Infrastructure Violence and Retroliberal Development: Connectivity and Dispossession in Laos

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Abstract

This article examines the centrality of infrastructure connectivity within the post-2008 'retroliberal' global aid regime. Through the critical interrogation of connectivity and development discourse within Southeast Asia, as well as longitudinal field research examining repeated bouts of dispossession in Laos, I argue that all Southeast Asian states, regionally operating multilateral development banks, and leading regional bilateral aid providers consider transnational infrastructure connectivity to be essential to development. Following this, I contend that large-scale infrastructure projects frequently increase disadvantaged communities exposure to intersectional forms of structural violence, epistemic violence, slow violence and infrastructural violence. Having made these arguments, I suggest that the normalisation of infrastructure connectivity as *constitutive* of development is producing increasingly violent development outcomes, and that intersectional interrogations of infrastructure violence are needed to better understand such outcomes. The argument presented is based on more than 20 months in-country fieldwork in Laos and 40 interviews with 18 displaced residents. Fieldwork first commenced in 2009 and remains ongoing.

Keywords

Infrastructure violence, displacement, connectivity, belt and road initiative (BRI), Laos, Southeast Asia

Introduction

According to Murray and Overton (2016), the post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) aid regime has seen a blurring of classical liberalism state-market principles with those of neoliberalism. This has resulted in what they describe as a 'retroliberal' aid regime, which is constituted by six key characteristics: 1) a return to economic growth as the principal objective of aid; 2) a renewed 'guiding role' for the state in bolstering the private sector; 3) the 're-entangling' of diplomacy and aid to better advance donor national interests; 4) stronger linking of aid contracts to donor country companies; 5) an emphasis on *infrastructural projects* that are intended to facilitate trade, outward orientation and economic growth, and; 6) greater alignment of aid and military objectives [emphasis added] (ibid: 249). The retroliberal turn in global development has also seen aid provision become increasingly financialised, privatised and profit-oriented – serving as a tool for the dual expansion of corporate capitalism and national strategic interests (Mawdsley 2018).

In this article I draw on Murray and Overton's analysis of retroliberalism in considering persistent calls for further transnational connectivity across Southeast Asia. I argue that all major financiers of development within the region consider infrastructural expansion to be essential to development, and that large-scale infrastructure projects may expose disadvantaged communities to intersectional forms of violence. This includes structural

violence (Galtung 1969), epistemic violence (Spivak 1988), slow violence (Nixon 2011) and infrastructural violence (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012).
To make these arguments I begin with a summative overview of the centrality of connectivity within Southeast Asian development, noting in particular the acceleration of direct state-support of infrastructure projects from 2008 onwards. As the following section demonstrates, connectivity is a core development aspiration of Southeast Asian states and leading bilateral and multilateral donors. Later, I then shift focus to a longitudinal case study analysis of displacement and dispossession in Laos where multiple manifestations of violence have been wrought by connectivity and development. By interrogating how global and national connectivity agendas have translated into violent lived experiences, I seek to reveal the intersectional forms of violence that are embedded within large-scale infrastructures. Building on the work of Rodgers and O'Neill, I undertake an intersectional understanding of 'when it is that infrastructure becomes violent, for whom, under what conditions, and why' (2012: 402). The analysis presented here draws on more than 20 months of observational fieldwork, commencing in 2009. Forty interviews were conducted with 18 members of the case study community. Twenty-six interviews were conducted between May 2011 – March 2011, and follow up interviews were undertaken in 2015, 2017 and 2018.

Infrastructure Connectivity in Southeast Asia

> *"the five objectives of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, ... all correspond well with the 17 objectives of the UN 2030 action plan. For instance, the objective of expanding infrastructure connectivity means investment in building new infrastructure. And that is exactly what the first objective of the UN 2030 plan wants to do --- eradicate poverty."*
>
> - UN Under-Secretary General Mr. Wu Hongbo, Opening Remarks 2016 Media Cooperation Forum on Belt and Road.

> "*Developing Asia will need to invest $26 trillion from 2016 to 2030, or $1.7 trillion per year,* [in infrastructure] *if the region is to maintain its growth momentum, eradicate poverty, and respond to climate change*"
>
> - Asian Development Bank (2017: xi)

The emphasis on infrastructure investment that Murray and Overton identify as characteristic of retroliberalism is nowhere more evident than within Asia. Asia's infrastructure investment over the past decade has exceeded any other world region and, according to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), some 14,000 projects are currently under various stages of development.[1] Through Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), growth-triangles, economic corridors, subregional integration programs, and other mechanisms, governments, donors, multilateral banks and the private-sector are all pursuing further infrastructure

[1] The Centre for Strategic International Studies is a leading US think tank examining infrastructure connectivity in Asia. For more information see www.reconnectingasia.csis.org

connectivity in the name of development. Indeed, as exemplified in the above quote by the UN Under-Secretary General Mr. Wu Hongbo, in many instances' infrastructure investment is being presented as both a *means for* Asia's development, and its *end goal.*

In Southeast Asia, infrastructure expansion has received widespread support across state and private sectors. All Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) 'roadmaps' and 'blueprints' and every national socio-economic development plan of ASEAN countries stress that future socio-economic development requires greater regional connectivity. Similarly, all major bilateral and multilateral donors have championed infrastructure investment. To provide some prominent examples of state infrastructure commitments, in Cambodia deepening 'integration into the region and the world' is one of four overarching state development priorities (RGC 2014: xv); in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte's 'Build, Build, Build' agenda calls for $180 billion in infrastructure investment to support 75 flagship projects (Government of the Philippines: n.d); in Indonesia, the Masterplan for Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesia's Economic Development 2011–2025 calls for six new national 'economic corridors' (Republic of Indonesia 2011); and in Laos the Government's latest 5-year National Socio-economic Development plan, 2030 Vision, and 10-year plan all list regional and national integration as a central objective (GoL 2016).

