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To cite this article: Miles Kenney-Lazar (2018) Governing Dispossession: Relational Land Grabbing in Laos, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 108:3, 679-694, DOI: [10.1080/24694452.2017.1373627](https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1373627)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1373627>



Published online: 14 Nov 2017.



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# Governing Dispossession: Relational Land Grabbing in Laos

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The government of (post)socialist Laos has conceded more than 1 million hectares of land—5 percent of the national territory—to resource investors, threatening rural community access to customary lands and forests. However, investors have not been able to use all of the land granted to them, and their projects have generated geographically uneven dispossession due to local resistance. Based on twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork, this article compares how dispossession materialized in eight villages targeted by a Vietnamese rubber plantation and a Chinese pulpwood plantation in southern Laos. I contribute to a nascent literature on the political contingencies of dispossession by showing how extraeconomic forces of expropriation are governed relationally. Developing a Gramscian relational environmental governance framework, I demonstrate how such contingencies are shaped by social and political relations among and internal to state, capital, and community actors, leading to either the extension and solidification or contraction and fragmentation of dispossession as a hegemonic mode of development. In the case at hand, I focus on four sets of decisive relations: (1) corporate–state relations that mediate the capacity of investors to mobilize state powers of land expropriation; (2) the state’s discursive framing of socioenvironmental relations between communities and their rural environments, which affects how amenable village territories are to acquisition; (3) community–government relations built on kinship, ethnic, or historical links that villagers can use to lodge effective grievances with the state; and (4) coherent and democratic internal village relations that build community solidarity against plantation development. *Key Words:* dispossession, environmental governance, land grabbing, Laos, resistance.

老挝的(后)社会主义政府,将超过一百万公顷的土地——该国领土的百分之五——承让给资源投资者,并对农村社群取得祖传土地与森林的管道产生威胁。但投资者尚未能够使用其所获得的全部土地,而他们的计画,部分因为面临在地反抗而导致地理不均的迫迁。本文根据为期二十週的民族志田野工作,比较老挝南方由一名越南橡胶种植者和一名中国浆木栽种者瞄准的八座村落如何进行迫迁。我透过展现非经济性的徵收驱动力如何以关系性的方式进行治理,对于晚近有关迫迁的政治偶合之文献作出贡献。我透过建立葛兰西的关系性环境治理架构,展现此般偶合,如何由国家、资本与社区行动者之间及内在于其中的社会与政治关系所形塑,导致既非延伸与巩固,亦非冲突与破碎的迫迁,作为发展的霸权模式。我在手边的案例中,聚焦四大决定性的关系组合:(1)中介投资者动员国家权力进行土地徵收能力的企业—国家关系;(2)国家对于社区与其农村环境之间的社会环境关系的论述架构,并影响着顺从的村落之领土如何被取得;(3)建立于亲属、族裔或历史连结的社区—政府关系,而村民能够以此对国家提出有效的不满;(4)打造对抗种植发展的社区团结之协调且民主的村落内部关系。关键词: 关键词:迫迁,环境治理,土地掠夺,老挝,反抗。

El gobierno del Laos (post)socialista ha entregado más de un millón de hectáreas de tierra—igual al 5 por ciento del territorio nacional— a inversionistas en recursos, amenazando el acceso de la comunidad rural a terrenos habituales y bosques. Sin embargo, los inversionistas no han sido capaces de usar toda la tierra que se les cedió, y sus proyectos han generado una desposesión geográficamente desigual debido en parte a la resistencia local. Con base en veinte meses de trabajo etnográfico de campo, este artículo compara el modo como la desposesión se materializó en ocho aldeas que estuvieron en la mira de una plantación vietnamita de caucho y una plantación forestal china para pasta de papel en el sur de Laos. Contribuyo a una naciente literatura sobre las contingencias políticas de la desposesión, mostrando cómo las fuerzas extraeconómicas de la expropiación son gobernadas relacionamente. Desarrollando un marco de gobernanza ambiental relacional gramsciano, demuestro cómo tales contingencias son configuradas por las relaciones sociales y políticas entre el estado, el capital y los actores comunitarios, cosa que lleva bien a la extensión y solidificación, o a la contracción y a la fragmentación de la desposesión como modo hegemónico de desarrollo. En el caso que me ocupa, me concentro en cuatro conjuntos de relaciones decisivas: (1) las relaciones corporación–estado que median la capacidad de

los inversionistas de movilizar los poderes del estado sobre expropiación de tierra; (2) el marco discursivo del estado de las relaciones socioambientales entre las comunidades y su entorno rural, que afecta qué tan dispuestos están los territorios aldeanos para su adquisición; (3) las relaciones comunidad–gobierno construidas sobre los vínculos de parentela, étnicos o históricos que pudieren usar los aldeanos para esgrimir reclamaciones efectivas con el estado; y (4) relaciones aldeanas internas coherentes y democráticas que construyan solidaridad comunitaria contra el desarrollo de las plantaciones. *Palabras clave: desposesión, gobernanza ambiental, acaparamiento de tierra, Laos, resistencia.*

Over the past decade, the Vietnamese state-owned Quasa-Geruco Joint Stock Company and the private Chinese Shandong Sun Paper Industry Joint Stock Company (hereafter, Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper, respectively) established a combined 10,000 ha of industrial tree plantations in southern Laos at the foothills of the Annamite Cordillera that straddles the border between Laos and Vietnam (see Figure 1). Their rubber and pulpwood plantations have dispossessed large numbers of ethnic minority peasants of their customary agricultural lands, fallows, forests, grazing lands, and the rural resources contained within these landscapes: water, wild plants and animals, timber, and firewood. Denied access to the resources that comprise their means of subsistence, production, and social reproduction, peasant rural livelihoods and relationships with nature have been radically transformed. They have become increasingly reliant on intensified and environmentally degrading forms of land and resource use, such as shortened agricultural cycles that exhaust the soil. And on the land that they used to farm independently, they now work as wage laborers to substitute cash income for lost biophysical resources.

Such transformations and impacts initiated by land dispossession, however, are spatially differentiated, an important mark of the uneven geographies of development (Bebbington 2003). Whereas some villages lost large portions of their productive agricultural and forestry areas, others effectively resisted and prevented the incursion of plantation development into their lands, apart from small areas at the edge of their territories. Thus, the industrial tree plantation landscape of eastern Savannakhet Province, where Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper operate, is highly variegated and patchworked. Although land allocation to corporate investors and related dispossession in Laos is often assumed to operate in a “management vacuum” (World Bank 2010, 1) or is represented as a “chaotic and opaque ‘free-for-all’” (Global Witness 2013, 13), I argue here that there is a logic

governing dispossession, one defined by relations among state, capital, and peasant actors.

