietnamese management and labourers are both crucial for producing plantation spaces, as are the Vietnamese plantation owners, as these spaces are ones that Lao workers and other Lao people often feel uncomfortable in. The broad organization is, of course, largely determined by the plantation owners, who engage with Lao government officials. The plantations themselves, in terms of how the trees are ordered, and where the roads and latex collection points are located, are largely determined by Vietnamese management. Within the plantations, however, tapping practices are affected by Vietnamese norms, but also by individual preferences. The depth in which tappers cut trees, and practices related to the use of fertilizers and hormones, are all variable to a certain degree, and are part of how plantation spaces are co-produced, with management and tappers both playing roles. Tappers are assigned particular lots, where they have some agency. For example, two of the fastest Vietnamese tappers working for HAGL claimed that they make deeper cuts than other tappers, which yield them more latex. This is a practice they learned from Vietnam. Most tappers get only 40 litres per day per tree, but they reported obtaining up to 80 litres.

The concessions are subdivided into estates with approximately 50 workers at each location. This mirrors the way that rubber plantations in Vietnam are organized. An array of signs, posters and memos in Vietnamese language are visible, while Vietnamese TV or music is commonly played. The buildings have been constructed by Vietnamese, and resemble buildings constructed for the same purpose in Vietnam, in relation to size and design. As these sorts of plantations did not occur in southern Laos before the

2000s, equivalent buildings did not previously exist. Vietnamese language is frequently spoken. They give both Lao and Vietnamese people the sense that these spaces are Vietnamese, and this has important implications for the level of comfort that both Vietnamese and Lao people have working in them. Illustrative of this, Lao forestry officials told the first author that they rarely went to the offices of Vietnamese rubber companies because only Vietnamese people stayed there and the Lao officials could not speak Vietnamese.

One good example of a Vietnamese rubber concession camp can be found at the Việt-Lào Company concession in Thateng District, Xekong Province (Figure 1). Approximately 40 workers were staying there in July 2015, almost all of whom came from outside Hanoi in northern Vietnam. As of 2015, nearly half had been there for 10 months, the next largest group had been working for the company for more than one year. Yet, only a few had lived in the vicinity for longer than a year. Still, they put their marks on all aspects of the concession, as they were working as construction workers, truck drivers, mechanics and field labourers. They reported preferring not to tap rubber since it requires long hours and pays less, although 10 worked as tappers. All aspects of the space, from small eatery stands, to motorbike repair stalls, were Vietnamese.

'Tapper spaces', or the locations where tappers live and work on the plantations, were simpler than the quarters of mechanics and managers, which fits with the general understanding that the Vietnamese people who work in these spaces have—that camp workers belong to a higher class than tappers. The men and women tappers we interviewed were in their 30s and 40s and had come from various parts of Vietnam: Gò Vấp District in HCMC; outside of Plei Ku City, Gia Lai Province; as well as Bình Dương Province, just outside of HCMC. Two were from Ninh Bình Province in northern Vietnam. Most had moved to Laos within the previous two years, although one individual (from HCMC) had lived in Laos for seven years and had a Lao wife.[3] In Thateng, tappers and other Vietnamese workers made up 25 per cent of the camp's labour, a higher percentage than in the Bachiang Vietnamese camps, but less so than for HAGL's camps in Attapeu Province.

One Vietnamese tapping couple working in Thateng reported that while the husband had been a tapper in Vietnam, the wife had not. They sent money back to Vietnam to pay for child care, thus affecting spatial organization in Vietnam, since increased wealth allows people to do different things, hire people to work for them, buy different items, and build and reorganize different buildings and landscapes. They did not, however, wish to reinvest in farming in Vietnam, and considered it a dying occupation, preferring to focus on their child's education. The husband saved several months of income from tapping.[4] He also worked unofficially as a mechanic fixing the managers' motorbikes. He reported that he preferred rubber tapping because he considers it to be a healthier life style than working in a factory in an urban area, since he lives in a rural area with cleaner air, and is physically active when working. Indeed, individual lifestyle preferences are a significant factor.

