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# Relations of sovereignty: The uneven production of transnational plantation territories in Laos

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The contemporary emergence of land grabbing across the Global South has been framed by critics as a threat to the national territorial sovereignty of postcolonial societies. Such concerns hinge on conventional notions of sovereignty as an abstract form of power possessed by the state and lost to global forces. However, the transfer of domestic lands into the hands of foreign investors is complicated by the contested and relational nature of authority in resource frontier spaces. Critical scholarship has shown that sovereignty in practice – the production of control and authority within spatial fields – is dynamic, contested, and variegated. It has further staked out an ontology of sovereignty as relational, although not explicitly stated in such terms. This paper employs the insights of relational geography to advance theorisation of sovereignty's relationality: the contested and consensual relations among heterogeneous actors that produce and transform authority in complex and variegated spaces. I demonstrate the value of this approach by examining Vietnamese and Chinese industrial tree plantation companies' differential access to land in Southern Laos, based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork. Each company differed in their access to land granted to them by the central Lao government due to the types of socio-political relations that they developed at various administrative scales of the Lao state. Such relations shaped their co-production of sovereignty driven by logics of centralised state territorialisation and capital accumulation. When such state–capital relations broke down, opportunities emerged for resistance by peasants who shifted relations of sovereignty toward their own interests.

## KEYWORDS

land grabbing, Laos, plantations, relationality, sovereignty, territory

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The increasingly extensive acquisition of lands and resources in marginalised countries of the Global South by private, public, and state-owned corporations over the past decade and a half, a phenomenon framed as “global land grabbing” (Borras et al., 2011; Rulli et al., 2013; Zoomers, 2010), has reignited debates about national sovereignty in the face of foreign resource extraction (Elizondo, 2012; Ferrando, 2013; GRAIN, 2010; Rice, 2009). According to Zoomers, land grabbing amounts to the “foreignisation of space” (2010, p. 429) and Sassen has contended that land grabbing is producing “massive structural holes in the tissue of national sovereign territory” (2013, p. 26). Such claims are partly a reaction to the sheer amount of land that has been granted to investors: deals have been signed that concede hundreds of thousands of hectares (ha) for periods of up to 99 years

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and it has been reported that 48 million ha of land deals have been concluded worldwide (Land Matrix, 2016), an area of land larger than the territory of Papua New Guinea.

The Southeast Asian nation of Laos has become a hotspot for such investments, generating similar concerns regarding the country's loss of sovereignty (Souksavanh, 2014), especially that Laos might be "preyed upon by its more economically advanced neighbours," China, Vietnam, and Thailand (Environmental Investigation Agency [EIA], 2011, p. 5). Such fears have been animated by data showing that the government granted over one million hectares of the country's land as long-term concessions to domestic and foreign investors for agricultural and tree plantations and mineral extraction, equivalent to five percent of the national territory (Schönweger et al., 2012). China's aggressive development plans throughout the country, especially its current construction of a railway as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, have ignited similar anxieties (Lintner, 2018). An Al Jazeera (2017) documentary absurdly claimed that Laos is "fast becoming a Chinese province, an unofficial colony." Additionally, scholars have framed special economic zones on the Lao–Chinese border as forms of "soft extraterritoriality" that extend the Chinese state southwards into Laos (Lyttleton & Nyíri, 2011). With less attention, Vietnamese actors in southern Laos have been characterised in similar terms. Global Witness, for example, claimed that Vietnamese resource companies operate in a "chaotic and opaque 'free-for-all' due to lack of political will and weak rule of law" (2013, p. 11).

In contrast to such characterisations, the Lao government projects the opposite image of strong state sovereignty, in which authoritative territorial control is vested in the centralised Lao state, controlled by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the only legally permitted political party. Rather than deterring foreign investment, strong state sovereignty can attract resource investors when it is oriented towards their needs and interests and secures their access to land and resources via legal property systems, state legitimacy, and the power to violently exclude and dispossess (Emel et al., 2011). Land investors have bought into the myth that there is a frontier of empty lands and resources in Laos because they are under exclusive control by the government and available for acquisition (Barney, 2009; Lu & Schönweger, 2019). Despite the differences in perspectives on strong versus weak state sovereignty, they share a common understanding that sovereignty is an abstract form of power that is either coercively lost to or willingly shared with foreign entities.

