



BRI as cognitive empire: Epistemic violence, ethnonationalism and alternative imaginaries in Zomian highlands

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China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the lodestar of Beijing's efforts to increase its global political and economic influence. This article interrogates BRI discourse, arguing that the normative adoption of BRI narratives as a means for making sense of connectivities between China and other places risks producing new forms of epistemic violence against subaltern populations. The empirical focus of this paper is on China-Laos relations, and the epistemic positioning of highland ethnic minority groups in northern Laos. This context offers a valuable case study for examining BRI discourse due to: (a) the profound effects of Chinese investment in Laos; (b) the geostrategic importance of Laos as a BRI 'gateway' between China and Southeast Asia; (c) the deep histories of ethnic minority engagements across China and Laos; and (d) the limited extant research on both China-Laos relations and the more localized effects of Chinese actors within the highland border regions.

Keywords: Belt and Road, China, Laos, epistemic violence, ethnic minorities, Zomia

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Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the lodestar of Beijing's efforts to increase its global political and economic influence. Through the coupling of massive infrastructure investment with discourses of peace, harmony and win-win exchanges, BRI is presented as offering manifold benefits for partner countries. This article interrogates BRI discourse, arguing that the normative adoption of BRI narratives as a means for making sense of connectivity between China and other places risks producing new forms of epistemic violence against subaltern populations.

Empirically, the article focuses on China-Laos relations, and the epistemic positioning of highland ethnic minority groups in northern Laos. These communities once moved relatively freely across border zones, engaging in trade and other relations throughout an ethnically diverse mountainous region extending from northeastern India to Vietnam. Most-commonly referred to as 'Zomia' (Michaud, 2000; van Schendel, 2002; Scott, 2009), this region—and particularly the part of this region within contemporary Laos—offers a valuable case study for examining BRI discourse for three key reasons. First is the strong ambitions to promote transnational connectivity across this region under China's BRI, and the Government of Laos' (GoL) land-linked development agenda. Second, the deep histories of ethnic minority communities across Zomia provides a rich context for interrogating and unsettling the state-centric narratives of transnational connectivity that are advanced through BRI. Third is the

profound effects of Chinese investment in Laos and the limited extant research on localized effects of Chinese actors within the highland border regions.

Two key examples of BRI discourse are interrogated in this article. The first is a 'signed article' by Chinese President Xi Jinping, that was published in Lao newspapers the *Pasaxon* (the People), the *Pathet Lao* and the *Vientiane Times* ahead of his 2017 visit to Laos. The second is a rock song titled 'Yidaiyilu' (一帶一路) performed by Vilayphone Vongphachanh, a host and program editor of the Lao service at China Radio International.

As will be shown, these related BRI discourses reflect both Beijing's ambitions and the domestic priorities of the party-state in Laos by promoting state-centric connectivity narratives. Long-range histories of ethnic minority transborder exchanges are ignored, and high-modernist (ethno)nationalist developmentalist discourses that represent ethnic minority communities as uncivilized, underproductive and in need of state incorporation, are reinforced. Such representations of people, place, past and present must be critically interrogated.

Belt and Road as geocultural imaginary

BRI has been interrogated from multiple disciplinary perspectives, with considerable attention being given to its political, economic and security implications. Common themes of analysis include the relationship(s) between BRI and China's strategic-militaristic ambitions, so-called Chinese 'debt diplomacy', and BRI's facilitation of land grabbing, extractive industries and environmentally deleterious practices (Ye, 2015; Callahan, 2016; Ascensão *et al.*, 2018; Jones & Zheng, 2019; Narins & Agnew, 2019). In addition, questions have been raised regarding the extent to which so-called BRI projects constitute a coherent 'unified whole' (see Clarke, 2017; Beeson, 2018; Hillman, 2020). For Narins and Agnew (2019: 21), for example, there is an intentional fuzziness to BRI's 'geographic limits and boundaries' that is promulgated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to facilitate global economic and political expansion while avoiding 'cartographically targetable' criticisms. Looking beyond the CCP, the still-expanding nature of the BRI and the multiple ways in which a wide diversity of actors have invoked BRI discourse to advance their own interests, as well as the incongruities that have resulted from such diverse interpretations of this still-emerging 'patchwork of scattered infrastructural plans, geopolitical visions and imaginations' (Lin, 2019: 3–4), make it difficult to identify BRI's boundaries.

While it is difficult to pin down BRI in its entirety, BRI discourses have been widely, and often uncritically, adopted as a means for making sense of past, present and planned global connections. This rapid uptake and normalization of BRI narratives is problematic, for BRI is not solely an exercise in infrastructure connectivity, resource accumulation, or strategic economic and security expansion. Rather, BRI also acts as a vehicle for knowledge-production that seeks to (re)make history by both reshaping current global political-economic relations, and by rewriting the past (see Winter, 2019; 2020).