Although Vietnamese labourers have varying degrees of knowledge about Lao labour regulations, the couple knew little. They reported having permission from all their Vietnamese managers to work as much as they pleased. This is important, as many Vietnamese labourers are more concerned about what their Vietnamese managers require than what Lao law stipulates, as they trust their managers to be diligent intermediaries. The position of management is tied to the substantial Vietnamese political influence in Laos, which makes it easier for companies, managers, and labourers to

operate. It allows the Vietnamese to set their own rhythm for tapping rubber, and adopt practices introduced from Vietnam. In the case of the Vietnamese couple, this meant applying techniques that fit with what the husband experienced as a tapper in Vietnam previously. For example, depth of tree cuts can differ, as can the amounts of hormone applied. These practices affect latex production and thus have important material implications. Vietnamese tappers also typically tap more trees per day than Lao tappers, which affects the number of tappers more generally, and the facilities required to house tappers. The couple noted that there is a hierarchy of tapping in the area, and that the Vietnamese tappers are at the top of their working pool because they have more experience, while tappers from Laos are at a lower level. This situation undoubtedly also has a lot to do with the fact that the companies are owned by Vietnamese and are managed by Vietnamese, with Vietnamese language being mostly used by the leadership. Their presentation of labour dynamics is indicative of a larger trend. Vietnamese have a significant role in the production of rubber plantation spaces because they set the rules and establish the tapping norms. But their role in the construction sector of the plantation industry may be even more significant, since structures are being built following Vietnamese practices. The skills and experience of many Vietnamese workers are used as reasons to elevate Vietnamese workers, and they also support generalized stereotypes about the Vietnamese being better workers than the Lao.

Return trips to Vietnam are one subtle but important way that Vietnamese workers affect their spaces. For example, some Vietnamese construction workers from Nghệ An and Ninh Bình Provinces and Hanoi who had lived in Thateng for almost 10 years reported initially coming to work for the company in Laos to build roads when the concession first started being developed. They generally return to Vietnam at least once a year, especially during the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, carrying between USD 1000 and 3000 each trip. The timing of these trips is part of the way that plantation spaces are being affected by Vietnamese labour, since much Vietnamese labour is absent during that season, thus affecting the way that plantations operate. This is also the time of year that their income affects spaces in Vietnam, since that is when they bring money home. None of these men reported planning on returning to Vietnam in the immediate future, unless they were offered better contracts there. But they were not excited to settle in Laos either. They generally considered Laos to be less modern and developed than Vietnam. Many also mentioned missing Vietnamese music and associated events in Vietnam. They reported that entertainment is more developed in Vietnam than in Laos.

In July 2015, Lao rubber tappers working for HAGL in Xaysettha District reported making about USD 125 for 15 days of tapping on lots of 600 trees per person, as they work long hours, from 1 a.m. to 10 a.m. each day, and they do not receive Sundays off, like workers in Bachiang do. There were no days off in Attapeu, unless when heavy rains make tapping impossible. This violates Lao law, but as with the Việt-Lào Company, HAGL is able to impose their own regulations, at least to some degree, and affect the way operations proceed and spaces are organized. Workers, however, can make choices about how many lots they tap, or how many shifts they work, as explained in more detail below.

Many tappers choose to tap only one hectare per day, but some tap as many as three or four. It thus takes only a few Vietnamese tappers to influence plantation spaces. If the tappers were Lao, and tapping just one lot each, many more tappers would be required to tap the same area. That would require more housing for tappers.

Moreover, the Vietnamese tappers tend to be more experienced, so they tend to become the model for Lao tappers. Still, both Vietnamese and Lao tappers in Attapeu generally collect less raw latex per day than their counterparts in Bachiang, where the soils are better and the trees are more mature. Thus the geography, and the environmental conditions, are also affecting how plantations are being spatially organized, as productivity levels and potential income affects the ability to recruit good tappers, both Vietnamese and Lao.

HAGL is supposed to take care of all the paperwork for the visas and work permits for their Vietnamese workers, but not all have complete paperwork. We heard in November 2016, that the company completed the official paperwork for some workers, and then brought other workers in to work illegally. If asked, these illegal workers would show the paperwork of those working legally. Keeping paperwork 'pending' also seems to be a sort of disciplinary measure used by Vietnamese management. One of the workers mentioned that 'as long as the paperwork is pending, if the manager is not happy, he can send us back!' This is one way that precarity is produced in plantation landscapes in Laos, something that has also been noted in other plantation spaces (Pye *et al*., 2012; Coe, 2012), but it must be recognized that there are different levels of precarity. For example, Indonesians working on Malaysian plantations are quite marginalized. In the case of Vietnamese working in Laos, they are generally situated in the higher levels of the worker hierarchy, and feel confident because they are Vietnamese, work for a Vietnamese company, and are linked with significant political power in Laos. Thus, the level of precarity for workers in Laos is much more limited than what exists elsewhere.

