



## High-Speed Empire: Chinese Expansion and the Future of Southeast Asia

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“Some sixty miles south of the Chinese border lies Oudomxay, a gritty staging site in northern Laos for heavy industry and a transport hub for regional cargo flows. Twenty years ago this was a highland village, but its population has ballooned to about 25,000 as Chinese entrepreneurs have settled in. Now it’s filled with auto dealerships selling steam shovels and street vendors hawking sheet metal (p.42).”

It seems somewhat contradictory that until quite recently the arrival of large enclaves of Chinese people would be regarded

as the dangerous spread of Communism. Now the same phenomenon is disturbing in that it heralds a new stage of more intensive capitalism. This is a form of capitalism that is characterized by authoritarianism and a relentless lack of interest in negative externalities such as pollution or the growth of the type of activities associated with large groups of men operating in a mostly cash-based economy. Drawing on extensive historical contacts and cultural and familial links, Chinese interests are becoming prominent throughout northern Myanmar, while resentment about incoming capital and people has been met with physical resistance in Vietnam.

Lao PDR has already witnessed in full the expression of the second kind of externality in the shape of the Boten special economic zone (SEZ), which flourished for a number of years in the north of the country. Although SEZs are generally associated with industrial activities, in fact anything can take place within them that can benefit from the imposition of a differential framework that encourages inward investment and generally favours the rights of capital over those of labour. In the case of Boten, this led to the construction of a casino resort aimed at Chinese tourists who were excused from the need of a visa to promote rapid growth. Casinos are cash-based economies which tend to attract activities that are usually considered to be sub-optimal: money laundering; racketeering; sex work; drugs consumption and so forth. Boten rapidly degenerated into a nightmare of cowboy capitalism and when the bodies of the indebted and those in the wrong place at the wrong time began turning up on the banks of the river it was evidence that changes would have to be made. The connections between China and Southeast Asia that have been evident in recent years, therefore, are multi-faceted and need to be unpacked thoroughly to be able to understand every impact they represent. There is certainly a need for more work in this area.

This book – a slim book with a text showing a journalist’s eye for detail – is an attempt to summarise if not encapsulate the multiple aspects of China’s increasing engagement with Southeast Asia through the prism of the emerging high-speed railway network that will help to link together the principal places of production and consumption in the region. This is a complex subject which has already led to the production of innumerable papers, books and theses and shows no sign of an end to such production in the foreseeable future. As a result, it is scarcely fair to criticize this report for all of the things that it does not include but, instead, consider it fairly for what it does include.

The purpose of the series of books of which this is part may be deduced from the note by the publisher on the final unnumbered page: “... commissions authors to do original on-site reporting around the globe on a wide range of issues. The resulting novella-length books offer new ways to look at and understand the world that can be read in a few hours. Most readers are curious and busy. Our books are for them.” The result resembles something like the long form journalism which has apparently become popular again and with which I am most familiar from Guardian podcasts. These pieces customarily attempt to tell stories about complex phenomena through multiple episodes, each beginning with a focus on human experience and then aiming to link these together to outline the phenomenon without any concession to theory or conceptual understanding. This leads to a readable text, as in this case but it is one that is very limited in analyzing what is really happening. Lacking necessary conceptual awareness, the form resorts to inadequate conclusions:

“China has a history defying its skeptics, however, and it’s trying to learn from its mistakes. Historically, it’s been a kingdom that eschewed alliances and was hesitant to embrace intimate friends. But as a rising

player on the international stage, it has little choice but to engage. And building infrastructural and commercial links is the tactic it's chosen for reaching out to the world (p.92).”

Perhaps this level of thinking will satisfy the curious but busy readers at which the publishers are aiming but members of the academic world will want something else.

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