A central feature of BRI discourse is the repetitive invocation of peaceful and harmonious exchanges, win-win benefits and common destinies. Whatever the geopolitical context, Beijing is harnessing BRI discourse to tell a story of connectivity that smooths over conflict, and positions all nation-states as embedded within shared histories of harmonious exchange. As Winter (2019: 131) and Rowedder (2020: 153)

respectively note, Beijing's BRI discourse adopts 'an explicit and deliberate avoidance of conflicts of any form' and claims 'full complementarity' with partners' national development strategies.

Narratives of BRI connectivity in Laos

Like Lancang-Mekong River that runs through our two countries, the common mission and ideals that bind us together have forged a common destiny (Xi, 2017).

Since the early days of state-building in Laos, state-wide and transnational connectivity has been pursued in tandem. During the colonial period, France's principal goals were to: (i) establish Laos as a resource hinterland to be tapped for economic growth in its Vietnamese territories; (ii) gain control of the Mekong River and establish riverine trade routes with Southern China; and (iii) establish a buffer against British colonialism in Burma (Stuart-Fox, 2002: 6). Indeed, France valued Laos more for its geographic location vis-à-vis proximate powers and trade networks than for its potential as a productive colonial territory (Ivansson, 2008).

In the post-colonial era, transnational connectivity has developed as a party-state priority and a leading objective of much foreign development assistance. According to prevailing views, Laos' highly mountainous and land-locked geography has restricted foreign investment, hampered international trade, and slowed industrial modernization in ways that can only be resolved through increased regional integration. Leading efforts to promote regional connectivity in and beyond Laos include the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Quadrangle Economic Cooperation Zone (Sims, 2015; Lin & Grundy-Warr, 2020).

As China has become the leading financier and builder of connectivity in Laos, new and existing transport and electricity infrastructures are increasingly being (re)labelled as components of BRI. This rebranding process includes the repositioning of long-held plans to increase riverine transport as a BRI project, and the reframing of GMS initiatives such as the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC) as part of the BRI China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (Lin & Grundy-Warr, 2020). Such examples demonstrate: (i) how many Chinese-backed investments are labelled as BRI projects in ways that are not entirely clear, as well as (ii) how non-BRI investments may contribute to BRI ambitions in ways that may be missed when focusing only on officially branded projects.

More obviously a BRI project is the USD 6 billion Boten-Vientiane railway, which extends 414 km from the China-Laos border in Luang Namtha province to the Thai-Laos border in Vientiane province. Construction of the project commenced in 2016 and is being undertaken by the Laos China Railway Company, a joint venture in which China owns a 70 per cent stake and Laos owns a 30 per cent stake (*ASEAN Today*, 2019). The railway is currently scheduled to open on 2 December 2021, and is part of the wider BRI Pan-Asia railway. If finalized, the Pan-Asia railway will offer a networked system linking China, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Vietnam. Yet, even here, some caution is needed in applying a BRI label. As Rowedder has noted, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between China and Laos to build the railway was signed in 2010, and three years prior to the announcement of the BRI (Rowedder, 2020: 154). Looking further back, ambitions to establish a transnational railway in Laos, build on and advance ADB efforts to create 'economic corridors'

throughout the GMS, as well as failed French colonial efforts to establish a national railway network (Stuart-Fox, 1996). Accordingly, the railway represents another example of how infrastructural projects that commenced (and in some cases were completed) prior to BRI's announcement, are now 'repositioned as elements of BRI' (Sidaway *et al.*, 2020: 799).

Since the China-Indochina BRI corridor was announced, speculative investment from China has brought new and expanding industries and infrastructures, and new people-to-people exchanges. Chinese investment is now prominent in agribusiness (particularly rubber and bananas), mining, tourism, real estate, construction and numerous other economic sectors, and alongside such industry expansion has been efforts to deploy BRI discourses as a means for promulgating narratives of harmonious relations and win-win exchanges. Here, two key examples stand out.