Of the more than 500 people who worked for the HAGL sugar factory in Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province in 2015, only a handful of security guards were from Laos. The rest were predominantly from Vietnam's central provinces such as Quảng Nam and Bình Định. Their work schedule was modeled on factory schedules in Vietnam: workers labour from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a 2-hour lunch break. More than half of the labour was between 18 and 25 years old, with the rest being middle-aged. Of a group of 50 workers, at least 10 males had families in Vietnam they sent remittances to; there were at least four young couples with children in Vietnam; and several others brought children with them. Another 10 were single males in their twenties. Roughly 40 per cent were women, half of whom were in their twenties, and half were working mothers. The large labour population required more services than a labour camp could provide. Hence, on the outskirts of the district centre, a newly established Vietnamese township (Vn.: *thị trấn*) had sprung up. There were barber shops, small eateries and karaoke bars to cater to factory and plantation workers. A row of houses constructed from sheet metal had Vietnamese 'For Sale' signs posted on them, but include Lao phone numbers. Land is technically owned by second or third generation Viet-Lao families, who have purchased it on behalf of more recent Vietnamese immigrants, especially employees of Việt-Lào Rubber Company, who reportedly enter into agreements with those Vietnamese who are now citizens of Laos. One can clearly see that the landscape is being affected by Vietnamese labour and associated businesses set up by other Vietnamese to serve them.

Vietnamese leaders of different labour camps are frequently fired by HAGL for stealing. An informant claimed that when HAGL first started operating in Attapeu, most of the Vietnamese managers were former military members who worked well but had lower levels of education. They were replaced by 'agricultural experts' from Vietnam,

who tended to be younger recent graduates of two-year agricultural technical colleges. He claimed that thievery became particularly problematic with this group. As a result, increased security measures have had to be instituted, including paying Lao policemen to provide security. This has increased the amount of scrutiny and security found in plantation spaces, and thus the atmosphere and relationships between management, employees and the Lao policemen. This is yet another way that Vietnamese labour is affecting—albeit indirectly—spatial organization in the camps and rubber plantations, as we contend that relationship changes inevitably result in spatial shifts, since people end up interacting differently with each other and the spaces they occupy.

Vietnamese managers and labourers play particularly important roles in co-producing plantation spaces, but there are also many other influences, including those introduced unevenly by the Lao government, due to different local implementation of laws and rules. In addition, however, Vietnamese plantation labour creates tapper spaces and tapper spaces create the possibility of supplemental employment, which is an important part of the labour geographies of Vietnamese rubber workers in Laos.

Supplemental employment

Migrant labourers from Vietnam associated with the Lao rubber industry often get involved in supplemental employment. This employment impacts economies that might not appear to be associated with rubber, or spatial organization, but in reality are a significant part of the rubber plantation spaces being produced. Examples include working in or owning restaurants, raising poultry, operating roadside repair shops, taking side jobs associated with plantation work (such as weeding), and mending clothes. Extra income is often highly gendered, with women working more in interior spaces, mending clothes and working in eateries, while men work more doing extra plantation work and or working at roadside repair shops. Workers reported they were told during the recruitment process that they would tap rubber from 4 a.m. to 10 a.m. on the plantation, and then could work a second shift tapping from noon to 7 p.m. This was a major reason why many took the work. However, few workers choose to work the second shift, instead opting to work in positions such as those highlighted above, which allow them to work near home. For example, in Xaysettha District, HAGL paid USD 0.25 for weeding around each oil palm tree. Moreover, a woman from Ninh Bình in her 50s made extra money mending clothes.

Both irregular and outside work is crucial. The ability of Vietnamese workers to take on additional work both for the companies and elsewhere is an important part of the way that labour geographies are established on the plantations in Laos. Some Vietnamese workers, particularly those associated with the HAGL plantation in Attapeu, claimed their side jobs were more lucrative than their main jobs. One Vietnamese tapper working in Attapeu, for example, claimed that workers earned much more by working 12-hour days, or earning an extra USD 11.25 per hectare of land they weed.