Geographically differentiated dispossession extends across much of Laos, where 1.1 million ha, or 5 percent of the national land area, have been granted to (but not always used by) investors for agriculture, forestry, mining, and infrastructure projects (Schönweger et al. 2012). The different forms and spatial unevenness of dispossession in Laos demonstrate the importance of examining its governance and politics, with the understanding that land grabbing is contingent and malleable, limited by land reforms and the actions of local resource users (Pedersen 2016). Although theories of primitive accumulation (Marx [1867] 1976) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) explain the driving political–economic dynamics behind dispossession, they do not sufficiently account for its political contingencies or how it materializes in unexpected and unique ways on the ground. In other words, they fall short of explaining the differential dynamics of actually existing dispossession. Such issues are not merely theoretical debates—they hold dramatic implications for how and to what extent resource investments uproot and transform rural livelihoods. For these reasons, it is imperative to understand not only the forces behind the drive toward dispossession, but also those that shape how it plays out empirically.

To do so, I argue that it is critically important to examine how dispossession is governed, examined via a Gramscian theoretical framing of relational environmental governance. Although environmental governance is a broad and descriptive theoretical umbrella, and often ideologically malleable (Bridge and Perreault 2009), it is a useful conceptual lens because it enables a relational approach for understanding environmental transformation. It encourages us to see nature–society relations as governed by inter- and intrarelations among state, market, and civil society actors, in ways that do not privilege one over another and that understand each actor as internally differentiated and

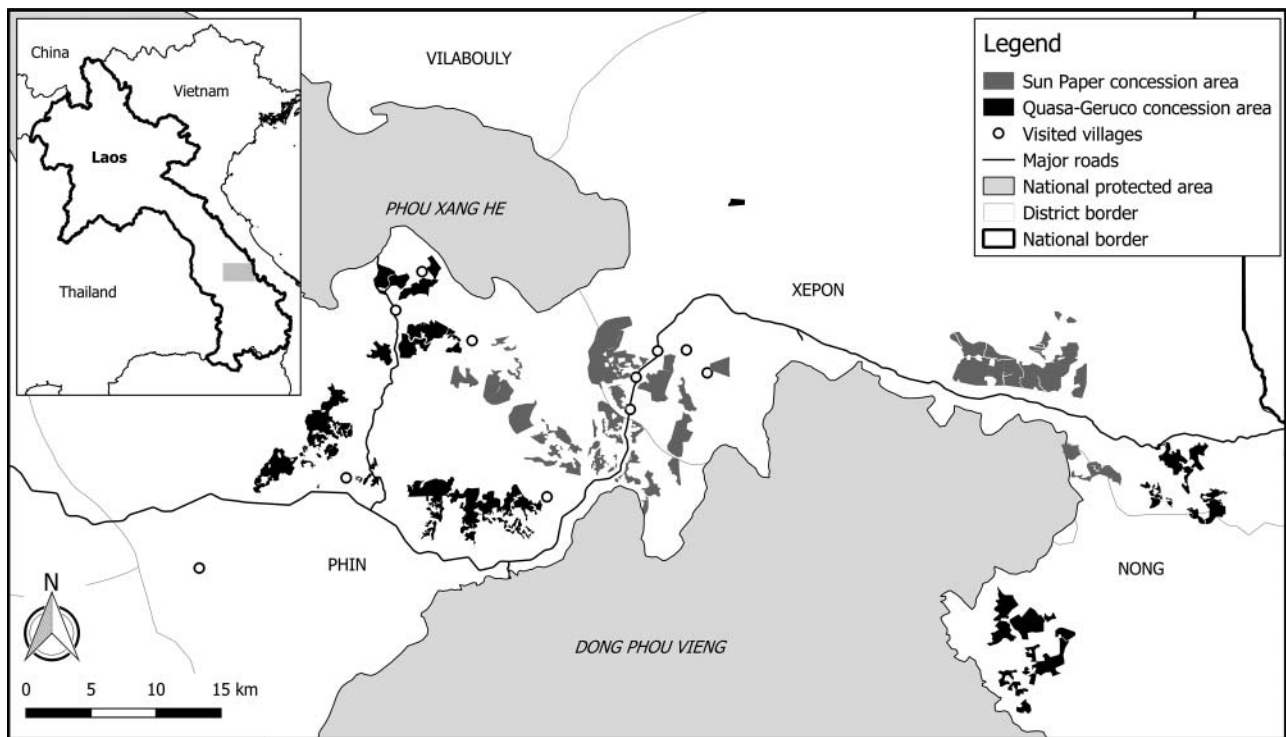


Figure 1. Map of Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper's allocated concession areas. Source: Author's drawing.

contradictory. In the case of industrial tree plantation development and related dispossession in Laos, the differential transformations that have occurred are governed by varying types of relationships among state, corporate, and peasant groups with respect to land and the environment. Dispossession in the Lao context relies on hegemonic alignments among all three actors, and when such relations do not solidify, resistance materializes.

I make these arguments as follows. In the next section, I outline how a Gramscian relational framework of environmental governance contributes to a nascent literature on the political contingency of dispossession by extraeconomic means. I then review the emergence of the Lao regime dispossession and resistance to it. Following that, I demonstrate the dialectical processes of dispossession and resistance that have played out in Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper's projects in southern Laos, highlighting the role played by varied relations among state, corporate, and community actors.

These arguments are based on twenty months of field research conducted in Laos. The research used semistructured interviews and focus groups, field site visits, ethnographic participant observation, participatory mapping, and the collection of government and investor documents and maps. Individual and focus

group interviews were conducted with government officials in relevant sectors at all administrative levels (central, provincial, and district), company managers and staff at the district level, village committees, village households, village women focus groups, and staff of domestic and foreign civil society organizations. Interviews with government officials were conducted by the author in the Lao language, most interviews in the villages were conducted in the Brou ethnic minority language with the assistance of Brou research assistants who translated to Lao, and company interviews were conducted in Chinese and Vietnamese, with translation to Lao provided by company staff. Several types of documents and spatial data were collected from government agencies, companies, and villages, such as land concession agreements, land survey maps and reports, and proposals, requests, complaints, and other forms of official communication between the companies, government offices, and villages.

## The Relational Governance of Dispossession

In this section, I develop a theoretical approach for analyzing how the geographies of dispossession are governed. I argue that current conceptual

frameworks of dispossession—primitive accumulation (PA) and accumulation by dispossession (ABD)—do not sufficiently address the political struggles that shape extraeconomic dimensions of dispossession. Although PA and ABD identify the broad political–economic drivers of dispossession, especially the expansion of capitalist social relations and capital overaccumulation, they do not conceptualize the politics of how and why geographically differentiated dispossession occurs. In other words, they lack a theoretical analysis of the governance of dispossession: the political and social relations among actors that influence socioenvironmental decision making and outcomes. The theoretical literature on environmental governance provides an opening for addressing these questions. Although the concept of environmental governance has been critiqued as vague and ideologically malleable (Bridge and Perreault 2009), it is generative and insightful when infused with a Gramscian relational sensibility for understanding how change occurs, resulting from contradictory relationships, processes, and interactions among social actors and the environment.