In advance of his visit to Laos in November 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping provided a 'signed article' titled 'China and Laos: Working Together for a Community of Shared Future with Strategic Significance' (*China.org.cn*, 2017). Emphasizing the 'common mission and ideals' that bind Laos and China together, the article was published in major Lao newspapers: the Pasaxon (the People), the Pathet Lao and the Vientiane Times. It is worth quoting at some length:

China and Laos are friendly socialist neighbors with shared ideals, the same social systems and similar paths of development. Over the past half a century since the establishment of diplomatic ties, the relations between the two parties and the two countries have withstood the test of time and the changing global environment, leaving behind many touching stories. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Kaysone Phomvihane, and other leaders of the elder generation forged among them a deep friendship based on a genuine meeting of minds, and laid down a solid foundation for lasting friendship between the two countries. The descendants of Quinim Pholsena studied for many years in China. They spent their youth in China, and became witnesses, supporters and members of new advocates for China-Laos traditional friendship. In the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese soldiers and civilians actively supported the national independence and liberation movement of Laos ... In recent years, China-Laos friendship has been further cemented and is showing fresh vitality... . Frequent high-level contacts and deepening inter-party exchanges have solidified our political mutual trust. The Chinese people believe that friends are those who follow the same cause and are inspired by the same vision ... As good neighbors, good friends, good comrades and good partners with the same vision, China and Laos have always treated each other as equals and supported each other in exploring innovation in socialist theories and practice, in fully advancing economic, political, cultural and social development, and in accelerating modernization ...

China and Laos have worked expeditiously to align their development strategies. Thanks to our similar visions for development, there is a high degree of complementarity between China's Belt and Road Initiative and the strategy of Laos to transform itself from a landlocked to a land-linked country, and between China's 13th Five-Year Plan and the 8th Five-Year National Socio-economic Development Plan of Laos... .

China and Laos are friends and comrades who have a shared mission in advancing the great cause of building socialism with our respective characteristics ...

As an official article attributed to the Chinese President, the text provides a prominent example of CCP efforts to fashion particular narratives regarding China and Laos' relationship. We see in the text, repeated emphasis on shared ideals and development pathways/priorities, a narrative of 'friendship' and (historical) partnership, and of respect and complementarities. Significantly, where CCP BRI narratives have

elsewhere invoked deep historical ties that present current connectivity initiatives as a natural continuation of historic Silk Roads (see Winter, 2019), the narrative constructed in the above text emphasizes socialist solidarities that can be traced back ‘over the past half a century’ to ‘the establishment of diplomatic ties’. Indeed, even within the post-diplomatic relations period, significant historical events have been omitted in order to construct more harmonious historicizations—the most notable of which is the post-1979 conflict between Laos and China, which included the stationing of Chinese troops (perhaps as many as 50 000) on the Lao-China border (Evans, 2002; Baird, 2018).

By focusing on the establishment of diplomatic relations, unresolved and heavily politicized questions about the past are carefully avoided. Longer-range histories are still sometimes invoked, but in fragmented and carefully curated ways that advance both BRI narratives of friendship, and nationalist histories of Laos. Regarding the aforementioned Boten-Vientiane railway, for example, the first passenger train has been named ‘Lan Xang’, in reference to the fourteenth century kingdom that is commonly presented as the historical antecedent to present-day Laos. This is significant both because Lan Xang offered tribute to China, and because the kingdom represents a pre-colonial history to the modern Lao nation-state. Yet, as numerous scholars have argued, a number of factors render such long-range nationalist historicizations of Laos problematic—including the 1828 invasion of Lan Xang by Siamese forces and the successive total collapse of the kingdom prior to French colonization of Indochina (Keyes, 2000: 210; Osborne, 2006: xiv).

Returning to the post-diplomatic relations period, in a related article on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China website that was also published prior to Xi Jinping’s November visit to Laos, significant attention is given to the ‘iron-clad’ friendship between ‘China’ and the Pholsena family—an elite Lao family that includes two party central committee Ministers (FMPRC, 2017). In this piece, Xi Jinping and the Pholsenas are described as ‘old friends’ and former school classmates, with ‘several young descendants of the Pholsena family living in Beijing during the 1960s and studying at the same school (Beijing Bayi School) as Xi Jinping’ (FMPRC, 2017). As in the above article, emphasis is again given to the ‘friendly cause’ between the two countries and the ‘traditional history of friendly exchanges between the older generations of leaders’.

Stories of friendship and historical ties between the Pholsenas and ‘China’ are repeated in at least two further Chinese media articles, including a 2019 piece by *Xinhua* (2019) in which the two Pholsena party central committee ministers are quoted as being impressed by China’s modernization. Of particular significance to this historicized friendship are two key factors. First, all pieces make reference to Quinim Pholsena, the founder of the Neutralist Party during the Second Indochina War who, according to particular reading of events, was assassinated in 1963 due to his support of the communist Pathet Lao (and in retaliatory response to an earlier assassination of a military officer). Here, an attempt is made to fashion a narrative that demonstrates China’s historic support of the Pathet Lao. Second, is the avoidance of reference to Phanlop Pholsena, Quinim’s younger brother, who fled from Laos to China in 1980 during the height of the aforementioned China-Laos conflict—an event that signifies elite ties but unavoidably draws attention to a history of China-Laos conflict that is selectively ignored.