Regarding bilateral and multilateral funding, in October 2018 the United States passed a Better Utilisation of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act to establish a new infrastructure lending agency for developing countries (Jaipragas 2018); in September 2018 the European Union announced a new strategy for infrastructure spending in Asia and elsewhere (Emmott 2018); and at the 2018 10th Mekong-Japan Summit Japan announced further increases to its already-significant Southeast Asia infrastructure funding (Lintner 2018). This funding is further supported by multilateral development banks, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) committing some 70 percent of its financing to infrastructure projects (ADB 2017: xviii) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) also allocating more than 70% of its lending to infrastructure (AIIB 2016; AIIB 2018). Finally, according to the New Development Bank's (NDB) 'operational strategy for 2017-2021' it will direct 'about two-thirds of financing commitments' to infrastructure, including numerous transnational connectivity projects (NDB 2016: 3).

As Mawdsley (2017) and others have noted, one of the key recent drivers of infrastructure investment across Southeast Asia and elsewhere has been increased South-South development cooperation. Expanding alongside, and contributing to, the retroliberal turn in development, Southern-led development cooperation has arguably been even more enthusiastic about infrastructure connectivity than 'Northern' donors. This is nowhere more evident than in regards to China's development financing, which is predominantly targeted at its grandiose Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI is the world's most ambitious global infrastructure project. Announced in September 2013 and now traversing more than 130 countries, BRI investment projections have been calculated by the OECD (2018) as likely to add over USD 1 trillion of outward funding for foreign infrastructure from 2017-2027. Through major investments across land and sea, as well as trade and transportation agreements and people-to-people exchanges, the BRI seeks to create new transnational corridors of economic growth and development. As of

February 2019, the Chinese government reported that its state-owned companies had already invested in nearly 1,700 infrastructure projects (SCMP 2019).

In Southeast Asia, the BRI is constituted by maritime routes that cross the South China Sea and Andaman Sea, and by two overland corridors: the China-Indochina Peninsular Economic Corridor (CICPEC), and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC). China is now a major infrastructure financier across the region, building an integrated network of highways, railways, power lines, and pipelines that will create new investment opportunities, increase access to natural resources, and tilt Southeast Asia's political-economy towards China's geostrategic interests.

Quantitatively tracking the total increase in Southeast Asia's infrastructure investment following development's post-2008 retroliberal turn is challenging. Projects cross many sectors and are financed by a wide diversity of stakeholders. However, two datasets that offer some insight are the CSIS 'Reconnecting Asia' platform and the Stimson Center's 'Mekong Infrastructure Tracker Dashboard'. Beginning with the former, CSIS lists 88 infrastructure projects commencing in Southeast Asia from 1990-2008 (a 19 year period) and 198 projects between 2009 and 2020 (a 12 year period) (see Tables 1 & 2). This includes transmission, seaport, road, rail, powerplant, pipeline and intermodal infrastructures and – while perhaps not an exhaustive list – clearly demonstrates a marked increase in infrastructure investment in the post-2008 period.

INSERT TABLE 1 & 2

Similarly, in the Stimson Centre's datasets on power generation (Figure 1) and railway and national road projects (Figure 2) in the Mekong region, a clear upward trend in investment can be seen in the post-2008 period.

INSERT FIGURE 1 & 2

It appears the above datasets do not capture the full range of infrastructure investment that occurred prior to the year 2000. Figure 2, for example, indicates that no national road projects were completed between 1965-2004. This is unlikely, and suggests challenges in data capture. Such limitations aside, the data does suggest a strong post-2008 upward trend in infrastructure investment. Furthermore, both of these portals – Stimson's Infrastructure Tracker and CSIS's Reconnecting Asia – are direct responses to the infrastructure boom in general and the BRI in particular, and are thus actually themselves evidence of the re-emergence of infrastructure as a central feature of Southeast Asia's development.

The post-2008 retroliberal turn has seen increasing efforts to use large-scale infrastructure projects as a means to drive economic growth. However, the assumed importance of infrastructure connectivity to development in Southeast Asia long precedes the emergence of retroliberalism. Building infrastructure connectivity was central to European colonial expansion, and has remained an ongoing state and donor priority throughout the post-colonial period. Indeed, it could be argued that Laos and mainland Southeast Asia were at the forefront of retroliberalism's increased commitment to infrastructure investment due to the

strong existing infrastructure development agenda within the ADB-initiated Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), and in Laos' national strategy to become "land-linked."
Recognizing this, the argument here is not that infrastructure-led models to development started with retroliberalism. Rather, it is that development's retroliberal turn has seen a further expansion of infrastructure financiers and projects in ways that have seen development become increasingly violent. Of significance here is the growing number of state-private sector partnerships for infrastructure investments, including the granting of large-scale land concessions to private firms, and infrastructure investment by (particularly Chinese) State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). As later elaborated, a growing state presence in the financing and construction of infrastructure projects across Southeast Asia has produced intersectional power dynamics that have enhanced infrastructure's violent effects.

