

## 6TH EUROSEAS CONFERENCE

### **Panel "*Governance of borderlands and the resilience of ethnic minority trade networks in the Golden Economic Quadrangle*"**

#### **Empires and struggle over Pu'er tea:**

##### **The place of Xishuangbanna's tea trade in the regional market in late imperial China**

In late imperial China, Xishuangbanna's thriving multiethnic tea industry was irremediably linked to warfare and control over territories.

The development of the tea industry in Xishuangbanna owes much to the tea and horse trade. This exchange of tea for horses was begun in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Chinese emperors to secure horses suited for warfare from nomadic Tibetan tribes. Due to a lack of financial resources, tea was exchanged for the horses. Horses were crucial in the battlefield, and this barter was the only viable option for emperors to protect Chinese territory from invasion.

Tea became the first import to Tibet and an indispensable part of the Tibetan diet. Xishuangbanna's tea found its way across the Himalaya, sometimes reaching Central Asia and India via Burma. Tea connected different ethnic groups, social classes and empires, and each one of them had specific interests in this trade.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the site of tea production in Xishuangbanna became the center of violence. First, different ethnic groups sought to get control over production and trade; then the Qing emperors needed to gain direct control over Xishuangbanna tea production sites in order to gain the financial resources needed to succeed in their military campaigns.

In South East Asia, tea was also at the center of struggles between empires in the region. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the establishment of large-scale British tea plantations in Assam and British attempts to open trade posts in Tibet not only challenged Xishuangbanna's position on the tea market but also seriously threatened the position of Chinese tea in regional and global markets.

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**Panel on "Governance of Borderlands and the Resilience  
of Ethnic Minority Trade Networks  
in the Golden Economic Quadrangle"**

**Foot binding and unbinding, re-binding and re-unbinding: the experimental governing of mobility and trade on the China-Laos frontier**

The proposed paper discusses the governing of subjects and objects' mobility in the context of trans-border rice and corn trade on the China-Laos frontier. It traces the multiple attempts by a group of ethnic Tai Lue (Dai) traders from China to assert themselves as flexible subjects and economically triumphant actors on the Upper Mekong market in the era of economic regionalisation. It illustrates how, between 2005 and mid 2006, the traders' economic success relied on a threefold process of experimentation: the Chinese government's flexible policies on personal identification, citizenship and import-export; the Lao frontier officials' arbitrary application of the rule of law; and the traders' ability to devise strategies that spanned the gender, ethnic, and transnational socio-economic domains. Traders balanced gender participation in commercial transactions normally dominated by men; they revitalised trans-frontier Tai ethnicity; they embraced Han Chinese styles of business; and wove transnational socio-economic networks. Yet, in late 2006, state authoritarianism re-emerged, withdrawing flexible policies and inhibiting the traders' commerce. The new shift was a politico-economic déjà vu. The paper suggests that, unlike what some defenders of globalisation and transnational theories maintain, in the age of economic regionalisation, the alleged flexibility and increased mobility of subjects and objects remain conditional on an unpredictable, experimental governing mechanism of "foot binding and unbinding, re-binding and re-unbinding".

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**Panel on "Governance of Borderlands and the Resilience  
of Ethnic Minority Trade Networks  
in the Golden Economic Quadrangle"**

**Rise and Doom of Opium Production in Northern Laos:  
Wicked Negotiations between Ethnic Minorities and States**

**Abstract**

The Lao PDR officially announced the eradication of opium production in 2006; the infamous "Golden Triangle" has officially vanished, at least from the eyes of the central Lao government. The legendary "Golden Triangle" that calls forth the imagery of the illicit drug trade led by local warlords is a relatively recent construct, assembled in the Western imaginary especially during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in light of the profitable triangular trade of tea-textile-opium established under the British empire. The French colonial administration progressively settled a deal with upland ethnic minorities of northern Laos and Vietnam to grow opium poppy and sell opium across Indochina and China. This State-controlled trade was the main source of financial revenue for the colonial administration in Indochina especially during the 1930s-1940s.

In Laos, the post-colonial state and communist opposition continued to instrumentalise the ethnic population in the northern mountainous region by recruiting them as armed forces and controlling the production of opium to support the conflicts. The socialist regime that gained power in 1975 tacitly negotiated deals with the upland ethnic minorities over the production of opium in order to maintain peace and national security in the newly established Lao state. The regulatory effort of the state to eradicate opium was only initiated at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, notably under the pressure of international institutions such as the UNODC and the US government's War on Drugs. By 2005, Laos had gone from being vilified as the world's third largest producer of opium to being hailed as a successful model that not only succeeded in the War on Drugs but also alleviated conditions of rural poverty in mountainous regions. However, a study conducted in Phongsaly in northern Laos invalidates the alleged linkage between the eradication of opium and the alleviation of poverty. Instead, the research demonstrates that the hasty elimination of opium marginalises upland farmers both socially and economically, and it could lead to a resurgence of opium poppy production in the remote hills of northern Laos.