Also missing from narratives of socialist ties and post-diplomatic relations connectivity is the centuries-long history of exchanges between China and Laos’ highland

communities (Siriphon, 2017; Lin & Grundy Warr, 2020). Such connectivities far pre-date the modern, state-centric, era, and are far more complex than the simplified historicizations emphasized by the CCP, or the ethno-centric historical narratives of the Lao party-state. Indeed, as Nyiri and Tan (2017: 17) note, ‘the continuity and complexity of cross-border interactions’ as well as ‘the historical memory of premodern overlapping sovereignties’ is more pertinent in the Zomia region than anywhere else in Southeast Asia. Austro-Asiatic groups such as the Khmou, for example, have inhabited the region for several thousand years. While written records on historic forms of ethnic minority practices and forms of exchange are limited (Michaud, 2009; Scott, 2009), official Chinese documents from the first century describe the Yunnan province as populated by numerous ethnic groups who traded in salt, rhinoceros, elephants, textiles and jewellery (Sturgeon, 2005: 44, 127). Elaborating further on the rich histories of these groups is beyond the scope of this article, but examples can be found in the work of many others (Mackerras, 1994; Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Evans *et al.*, 2000; Michaud, 2000; Davis, 2005; Sturgeon, 2005; 2013; Walker, 1999; Freeman & Ahmed, 2015).

The privileging of (ethno)nationalist narratives of China-Lao histories is also evident in pop-culture representations of the BRI, such as Vilayphone Vongphachanh’s rock song ‘Yidaiyilu.’ Referenced in Xi Jinping’s above speech, *Yidaiyilu* was reportedly ‘completed in 2016 to mark the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Laos’ (CGTN, 2017). At the time of the song’s release, Vongphachanh was the host and program editor for the Lao service at China Radio International, and had been living in China for approximately 6 years. A film clip for the song was uploaded to YouTube and has reportedly been widely shared on social media (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0LbGx01EIo>). With Lao vocals and English-language subtitles, *Yidaiyilu* (一带一路) is saturated with discourses of friendship and working together for mutual benefit:

Let me tell you about the Belt and Road Initiative...
The Belt and Road
We make concerted efforts for mutual benefits and win-win results...
The Belt and Road

President Xi Jinping looks far ahead and aims high
We advance side by side on the silk road
And make achievements hand in hand

You and me jointly build the Belt and Road
Facing problems big and small together
We keep close communications and better understand each other
As the Belt and Road enhances connectivity across nations

Let me tell you about the Belt and Road Initiative
Are you ready for the Belt and Road
From now on, we are more connected by sea and by land
Are you ready for the Belt and Road

[Verse 3 is repeated twice more].

In *Yidaiyilu*’s (一带一路) video-clip, lyrics on working together for mutual benefits are accompanied by repetitive symbolic displays of Lao nationalism. The clip begins with Vongphachanh singing into a studio microphone, followed by a young Lao male dancing on the roadside at the base of the city’s prominent Avenue Lane Xang, home

of the Patuxai independence monument. Built by the Royal Lao government in the period 1957–68 using US aid funding, Patuxai serves as a strong symbol of Lao nationalism that is dedicated to the fight against French colonialism. Of importance for BRI narratives, the beautification of the surrounding grounds and gardens of the monument were funded as part of China’s development assistance. Patuxai features in the video clip on multiple occasions, including close-up footage of sunlight moving across the monument that may be interpreted as the bringing of light (modernity) to a shaded semi-relief Buddha sculpture (traditional cultural practices/beliefs).

As the song continues, the videoclip shifts to young Lao women dancing in front of Pha That Luang—a prominent symbol of Buddhism and of Lao sovereignty. Built in the mid-sixteenth century following King Setthathirat’s designation of Vientiane as the new capital of Lan Xang, That Luang is a site used in many Lao festivals and celebrations of nationalism. For prominent Lao scholar Vatthana Pholsena (2006: 67), the That Luang monument represents a ‘national symbol’ that has replaced the ‘hammer and sickle’ of communism. Like Patuxai, That Luang features prominently throughout the film clip, including a scene of a woman dancing in front of the monument while holding the Lao national flag (see Figure 1).