Connectivity and Infrastructure in Laos

> *Unlike in many countries, Lao PDR's rapid economic growth has not led to a commensurate reduction in poverty. The Government's single-minded focus on large infrastructure projects (such as dams and railways), land acquisition, resource extraction, and foreign investment has created all too few jobs for Lao people, generated very large debt repayment obligations, and disproportionately benefited wealthy elites.* (Vientiane, March 2019)

- Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Vientiane, March 2019

No country in Southeast Asia has more actively pursued transnational connectivity than Laos. As a small, mountainous, land-locked country that serves as an important crossroads for mainland Southeast Asia and China, Laos' infrastructure connectivity is instrumental to both its national development efforts and Southeast Asia's regional integration. All of its provinces have international borders, two of mainland Southeast Asia's primary transnational highways traverse the country, and for almost three decades the Government of Laos (GoL) has placed increased transnational connectivity as a core national development priority (Pholsena & Banomyong 2006).
The GoL has worked hard to promote greater regional integration within Southeast Asia, becoming an ASEAN observer in 1992 and a full member by July 1997. In the early 1990s Laos also joined the GMS and began rolling out a series of economic reforms to increase foreign trade and investment (ibid). Ongoing efforts to drive transnational connectivity include upgrades to transport and telecommunication infrastructures, trade deregulation, the establishment of investment-incentivising Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and the allocation of vast land concessions to foreign investors. As a landlocked country, Laos' economy is principally oriented toward its neighbours and, accordingly, regional integration is strongly supported by its major development partners.
The most grandiose current infrastructure connectivity project in Laos is the Kunming-Singapore Pan-Asia Railway, which serves as a flagship of the BRI and the backbone of its over-land route through Southeast Asia (Doig, 2018). Expected to be completed sometime in 2021, the Lao section of the pan-Asia Railway has an estimated cost of US$6-7 billion

(estimates vary), and will run from the China-Lao border in Luang Namtha province to the Thai-Lao border in Vientiane province.
Like many other transnational infrastructure corridors, the railway project is perceived as a crucial mechanism for stimulating social and economic development in Laos and neighbouring countries (Enns 2018). Key anticipated socio-economic benefits of the project include increased trade and tourism flows (particularly with China and Thailand), job and business creation, enhanced access to education and other social services, and technology transfers through the construction process (Rowedder 2020). Conversely, it is also widely anticipated that the Pan-Asia railway will produce new forms of poverty and environmental degradation. Perhaps the most contentious consequence of the railway, is forced displacement. More than 3,800 hectares (9,500 acres) of land have been reserved for the mega-project and, while estimates vary, the most commonly-reported displacement figure is 4,411 families (RFA 2018; 2019a). Despite strong state efforts to silence and supress critical commentary, numerous reports of poor project-related displacement outcomes have already emerged, including claims that some displaced residents remain uncompensated two years post-resettlement (RFA 2019b; 2019c; Morris 2019).
The provision of land concessions to (largely foreign) investors and the construction of socially and environmentally damaging large-scale infrastructure projects have been central to GoL development strategies. Alongside economic growth, associated projects have produced widespread loss of livelihoods, predatory elite capture, and environmental degradation. Displacement and forced resettlement have been a prominent feature of Laos' post-independence history and, overall, the GoL has a poor track record in ensuring that land acquisitions, displacement and resettlement do not negatively affect poor and vulnerable groups (Vandergeest 2003; Baird & Shoemaker 2007; Lestrelin 2011; Sims 2015; 2017; Katus et. al 2016; Delang & Toro 2018).

A case study of displacement and dispossession in Luang Prabang

> *Luang Prabang is a boom economy city so land is very very valuable. Investors have seen the land is gold and the people who have the big pockets are ready to pay the authorities to move other people away from the cities*
>
> – Lao Journalist (pers. Comm, Vientiane, 2011).

The UNESCO World Heritage city of Luang Prabang is Laos' foremost tourist attraction and an increasingly important relay point for regional commerce. It is the largest city in northern Laos and, beyond its heritage core, new tourist facilities such as hotels, restaurants, gift shops, and golf courses are rapidly expanding alongside new non-tourist industries. As investment pours into the city, forced resettlement and development-induced displacement has become widespread.
Between 2004 and 2019, the now-residents of Luang Prabang's Ban Pou Lek (Pou Lek village) have experienced two rounds of forced displacement and one round of dispossession resulting from the promotion of national and transnational connectivity and infrastructure expansion. Through each of these 'development' efforts, vulnerable people's livelihoods

have been erased, their homes have been obliterated, and the connectivity of some has expanded alongside the forced marginalisation of others.