Bonuses also occasionally play an important role in the plantation economies in Laos. One male tapper who previously worked in Gia Lai Province, Vietnam, claimed he made USD 46 or more per month in bonuses, for a total monthly take home pay of USD 138. He tapped 3 ha per day. Higher wages in Laos were the reason for their migration, but these supplemental occupations significantly affect the lives of workers, those receiving remittances, and the labour market in Laos generally, and they influence the way plantation spaces are organized. The aggregate of supplemental wages also has a direct impact on the ability of individuals to send remittances to Vietnam.

Remittances to Vietnam

Remittances are widely accepted as crucial elements of migrant labour economies. Indeed, they play an important role in shaping spaces associated with rubber concessions, in both Laos and Vietnam, even though money transfer fees are often considered too high by Vietnamese labourers to send money. Those on shorter contracts generally prefer to carry remittances to Vietnam. Many long-term Vietnamese workers in Thateng return home three times a year. Vietnamese social norms impact the number of times that workers are allowed to return home each year, as well as when these occur, including during Vietnamese holidays such as the Lunar New Year. Near Thateng, there are few other options for sending remittances. Most migrants reported that they exchange Lao Kip to Vietnamese Dong in either Xekong or Attapeu towns and then carry it to Vietnam.

Vietnamese workers in Laos often take one or two months of savings with them to distribute in cash during the Lunar New Year. One Vietnamese tapper in her 30s and her husband, a security guard with the company, reported trying to send home as much as half of their combined earnings (about USD 321 per month); but they did not send money every month. Their family in Thanh Hóa Province was still primarily agrarian and the remittances were used to cover a variety of expenses. A few hundred dollars is enough to upgrade an ox cart to a water buffalo cart (which can carry at least twice as much load), purchase new parts for an irrigation system, repair an old one, or make home improvements. Still, savings are not usually sufficient for purchasing land: even land far outside Huế costs approximately USD 25 000 for 1000 m^2. Even a manager has problems saving sufficient money to buy land, let alone tappers, drivers, mechanics, and construction workers. One of the individuals we interviewed—a woman in her 30s from rural Phú Thiên District, Gia Lai Province, Vietnam, who had lived in Laos for only two years with her children, while her husband worked for the Việt-Lào Company—noted that she devotes her entire income (USD 92 per month) to remittances for her parents in Vietnam, where they spend the money on home improvements and health care.

Some claim that remittances are higher, mostly because their wages are higher. Of a group of 40 sugar cutters in Attapeu, one claimed he earned USD 350 per month, a basic biweekly salary supplemented by some extra income he earned in machine repair and maintenance. Among this group, the majority reported carrying money back to Vietnam every few months and one group of brothers claimed they had pooled funds within their family, contributing toward purchasing land far outside of Huế, newer motorbikes, and paid for technical schooling for their younger sister. Although their success seems disproportionate to their income, it is clear that remittances are influencing the organization of space in parts of Vietnam.

Two young men in their 20s in Bachiang stressed, however, that it is not always easy for Vietnamese workers to save money. One mentioned that construction workers sometimes spend two week's savings on a single day off on food and drinks for their peers. Nothing is left after. Others prefer to work in Laos because they are less likely to go into debt by overspending than in Vietnam. Some noted that they take special goods with them when they return: Thai foods, office supplies and educational supplies are cheaper in Laos. These can be gifted or sold to help supplement the cost of the trip.

Ethnic relations between Lao and Vietnamese

Our discussions with Lao people in Bachiang revealed that some Lao citizens do not want to work for the plantations because the bosses were mainly Vietnamese and were