Such framings miss out on how the transfer of land into the hands of foreign investors is complicated by the contested and relational nature of authority in resource frontier spaces. The alarmingly large figures of land granted to foreign investors, globally and in Laos, only account for the land awarded to the company on paper rather than land secured in practice. The meta-narrative of the global land grab's threat to national sovereignty (Baird, 2014) has unravelled as many land deals have failed to materialise (Bräutigam & Zhang, 2013; Edelman, 2013). Projects face cancellation by governments, regulatory restrictions that decrease the size of land allocated, or resistance from rural land users, such as in Laos where many agro-industrial plantation projects have secured much less land than originally granted (Lu & Schönweger, 2019; Schönweger & Messerli, 2015).

The debate over sovereignty in relation to land grabbing hinges on conventional notions of sovereignty as unlimited and indivisible rule by a centralised state over a territory and the people within it, a quality that states ostensibly possess or lack in varying degrees. Yet, foreign land investors do not just borrow state sovereignty or take advantage of its absence, they often encounter a complex terrain of fragmented state sovereignty in which a host of entangled national-, local-, and community-scale political forces can limit their access to land. It has been shown across a wide range of cases that investors acquire land by engaging with complex relationships of authority over rural spaces that are shared with the state and local elites (Baird, 2014; Fairbairn, 2013; Peluso & Lund, 2011; Wolford et al., 2013; Woods, 2011). Such understandings are supported by critical scholarship on sovereignty that emphasises the importance of *de facto* or *effective* sovereignty (Agnew, 2005): the actual "extension and institutionalization of control and authority within a spatial field" (Agnew, 2009, p. 3). This scholarship has shown that sovereignty is not an abstract power held by certain actors (Lunstrum, 2013), such as a centralised state, but is socially constructed (Biersteker & Weber, 1996) unevenly across space.

This paper contributes to debates in geography on how sovereignty operates in practice by advancing the relational ontology that underpins much critical work on sovereignty (Agnew, 2009; Emel et al., 2011; Lunstrum, 2013), in which control and authority over space is understood to be produced and transformed by a range of contested and consensual relations among heterogeneous actors. It integrates the insights of relational geography, which conceptualises space as a dynamic and open product of processes and interrelations between contemporaneous and heterogeneous entities (Harvey, 1996; Massey, 1998). Four key proposals are developed from such an approach. Sovereignty is (1) an anti-essential form of power, (2) not teleologically produced for any particular ends, (3) produced among a wide range of entities at multiple scales, and (4) best understood through fine-grained, ethnographic investigation. Such proposals are explained in greater depth in the following section.

I demonstrate the value of a relational approach to sovereignty by investigating the divergent experiences of a state-owned Vietnamese rubber enterprise and a private Chinese paper and pulp company in accessing land in southern Laos to develop agro-industrial plantations. While the Vietnamese enterprise was able to secure and plant all of the land granted to them by the Lao government, the Chinese company secured access to less than half due to local community resistance to their project that district officials were hesitant to confront. The former was able to do so by mobilising Vietnamese geopolitical relations and developing new relations with the local Lao state and villagers that co-produced and solidified the state's centralised relationships of sovereignty, shaping it towards goals of state territorialisation. The other lacked such existing geopolitical relations and was unwilling to forge and mobilise new local relations of authority and thus succumbed to a more village-centred relationship of sovereignty.

## 2 | RELATIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY

This section advances critical scholarship on sovereignty and its relevance to the political ecologies of resource extraction by integrating the insights of relational geographic theory. In addressing debates concerning whether globalisation erodes state sovereignty, critical approaches, particularly in political geography, have questioned the underlying assumptions of conventional notions of sovereignty. In particular, they challenge a *de jure* view of sovereignty as unlimited and indivisible rule by a centralised state over a territory and the people within it, focusing instead on *de facto* sovereignty (Held, 1995), or *effective* sovereignty, the actual practices of control and authority over space (Agnew, 2005).

Critical scholars of sovereignty make two major contributions regarding the spatiality of sovereignty and its social construction. First, they debunk the assumption of the “territorial trap” (Agnew, 1994), demonstrating that political authority and the territorial boundaries of the nation-state do not necessarily line up into neat configurations of national sovereignty. State sovereignty is often institutionally and spatially fragmented (Lund, 2011) and thus operates unevenly in different geographic locations. As Aihwa Ong's work on graduated sovereignty demonstrates, political authority is spatially variegated, flexibly adjusted in different zones of national spaces, “giving corporations an indirect power over the political conditions of citizens in zones that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits” (2006, p. 78).