In 2004 the residents of the small Hmong village of Ban Long Lat (as well as surrounding communities) were relocated to Luang Prabang's provincial capital – Luang Prabang city. This resettlement was part of a nation-wide resettlement program that commenced in 1998, and which advocated for the merging of 1200 rural villages into clustered 'focal sites' where public services could be more easily provided (Lestrelin 2011). By relocating minority groups into cities and townships, the GoL and many of its aid partners sought to prevent swidden agriculture and opium cultivation, clarify land rights, establish boundaries between agricultural and forest land, promote agricultural intensification, reduce the security threat of armed rebel groups, more easily deliver public services such as education and healthcare, increase connectivity to public infrastructures such as roads and electricity, and – arguably – to encourage ethnic minority groups to adopt the Lao language and lowland cultural practices (Baird & Shoemaker 2007; Lestrelin 2011).

Legitimised through discourses of development, such displacement and forced resettlement have resulted in a 'dramatic deconstruction and restructuring of upland Lao societies over very short periods' (Baird and Shoemaker 2007: 867). In particular, forced transitions from upland to lowland farming practices have resulted in reduced outputs and food shortages, high rates of communicable diseases in resettlement sites, and severe socio-emotional stress resulting from lost livelihoods, cultural practices and other attachments to place (Evrard & Goudineau, 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2007; Lestrelin 2011). For the former residents of Ban Long Lat, no financial assistance was provided to build new homes, grow new crops, or to relocate livestock and personal belongings. Residents were required to build their own homes in the relocation site, and to walk (or arrange transportation at their own expense) to the city with whatever belongings they could carry. Expectedly, all of the 12 residents interviewed regarding this initial displacement report it as a time of great hardship:

> *That time* [2004] *was very difficult. We had to walk for three days to reach Luang Prabang, and we could only bring with us what we could carry. We had to kill our animals* [livestock] *or sell them at a cheap price. All that we could carry was some food and some clothes. In the city we had to pay for everything, and because we don't have an education it is very difficult to get a job* (elderly woman, pers. comm., Ban Pou Lek, Luang Prabang, 17 October 2011).

In 2010, the former residents of Ban Long Lat were again forcibly displaced for purposes of development. On this occasion, the GoL commissioned the upgrade (and expansion) of Luang Prabang airport to meet rising tourist demands through the operation of larger – B737 and A320 – aircrafts. According to ADB projections, this would create an almost 400 percent increase in total passenger numbers over a twenty-year projection (ADB, 2008). Luang Prabang airport is the second busiest in the country (after Vientiane), serving as a regional hub via international flights to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Hanoi, Jinghong, Chengdu, Siem Reap, Singapore and Seoul, as well as a major domestic hub for accessing other cities in Laos (GoL 2019). At a cost of approximately US$ 83.6 million, construction of the airport upgrade was

undertaken by China CAMC Engineering (CAMCE), with 75 percent of project financing coming from China-Exim Bank.
To accommodate the airport expansion, the residents of Ban Long Lat and two other villages were relocated to new village sites. On this occasion, financial compensation was provided, but for many families it was insufficient to rebuild new homes and meet other relocation expenses:

> *My family received 18 900 000 kip (US$2100)* [compensation] *for our old house. When our new house is finished, I think it will have cost us 70 million kip to rebuild (US$7,824). We pay workers US$8/day and we have to buy bricks and cement. We also had to pay 1.5 million kip (US$167) to be connected to electricity and 1.8 million kip (US$201) for plumbing. And we had to pay for 50 [utility vehicle tray] loads of soil to make our land higher and flat because this land used to be a fish farm. This cost 180 000 kip (US$20) per delivery….* [and] *We did not get any money for our* [former] *garden or fruit trees.* (28 year-old man, pers. comm., Ban Pou Lek, Luang Prabang, 06 September 2011).

> *My old house cost US$20,000 to build* [in 2006] *and I was compensated US$32,000. But the cost to rebuild now* [in 2011] *will be more than US$32,000. My land is also smaller now, and I do not have room to park my car. I am unhappy because I was told that I would receive 100% of my* [former] *house value but I was only given 80% of its value.* (32 year-old man, pers. comm., Ban Pou Lek, Luang Prabang, 24 September 2011).

> *I am not educated so I did not know how to ask for a fair compensation price. I was given 5.5 million kip (US$600) for my old house. I cannot build a new house with this* [amount of] *money. And now I have spent this money on rice* [speaking one-year post relocation] (25 year-old man, pers. comm., Ban Pou Lek, Luang Prabang, 07 November 2011).