believed to discriminate in favour of Vietnamese workers. This sort of advantage for migrant labour differs starkly from other migrant labour experiences, such as those that Pye *et al.* (2012) write about. Crucially, however, these circumstances tend to work in such a way as to reproduce themselves, because the sense that plantations are dominated by Vietnamese in various ways results in many Lao people preferring to work elsewhere. According to a Lao employee of HAGL, both Lao and Vietnamese labourers can make a lot of money if they work hard, but it is clear that the Vietnamese workers are the example in terms of how work should be done. Other Lao workers believe that their Vietnamese bosses make up excuses for why they should not be paid in full and cheat them of part of their salaries. Frequently, the top bosses pay Vietnamese middlemen who are responsible for groups of Lao labourers, and some Lao believe that these middlemen cheat them of part of their salary. Lao and Vietnamese workers tend to believe, however, that the Vietnamese generally pay Vietnamese labourers in full. They also believe that the Vietnamese tend to get higher pay for the same work, and are given the best paid and least dangerous jobs. For example, if Vietnamese workers are concerned about getting sick from using agricultural herbicides and pesticides, Lao workers are hired to do the work. The Vietnamese managers, however, explained that Vietnamese labourers often have more skills, training and experience before coming to Laos. In addition, Vietnamese tend to come to Laos with contracts pre-arranged in Vietnam.

We also heard this from a Lao labour manager for HAGL, who claimed, however, that the Vietnamese are tougher on their own people than they are on Lao employees, due to political concerns. If Vietnamese make mistakes, they are fired. If Lao make mistakes, they are only reprimanded. The Lao manager claimed, for example, that some Vietnamese were making USD 37.50 per day applying fertilizer on a per tree basis, while others typically made only USD 8.75 to USD 10 per day. When the discrepancy was investigated, it was found that the Vietnamese were throwing away large amounts of fertilizer while claiming to have applied it. They were fired immediately. The Lao labour manager for HAGL claimed that the Lao tend to be more honest than the Vietnamese. Clearly, there is a considerable amount of ethnic stereotyping occurring in the workplace, which is the basis for ethnic tensions of various kinds.

Crucially, these ethnic divisions, which are related to skill and experience, but also ethnic stereotypes and geopolitics, are an important factor that has led to Vietnamese labour dominating the land concessions and shaping the way that the plantations are structured and spatially organized, even if the Lao government would like to promote more Lao labour on the plantations, and despite the fact that Vietnamese companies have been showing an interest in increasing the amount of Lao labour, so as to reduce labour costs and also to satisfy Lao government concerns about employing more citizens of Laos.

Changes in Vietnam due to labouring in Laos

Vietnamese labourers working on rubber plantations in Laos have changed the spaces where they came from in Vietnam, but in varied and uneven ways. Le Thu Ha conducted interviews in a few villages in Gio Châu Commune in Gio Linh District, Quảng Trị Province, and in Hòa Vang Village, Lộc Bổn Commune, Phú Lộc District, Huế City. These interviews were with families of people who had gone to work for Vietnamese rubber companies in Laos. Vietnamese workers were also interviewed in Laos about the circumstances back in Vietnam. Each of the Vietnamese construction workers interviewed on the outskirts of Bachiang town reported having at least 2 ha of land near their hometowns in Vietnam. The largest plots are more than 6 ha. These labourers

previously worked as farm labourers. About five years ago, however, farmers began to mechanize and to spray their fields more frequently with chemicals. This shift in rice production was identified by those interviewed as being crucial for freeing up younger workers in Vietnam to work in Laos. Workers were also occasionally middle children who did not pass their college entry exams. Having fewer options at home, they decided to go to work in Laos.

Interviews conducted in Vietnam generally corroborated the stories told by Vietnamese labourers in Laos. Most Vietnamese workers go to Laos to receive somewhat higher salaries. While people from Vietnam have gone to work for rubber companies in various capacities, those with some sort of agricultural education are most commonly recruited, probably because it is mainly only possible to recruit non-skilled labour in Laos. Workers who manage to stay in Laos for many years may be gradually promoted to higher managerial positions. Starting salaries are as low as USD 170 per month but can eventually increase to USD 425 or more. The benefit packages include health insurance, and allow Vietnamese workers to return to Vietnam up to four times a year, including on important holidays.

Informants reported that remittances were used to buy and rent agricultural machinery and to invest in raising cattle, but most are used for non-agricultural purposes, something that should not be surprising considering that most people see agriculture as the way of the past. Remittances were often used for building houses; repairing homes; supporting education; buying refrigerators, television sets and other household items; paying for medicine; and paying for other daily living expenses, including food. One Vietnamese man with a managerial position in a rubber company in Laos was reportedly building a house worth about USD 26 500 using his income from Laos. Those who conducted interviews in Vietnam did not hear of anyone using funds earned in Laos to buy new agricultural land in Vietnam.