Second, they question the dominance of the state as the sole locus of political authority, highlighting the roles played by a wide range of actors in constructing or producing sovereignty. Emel et al. (2011) demonstrate how state sovereignty can be constructed and shaped in relation to the needs and demands of global capital, which states seek to attract. Lunstrum (2013) shows how sovereignty is produced in practice through articulations between state and non-state actors, shared forms of power that can also be framed as hybrid sovereignty (Ramadan & Fregonese, 2017). Such power arrangements show that sovereignty is not a form of power that pre-exists but that it is produced, constructed, and contingent (Biersteker & Weber, 1996; Lund, 2011; Lunstrum, 2013). Produced sovereignty is never given, monolithic, coherent, or stable, but is always contested and unevenly developed across space (Sidaway, 2003).

Such scholarship has highlighted the importance of relations between state and non-state actors in the production of effective sovereignty. As noted by Agnew, “effective sovereignty is always and everywhere exercised in relation to a variety of actors – state-based, corporate, societal” (2009, p. ix). Similarly, Emel et al. write that sovereignty is a “*relational aggregation* of global forces” that “can only be theorized in relation to the multiple social relations and political forces struggling over resources and territory” (2011, p. 72, original emphasis). Lunstrum (2013) uses the term “articulated sovereignty” to capture how sovereignty as a set of powers is articulated through interactions between state and non-state actors. Such scholarship thus views sovereignty as an ontologically relational form of power, although explicitly not stated in those terms.<sup>1</sup> It has stopped short of theorising what it means for sovereignty to be produced relationally, particularly how complex interactions and relations between and within state and non-state actors lead to variegated, flexible, and diverse forms of sovereignty across space.

This paper extends such work by making explicit a relational approach to sovereignty and advancing it conceptually by integrating the insights of relational geography. In doing so, I conceptualise sovereignty's relationality as the ways in which spaces of sovereignty are produced and transformed by a range of contested and consensual relations among heterogeneous actors and entities. Relational analysis has played an important role in human geography since its turn away from spatial science towards radical political economy in the 1970s and 1980s and especially in its later post-structural and cultural turns in the 1990s and 2000s. Marxist geography has always had an implicit relational basis through its dialectical analysis of how spatial transformations, such as uneven development, result from the spatial manifestation of the contradictions between the expansion of capital accumulation and unequal social and class relations (Harvey, 2006 [1982]; Smith, 2008 [1984]). Relational approaches to space and geography were articulated more explicitly in the 1990s as part of geography's

broader embrace of post-structuralism. Harvey (1996) has argued that space is not just a “container” but is produced by dynamic relational processes, only generating spatial “permanence” when these processes and relations are stabilised.

Massey (1998) advanced the debate with three key propositions concerning relational space. First, space is a product of interrelations between entities, rather than a container or surface upon which processes occur. Second, space is where multiple entities and relations can exist contemporaneously, the sphere of coexisting heterogeneity. Third, space is always in the process of construction and change, thus it is open and dynamic. She further articulated that relational space is produced across different scales: “Space ... is the product of the intricacies and complexities, the intertwinings and the non-interlockings, of relations, from the unimaginably cosmic to the intimately tiny” (Massey, 1998, p. 37). Murdoch (2006) has added that the relational making of space is both consensual and contested; consensual in that relations can be constructed through agreements or alignments between entities; contested because the construction of relations may exclude some entities or forcibly enrol others. Thus, relational space is shot through with power and unequal – some relations dominate over or out-compete others.

These insights can be used to expand and deepen a relational ontology of sovereignty. Relational geography considers not only how power is negotiated and produced through relations, but also how power relations transform space and place. Similarly, sovereignty, as authority over space, is also negotiated and produced through a wide variety of consensual and contested relations. State and non-state actors are not just articulated (Lunstrum, 2013), but are dialectically entangled with one another, changing each other, and generating specific configurations of authority over particular places.

Building on the insights of relational geography, four key features of a relational approach to sovereignty can be proposed. First, sovereignty is an anti-essential form of power, meaning that it is not a pre-existing and authentic reality but that it only comes into being through practice. In this view, sovereignty is not a power that is held; instead, it is a power that is co-produced through relations. Second, sovereignty is not teleologically produced for any particular ends, such as state territorialisation or capital accumulation, but can be challenged and reworked, shaped towards different ends. As a produced relationship and an arena of contestation and struggle, its endgame is shaped by the entities that make up and have power within such a relationship, which can change over time to include those who were previously marginalised. Relations of sovereignty are often dominated by state and capital interests, but a wide range of other actors are also part of that relationship and can exert more power within it over time. Thus, a relational approach to sovereignty can link more traditional debates about globalisation and state sovereignty with those of peasant-oriented food and land sovereignty (Altieri and Toledo, 2011; Borras and Franco, 2012; Wolford et al., 2013) or the sovereignty of indigenous peoples over their territories (Therault, 2011). These debates are concerned with appropriating sovereignty relationships towards the interests of the marginalised, oppressed, and exploited.