As I have elaborated elsewhere, displacement for the airport upgrade and expansion required the resettlement of 424 households, and the destruction of educational institutions, religious sites, businesses, agricultural plots and fruit bearing trees that require years of cultivation to re-establish (Sims 2015). The majority of villagers were displaced before new homes had been built, and two months prior to the provision of any public water and electricity services. Land allocations provided in the resettlement site were smaller than most resident's former landholdings, and in some instances of such poor quality that extensive earthworks were required (at resident's expense) before any rebuilding could commence.
Indeed, one-year post resettlement 51 families were still illegally squatting on private land holdings while they awaited a suitable allocation to rebuild their homes and re-establish garden plots. The majority of these families had built small temporary housing, but the most vulnerable residents continued living in tents provided by the airport construction firm. Lacking in electricity, plumbed water, or any furnishings beyond a shared family bed, all interview respondents living in tents complained of daily discomfort and an inability to take children to school, visit health services or attend work – due to risk of theft (pers. comm.). It

would take one tent-dwelling family 6 years to build their own home in the resettlement site, while another family abandoned their land allocation to return to farming in the countryside. Luang Prabang airport is central to the city's transnational connectivity and its upgrading has been the primary catalyst for much of the new investment that has flooded in. Many urban residents, including those in the resettlement village, depend on tourism for their income and receive higher earnings in the tourism sector than are available in other industries. Many residents of Laos travel to the city from other provinces in search of work, business and education opportunities, as do migrants from Thailand, Vietnam, China, and elsewhere. In 2018, 224,543 tourists entered Laos through Luang Prabang airport – more than a 100 percent increase from 106,478 arrivals in 2014 (GoL 2019). To meet these swelling numbers, the total number of accommodation establishments in Luang Prabang has increased from 380 to 477 between 2013 and 2018, while Lao travel agents have expanded from 42 to 78 operators (ibid).

Greater infrastructure connectivity to Luang Prabang has stimulated foreign investment, increased state revenues, boosted employment, and generated new tourism markets. Such growth offers spill-over effects that, when correctly managed, can provide significant improvements to livelihoods and wellbeing. Further, the upgrading of airports is not only important for national GDP, but also for economic growth across Asia, with regional airlines and tourism operators benefitting from more streamlined regional connections.

However, longitudinal fieldwork research indicates that such benefits have largely been pursued at the expense of displaced residents. None of the residents interviewed for this research reported significant socio-economic benefits resulting from the airport expansion. Air travel remains too expensive for most residents, and the increased business opportunities resulting from expanding tourism have primarily benefitted educated elites with investment capital and foreign language skills. So-called 'trickle-down' economic benefits have been counterbalanced by relocation expenses and increasing business competition resulting from the in-migration of savvy Chinese entrepreneurs. Indeed, through the resettlement process pre-existing inequalities have expanded into new forms of marginalization, disadvantage, and livelihood constraints.

> *I am angry because my wife and I cannot go anywhere. We have no door and we cannot lock our tent. If I leave, my wife must stay here, and if she leaves, I must stay here. Otherwise people can come and steal from us and I am worried people will take our rice. It is also a problem because we* [he and his wife] *used to work together and could earn 50 000 kip (US$6.35) per day. Now only I can work. I do not own a motorbike so before if I had a job far away my wife would come with me and stay at that place* [the worksite]. *Now I cannot do this so I have to travel a lot and it is expensive* (35-year-old father of three, pers. comm., Ban Pou Lek, Luang Prabang, 24 September 2011).

In March 2016, a twice-displaced former resident of Ban Long Lat arrived on his family farm to find Chinese labourers hammering wooden stakes into the ground. They were marking the route for the Pan-Asia railway track, which skirts his current village of Ban Pou Lek. Seven months later, in November 2016, the Luang Prabang Provincial Governor scheduled a

meeting to seek feedback on who owned land and assets that would be affected by the project, and to explain the acquisition and resettlement process. Residents were informed that compensation would be paid for lost assets including housing and crops, but no details were provided on compensation rates. Approximately a week after the governor's meeting, the aforementioned resident – Mr Tshua – visited the relevant Ministry office to request the compensation rate for rubber trees.[2] His family would lose 800 rubber trees through railway land acquisition, which he estimated at a replacement cost of 500,000 kip per tree (US$56). Tshua was informed that he would receive 200,000 kip per tree, or a total of 160 million kip (approximately US$18,000). Tshua would also lose an additional 600 teak trees to the railway project, but rather than seek compensation his family decided to log and sell this timber privately. According to Tshua, a matured teak tree is worth 300,000 kip (US$33.80), but as their trees had not yet matured, they received 150,000 kip/tree (pers. comm., 25 September 2018).

Despite the significant assets described above, Tshua and his family are not financially wealthy. All of their lost assets, including land and crops, were originally purchased by a benefactor from the United States and the family's combined income earnings are modest. While the resident holds title for his land, he claims that a representative of the provincial government informed him that all land belongs to the state, and that he will not be eligible for land compensation. As he elaborates:

> *My country is not like other countries... You cannot comment to them* [members of the government]. *If you say something, or give a big comment, you will disappear somewhere that nobody knows. For example, Sombath Somphone*…[a well-known enforced disappearance in Laos]*, and similar to our village last time with the new airport. Some people did not listen to the Governor, so they were going to be taken to jail. But ahhh… they were lucky that some people who live in our village have relatives who work for the Prime Minister* [and were able to gain leniency for fellow residents] (pers. comm., 25 September 2018).

Tshua's fears are not unfounded. Multiple enforced disappearances and unlawful detentions have occurred in Laos, including disappearances linked to land-related conflicts (Sims 2018). In Luang Prabang, residents who resisted displacement for the establishment of a South Korean-owned golf course on the Mekong riverfront were imprisoned (Ngaosrivathana & Rock 2007) and, as the resident states, those who resisted displacement for the Luang Prabang airport upgrade were also threatened with imprisonment. At time of last communication, approximately 13 families from Ban Pou Lek were anticipating loss of land and other assets as a result of the railway project.