Theoretical and empirical work on dispossession is an indispensable theme within nature–society geography for studying the social–environmental transformations of resource extraction projects such as mining (Bebbington et al. 2008), hydropower (Sneddon 2007), and agro-industrial plantations (Kenney-Lazar 2012). Geographical work on dispossession is largely prompted by Harvey’s (2003) theoretical reworking of PA as ADB, a contemporary and relational dynamic of neoliberal capitalism. Similarly, De Angelis (2004) usefully conceptualized how PA occurs in instances when “regular” capital accumulation, or Harvey’s accumulation by exploitation, meets its limits: political–economic contexts or domains of society where the conditions necessary for capital accumulation are not already established. Such a process is evident in the contemporary global land rush or “land grab” of the past decade, as global and regional investors have forcibly acquired large plots of land to extract value via agricultural and tree plantations, mining, or land speculation (Zoomers 2010). The global land grab is characterized by a diverse set of investment activities, drivers of investment, and geographical contexts of land acquisition. Thus, the concept of land grabbing is most coherent when understood conceptually, as an unjust and coercive

dispossession of the land and livelihoods of the marginalized and rural poor, depriving them of their means of production and social reproduction (Borras and Franco 2013).

Theories of dispossession are effective at providing a broad and structural political–economic explanation for why dispossession takes place. Marx’s PA places dispossession as an integral element of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The dispossession of common and household lands from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries in England freed up land for agrarian capitalism and people as labor in burgeoning manufacturing industries, creating the class divisions essential for capital accumulation. For Harvey (2003), ABD occurs today as a strategy for addressing crises of capital overaccumulation, to open up new fields of investment and restore rates of profitability.

Levien (2012) has argued that Harvey’s conceptualization of ABD places more emphasis on its role in resolving crises of capitalist overaccumulation than on its means of extraeconomic coercion. In Harvey’s (2003, 149) words, what ABD does for capitalism is “to release a set of assets (including labor power) at very low (and in some instances zero) cost. Over-accumulated capital can seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use.” Levien (2012, 940), while still recognizing ABD as a critical element of capitalist expansion, foregrounds how it operates: “it is not simply an economic process of over-accumulated capital seizing hold of under-commodified assets . . . but fundamentally a political process in which states—or other coercion wielding entities—use extra-economic force to help capitalists overcome barriers to accumulation” (Levien 2012, 940).

In following Glassman’s (2006) emphasis on the extraeconomic, such as coercion, the law, and violence, Levien (2013) has turned our attention toward how dispossession is a contingent political phenomenon, rather than a determined outcome of capitalist expansion. For Levien, dispossession is influenced more by specific class struggles at sites of expropriation than the needs of an expanding and deepening capitalist system. Thus, a major gap in the work on ABD is exposed: The structural political–economic drivers underlying the push toward dispossession do not on their own explain the sociospatial differentiation of dispossession or its geographies—why it occurs in some places and not others. Just because dispossession should occur to facilitate capitalist accumulation does not mean that it will. The literature on land grabbing

has evolved to recognize this, noting how planned projects often fail to materialize when local actors wield various forms of power to prevent corporate access to their land (Pedersen 2016). Thus, there is a need to further theorize and empirically study the meso-level political processes that shape how dispossession actually takes place.

Levien (2013) used a “regimes of dispossession” framing, referring to the “socially and historically specific constellations of state structures, economic logics tied to particular class interests, and ideological justifications that generate a consistent pattern of dispossession” (383). Although this approach is useful for studying patterns of dispossession across time and space, it is limited in its capacity to analyze differing dynamics of dispossession within such regimes. Instead, I turn to a relational, Gramscian-based framework of environmental and resource governance, which sheds light on the networked but power-laden social and political relationships that shape the geographies of a regime of dispossession. The concept of governance is useful for studying such relationships because of its emphasis on the roles of multiple actors, in contrast to a state-centric focus on government (Painter 2000). Governance also allows for sophisticated analyses of the state as more than a black box or unitary actor but as an assemblage of processes, people, and relationships (Wolford et al. 2013).<sup>1</sup> Just as important, a governance approach questions inherited analytical categories of social science (private, public, state, capital), showing how power operates across and between state, civil society, market, and community actors as well as political, economic, and environmental fields (Bridge and Perreault 2009). Thus, it is useful for analyzing how dispossession is shaped by relationships among a range of actors as well as economic, political, and social forces.

Focusing on socioenvironmental change, environmental governance is often invoked in studies of land grabbing to link political economy and politics with concrete agrarian–environmental outcomes and transformations (Margulis, McKeon, and Borrás 2013; Wolford et al. 2013). Environmental governance is concerned with investigating the institutional, regulatory, and political processes and dynamics that influence and impact nature–society relationships (Bridge and Perreault 2009). Himley (2008) defined environmental governance as “organizational, institutional, and epistemological systems through which access to natural resources is now structured/negotiated and decisions regarding resource use and environment

management are now taken” (435). Bridge and Perreault (2009) argued that environmental governance has merit in focusing on the problem of *coherence*, or how human and nonhuman worlds are brought into alignment with one another, despite their seeming incommensurability. The concept of environmental governance imparts analytical value by prompting geographers to think critically beyond the realm of government and through the political, economic, and social relations among actors and institutions that constitute governance arrangements, to explain how socioecological configurations are produced, organized, and transformed (Liverman 2004; Lemos and Agrawal 2006; Bridge 2008; Robertson 2015). Scholars analyze how such arrangements ultimately structure and sustain access to and control over vital resources (Bridge 2008; Dressler and Roth 2011; Osborne 2015).

A prominent strand of the literature views governance as rule based (Leach, Mearns, and Scoones 1999; Thorburn 2000; Cleaver 2002), looking toward institutions, or “rules of the game in a society” (North 1990, 3). This conception informs much policy thinking on governance and partly explains why development agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the World Bank and Global Witness discussed earlier, refer to countries like Laos as lacking good governance. In other words, governance is weak or nonexistent when proper rules are not in place to shape action and behavior (Najam, Papa, and Taiyab 2006; United Nations Environment Programme 2009). Although there is much value to a rules-based approach to governance, it is a one-dimensional form of analysis that is blind to an equally important dimension of governance: social relations. The absence or poor enforcement of rules is not equivalent to a lack of governance or even poor governance—action and behavior can instead be governed and shaped by social relationships.