**Kommentar [OD1]:** Opium trade was a monopoly of the colonial administration. So, authorities did not only facilitate opium trade, but led and managed it (both internally in Indochina, and export to China).

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**Where is the Gold?  
Experiencing Migration in the Golden Economic Quadrangle**

Abstract

For centuries, long distance trade and cross-border movement of people have characterized the border region between Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Southern China, known as a 'golden economic quadrangle'. Such a long history and tradition of social and political economic relations among the people in the region have been renewed once again, and even intensified, by the launching of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) economic integration program by the [Asian Development Bank](#) in 1992. The GMS aimed to facilitate economic growth and poverty reduction in the region through increased connectivity and resource sharing among member countries. The Bank's 2008 evaluation of the GMS concluded that the overall performance of the GMS was "successful" and that it should move forward to the next level by maintaining its 'regional nature'. This official rhetoric of regionalization sharply contrasts the everyday experiences of cross-border peoples who are displaced from their villages and towns to pave the way for infrastructural projects supported by the GMS.

Migrant right advocates claim that these displaced people are 'refugees' because of their experiences of forced eviction and militarization, and that receiving states should provide humanitarian assistance to them. On the other hand, the receiving countries treat displaced people indiscriminately as 'illegal' economic immigrants by pointing to those who left their homes due to poverty and unemployment. This claim is further assisted by the official and NGO narratives of migrant workers earning more money in the receiving countries than in home countries. My paper will scrutinize the ADB's rhetoric of successful regionalization, as well as the arguments of migrant right advocates and receiving countries by charting direct and indirect relationships between violence, various reasons of cross-border migration, labour relations and livelihood of displaced people within the context of regionalization. As a case study, my paper will explore the everyday experiences of ethnic Shan from Burma/Myanmar who are working in Thailand as 'illegal economic immigrants'.

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**Panel on "Governance of Borderlands and the Resilience  
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**Ethnic Minority Rubber Cultivation in the Borderlands of China and Laos**

**Abstract**

Akha and Tai (Dai in Chinese) farmers in Xishuangbanna, China, have long had close ties with relatives and friends in the neighbouring Sing district of Laos. Cross-border movement, trade, and labour exchanges have taken place for centuries. This paper examines recent reworkings of cross-border arrangements for the cultivation of rubber in light of China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization. Large state rubber farms in Xishuangbanna have recently been privatized as "companies" to allow them to expand internationally. Although national agreements between China and Laos have in principle granted approval for Chinese rubber concessions in Sing to help with opium eradication, Chinese rubber "companies" have run in bureaucratic snags at different administrative levels in Laos. Ethnic minority rubber farmers in Xishuangbanna have meanwhile rapidly extended rubber across this border through share-cropping agreements with relatives and friends in Sing. Based on multi-sited ethnographic research in Xishuangbanna and in Sing district, this paper examines the vagaries of "regionalization," some of which is related to state or Asian Development Bank efforts to increase trade and economic growth, and some of which is generated by ethnic minority rubber farmers without outside help. Power relations between China and Laos matter in both instances. In relation to large Chinese rubber companies, Lao administrators are wary of Chinese economic dominance through land concessions. For Akha and Dai rubber farmers from China, the story is different. Long cast as "backward" members of Chinese society, these farmers are getting rich on rubber, and now see themselves as rising in modernity in contrast to their "backward" Lao relatives, whom they are "helping" to "develop". Interactions across this border, whether involving large rubber concessions, or farmer-to-farmer share-cropping arrangements, are all mediated by Chinese economic dynamism as well as by Chinese understandings of "progress" and "modernity". Efforts to launch rubber cultivation in Laos, whether formal or informal, reinforce the distinction between "the developed" and those "in need of help".

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**Role of social capital and commoditization of upland agriculture in the borderlands**

**Abstract**

Mountainous northern Laos bordering the infamous “Golden Triangle” is often portrayed in development literature and policy papers as the rural periphery where ethnic minorities reside, and a place ridden by poverty, largely due to upland people’s dependence on upland shifting agricultural system, where not only rice is produced for food but illicit crops such as opium are cultivated. As a way to reduce rural poverty, the central government has introduced policies that consolidate rural population and regulate their agricultural practices. Studies claim that these efforts to make rural population and their resource use “legible” to the state authorities have aggravated rural poverty in Laos by displacing people, and their access to resources. At the same time, however, increasing numbers of rural farmers in mountainous region of northern Laos are transforming their agricultural practices by adopting commercial crops such as rubber, and reducing their incidences of poverty without the direct help of government or development agencies. Rural farmers that are swiftly adopting commercial agricultural practices are especially using their transboundary social networks and strategizing their livelihoods. Some are also using the social network to gain access to other productive resources which contributes to the overall reduction of poverty at the household level. The current paper examines the role of social capital, as a form of transboundary social network of farmers in northern Laos bordering China, and how this influence household livelihood choices and their access to productive resources that enable them to improve the well-being. The current paper also re-examines the assumptions on rural peripheries of northern Laos as remote and impoverished borderlands.

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