Laos is a single-party state governed by an authoritarian regime that has ruled for more than 40 years without opposition. According to Freedom House (2020), the Government of Laos is one of the world's most politically repressive regimes. No rival political parties exist, even provincial and municipal administrators are not democratically elected and, with the exception of a few independents, all political candidates are Lao People's Revolutionary Party members (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014, p. 7). Rights and advocacy-based organizations

[2] Tshua is a pseudonym. Resident's names have been kept anonymous to ensure their safety.

cannot operate in Laos and the GoL has constructed a heavily regulated media environment in which all print and broadcast news must meet the approval of its censors (Sims 2018). As such, any efforts to resist or speak critically about state-supported projects by Laos citizens comes with serious risks to personal safety.

As is further discussed below, in authoritarian states such as Laos, intersecting forms of infrastructure-related violence are further enhanced by the censorship of free speech, the suppression of civil society, and by acts of state violence against those who contest the illegitimate acquisition of public assets by political and economic elites. The coming together of state-supported infrastructure projects and political authoritarianism (including through SoEs) often produce overlapping power dynamics and forms of violence that compound upon negatively-affected communities who have limited space to seek redress. This is not only evident in Laos, but within many other politically-oppressive countries across Southeast Asia.

The Violence of Infrastructure Connectivity and Retroliberal Development

The violent and harmful consequences of development that is growth-focused, infrastructure-led, private-sector driven, and privileges foreign interests (à la retroliberal development) has been widely interrogated within Southeast Asia. Notable attention has been given to exclusory land dynamics including displacements and dispossession (Hall et. al 2011; Neef & Singer 2015; Sims 2015; Kenney-Lazar & Ishikawa 2019); environmental injustices and ecological decline (Marks & Zhang 2019; Baird & Barney 2017); loss of livelihoods (Rosario & Rigg 2019; Lagerqvist et al. 2014); corporate cronyism and elite capture (Hodgon 2008; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Milne 2015). As summarised by Jonathan Rigg (2016), Southeast Asia's common development success narratives exists alongside enduring and deepening inequality, the creation of new forms of poverty, and other social, environmental and political trade-offs that have accompanied development.

Within this wide body of literature, recent attention has been given to the violence of infrastructure development (Springer 2015; Li 2018; Blake and Barney 2018), which is defined here as 'the entanglement of infrastructure with uneven development and broader processes of marginalisation, abjection and disconnection' (Alam and Houston 2020: 3). For Li (2018: 328, 334), for example, the violence that is 'embedded in the material, social and political infrastructure' of oil palm zones in Indonesia's West Kalimantan region permanently removes land from village control, excludes former landholders future use, and violently erases 'diverse farming systems, and ecological balance'. Such findings are also, partially, reflected in Blake and Barney's analysis of slow violence and hydropower development in Laos, which they find has contributed to 'ecosystem degradation, livelihood choice erosion, loss of local autonomy, cultural transformation and exposure to multiple new risk factors from development-induced displacement and resettlement' (2018: 808, 828). In this section I seek to build on such research by arguing that the local effects of infrastructure connectivity projects are both shaped by existing, and can establish new, forms of social inequality, disadvantage, and intersectional violence.

For the former residents of Ban Long Lat, access to infrastructure was used to justify forced resettlement from their mountainside homes and crops to small residential blocks on the

urban periphery. Seven years later, connective [airport] infrastructure expansion again resulted in their displacement, which was perceived (by the GoL and ADB) as essential for stimulating economic growth and job-creation. In the current (ongoing) round of displacement and dispossession, the Pan-Asia railway has served as the justification for the further acquisition and destruction of land and other resident assets. In each of these three cases, efforts to promote infrastructure connectivity have seen the intersection of new and existing forms of violence enacted against vulnerable residents.

Beginning with structural violence, *repeated* bouts of displacement over a 15 year period reveal that land acquisition and associated forms of violence are not by-products or negative side-effects of infrastructure-led development, but one of its constitutive features. Displacement and dispossession – whether to resettle communities closer to infrastructures or to displace them to allow for infrastructure expansion – is not an occasional process, but a repeated pattern of structural violence that is embedded within the forms of top-down, technocratic, and growth-focused development that have expanded under retroliberalism (see Vandergeest 2003; Evrard & Goudineau 2004; Lestrelin 2011). In this sense, the structural violence of infrastructure connectivity has a significant role to play in the expansion of what Rigg (2016) has termed as the 'produced poor', that is, those whose impoverishment has been created through processes of development (see also Dwyer 2020).

In addition to repeated displacement, structural violence is also manifested through infrastructure's uneven distribution of benefits and harms, and particularly through the pursuit of national and transnational development at the expense of community needs. It is through the intersection of structural and infrastructural violence that the construction of international airports and transnational railways occurs simultaneously to withdrawn resident access to basic housing, plumbing and electricity infrastructures. As High (2009), Balcaite (2016), Enns (2018) and others have demonstrated, transnational infrastructures are accompanied by governance frameworks that are 'geared towards the free large-scale movement of capital and commodities', rather than more localised mobilities. This has seen an 'increasing divide' between the 'privileged and underprivileged' (Balcaite 2016: 881).