Thus, in this article I advocate a relational view of environmental governance. Moving beyond a focus on state-led government to a multiactor governance coalition offers a way of thinking through how socioecological outcomes result from relational configurations among multiple actors and spheres of our world. Lemos and Agrawal (2006) usefully proposed that governance approaches should focus on understanding such relationships among multiple actors. These include comanagement of resources by state and community actors (e.g., community-based natural resource management arrangements), public–private partnerships between state and market actors (e.g., concessions

and leases for resource extraction), and private–social partnerships between community and market actors (e.g., payments for ecosystem services or ecotourism). They argued, however, that these actors should be understood as operating on an equal plane in cooperation with one another, ignoring the significant power inequalities among them, a common problem of apolitical governance approaches that elude questions of power and difference (Bridge and Perreault 2009).

To address these deficiencies, I advocate a Gramscian-infused conception of relational governance for two reasons. First, it provides a dialectical approach to relationality that allows for a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how relations are historically shaped, temporally and spatially dynamic, and contradictory. Relations internal to actors and categories are understood as equally contradictory and complex. Thus, the state is viewed as a complex social relation and a site for strategic action (Jessop 1990). As Gramsci argued, “It is not enough to know the *ensemble* of relations as they exist at any given time as a given system. They must be known genetically, in the movement of their formation. For each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations but of the history of these relations” (Gramsci 1971, 352–53, italics in original). This is a focus on “immanence,” understanding that change results from internal social contradictions and a refusal to “take as given discrete objects, identities, places and events; instead it attends to *how* they are produced and changed in practice in relation to one another” (Hart 2004, 98, original emphasis). Such an approach is well established in geographical thought (Massey and Collective 1999; Bathelt and Glückler 2003; Yeung 2005), influenced by Lefebvre’s ([1974] 1991) thesis on the production of space, prompting geographers to investigate the materially mediated social interrelations and interactions that generate specific spatial forms (Massey 2005).

Second, a Gramscian lens attends to politics and power, correcting apolitical approaches to governance by showing how sociopolitical relations can be used to either extend and solidify or impede and fracture hegemonic modes of capitalist accumulation and development. If hegemony is read as the ability of a dominant class to successfully present its interests as being the interests of all, a logic that becomes “common sense,” then it is important to understand what relations between classes or key social actors enable such a project to be advanced. Thus, relations are no longer politically neutral but are infused with the power to either

expand hegemonic power or contest it. As Glassman (2011) argued, although hegemony seems designed to explain accommodation to existing social structures rather than resistance, Gramsci’s theorization was also aimed toward understanding how rebellion could take place within hegemonic social formations. Thus, the theorization of hegemony can also be used to understand how it breaks apart and resistance can emerge from within.

In the case of Laos, the state has solidified hegemonic power over land and territory through years of struggle, war, revolution, and propaganda (Stuart-Fox 2005), but new modes of development based on resource extraction and ADB have yet to become hegemonic. The types of relations that are mobilized or are developed among and within state, corporate, and peasant actors are critically important in shaping whether a new hegemony of development by dispossession is forged or if resistance—in its myriad and diverse forms—emerges in its absence.

## The Lao Regime of Dispossession and Its Resistance

A relational approach to the governance of dispossession is relevant across a broad spectrum of political–economic contexts, including authoritarian political environments like Laos. Despite the disproportional role of the state in Laos, state power is relational to other actors like resource investors, rural communities, and civil society, as well as its own internal contradictions and fragmentation. In this section, I discuss the emergence of a regime of dispossession in Laos and the external and internal relations among state, corporate, and community actors that govern land and resource expropriation but also generate resistance to it.

The Lao regime of dispossession has emerged as a tool to facilitate resource investment projects as part of the government’s plan to transition the economy away from centralized state planning toward a mix of state and market—what Lao leaders might refer to as a “Lao path to socialism”—and high levels of gross domestic product growth. Since the mid-1980s, the government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) initiated several reforms that introduced market elements into the economy, such as the opening of the economy to foreign capital with the passage of the first law on foreign direct investment in 1988. Foreign investors were first allowed to access land for projects through the lease or concession of state land, as authorized by the 1992

Prime Ministerial Decree on land. Land concessions, however, accelerated after 2000, especially when promoted by the 2006 strategy of Turning Land into Capital (TLIC), which endorses projects that generate revenue for the state by creating value from land. It also supports land-based investment projects that create permanent employment for peasants and enroll them into the market (see Baird 2011). State land leases and concessions are an important iteration of the TLIC policy in that they are intended to provide fees, royalties, and rents to the Lao government while also generating rural employment and economic growth (Pathammavong, Kenney-Lazar, and Sayaraj 2017). These projects, however, have led to significant social and environmental impacts over the past decade, dispossessing people of their customary lands and resources, polluting surrounding environments, and providing little economic opportunity in the form of wage labor (Obein 2007; NLMA, Chiang Mai University, and TERRA 2009; Baird 2010; Barney 2011; Dwyer 2011; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Laungaramsri 2012; Suhardiman et al. 2015).

Although land concessions represent a liberalization of the economy that puts greater economic control in the hands of private investors—foreign and domestic—the state continues to play an outsized role in their management. As such investments are essentially long-term leases of state land, government agencies and officials decide which lands will be allocated to investors, a highly political decision-making process. Barney (2011) investigated the Lao government's policy to allocate degraded forestland for concessions as a bid to protect denser forest areas, showing that degraded land is used by communities for swidden agricultural cultivation before it is reclassified as state land. Baird's research on political landscapes has shown how concessions are implemented unevenly due to political memories of involvement in the Second Indochina War and the subsequent communist revolution, particularly whether villagers fought in support of the current regime or the enemy (Baird and Le Billon 2012; Baird 2014b). Dwyer (2014) showed how Chinese rubber investments in northwestern Laos are selectively shaped by local officials, targeting ethnic groups that were associated with the counterrevolutionary, U.S.-backed Royalist forces during the war (Dwyer 2014).

Despite that the lands targeted by companies are framed as "state" property, they are often used by local communities for farming, foraging, and raising livestock. Established by a legal framework developed in the 1990s, the idea of state land is relatively new to Laos and has largely been put in practice since 2000 to

pave the way for concessions. Thus, most lands throughout the country had previously been managed customarily by village communities and households. In rare cases—mostly for housing and paddy land rather than swidden and common lands—peasants have formal, statutory tenure to the lands. Thus, the concession of land to investors inevitably involves the dispossession of lands from current occupants.