Third, the production of sovereignty concerns the relations of a wide range of entities at multiple scales connected to the spatial field in question, including the local social relations that are grounded or embedded in the materiality of such spaces. Regardless of the top-down character of formal power structures, actors in particular places, especially those with historical ties to the lands, resources, and environments that are targeted as sites of extraction, must be engaged in one way or another. Sovereignty is multi-scalar, as Agnew argues when he writes that “sovereignty is made out of the circulation of power among a range of actors at dispersed sites rather than simply emanating outward from an original and commanding central point such as an abstracted ‘state’” (2009, pp. 13–14). Sovereign power at one scale does not necessarily translate to sovereign power at another – powerful relationships of sovereignty are constructed at multiple scales. Fourth, *how* consensual and contentious relations co-produce complex and variegated forms of sovereignty across diverse and fragmented spatial fields in practice can be best understood through fine-grained and ethnographic analyses, as the remainder of the paper will demonstrate.

### 3 | LAND AND SOVEREIGNTY IN LAOS

Questions of sovereignty have animated political movements in the Lao territory throughout its turbulent history and continue to shape contentions over foreign land concessions in the current era. As a marginalised, landlocked country that is surrounded by economically and politically dominant neighbours and has often been caught up in larger global geopolitical forces, sovereignty in Laos has always been negotiated in relation with foreign powers, oftentimes playing them off one another. Nationalist and communist forces fought for independence from the colonial French and imperialist Americans for three decades during two Indochina Wars (1945–1975). Thus, when the Pathet Lao came to power in 1975 and established the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), the country’s new leaders were concerned with constructing territorial sovereignty to prevent interference by foreign powers and exert centralised state control over remote and rugged rural territories.

Despite taking political power in 1975, sovereignty was in many respects still *de jure* rather than *de facto*. Externally, the Lao PDR found itself dealing with and relying on the political presence of Vietnam. Vietnamese troops had fought in Laos during the war and Vietnamese advisers were involved in party administration and government functioning afterward. In 1977, a “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation” was signed, providing the legal basis to station Vietnamese troops in Laos (Stuart-Fox, 1997). Vietnamese companies were granted vast logging rights as a *quid pro quo* exchange for road construction and a form of reparation for Laos’s debt to Vietnam during the war (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007). Internally, years after the Lao PDR regime was established in 1975, areas of the country were not under government control due to holdouts from insurgents (Baird, 2018). Despite the top-down discipline of the Party, provincial governments maintained a significant degree of autonomy into the 1990s and were often in charge of generating their own revenues and managing expenditures (Stuart-Fox, 2005), a historical legacy that continues to this day despite successive attempts at re-centralisation of power.

Thus, asserting and constructing state sovereignty has become an important part of the Lao government’s political work since 1975, achieved in particular through territorial strategies. Externally, Vietnam retains its strong political presence in Laos to this day, but among a wider set of powers that the Lao government has courted since the 1990s, including western donors and China. In 1987, efforts were made to restore normal relations with China, which had collapsed in 1978 when Vietnam toppled the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and Laos supported its Vietnamese ally by denouncing the Chinese (Stuart-Fox, 1997). Such a relationship started to gradually improve in the 1990s, especially when China began providing development aid in 1999 after the Asian financial crisis, which has only increased since (Stuart-Fox, 2009). In return, Laos has increasingly approved large Chinese investment projects, particularly land concessions for hydropower, mining, and plantation projects (Stuart-Fox, 2009).

Internally, since the late 1970s, the government has pursued a range of territorial strategies intended to bring remote ethnic minority communities and “reactionary” groups within the orbit of state power. These included forced resettlement from upland to lowland areas (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007), stabilisation and eradication of swidden cultivation (Kenney-Lazar, 2013), and land use planning and registration programmes (Lestrelin et al., 2012). As the economy has opened to foreign investment, the government allowed land concessions for resource extraction to be granted to foreign entities, especially since the creation of a new Land Law in 2003 (Baird, 2019). Such projects are not only a strategy of revenue generation and economic growth but also state territorialisation. By granting “state land” to investors, the government has sought to demonstrate its authority over large swaths of the country’s land and the surrounding remote villages by providing them with permanent employment (Baird, 2014; Dwyer, 2014).