While it may be unsurprising that a BRI propaganda video for Laos includes nationalist imagery, it bears emphasizing that such imagery reinforces ethno-nationalist narratives that normalize Laos as an ethnically Lao nation-state. This is further demonstrated in scenes of Buddhist monks and ceremony, as well as numerous snapshots of ‘everyday life’ in the Lao capital of Vientiane, footage of a fisherman in a long-tail boat on the Mekong River, and a young Lao woman performing a respectful greeting (*nop*) to a statue of Lang Xang’s ‘warrior king’ Chao Anouvong. Filmed entirely in Vientiane and emphasizing urban landscapes and Lao cultural and religious practices, the clip offers no imagery of rural life, mountainous regions, or ethnic minority communities. Continuing on, symbols of Lao nationalism are accompanied by scenes of modernization and connectivity, as invoked through a young woman on a



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Yidaiyilu's* (一带一路) YouTube clip.

Source: YouTube clip. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0LbGx01EI0> (accessed 16 April 2021).

smartphone waving from inside a shopping mall and an airplane filmed through the window of Vientiane's Wattay International Airport. Airport upgrades and the construction of shopping malls have been features of Chinese investment and development financing in Laos, and have driven Chinese business expansion, including the Huawei office that is seen at the end of the film clip.

In the above examples we see attempts to promulgate BRI discourse as a normative way of explaining China-Laos entanglements. Positively, these are attempts to fashion narratives of peaceful cooperation and win-win outcomes. Yet, putting aside the differences between discourse and materiality, much is missing from BRI narratives, which are carefully constructed to align with state-centric CCP and LPRP connectivity narratives.

Laos as multi-ethnic country within Zomia

Laos is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Southeast Asia. Almost half of the population are ethnic minorities, with 50 ethnic groups (included the recently-recognized Brou) and 160 sub-groups officially recognized by the GoL (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Baird, 2015). Similarly, neighbouring China and Vietnam respectively recognize 56 and 54 ethnic groups—some of which have populations that are located across all three of these bordering countries. This diversity has presented challenges for the Lao party-state's nation-building efforts, which advocate for ethnic pluralism and equality, but normatively advance the socio-cultural values of ethnic Lao.

Ethnic groups in Laos are grouped by the state into the four ethno-linguistic 'families' of: Lao-Tai; Mon-Khmer; Sino-Tibetan, and; Hmong-Mien (see Table 1). While Tai-Lao speaking groups including the lowland Lao make up just over half of the national population (Michaud, 2009), they are outnumbered in much of the country's north. All four language groups are present in the north, and ethnic segregation of villages remains strong, albeit with exceptions. According to Mansfield, for example, many ethnic minority groups have demonstrated 'a fierce opposition on the part of many hill tribes, particularly those in the north and northwest, to any form of assimilation into mainstream Lao culture' (Mansfield, 2005: 278). The present day Laos-China border zone is, on the Lao side, predominantly populated by Hmong-Mien and Sino-Tibetan language groups (Messerli *et al.*, 2008).

While the party-state has worked to build a sense of shared national identity across ethnic groups (Lestrelin, 2011), such efforts have been accompanied by

Table 1. Ethnic groups of Laos.

Sino-Tibetan	Hmong-Mien	Lao-Tai	Mon-Khmer	Mon-Khmer	Mon-Khmer	Mon-Khmer
Akha	Hmong	Lao	Bid	Khmer	Ngouan	TaOy
Hayi	Iumien	Lue	Brao	Khmuu	Nhaheun	Toum
Hor		Nhoau	Brou	Kree	Oy	Thaen
Lahou		Thaineua	Cheng	Kriang	Pacoh	Tri
Lolo		Phouthay	Erdou	Lamed	Phong	Trieng
Phounoy		Tai	Harak	Lavy	Prai	Xuay
Syla		Xaek	Katang	Makong	Sadang	Xingmoun
		Yang	Katu	Moy	Samtao	Yae
						Yrou

Source: Generated by author using data from: <https://laos.opendevlopmentmekong.net/topics/ethnic-minorities-and-indigenous-people/>.

widespread coerced resettlement of ethnic minorities, the acquisition of their land and erasure of their livelihoods, prevention of their farming practices, the violent persecution of some Hmong communities, and a prevailing perception that the socio-cultural systems of minorities are ‘backwards’ and in need of modernization. The majority of party central committee members are Lao (approximately 75 per cent) (Somphabmixay, 2021), and this disparity in political voice is paralleled by markedly higher rates of impoverishment within ethnic minority communities (World Bank, 2020).