Not surprisingly, the separation of peasants from their ancestral, customarily used lands is a contentious process that generates anger and frustration. However, there has been little publicly visible protest or formation of broad-based social movements across varied groups of people, communities, and regions, as has been seen in other countries across the Global South (Hall et al. 2015; Baird 2017). The most obvious reason for the lack of open protest is fear of repression and the consequences that demonstrators and their families might face. In the few cases of open protest that have occurred, villagers have been swiftly arrested, such as when villagers protested expropriation for a Vietnamese golf course in the Laotian capital, Vientiane (Smith 2010), a road connected to the World Bank-sponsored Nam Theun 2 hydropower project (Radio Free Asia 2012b), and a Vietnamese rubber plantation in Xekong (Radio Free Asia 2012a).

There have, however, been several cases of resistance throughout the country that have not led to arrests and detention, despite threats, but have generated positive gains for the communities involved. In rare cases, they have facilitated the return of confiscated land to communities (Baird 2017), but more commonly they result in monetary or in-kind compensation. One well-known case was the acquisition and partial return of land from villages on the Bolaven plateau in Paksong District, Champassak Province by the Singaporean multinational agribusiness, Olam International, for a coffee plantation (Smith 2012). With support from NGOs working on the issue and a spotlight in the international media, villagers brought their case to the National Assembly (NA) as a public grievance, setting in motion a process of conflict mediation. Ultimately, 281 ha of the approximately 800 ha acquired was returned to the village (interview with NGO staff, 9 February 2015).

Despite a few such high-profile cases of successful resistance (Baird 2017), many go unnoticed because they do not lead to protracted conflict and generate media attention. Interviewed staff at international NGOs and Lao nonprofit associations who aim to empower villagers to protect their land and forestry



rights have noticed that the villagers they work with have become increasingly hesitant to accept the terms that companies offer. As noted by one anonymous respondent who has worked on land issues for more than two decades and is well respected among land rights advocates:

Previously, villages gave land away very easily. The village headman would accept money from the company, maybe \$1,000, and give some of it to the villagers. There was very little consultation, and a lot of village land would be given away. Now, there is consultation with the village and negotiating. The villages cannot completely protect their land against expropriation, but they can negotiate so that they only give away part of their land. When the company asks for 1,000 ha they only end up giving away 100. (Interview with a representative of a Lao nonprofit association, 3 March 2015).

Interviewees noted that these changes resulted partly from their organizations's projects on legal rights education and land use planning, but as importantly because of villagers gaining knowledge of the impacts of land investments and their heightened savvy in creatively avoiding them.

Even central-level government officials have admitted that the ways in which villagers react to concessions have changed over time. One official remarked, "Now, villagers are not the same as before, they raise concerns to the National Assembly, to the government and to us [the environment ministry]—they never did this before" (interview with environment ministry official, 5 December 2014). This is not to say that rural Lao people did not lodge complaints or negotiate in the past but that they have become increasingly empowered in recent years within a dynamic political environment. Such changes are partly enabled by the multiple and partial moratoriums that the government has enacted on certain types of new land concessions, the first of which was issued in 2007 and the latest of which is still in place.

Scholars, such as McCallister (2015) and Baird (2017), have written about these new forms of resistance emerging across the country, which parallel the processes examined in this article. McCallister (2015) analyzed the case of a Chinese rubber plantation in northern Laos to show how villagers combined everyday acts of resistance with direct appeals to the local government concerning project illegalities. Baird (2017) investigated cases from southern Laos in which villagers have engaged in "contingent contestation," resistance that emerges from specific histories, identities, politics,

and geographies. As research on resistance to land concessions in Laos is relatively new, however, there is a lack of analysis of the factors that enable or constrain its occurrence, a task to which I now turn.

## Relational Tree Plantations in Southern Laos

In this section, I review four key relations—capital–state, socioenvironmental, community–state, and internal community relations—that govern the geographies of industrial tree plantation development and rural livelihood change in eastern Savannakhet Province, southern Laos. Despite the necessity of expropriation for establishing plantation-based capital accumulation, dispossession remains a politically contingent process governed by such relations, which either facilitate or impede the expansion of state hegemony over rural spaces of accumulation. The supporting evidence for these arguments comes from eight of the ten focus villages studied in the research project. The types of resistance and dynamics of governing relations for each of the villages<sup>2</sup> referenced are summarized in Table 1.

### Capital–State Relations

The political relationship between plantation investors and state actors and institutions at different scales partly governs the capacity for investors to secure land via dispossession. When plantation companies like Quasa-Geruco develop close relationships with the right elements of the government—particularly at national and local scales—they can effectively mobilize state power to expropriate land for their project. This is especially important in authoritarian Laos, where the state plays an essential role in expropriating land due to its legal mandate to manage all lands throughout the country. Sun Paper, on the other hand, failed to develop close connections with the district government, losing the political support necessary to continue expropriating land without facing prohibitive levels of resistance from villagers (for a deeper analysis of how these relations are shaped by geopolitical histories among the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao governments, see Kenney-Lazar 2016, 91–117).

Quasa-Geruco, a subsidiary of the state-owned Vietnam Rubber Group, began developing its plantations in 2008 after signing a contract with the central government in 2006 for 8,650 ha. Their project was implemented swiftly—by 2012 they had

**Table 1.** Matrix of village resistance and governing relations

Village	Type of resistance or dispossession	State–capital relations	Socioenvironmental relations	Community–state relations	Internal community relations
Nammak	Significant loss of land, no resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for Quasa-Geruco	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal divisions concerning expropriation
Xaylom	Significant loss of land, failed resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for Sun Paper (initial phase of project)	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Saphang	Land losses partially limited by resistance	Limited state coercion and repression for Sun Paper	Lowland paddy and reserved lands, prioritized for village use	Wartime links to provincial and national government	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Phouliao	Significant loss of land, no resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for Quasa-Geruco	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal divisions concerning expropriation
Phoulao	Land losses partially limited by resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for Quasa-Geruco	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Phailom	No loss of land, outright refusal	Limited state coercion and repression for Sun Paper	Lowland paddy and reserved lands, prioritized for village use	Ethnic-based links to local government	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Thatham	Significant loss of land, no resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for Quasa-Geruco	Upland swidden and fallow lands, targeted for investment	No political links	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation
Nalao	Land losses partially limited by resistance	Heavy state coercion and repression for Quasa-Geruco	Both upland and lowland fields impacted	Kinship-based links to the highest realms of government	Internal solidarity to resist expropriation

cleared and planted rubber trees on all the land granted to them and by 2015 had begun tapping latex on 300 ha of their plantation. Their project was developed efficiently due to strong political support from the district government to expropriate land and quash most of the resistance that cropped up in response. In all of the villages researched, leaders and households described the coercive pressures placed on them to concede land. As reported by village leaders in Nammak Village,