Finally, it is significant to note that all of the displaced residents interviewed for this research are Hmong – an ethnic minority group that has experienced repeated state violence. As a wide body of literature demonstrates, in China and Mainland Southeast Asia the Hmong and other upland minority groups have been commonly represented within state discourses as backwards and barbaric communities in need of development and modernization (Scott 2009; Sturgeon 2013). Ethnic minorities across the region experience many forms of disadvantage (Lestrelin 2011), which has been frequently used to legitimise displacements and (state and non-state) land acquisitions (Sturgeon 2013). For the Hmong, such state violence has been exacerbated by the legacies of the Second Indochina War, in which Hmong resistance forces fought against the victorious Pathet Lao communist forces (see Amnesty International, 2007; FIDH, 2012; MSF, 2009).

Alongside structural violence, repeated acts of displacement also constitute a form of slow violence. The effects of displacement are sudden, and often devastating. But in addition to immediate effects, displacement also has slower effects, including increased exposure to sickness and disease, social and psychological strain, food insecurities and poor agricultural yields, as well as loss of livelihoods that are tied to place. In this case study, slow violence is

revealed through the repeated loss of livelihoods and other assets that has occurred through multiple acts of displacement and dispossession. Indeed, as indicated in Section 3.1's summary of Tshua's involuntary (below market price) sale of one of his family's chief assests – their teak and rubber crops – the slower effects of displacement in the case study are ongoing. Similarly, for the previously mentioned family who returned to the countryside following insufficient compensation to rebuild in the city, it is unlikely that they will ever raise the financial capital required to repurchase land in Luang Prabang city. Infrastructure violence is not short-lived, but has repeated and enduring expressions that disadvantage particular groups over decades.

Long-range perspectives enable the revealing of hidden forms of slow violence that are often not viewed as violence at all. As Nixon has noted, attentiveness to slow violence allows for the excavation of forms of violence that are commonly rendered 'invisible' by their dispersal across time, and their spatial dispersion into geographies of marginality and disadvantage. As he states, 'it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence' (2011: 4). In the case study site examined in this article, it is only through longitudinal research and interviewing on historical biographies that the three bouts of displacement experienced by the residents of Ban Pou Lek are revealed. Physical traces of former villages have been erased, but the lived effects of displacement continue on.

The invisibility of slow violence through its uneven spatial dispersal towards marginalized and impoverished communities also represents one of a myriad of ways in which slow violence intersects with other violent forms – including epistemic violence. Epistemic violence is a 'practice of silencing' that polices ideas and establishes who can speak and with what authority (Dotson 2011). In the case study site, the epistemic violence of infrastructure connectivity is revealed through the invisibility of the stories of the displaced residents. Importantly, this invisibility is not due to a lack of arresting stories, but to forms of epistemic violence that prevent disempowered voices (Davies 2019).

In Laos and many other parts of Southeast Asia, growing state support for infrastructure expansion frequently serves to silence stories of harm, as displaced or otherwise negatively affected communities fear state persecution – including imprisonment and enforced disappearances. This is reflected in the former comments by Tshua, and his reluctance to contest the acquisition of his land. Since the research described in this article was conducted, there have been multiple arrests in Laos of residents who have publicly challenged forced resettlements, and another disappearance of a Lao activist (Od Sayavong). State monitoring and regulation of media outlets remains strong, and this further limits discussion on infrastructure's harmful effects.

Finally, epistemic violence is also produced through retroliberal discourses that legitimize harmful infrastructure projects as essential social goods. Resettlement projects and the justifications for them have proliferated over recent decades (Rogers &Wilmsen 2020: 257), and it is through discourses of development that the dispossession of land and assets from disadvantaged groups becomes socially and politically acceptable – as essential for national and regional progress. As Davies (2019: 4) notes, violence possesses 'two key characteristics: the presence of brutality, and the notion of intent'. A central intent of retroliberal development discourse is to define infrastructure connectivity as constitutive of development, and therefore as an ethical imperative irrespective of its social or environmental 'side-

effects'. In short, the epistemic violence of retroliberal development is a product of both a targeting of infrastructure violence against those who can be silenced and the establishment of a powerful moral discourse that sees infrastructure expansion as both essential and inevitable.

Infrastructures are vectors that 'organise social lives' and enable or constrain 'particular forms of sociality and life to flourish' (Alam & Houston 2020). In order to counter retroliberalism's normative positioning of infrastructure and connectivity as constitutive of development, further recognition of how 'unjust social and structural processes' are 'operationalised' through infrastructures is required (Alam & Houston 2020). As Rodgers and O'Neill (2012: 403, 404) state, infrastructure violence 'constitutes an often-ignored material channel for… reflecting upon the systemic forms of violence' that are embedded within development efforts, as well as a powerful entry-point for examining 'how broader processes of marginalization, abjection and disconnection' become 'operational and sustainable' through material forms that unevenly connect and disconnect different people and places. It is here where an intersectional reading of violence is particularly useful. Large-scale infrastructure projects are constituted through multiple, co-forming, systems of power that produce complex and interdependent forms of violence and social inequalities. Accordingly, examining the ways in which different forms of violence overlap within infrastructure projects, as well as how intersecting systems of power converge to produce infrastructural violence, is critical to establishing more complex readings of infrastructures effects. In the case study, immediate fast forms of violence (loss of housing and livelihoods) have intersected with slow violence (loss of assests, involuntary retreat to the countryside), as well as structural violence that has rendered particular groups repeatedly vulnerable to forced resettlement, and epistemic violence that the oppressively silences any expressions of critique. Examining where, and how, these different forms of violence intersect through infrastructure provides opportunities for exploring each of the independent systems of power/violence from new angles, as well as how they crossover and diverge from one another (Collins 2019: 622-628 of 8221).