The model of resource extraction via state land concessions in Laos is based on ideas promoted by the Lao government and the Asian Development Bank that Laos is one of the most politically stable countries in the region<sup>2</sup> and that there are large areas of empty land owned by the state, ripe for foreign investment (Barney, 2009; Lu & Schönweger, 2019). Yet as Lu and Schönweger (2019) have shown, the concept of empty land in Laos is largely a myth, which Chinese agribusinesses have learned the hard way as they have struggled to secure the land granted to them in their contracts. Other major plantation companies from India and Japan have had similar experiences of acquiring much less land than promised (Barney, 2011; Fogde & Dam, 2012; Hunt, 2011; Sommer, 2013) and have sold or are in the process of selling their plantations.<sup>3</sup>

This is largely because of the contradiction between the central state’s expression of territorial sovereignty, enacted through concessions of state land, and the *de facto* reality of fragmented sovereignty in Laos across competing institutions, actors (Lund, 2011), and administrative levels of the state to grant “state land” to private investors. While land concessions are largely granted by the central government, the work of developing a land concession – surveying and securing land for the investors – is decentralised at the provincial and district administrative levels. Furthermore, it is villagers who actually use and manage such lands. They are represented by the village administration, the lowest level of the government in Laos that retains a degree of authority concerning how village lands are used for the benefit of villagers’ livelihoods. Thus, it is a tricky endeavour for the district government to wrest lands away from them on behalf of central government claims that such land belongs to the state. Considering the complex and fragmented relationships of sovereignty over land in Laos, if land investors seek secure access to land then they must embed themselves within and shape such relationships.

#### 4 | UNEVEN PLANTATION TERRITORIES

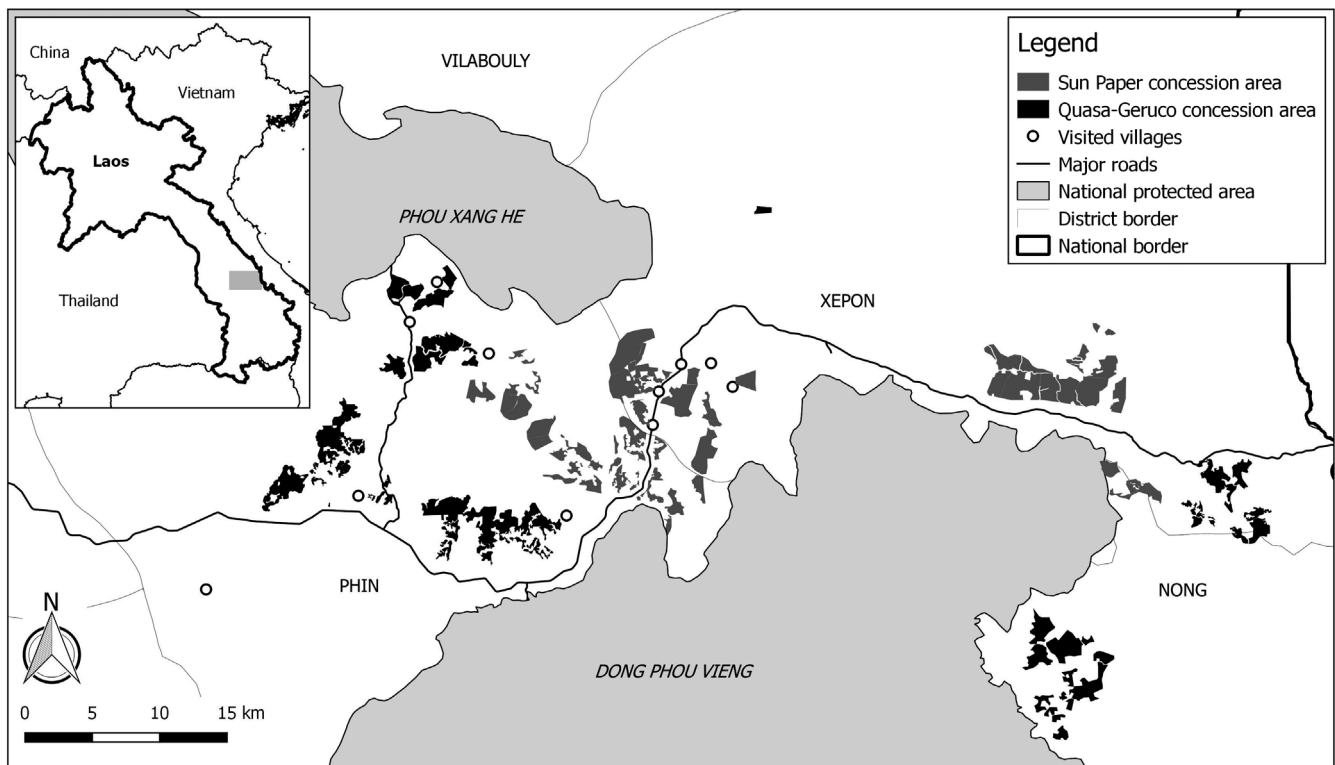
This section examines the relational production of sovereignty via the different ways in which a Vietnamese rubber enterprise and a Chinese paper company accessed land in a remote area of southern Laos to develop agro-industrial plantations and processing facilities (see Figure 1). Quasa-Geruco Joint Stock Company (hereafter Quasa-Geruco), a state-owned enterprise and subsidiary of the Vietnam Rubber Group, secured all of the land granted to it in its land concession contract and