At first, Ai [older brother] Somvang came from the ministry [central level government] to measure land. He came and asked for our land. The village refused. He said again that if you don't give the land we'll still take it, we'll arrest you and take you away. (Focus group interview with Nammak villagers, 28 February 2014)

Sun Paper, the largest private paper and pulp company in China, was much slower to develop the 7,324 ha granted to them in their contract, only clearing 3,228 ha—less than half—five years after signing their contract in 2010.<sup>3</sup> This was largely due to village resistance, which the district government was hesitant to suppress. This was not always the

case, though. During the initial stages of the project, the district government put much of their political weight behind Sun Paper's project. This reflects Sun Paper's reliance on the central government, with which they developed close ties, to place political pressure on lower levels of government, a strategy only effective during the first few years. In Xaylom Village, for example, villagers refused to concede land multiple times until the district government escorted Sun Paper's bulldozer operators with police and soldiers to keep villagers at a distance. Village leaders expressed that they were "afraid of the soldiers hitting them and the police officers hitting them. If they wanted to arrest the villagers, they could do what they wanted" (focus group interview with Xaylom villagers, 10 March 2014).

In the following years, however, district officials became increasingly frustrated with Sun Paper for taking too long to clear the land that had been allocated to them and for not "taking care of them" the way that Quasa-Geruco does (Phin District official, personal communication, 21 November 2013), giving them gifts and favors to grease the wheels of dispossession. A district official remarked to me in private that Sun

Paper “is stingy, they don’t give anything to villagers or district officials, beyond what is required by the regulations” (Phin District official, personal communication, 17 February 2015). Sun Paper staff also operated at a distance from district officials; they assumed that because the district government was mandated by the central government to secure land for them that they would do so without hesitation. They did not understand the importance of developing close relationships with district agencies and working with them to secure land. Eventually, the district government encouraged Sun Paper to make deals with villages independently by leasing land from the community or households or by engaging in contract farming with them, dividing the profits with villagers. These efforts met with mixed success; some village chiefs or households agreed to such arrangements to make money from the company, but most refused the company’s offers, as they did not feel the financial benefits to be worth the loss of land and they were not pressed under the weight of state power to concede.

In a telling example of how the tide of government support changed for Sun Paper, residents of Saphang Village in Phin District refused to allow the company to clear their land and the district government eventually let up, encouraging Sun Paper to look for land elsewhere. The district government did not initially respect the village’s refusal to concede land, allowing Sun Paper to begin clearing land anyway. Yet when villagers camped out in their fields to stop the company’s bulldozers, the district government backed away and Sun Paper was aware that they were no longer politically supported by the state’s monopolistic use of symbolic and physical violence. Although Sun Paper had been granted 400 ha in Saphang’s village territory, they could only clear half of it due to village resistance.

### Socioenvironmental Relations

The political and social relations among and within plantation companies, government agencies, and communities also played out in relation to the lands, territories, resources, and ecologies of the targeted area for investment. The human–environment geographies of the targeted landscapes affected the ease with which dispossession or resistance manifested. What mattered most was the ways in which the relationships between communities and their lands were politicized and inserted into the broader political–economic relations of plantation development. These relations, in turn,

shaped the political feasibility for peasants to protect some lands over others.

Many of Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper’s plantations were allocated and developed in midland or upland areas where farmers mostly practice swidden agriculture, pejoratively referred to as “slash-and-burn.” Villages that lost the largest amounts of land to both companies, such as Nammak, Phouliao, Phoulao, and Xaylom, are mostly composed of upland areas. The relationship between villagers and their environment in such mixed swidden–fallow–forest landscapes is politicized by the state in ways that frame such areas as unproductive, ecologically degraded, and available for investment (see Barney [2011]; Baird [2014a], for analyses of how discourses of degraded land have been used to justify plantation expansion throughout the country). Thus, it is challenging for communities to protect access to such areas in comparison to lowland areas that have the potential for other forms of agriculture that the state views as more productive, primarily wet rice paddy agriculture. District officials often starkly represented upland areas as in need of investment. A Xepon District official captured this sentiment clearly when discussing why the government allowed Sun Paper to clear land in Xaylom Village despite refusals and complaints from villagers:

Villagers want to cut deep forest for swidden so that there won’t be many weeds when they plant rice. We want to prevent them from cutting the forest and we want to make their lives more comfortable. . . . The government policy is that the purpose of investments is to reduce poverty by creating jobs for the people. Villagers don’t know or are not interested in developing their land, they just want to continue their lives like before. They want to clear the forest that has big trees. . . . We don’t want investment on all their land, only land that is empty, not used in any way. (Interview with Xepon District official, 18 February 2015)

Such “empty land” is precisely the so-called unproductive swidden fields and fallows that the government seeks to convert to plantation forestry.

In contrast, villages with territories that contained large percentages of paddy rice land could resist the project by arguing that they use their land productively. This was particularly effective if the village had little additional land to use: It is common for lowland, paddy rice farming villages in Xepon and Phin District to have a smaller land area than the upland villages, especially in relation to population size, and thus they could effectively claim that this land should not be

appropriated. These claims were lent weight by a legal framework and government discourse that places a premium value on paddy rice land and aims to prevent its conversion to other land uses (Vandergeest 2003; Baird 2014). Paddy land has high political value due to its rarity in the mountainous country as well as lowland Lao prejudices against upland minority agricultural practices.

A related and effective resistance strategy was to claim certain types of forest or fallows as reserved land (*din chap chong* in Lao) for cultivation by future generations. This worked particularly well if villagers claimed that the land was to be converted to paddy rice land, as it is a major goal of the provincial and district governments to compel villagers to expand the amount of paddy land in their village. Villagers remarked that even the district government recognized that reserved land should not be cleared: “After the land survey had been completed, the company and district government informed us that apart from the land that the village had reserved (*din ban chap chong*), the remaining empty land belonged to the state” (focus group with Saphang villagers, 5 March 2014). Saphang villagers turned this discursive support for reserved land against the district government and company by then claiming that much of the land allocated to Sun Paper for their plantation was reserved land that had already been divided and allocated among households for future production. These claims were convincing because the village had a history of converting swidden fields and fallows to paddy land, even using money from development projects and logging to pay bulldozer operators to clear land for paddy rice production.<sup>4</sup>

### Community–State Relations

The hegemonic alignment of social forces that enables dispossession can be constrained when villages have some means of power to leverage in their engagements with government officials. In the Lao context, maintaining informal connections with the state is critically important for ensuring that complaints and grievances bypass bureaucratic roadblocks. Two types of connections were most effective at enabling communities to lodge complaints with the government: ethnic or kinship links and political connections forged during the Second Indochina War and subsequent communist revolution (also see Baird and Le Billon [2012]; Baird [2014b]; and Dwyer [2014], for related arguments and cases).