Persistent marginalization and disadvantaging of ethnic minority groups is shaped by multiple forces, including socio-cultural norms that perceive Laos as foremost a nation of lowland, wet rice-farming, Theravada Buddhist, communities. Ethnic minorities are acknowledged as part of the nation of Laos, but are positioned as ‘backward’, and in some cases as a threat to peace and stability. Such perceptions of Lao superiority often manifest as patronizing attitudes and policies that seek to ‘modernize’ ethnic minorities through state interventions including the prevention of shifting cultivation, resettlement of sparsely-populated communities to lowland ‘focal sites’, and the introduction of standardized schooling that is taught in the Lao language and reinforces Lao-centric nationalist histories (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Vandergeest, 2003; Baird, 2010; Sturgeon, 2013). Such practices have brought widespread harm to minority groups while doing little to alleviate ethnic inequalities.

In recognizing that the ‘ways of life’ of ethnic minority groups are being erased (see Tooker & Baird, 2020), numerous scholars have conceived alternative ways of understanding the place and histories of ethnic minority communities. Much of this analysis has centred around the concept of ‘Zomia’, which was first introduced by van Schendel to problematize and ‘denaturalize’ normative regions of area studies—South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. For Scott, whose work saw the popularization of Zomian studies, Zomia refers to:

virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan). It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers containing about one hundred million minority peoples of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic variety (Scott, 2009: ix).

Scott’s geographical boundaries of Zomia, as well as his usage of the concept to position ethnic minority communities as ‘state-evading,’ is contested (see Jonsson, 2010), but for the purpose of my analysis, the socio-spatial *details* of Zomia matter less than what the *concept* offers in terms of thinking anew about geographies of upland Asia (Giersch, 2010). As Scott (2009: ix) further elaborates, because Zomia ‘bestrides’ the common regional categories of Southeast Asia, East Asia and South Asia, (as well as Mainland Southeast Asia and the Mekong region) it offers both ‘a novel object of study’ and ‘a new way to think of area studies’. Rather than adhering to nation-state borders, Zomia is situated within the peripheral border regions of what has also been termed the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud, 2000; van Schendel, 2002), and is woven together not by social, cultural, political or economic unity, but by what Scott (2009: 16, 19) calls ‘comparable patterns of diverse hill agriculture, dispersal and mobility’. This mosaic of peoples stretches back many centuries, transgresses national boundaries, and precedes both the arrival of the Han Chinese in Southern China and the migration of Lao populations into present-day Laos (Michaud, 2010).

One critical means by which BRI discourse reinforces state-centric epistemic violence against ethnic ‘minorities’ is through the normative positioning of highland social groups within the restrictive frames of nation-states. As Michaud (2010: 208–9) explains, such positioning shifts coherent transnational cultural entities into the binaries of ‘majority–minority, modern–ancient, civilized–barbarian’ (as well as remote and marginal) that can only exist through ‘lowland perspectives’ that seek to ‘produce authoritative knowledge’ about their peripheries. While a population’s value or significance is not determined by its size, it is worth emphasizing that nine minority groups within China are ‘each more numerous than the entire population of Laos’ (Michaud, 2009: 37).

Producing knowledge about ethnic minorities from state-centric perspectives reveals only a fraction of the complexities of their existence. As Michaud and others have consequently argued, ethnic groups should be ‘studied in their cultural integrity in a transnational way’, rather than ‘solely as part of one nation-state’ (Michaud, 2010: 209). The argument made here is not a call for analysis of Zomian minorities as a singular, oppositional, collective to lowland states (Jonsson, 2010). Rather, it is to use the conceptual metaphor of Zomia as a starting point to ‘up-end the state’s hegemonic definitions of hinterland peoples’ (van Schendel, 2002; Jonsson, 2010: 209).

BRI as an ethnonationalist geocultural project

The Belt and Road initiative is an open and inclusive project... It advocates tolerance among civilizations, respects the paths and modes of development chosen by different countries, and supports dialogues among different civilizations so that all countries can coexist in peace for common prosperity (Qu Zhe, ambassador to Estonia—cited in Winter, 2019: 89).

At a time where many states appear to be retreating from international cooperation, there is notable benefit in advocating for shared tolerance, peace and respect. Dialogue between states is fundamental to international diplomacy, and the identification of commonalities and shared values or priorities can aid in the prevention or resolution of hostilities. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, BRI opens up new ways of thinking about past histories of connectivity and ‘civilizational’ exchange. In doing this, BRI may contribute to the reworking of complex processes of Asian decolonization, in which nation-building projects privileged national icons and traditions rather than (and sometimes in opposition to) histories of transboundary connectivity (Winter, 2019). This also provides a challenge to the binaries of East/West and Global North/South (Narins & Agnew, 2019: 20).