began tapping the rubber trees and constructing a latex processing facility. In contrast, Shandong Sun Paper Industry Joint Stock Company (hereafter Sun Paper), a private Chinese paper and pulp company, secured less than half of the land granted to it, which in itself was significantly smaller than what it originally requested from the Lao government.

The empirical data employed come from 20 months of primary field research in Laos with a wide range of actors. The investments took place in the same region of the country where a majority of the villagers come from the Brou ethnic group and where both companies are interacting with the same provincial and district governments. All of the Brou people in this area were aligned with the Pathet Lao during the Second Indochina War and thus the government has not differentially identified or targeted some communities as revolutionaries and others as reactionaries (see Baird & Le Billon, 2012). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with government officials in the investment, environment, agriculture, and forestry sectors at all administrative levels and with representatives of the companies; focus groups were held with village-level authorities and households. A wide range of project documents were collected and analysed, including concession contracts, project reports, and environmental and social impact assessments. Insights were gained via long-term ethnographic participant observation with government officials, built on my affiliation with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE). I conducted interviews in Lao language – translation from Chinese and Vietnamese to Lao was used for interviews with the companies. When speaking with ethnic Brou communities, some discussions were held in Lao language while others were conducted solely in Brou language with help from a Brou research assistant, which allowed villagers to express themselves more freely when government officials were present.

#### 4.1 | Quasa-Geruco's "sea of rubber"

Quasa-Geruco was established by the Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), a state-owned enterprise and largest rubber producer in Vietnam, as part of the VRG's efforts to expand into Cambodia and Laos as of 2005. VRG subsidiaries had already planted 220,000 ha in Vietnam and the group sought to develop another 100,000 ha in Cambodia and Laos. The political support and weight of the state-owned VRG were facilitated via high-level meetings and agreements between VRG representatives and senior Lao government officials that began in 2004 (Obein, 2007). In 2006, Quasa-Geruco was granted a land concession by the central government of 8,650 ha that would span Phin, Xepon, and Nong districts of eastern



**FIGURE 1** Map of QSG and SP's allocated concession areas.

Source: Author's drawing

Savannakhet province. Six years later, they had secured, cleared, and planted trees on all of this land; by 2015, they began tapping 300 ha of trees and cleared a site for the construction of a rubber latex processing facility. They had produced what the district governor described to village leaders during training at the district government compound as a “sea of rubber” (*thale yangphala*), alluding to the large expanses of contiguous, uniform mono-cropped trees, the tops of which sway in the breeze like waves, a sea that had dispossessed land from more than 40 villages.

While VRG, as a representative of the Vietnamese state and the special Lao–Vietnamese geopolitical relationship, was able to secure land concessions for its subsidiaries, Quasa-Geruco itself was established specifically to implement the concession by creating close political connections with provincial and district governments, as an investment that would link bordering Vietnamese and Lao provinces. This is even expressed in the odd-sounding name of the company, the first part of which is an amalgamation of neighbouring Quang Tri province in Vietnam and Savannakhet province in Laos, while Geruco stands for “General rubber corporation.” In Phin district, where the company’s headquarters were established, special efforts were taken to embed the state-owned enterprise in the political life of the district. Their offices and staff residence inhabited the old district administration buildings, across the road from the new district government compound. When government buildings were decorated with colourful flags and congratulatory banners during an annual political meeting, Quasa-Geruco followed suit on the walls of their office compound. At the roadside in front of the compound stood a large billboard with images of their plantation proudly celebrating its contributions to the socio-economic advancement of the district.

Quasa-Geruco officials also developed close relationships with district government officials, facilitated through gift-giving, developing key patron–client relations. At the beginning of their project when it was under review by the district governor, they planted 14 ha of rubber on his land. They had also developed a particularly close relationship with the district land officer in charge of the area where most of their plantations were developed. They sponsored his daughter’s studies in Vietnam to train her to be a manager at the company’s latex processing facility, which was then under construction. When they talked on the phone and met in person, during the course of our research, they treated each other like old friends – they could phone him whenever they ran into problems and he would immediately be at their service. Yet, they could also push back when challenged. When my district government contact called them to set up an interview, they suspiciously and aggressively questioned my motives, often trying to delay or arrange to answer my questions by email. Company representatives skilfully engaged with government staff, knowing who to give money to and how to avoid overpaying, as has been the case with illegal logging (Baird, 2010).