Most villages targeted by the plantation were inhabited by ethnic Brou people. Although they are the predominant ethnic group in Phin and Xepon Districts, they make up a minor percentage of local government staff (Pholsena 2012). Interviews with focus groups in the ten villages studied showed that villagers had few if any personal or kinship links to government officials in the district government or at the provincial and national level. One exception was Phailom Village, which was mostly inhabited by Phou Thai people, an ethnic group of people closely related to the lowland Lao and who hold most district government positions. They had several close links with the district government; the deputy village headman had even previously worked as a district-level police officer. When they were approached by district government officials to concede land for Sun Paper’s project, they easily refused. As described by the deputy village chief:

These decisions depend on the village, if the village doesn’t give [the land], then that’s it. If the village *did* give land the district government couldn’t stop us. It depends on our will (*chit chai*), they don’t force us. (Interview with Phailom Village deputy chief, 6 March 2014)

The difference from the experience of many ethnic Brou villages described earlier is striking.

Kinship can be another important form of connection with political power. Like ethnicity, however, it was generally not a type of relation that Brou villagers could call on, except in one extraordinary case. Nalao villagers were unsure how to react when they witnessed their agricultural and forest lands being cleared by Quasa-Geruco bulldozers. A neighboring village had conceded land, but the company cleared beyond that village’s border into Nalao territory, even clearing some of their paddy rice lands. When villagers complained to district officials, they were told that there was nothing that could be done, as the land had already been cleared. They could either receive compensation for private land lost—1 million kip per hectare of paddy land and 200,000 kip for each hectare of reserved land (approximately US\$125 and US\$25, respectively)—or get nothing. Although villagers accepted the compensation, they were not yet satisfied. When their complaints to the upper levels of the district and provincial governments had no effect, they begin to organize with similarly affected neighboring villages to appeal to the central government. They were fortunate that a woman in a neighboring village was a relative of the then vice president and current president of Laos, Bounnhang Vorachit, who

is also ethnically Brou. They used their compensation money to pay their way to Vientiane where they presented their case to Vorachit, after which he ordered the district government to return the land to them. When the district government questioned why they made complaints to higher levels of government despite accepting the compensation, villagers responded that

we weren't satisfied, so what could we do. If we didn't take the money, you would still clear the land, so we had no choice. (Focus group with Nalao villagers, 4 March 2014)

When the company asked them to return the compensation money, the villagers said they had spent it all on getting their land back.

In other cases, villagers mobilized connections with provincial and central-level government officials that they had established during the war and revolution, which were particularly important for Saphang Village, discussed earlier. When village leaders attempted to lodge a written complaint with the district and provincial governments, they were shuttled back and forth between them. Frustrated that their complaint was not being taken seriously, village leaders—several of whom had fought in the war—made an appeal to a veteran comrade now placed within the Savannakhet provincial branch of the NA. As one villager recalled, “We studied revolution together, were comrades (*sahai*) together, but in 1977 [two years after the Lao PDR was established] I left to be a citizen (*pasaxon*) but he became a leader (*nai*), part of the government” (focus group with Saphang Village households, 21 October 2014). Their comrade helped them submit a formal complaint to the NA through the correct channels and ensure that NA members came to visit the village and view the site of conflict. Although the NA did not directly stop the company from clearing the village land and even recommended that villagers work as laborers on the plantation, they did encourage villagers to mark off their paddy rice lands and begin planting rice on lands that they wished to preserve. The NA visit elevated pressure on Sun Paper and provided villagers with the confidence to occupy paddy rice and reserved lands (see Kenney-Lazar [2016, 122–55] for a more detailed discussion of this case).

Revolutionary histories, however, do not always lead to the protection of land. In some cases, as shown by Baird and Le Billon (2012), those with the most useful revolutionary connections are also those who most enthusiastically support government policies. In

other cases, connections are not maintained over time and lose their effective power. This occurred in Thatam Village, which lost large amounts of land to the Quasa-Geruco rubber plantation. A village elder mentioned to me his old friendship with founding members and leaders of the Lao revolution, including Kaysone Phomvihane, Souphanouvong, and Khamtay Siphandone, and that he had lived and fought with them during the war in Houaphan Province, northern Laos, before moving to the south. Although I found it hard to believe, government officials who accompanied me believed that it was true but that he had not maintained such political connections as he had fallen into poverty due to alcoholism.

### Internal Community Relations

The decision at the village level to resist, essential to constraining plantation development on village lands, was partly based on internal village relations. Villages that held a unified oppositional position were more likely to resist than those that suffered from internal tensions and conflicts (only Nammak and Phoulao fall into the latter category; see Table 1). It was especially important whether there was a unified relationship between village elites, especially the chief and village committee, and regular households. Such dynamics shaped whether decisions were made with democratic input from villagers or whether village leaders operated on their own, especially if they received payouts from the company.

Village solidarity enabled several villages targeted by Quasa-Geruco to bravely refuse the concession of their land in the face of heavy repression and coercion. Phoulao Village was united in opposition to the project since it was first proposed to them and thus they could stand up to government coercion and prevent the acquisition of part of their lands. District officials and Quasa-Geruco staff visited the village six times before they could pressure them to concede any land for the project. At first, government officials from every level of government approached villagers and told them that they had the right to decide whether to concede land. Villagers took this offer literally and refused. The company and government continued to return and made stronger demands each time. They eventually declared that the company would develop the plantation project regardless of village dissent. Yet Phoulao villagers continued to refuse, confidently asserting their rights to land, despite the

complexities of land ownership in the Lao context. “This isn’t only village land, it also belongs to the state, but we live here, we protect it (*pok pak haks*), we are the owners (*hao pen chao*)” (focus group interview with Phoulao villagers, 28 February 2014). Village leaders recounted their solidarity in response to state pressure:

They started writing down people’s names. Whoever won’t give land, write your name down. So, everyone in the village wrote their name down. They asked, “Who’s the chief here?” and we responded, “The whole village is the chief.” So, they stopped. If it was just one or two of us they would have taken us away. (Focus group interview with Phoulao villagers, 28 February 2014)

An agreement was only reached when the company met the demands set by villagers to pay for the extension of power lines to the village and to fix and maintain a dirt access road each year. Quasa-Geruco failed to deliver on these promises, even after the land had been cleared and trees planted. When they later requested another plot of land to expand the plantation, the village immediately refused without conditions, effectively ending plantation expansion within their village territory.