By approaching infrastructure violence through the lens of intersectionality, space is created to explore 'social structural arrangements of power, how individual and group experiences reflect those structural intersections, and how political marginality might engender new subjectivities and agency' (Collins 2019: 588 of 8221). Regarding the latter, it is through intersectional interrogations of infrastructure violence that opportunities to respond to, and mitigate, such violence may occur – providing the possibility to create a greater 'ethics of care' in infrastructure development (Alam & Houston 2020). As Collins states, solutions to violence remain unlikely if violence 'is imagined through mono-categorical lenses', while viewing violence through an intersectional lens 'potentially creates new forms of transversal politics to confront it' (791 of of 8221). This requires 'thinking about infrastructures beyond the material' to recognise their inherent relationality with existing power structures and practices (Alam & Houston 2020) and, accordingly, how individual and disconnected acts of resistance may also be interconnected (Collins 2019: 4921).

Conclusion

Connectivity is nothing less than our path to collective salvation

– Parag Khanna (2016: 6)

Infrastructure connectivity has become a central feature of global development efforts. In retroliberal discourse, infrastructure investments are presented as an inherent social good, seen to drive investment, promote industry, create jobs, improve transportation to schools and hospitals, and better distribute public services (Murray & Overton 2016). Indeed, as the above quote by Parag Khanna demonstrates, for many scholars and practitioners alike connectivity has become elevated to being constitutive of development.

As this article has sought to demonstrate, infrastructure connectivity has been aggressively pursued in Southeast Asia. In Laos and elsewhere, states and their development partners have placed enhanced regional connectivity at the centre of national development policy, investing heavily in transnational infrastructures. New roads, airports, railways, urbanisation projects, and Special Economic Zones are all bringing development opportunities, but they also entwined with existing inequalities and power dynamics that are producing violent forms of expulsion, displacement, predation, and exploitation.

As connectivity becomes one of the principal modality's through which development is pursued, there is a need to further interrogate infrastructural violence and its intersectionalities with other forms of violence. The violent manifestations of infrastructure investments take many forms including, but not limited to, structural violence (Galtung 1969), epistemic violence (Spivak 1988), and slow violence (Nixon 2011; Davies 2019). Indeed, infrastructure development often simultaneously advances multiple, intersectional, forms of violence that are interwoven with 'everyday lives, institutions, and structures' in manifold ways (Springer & Le Billion 2016: 2).

In this article, I have sought to argue that: retroliberalism has contributed to a major scaling up of infrastructure connectivity investments within Southeast Asia, such that infrastructure projects are entangled within existing, and produce new, forms of intersectional violence, and; that the normalisation of connectivity as constitutive of development is rendering development increasingly violent. When infrastructures are inserted into places where pre-existing forms of inequality and violence exist, they often enhance, rather than ameliorate such violence.

To be clear, this is not to deny the positive possibilities of infrastructure development. As Rodgers and O'Neill (2012: 402) note, infrastructure 'can be a key means through which social improvement and progress is distributed throughout society'. Rather, and as previously noted, what this article seeks to offer is an intersectional understanding of 'when it is that infrastructure becomes violent, for whom, under what conditions, and why' (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012: 402). I see violence as a particularly useful concept for theorising the harm wrought by infrastructure projects because it does not deny the opportunity for these projects to also bring positive change. The violence enacted against the former residents of Ban Long Lat has not resulted in widespread destitution. Rather, through their own tenacity and hard work, many [though not all] families have successfully rebuilt their homes and established new livelihoods. When interviewing residents in 2018 (following two bouts of resettlement),

the most common story recounted is one of significant hardship, followed by valued opportunities for younger generations.
However, people's tenacity does not negate the violence that infrastructure expansion has inflicted upon them, nor suggest that such violence was either necessary or morally justifiable. It does not negate the violence that exists within the discursive labelling of displacement, land acquisitions, and the destroying of livelihoods as 'development'. Infrastructure can be violent – and violent towards particular peoples and environments – while still bringing opportunity. But the labelling of infrastructure projects as contributing to development must not serve to silence, pacify, or legitimise, violence.
Retroliberalism's praise of infrastructure too often fails to consider the violent materialities of infrastructure produce inequality and actively push people down. Indeed, as an intersectional interrogation of infrastructure violence reveals, retroliberalism's repeated emphasis that infrastructure is constitutive of development actively serves to suppress, silence, and delegitimise efforts to recognise infrastructural violence.

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