The company’s “gifts” were given to a wide range of district and village officials. My district government contact noted that “when Quasa treats villagers or government officials to a meal, afterward they give money to everyone,” at which point he made the motion of someone handing out envelopes as if he was dealing cards at a casino. Whenever village authorities go with company staff to help survey land or resolve a land conflict, they receive a per diem of 50,000 Lao kip (US\$6.25). In addition to paying off village chiefs and authorities, they also handed out attractive salaried plantation jobs to them, like guarding the plantation. I directly experienced this extensive culture of bribery during an interview, at the end of which they gave myself and accompanying government officials envelopes labelled with the company insignia that each contained 200,000 kip (US\$25) and then proceeded to take us for lunch and give us a tour of their plantations to talk up its positive aspects. Notably, their translator was a Vietnamese man who was raised in Laos and thus spoke fluent Lao and Vietnamese, while several staff members could speak conversational Lao.

Gifts and bribes were not used by the company for direct exchanges but to build relationships that they could call on at advantageous times, especially when they violated the law or needed to mobilise district political power, as in the example of Phoulao village described below. Quasa-Geruco often took the development of their plantation into their own hands. They followed government regulations when government officials were present but then cleared land in restricted areas when on their own. They cleared beyond the borders of land allocated to them and into villagers’ swidden and paddy rice fields, clogged streams with debris, and even illegally cleared 380 ha of production forest, a zone reserved by the government for timber harvesting. District officials expressed their frustration with the company’s illegal clearance of productive agricultural land: “When we’re with them they do everything correctly but when we come back, as we’re not with them all the time, at night-time they start clearing ... they completely flatten the land.” A central government official remarked that “It’s mostly the Vietnamese companies that have problems and don’t follow the rules, regulations, and laws.”

While the district government sought to present Quasa-Geruco’s activities as illegal transgressions, government officials had done little to stop the company. For example, they let Quasa-Geruco clear land based on a rough map-based survey of the land granted to them rather than a detailed survey of the area, as required by law. The land surveys were then conducted after the trees were already in the ground – I witnessed provincial land teams surveying and mapping out Quasa-Geruco’s plantations that were established years earlier. Furthermore, district officials felt they were unable to fine or



punish the company because of its deep, geopolitical connections with multiple scales of the Lao state. A district official reflected that “the friendship between Laos and Vietnam can be difficult.”

At other times, close relations with the district government were used more directly to separate villagers from their lands, by mobilising state powers of expropriation. The Lao state is in a unique position to employ a range of powers of exclusion (Hall et al., 2011), that combine various elements of consent and coercion, in ways that the company would be unable to pursue on their own. At first, the district sought to acquire villagers’ consent by using state ideologies of development or statements about the historical solidarity between the Vietnamese and Lao people, combined with rosy pictures of how the plantation project would improve their livelihoods. In villages that resisted, however, district officials quickly turned to the tools of coercion.

In Phoulao village (a pseudonym), district officials proclaimed that the project would only be developed on unused, empty land and that villagers would be able to secure a stable source of income working on the plantation. They also told villagers that they had the right to decide whether or not to concede their land – villagers took this literally and chose not to give up their land. Government officials returned multiple times and became increasingly aggressive, eventually claiming that the project would be developed regardless of the villagers’ decision as it had been approved by higher levels of government and the land belonged to the state. When Phoulao villagers refused again, senior-level district officials, including the governor, intimidated villagers by threatening to take them to the district government office for questioning and education, an ominous reminder of the re-education camps that members of the opposing regime were taken to after the Pathet Lao took power in 1975 (Stuart-Fox, 1997), including one located in the nearby town of Xethamouak. Eventually, Phoulao cut a deal with the district and the company to concede some land in exchange for the company’s promises to extend power lines to the village and maintain the dirt road to the village each year, promises which they subsequently failed to uphold. In other villages, farmers who had resisted giving up their land had actually been taken to the district for questioning by the police and one villager was briefly jailed. That these incidents arose frequently in discussions across multiple villages showed the important role that fear of state violence played.