However, BRI also has its own conceptual shortcomings, including the uneven valuing of certain events, histories, geographies, cultures and peoples in accordance with China’s strategic interests and imperial ambitions (Winter, 2019). For this reason, BRI as a normative concept has been criticized, with much attention being devoted to how it advances Chinese strategic state interests (see Blanchard & Flint, 2017; Beeson, 2018; Flint & Zhu, 2019). While BRI seeks to build relationships across national borders, its official invocation usually supports state sovereignty, ‘organizing culture and history in ways that aggregate state power’ and offering narratives of transregionalism and internationalism that are repeatedly subverted by national interests (Winter, 2019: 17, 79). In the northern highlands of Laos, this has resulted in the (further) celebration of state-centric connectivity narratives that state territorialization efforts, while simultaneously erasing ethnic minority histories. Such

narratives are underpinned by perceptions of ethnic minority communities as 'backward' and in need of 'modernization'.

In China's Xishuangbanna region (which borders northern Laos), for example, Sturgeon (2010: 319–20) has argued that the official process of ethnic identification in the 1950s 'drew on long-held social hierarchies that for centuries had located the Han at the acme of civilization'. As she elaborates, 'minority nationalities were mapped onto the backward, and stagnant side of social binaries, identifying them as the most ignorant members of the nation, passively awaiting help' (Sturgeon, 2010: 322; see also Michaud, 2009). Such perceptions of minorities endure.

Moreover, Chinese development discourse is arguably underpinned by a middle kingdom mentality that perceives China as being surrounded by 'less advanced' nations in need of China's guidance and assistance (Stuart-Fox, 2003). In many ways, this approach to development resembles a refashioning of longstanding imperial discourses of a 'civilizing mission' into a new technocratic and apolitical framework for development. It resembles modernization theory's economically determined, developmentalist, hierarchical categorization of nation-states, but adds China to the list of 'advanced' countries that Laos and other 'developing' states must catch up with (Banks & Hulme, 2014). Further, where the CCP was once reluctant to advocate for a China 'model' for development, it is now becoming much bolder, as evinced in Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's recent statement that 'China is building a new development paradigm, it will bring Laos more development opportunities' (FMPRC, 2021).

In northern Laos, China's high modernist development ideologies have aligned with the Lao party-state's own high modernist development interventions, including ongoing efforts to expand transnational connectivity and state territorialization. Through Chinese investments into infrastructures, agribusiness, special economic zones (SEZs) and other sectors, the party-state has been able to exert increasing controls over people and resources, expanding taxation, acquiring land, resettling populations, introducing new markets, and preventing (what it considers to be) backwards or undesirable practices (Suhardiman *et al.*, 2019). In both state-territorialization efforts and via the expansion of regional economies, 'long-term prejudices' against ethnic minorities have persisted (Lyttleton, 2017: 217), underpinning elite wealth accumulation through the appropriation of land and resources from highland communities (Lu & Schönweger, 2017; Sims, 2017; Laungaramsri, 2019).

In promoting only state-centric narratives of connectivity across China and Laos, BRI discourse not only perpetuates and legitimizes the expansion of forms of development that have disadvantaged many ethnic minority groups, rather it also erases the epistemic presence of highland minorities (see Sims, 2021). France's discursive construction of Indochina as 'primitive' and 'backward' allowed French-led modernity and 'progress' to become the absolute standard against which colonial subjects were measured (Norindr, 1997: 5). BRI similarly articulates new development standards against which highland communities are evaluated. Mirroring the epistemic violence of colonialism, BRI discourses support Beijing's geopolitical ambitions and Lao party-state territorialization efforts but simultaneously erase, or at least ignore, ethnic minority histories and futures. New discourses of connectivity reinforce long held ethnonationalist biases that privilege ethnic Lao nationalist narratives, and inhibit other ways of making sense of the region. In short, Northern Laos' upland ethnic groups are experiencing a twofold discursive squeeze between nationalist histories of the Lao party-state and the trans-civilizational histories of the BRI. A critical question then, is where we can find/create space for diversity (of narratives, languages, cultures,

ethnicities, religions and so on) within Beijing's discourse of common destiny and Lao state territorialization efforts?

Conclusion

As BRI rewrites histories and reshapes the present, its state-centric narratives of mutual benefit and win-win exchanges have facilitated state and non-state enclosures in northern Laos. This is not to suggest that BRI's material investments into transport infrastructures and associated market expansion cannot offer benefits to highland communities, or that all communities seek to resist the state. Development and state territorialization has occurred in uneven ways, being both embraced and resisted, and bringing material and economic benefits alongside new forms of hardship. What this article argues rather, is that BRI's construction of past and present narratives of connectivity and development privilege particular voices and representations of the world which extend existing epistemic violence against ethnic minorities.