Overall, the migration of Vietnamese labour to Laos is contributing to a broader agricultural transition in Vietnam. As people move away to work in Laos, there is less labour available for farming in Vietnam, and this has contributed to increased interest in mechanized agriculture, which has also become increasingly available and cheaper. Sometimes this machinery is purchased but more often it is rented. Migration to other parts of Vietnam is undoubtedly an even more important part of the agricultural transition in Vietnam, so it is hard to link large-scale agricultural change in Vietnam to people specifically going to Laos to work on rubber plantations. Therefore, applying a political ecology approach in combination with a labour geographies approach seems productive, as the migration of labourers from Vietnam to Laos is resulting in changes in income levels (from remittances) but also changes in the amount of labour available for work in local areas in Vietnam. The transitions occurring are complex and are thus in need of a framework that fits.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have sought to demonstrate the importance of examining the impacts of large-scale plantations through explicitly focusing on labour, not only the labour of people displaced from their villages or previous livelihoods by large-scale plantation development, but also by the movement of transnational labourers, in this case from Vietnam to southern Laos. Vietnamese plantation workers in Laos confirm that many purposely choose *not* to invest in agriculture in Vietnam, but instead use remittances

for various other purposes. Still, remittances from Laos are affecting spatial organization for some families in Vietnam, as are the absence of those working in Laos. Vietnamese workers and the companies they work for are also introducing norms, rules and practices that are affecting the spatial organization of rubber plantations in Laos, and often making Lao labourers and other Lao people feel uncomfortable and excluded in these spaces. In the land grabbing literature, the important role of foreign capital in developing plantation land concessions is emphasized, but here we make the point that the movement of Vietnamese labourers to work on rubber plantations in Laos is having important implications for how plantation spaces are organized in Laos, and for how space is organized at the family level in Vietnam as well. This is productive as it helps us to see how developments like the plantations discussed are not only linked to capital but also to geopolitically embedded labour.

Although we expected that some Vietnamese workers might be using their positions on plantations in Laos to allow them to permanently immigrate to Laos, our research indicates that the vast majority of workers have come to Laos due to higher wages, and with the intention of returning to Vietnam sometime in the future. Many engage in overtime and extra unofficial jobs to increase their wages, ones that indirectly affect how plantation spaces are organized.

We chose to adopt a labour geographies approach, within a broader political ecology framing, in order to consider how Vietnamese labour is influencing how rubber plantations in southern Laos are being spatially organized, and how Vietnamese labour migration has impacts on agriculture and livelihoods in Vietnam, even if remittances are not mainly used for investing in agriculture, as has been shown to also be the case in other places where remittances are sent to people in small-scale farming families (Piras *et al.*, 2018).

Crucially, we have also emphasized the importance of geopolitics, particularly the special government-to-government relations that exist between Vietnam and Laos, as being crucial for creating the conditions that have made it relatively easy for both Vietnamese companies and workers to operate in Laos, and influence the ways that plantations are spatially organized. The role of geopolitics has not been sufficiently recognized in the labour geographies literature, although those working on land grabbing have emphasized its importance (Hall *et al.*, 2011; Baird & Le Billon, 2012; Dwyer, 2014).

Ultimately, the advantage of adopting a geopolitics-informed labour geographies framing that is embedded within political ecology is that it helps to both (i) emphasize the agency of labour in producing outcomes with specific spatialities and also the structural influences and social contexts that are also crucial, and (ii) encompass all the possible ways that different types of circumstances and interactions can lead to complex and subtle outcomes; ones that we need to take seriously when considering labour issues in the context of land grabbing, whether in Southeast Asia or in other parts of the world.

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Endnotes

1 Tapping usually begins six years after planting.

2 We use USD estimates for all currency throughout. However, Vietnamese language sources gave monetary estimates in Vietnamese Dong, while Lao language sources gave estimates in Lao Kip. For consistency these amounts were converted to USD.

3 Nguyễn (2008: 26) has claimed that most bicultural marriages are Lao men married to Vietnamese women. We, however, did not find this to be the case. It was common to hear about Vietnamese men who had married Lao women.

4 This would be a substantial amount of money. The husband claims to gather 90 litres of raw latex on his best days, which is one and a half times as much as the average worker and twice as much as the slowest quarter of tappers.

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