

# Beyond hills and plains

*rethinking trade, state and society in the upper Mekong borderlands*

*Borderlands are often described as 'frontier zones' characterised by 'rebelliousness, lawlessness and/or an absence of laws' (Kristof 1959: 281). Anecdotes resonate with popular images of a remote underworld (or perhaps 'outerworld') where state authority is weak and lawlessness prevails. In the upper Mekong borderlands of Thailand, Laos and Burma, the imagery of borderland illegality persists both as spectre and lure, but the substance of what happens there reveals a state and society in league.*

Andrew Walker

## Fragments of borderlands trade

In late 1994 a golden Buddha image appeared in the doorway of a main street warehouse in Chiang Khong, a busy Mekong River border town in northern Thailand and key trading point with northern Laos and beyond. Its long main street sprawls with shops, banks, restaurants and warehouses. The large Buddha image added colour to one of the more non-descript parts of town; a large banner above it invited participation in a major merit-making festival in a Luang Namtha temple 200 kilometres away in northern Laos. The Buddha image, and a major cash donation, would be presented to the temple following the procession that would set off from Chiang Khong's major river port at nine a.m. on 9 November. Merit-makers were advised to present three photographs and their identity cards so the official paperwork for travel to Laos could be prepared.

This auspicious display of trans-border merit was the initiative of the Budsapha Sawmilling Company run by a larger-than-life Thai businessman with a long history of timber export operations in northern Laos. Visit Wongprasert's most recent venture was a Luang Namtha sawmill originally built by Lao provincial authorities who, desperately short of capital, entered into a partnership with Visit. His investment transformed the mill into the most technologically advanced in the far northern provinces. On the information sheet distributed to merit makers Visit was listed as fundraising committee 'chairman'. Given his investment arrangement with the provincial authorities, it comes as no surprise that the governor and vice-governor of Luang Namtha province served as committee deputies.

Sourcing timber is a complex business in Laos. Government quotas place limits on how much timber can be harvested. In Luang Namtha the quota lay well below the production capacity of Visit's sawmill. In other words, the mill's economic viability depended on relationships with provincial regulators to facilitate the extraction of logs well in excess

of the quota (including logs from the fringes of the nearby biodiversity conservation area). The strategy appeared to work: in 1994 Thai customs (renowned for their under-reporting, given collaborative evasion of import duties) recorded that Visit exported sawn timber amounting to 4,000 cubic metres when that year's quota was only 1,000 cubic metres. Elaborate merit-making with senior members of the provincial government was a small price to pay for this convenient oversight.

Somjit was a Lao petty trader and cross-river boat operator. She was the only woman I met who regularly operated a boat between Chiang Khong and Houayxai on the far side of the Mekong border. Most mornings her long blue boat was a regular sight, cutting across the Mekong to Chiang Khong's muddy port, where she casually wandered the main street's wholesale shops, filling orders placed by customers in Houayxai. Having made her purchases, she usually waited among the riverside sheds and restaurants directly opposite the Thai customs house. Eventually, her tuk-tuk arrived and headed down the concrete ramp to the port below where her goods would be loaded into her boat. Nonchalantly, she finished her conversations or bowl of noodles, paid the tuk-tuk driver, poled her boat out into deeper water, started the engine and rounded one of the islands that marked the beginning of Lao territory.

The profitability of Somjit's petty trading depended heavily on the non-payment of border duties and fees. On the Thai side Somjit rarely paid the 50 baht immigration charge, the 'processing charges' or export taxes. She often avoided port fees collected by Thai boat-operators who controlled cross-border passage. When relations with customs officers were strained or the cross-river boat association was being particularly diligent in collecting fees, she moored her boat at the port's far end (only 50 metres downstream) and loaded her goods via a muddy lane that avoided the customs house but ran past a restaurant where customs officers often chatted and planned their evening badminton games. On the far side of the river, where Lao import duties on many

items were prohibitively high, Somjit rarely had to resort to the wads of Thai baht and Lao kip tucked in her fake leather handbag. She was friends with the customs officers, had known them for years and sometimes brought them treats like pornographic videos. More often they invited her to share a beer.

## The state of illegality

Both accounts illustrate aspects of borderlands illegality: above-quota logging, smuggling, bribery, peddling pornography. Most interesting is that both accounts involve close collaboration with the state (for other accounts see Walker 1999). Somjit's success was not based on cross-border smuggling stereotypes: she did not slip across the Mekong at night to collect goods hidden in riverbank overgrowth. Her passage through official ports was highly visible and often noticed by border officials. Somjit was much admired amongst the male port fraternity. The petty officials and cargo-port notables seemed keen to engage her in the flirtatious and sexualised banter in which she excelled. Some may have entertained forlorn hopes of sexual access but for most her pale-skinned presence was an end in itself. One group of Thai immigration police seemed so captivated that they gave her small gifts, even asking her what brand of beer she preferred. No doubt the relationships Somjit cultivated on both sides of the border varied in their nature and intensity, but it is clear that her 'smuggling' was based on a personalised engagement with – rather than avoidance of – state border officials. Visit's case is similar: he did not seek to operate in a 'non-state' illegal timber economy but rather to forge new, more secure and profitable forms of regulatory collaboration.

It's tempting to suggest that these remote local officials are simply out of control, subverting central government regulations and in urgent need of what international development agencies call 'capacity building' or that the actions of Visit and Somjit typify the undermining of central state power as traditional boundaries are subverted by a proliferation of transnational flows. But both of these common responses are informed by an overly formal model of



Image of the Buddha en-route to Luang Namtha. courtesy of author

state authority that lays down a formal regulatory grid (such as the national border) and polices it for illegality (such as smuggling). By contrast, what these fragments of borderland trade suggest is that state power may be examined in terms of its genesis in local social relationships. State regulation is one aspect of sociality, constituted by the numerous cross-cutting allegiances in which state policymakers and officials find themselves. From this perspective definitions of illegality become problematic – not just because transnationalism introduces non-state frames of reference, but because diverse and hybrid forms of governmentality become apparent. The national border itself emerges as a site where various forms of power, agency and constraint creatively (and often unequally) interact, rather than as a place where state power stands opposed to local aspiration.

## Beyond hills and plains

These insights encourage the rethinking of conventional models of social space in mainland Southeast Asia, which generally posit that frontiers are formed – and state power established – through a process of diffusion from powerful centres in the lowland plains to less powerful peripheries in the hills, where social life in the 'periphery' becomes a simple confrontation between the 'penetration' of pre-existing states and the 'resistance' of pre-existing local communities. While the symbolic division between hills and plains culturally

persists, we need to be aware of how the 'lived essentialism' (Scott 1999) of this simplifying narrative constrains scholarly analysis.

An alternative approach would be to explore processes of collaborative state and community formation that take place in frontier regions. For while the reality of unequal power relations cannot be denied, neither can the creative and unpredictable agency of people in frontier areas in forming these relations. The subtle interplay between the illegal and the licit provides one useful point of entry into the multi-faceted governmentality of Southeast Asia's seemingly peripheral regions. ◀

## References

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To explore diverse forms of borderlands governmentality in other contexts, scholars at the Australian National University, The National University of Singapore and Yunnan University are developing a new project called 'Beyond Hills and Plains: Rethinking Economy, State and Society in the Southeast Asian Massif'. For further information contact the author.