Saphang Village’s success in limiting the extent of Sun Paper’s plantation, as discussed earlier, was aided by their ability to make their case heard and be taken seriously by the government. They were only able to achieve this, however, by rejecting the plantation project in solidarity and working together to prevent it as soon as they learned of it. Whenever the company and government approached them to acquire land, the village held a communal meeting and consistently refused the project due to a lack of perceived benefits. When they traveled to Vientiane to appeal to the NA, each household chipped in cash to raise 4 million kip (approximately US\$500) to pay for it. When contesting the clearance of their lands, they organized themselves so that a few villagers would always be physically in the fields to occupy and defend them. Later, another plantation company made an offer to lease village land, offering to pay \$350 per hectare for a thirty-year concession. Although the village chief was impressed by the offer, he repeatedly emphasized that he lacked the authority to decide without the support of all villagers.

On the other side of the spectrum, villages lacking in solidarity and democratic consensus or rife with internal conflicts were unable to put up any front of resistance. When Nammak Village was approached to

concede land, they were unable to resist in part because there were two opposing groups within the village, one that was in favor of the plantation because of the supposed employment and monetary benefits that it would bring and another that was in opposition because of the losses of land and livelihoods. The tension was heightened by the significant amount of debt that the village had racked up—73 million kip (approximately US\$9,125)—with the state electric company when power lines were extended to their village. Quasa-Geruco offered to pay off their debt in return for the acquisition of their land, a deal that was too attractive for villagers to refuse.

In direct contrast to Phoulao’s bold resistance in the face of intimidation and threats from the district government, neighboring Phouliao villagers were afraid to stand up as a community to protect their land. When asked if they willingly gave up their lands to the company, they replied:

Who would be? It’s the land next to our paddy fields, but if we didn’t they said they would put us in jail, so we were scared. The district [government officials] said that whoever doesn’t give [land] must sign their name on the document. Who would be brave enough to sign? (Focus group interview with Phouliao villagers, 1 March 2014)

Villagers could not be brave because the former village chief who was in power when the project was being developed had been paid off by the company. Additionally, he, along with other village elites, received coveted salaried positions as plantation guards.

## Conclusion

The cases presented here demonstrate how various types of social relations govern the materialization of dispossession—the deprivation of rural people’s communal and household agricultural lands, fallows, and forests—or resistance to it. They show how the uneven geographies of industrial tree plantation development, and their attendant socioecological ramifications, reflect the relational nature of environmental governance in Laos. In each case, relations between and internal to communities, the state, and plantation companies interacted in ways that either facilitated or impeded the expansion of state hegemony into new forms of resource-extractive capital accumulation. Such hegemonic expansion depended on the formation and deployment of particular social and political relations, especially (1) political relationships between plantation companies and the state at multiple scales;

(2) the state's interpellation of relations between peasants and land as environmentally degrading, unproductive, and linked with poverty and thus in need of replacement; (3) weak or absent political linkages between communities and the state, preventing them from linking their land claims with political power; and (4) internal community relations marked by divisions and conflict that can be exploited to push through concessions of community land, particularly when village leaders accept bribes or favors from the company and then make decisions on behalf of the village without democratic consultation.

These relations did not act in isolation from one another but interacted in several distinct ways that either enhanced or diminished forces of dispossession. Villages targeted by Quasa-Geruco that were unified in their resistance or had political connections with the government still faced an uphill battle due to Quasa-Geruco's strong state support. Despite Phoulao's unified resistance and constant refusal to concede land, they eventually relinquished a major portion of their land before being able to successfully refuse the concession of a second plot. Only a small amount of land was restored to the villages that held kinship connections with the former vice president of Laos. Furthermore, only paddy land inadvertently cleared by the company was returned; all of their expropriated swidden fields and fallows were retained within the company's concession area. In contrast, Phailom Village could refuse any loss of their land based on their strong political connections and Sun Paper's weak links with the district government. Saphang Village is the best example of how the interaction of these relations amplified the potential for resistance. Villagers were unified in their opposition to the project; they had a wartime political connection that enabled them to prompt the NA to investigate their case, thus drawing attention to it despite the NA's lack of official support; they sought to protect private paddy and reserved land; and they resisted against a company, Sun Paper, that was unable to consistently use district government forces of repression to expropriate land.

These cases show the variable and contingent nature of dispossession and how such variation is relationally governed. Both Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper sought extensive plots of land for the development of their plantations, which required the displacement of land-dependent rural communities. Despite the general capacity of state machinery to dispossess for the purposes of foreign resource investment, how such dispossession specifically took place was much more

complicated and politically contested, even within the authoritarian environment of Laos. Because dispossession is a political process produced by the state, in relation with capital and rural communities, it is inevitably contested and negotiated. This is what I refer to here as processes that govern dispossession, the social-political forces that shape how dispossession versus resistance manifests on the ground.

I show in this article that such governing forces are productively seen as relational, meaning that they are based less on abstract rules and institutions than on sociopolitical relations among state, corporate, and community actors, with all of their internal contradictions and fragmentation. Thus, even when Lao laws are not applied to investment processes or are not enforced, it does not mean that there is an absence of governance or weak governance, as development agencies and NGOs contend (e.g., World Bank 2010; Global Witness 2013), but that they are governed by other, relational logics. The geographical unevenness of plantation development reflects the power inequalities that pervade such governing relations. Understanding how such relations operate and both open and close opportunities for resistance to dispossession tell an important part of the story concerning where and why plantations are developed, peasants are dispossessed of land and resources, and rural livelihoods and long-standing human-environment relationships are undermined.

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to the villagers, NGO staff, government officials, and company representatives who facilitated and participated in this research project for their time, patience, and generosity. I would also like to thank those who provided helpful comments on earlier versions of this article: Jody Emel, James McCarthy, Tony Bebbington, Jim Glassman, Jeff Bury, Ian Baird, Kelly Kay, panelists and audience members at the "Critical Environmental Governance" sessions of the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers, and three anonymous reviewers of the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*. Any remaining errors or omissions are my own.

## Notes

1. Although I understand the state to be a complex, contradictory, and fragmented social relation, I continue

refer to it as “the state” throughout the article as shorthand for the ways in which it coheres as a relatively stable social entity.

2. Pseudonyms are used for village names to protect the identity of villages and guard them against potential political repercussions.
3. Sun Paper’s project was approved after the Lao government instituted a nationwide moratorium on land concessions over 100 ha in 2007. Although the moratorium has shifted the political environment in Laos, making it more difficult for companies to acquire land, an exception was made in the case of Sun Paper, showing their influence with the central-level government. At the district level, officials never mentioned the moratorium as a reason for Sun Paper’s difficulty acquiring land.
4. Without technology and capital, the creation and expansion of paddy rice fields is a major investment of labor time.

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