This has lived implications for the people of northern Laos, and for ethnic minorities elsewhere. By positioning minority communities as backward or pre-modern, BRI provides a new legitimacy to wide-ranging state interventions that rework, and erase, minority ways of life (Tooker & Baird, 2020). Where widespread development literature calls for the greater empowerment of minority groups to identify their own needs and shape their own development futures, BRI's high modernist development discourse calls for rapid modernization driven by Chinese technical expertise and investment (Sims, 2020). The detrimental effects of such interventions are widely documented, and appear to be accelerating under BRI.

In addition to its material effects, BRI discourse also shapes knowledge production. As Winter (2019) and Lin *et al.* (2019) have noted, analysis of the BRI and the adoption of BRI discourse has been particularly prominent within academia, as it should. BRI is a world-changing phenomenon that offers a means to rethink global connectivity beyond Western-centric perspectives. Yet, the normative adoption of BRI discourse when interrogating, understanding and explaining multifaceted historical and contemporary forms of exchange between China and other places often oversimplifies the complexity of what is occurring. When the histories and present-day lives of minority communities are written in accordance with state-centric narratives, knowledge-production on transnational connectivity acts to silence the perspectives and voices of communities and cultures that are situated within BRI landscapes. At work here is a variant of what Grundy-Warr and Sidaway have referred to as 'political geographies of amnesia, silence and erasure' (Grundy-Warr & Sidaway, 2006: 481).

While recognition of the political dimensions of knowledge production is nothing new, the scale and significance of BRI, as well as the speed at which BRI discourses have become normalized, demands further critical analysis. Without such critical attention to the social and political consequences of BRI discourse, academia risks extending epistemic violence against ethnic minorities and other subaltern communities. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020: 3–4) writes on what he describes as Euro-American-centric modernity:

epistemology was instrumentally and strategically deployed in accordance with the coloniser's model of the world, whereby Europe and North America were put at the centre. The worlds of indigenous people... became subjected to 'discovery' paradigm and colonisation. Epistemology became highly political in the service of the cognitive empire [as]... economic, ontological and epistemological extractivism coalesced.

We have not experienced the end of the Euro-American cognitive empire, yet through BRI, a competing cognitive empire is being advanced. While BRI discourses are of peace, mutual benefit and harmony, the use of BRI to write the stories of others constitutes a form of epistemic violence that reworks and rewrites networks, ideas, sites and spaces of European imperialism (Sidaway & Woon, 2017: 599). To be clear, what is 'new' here is the adaptation and refashioning of themes of empire in a new global context, where China is seeking a central place. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni further continues, 'all modern empires were underpinned by the problematic paradigm of difference and its politics of alterity, which expressed itself epistemologically' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 4). What is needed then, is greater attentiveness to BRI's 'cognitive injustices', which involve 'the failures in the domain of knowledge to recognize the different ways of knowing by which diverse people across the human globe make sense of the world and provide meaning to their existence' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 6).

How to draw attention to BRI's significance in reworking geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural geographies, while simultaneously problematizing the normative usage of BRI as a sense-making tool, remains a critical challenge. One important contribution to this endeavour is ethnographic research around histories and exchanges that sit outside of these narratives, as well as into the complexity of actors and networks that shape face-to-face interactions across China and Laos (Nyiri & Tan, 2017). Such research enables more multidimensional perspectives on people, place and history-making, and accordingly allows for more nuanced readings of connectivity.

By comparatively positioning Zomia and BRI as alternate geocultural imaginaries, this article has sought to draw attention to how BRI discourse furthers state-centric narratives of upland peoples that speak on behalf of ethnic minority communities and silence alternative conceptualizations of place, connectivity and identity. Thinking about other geocultural imaginaries like Zomia helps us make sense of transnational connectivities in multiple ways, and creates greater possibilities for alternative voices to be heard. To paraphrase van Schendel (2002: 665), Zomia 'brings together spaces and social practices that are now academically marginal and partitioned' by constructing a region that crosscuts conventional area studies boundaries, and showcasing spatial configurations that have no particular heartland. Zomia brings its own set of conceptual challenges (see van Schendel, 2002; Michaud, 2009 and Giersch, 2010), perhaps most notable of which is the risk that this concept metaphor comes to 'invent the reality that it supposedly only describes', in turn producing 'new kinds of area ignorance' (Jonsson, 2010: 191, 195). Zomia is a conceptual metaphor that itself requires continual critique, reinterrogation and comparison against localized conceptualizations of connectivity—but thinking about alternate geocultural imaginaries alongside BRI may open up possibilities to reduce the epistemic violence of state-centric knowledge production and struggle for alternatives.

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