## 4.2 | Sun Paper’s land dilemma

Initially, Sun Paper had big plans for their project in Laos: the construction of a paper and pulp processing facility in Xepon district, eastern Savannakhet, 100,000 ha of pulpwood plantations (30,000 ha via land concession and 70,000 ha via contract farming) to provide enough raw material to run the mill at full capacity, and the construction of a new port across the border in Dong Ha, Vietnam to export the processed goods to China. It matched the Lao government’s plans to promote projects that link raw material extraction and production with second-tier processing to add value to the extraction of the country’s natural resources. However, it was quickly cut down to size. First, the Vietnamese government did not approve the port project due to Chinese–Vietnamese geopolitical tensions. Second, while the Lao government initially allowed them the right to acquire up to 39,000 ha of land in the country, after discussions with provincial officials in Savannakhet it was determined that it was not feasible to allocate such a large amount of land and thus their contract was limited to a mere 7,324 ha. By 2015, five years after their contract had been signed, Sun Paper had only planted 3,228 ha of land with trees, less than half of what their contract granted to them.<sup>4</sup> Company officials noted that by that time they should have already completed construction of their factory and been ready to process raw material, but instead the factory machinery lay in the district compound covered in grass.

In some ways, Sun Paper’s failures were predetermined. Despite being China’s largest private paper and pulp company, their Lao project was their first foreign investment and their first experience planting trees. The manager of another eucalyptus plantation company operating in the same area of southern Laos was appalled to see Sun Paper planting their trees down, rather than across the slopes of hills, inviting erosion; he said his boss would “kill him” if he were to make the same error. Additionally, they began their project a few years later than Quasa-Geruco, at a time when district officials as well as villages were becoming savvier at managing and negotiating land concession projects.<sup>5</sup> However, all of these problems were compounded by Sun Paper’s inability to develop a close relationship with district and village authorities and thus co-produce relationships of sovereignty over rural territory.

Sun Paper’s distance from the government was even expressed geographically in the location of their office compound, 16 km from the district capital and 6 km from the nearest paved road. Their office sits on the third floor of a freshly built complex of empty dormitory and office buildings next to the site where construction had just begun on their paper and pulp processing factory. When we interviewed them inside this walled-off compound, our interaction felt isolated and disconnected from both the political life of the district and the social life of nearby villages. The conversation was often stilted and awkward, as the company translator, who was proficient but not entirely comfortable with the Lao language, shuttled

questions and answers in and out of Chinese. While our accompanying district official had arranged the interview easily enough, he was unfamiliar with the company staff.

Additionally, rather than leading the search for land, Sun Paper relied on the district government to find land and make deals with villages for them. Sun Paper expected district officials to work on their behalf despite not offering them much incentive to do so. This was because they believed that their concession contract with the central government guaranteed their access to land as it merely required that district officials survey and allocate land to them. Lu and Schönweger quoted a Sun Paper manager saying that “They (central government officials) really know how to talk, they said all of the land was high quality and available. It was a big leader who said this, so we really believed it” (2019, p. 72). In my interviews with company representatives, they often repeated their main gripe, which was that “there isn’t land, there isn’t satisfactory area.” However, this is a politically loaded claim that reflects the company’s inability to engage with the local state rather than a lack of biophysical land. As the manager of another pulpwood plantation company put it, “There isn’t a lack of land in Laos, there’s actually an abundance of underused land. The issue is whether or not farmers want to work with companies and allow them to use that land.” The same could be said for district officials.

When interacting with district government officials, Sun Paper representatives often seemed meek, quiet, apologetic, and cautious. This was apparent in my own interactions with them – they were available to interview immediately, unlike Quasa-Geruco, and in the interview, they were melancholic and almost embarrassed about their inability to acquire land. With government officials present during the interview, they politely brought up the challenges they have had in finding land. Their behaviour was likely shaped by the company’s private ownership structure. They were blind to the importance of developing political relationships and they avoided the risks of corruption or legal violations in order to guard their budding international reputation (see Rushton, 2012). For example, they tended to assume that their contract with the central government guaranteed the cooperation of local-level government officials. As framed by the pulpwood plantation company manager quoted above,

The problem that companies like Sun Paper have faced is that they use a top-down concession model. They may be able to force the government to give them some land, but eventually, the model is ineffective because of the strength of Lao farmers.

He added that Sun Paper mostly pays off high-level government officials, which is ineffective in a de facto decentralised political system.

Sun Paper’s lack of engagement with the district government was especially evident in their evasion of local-level corruption. District officials expressed that “they don’t take care of us like Quasa[-Geruco] does,” which in the Lao cultural context means that they have not provided the same types of personal benefits, whether in the form of padded envelopes, jobs, or meals. The official complained that Sun Paper “is stingy, they don’t give anything to villagers or to district officials, beyond what is required by the regulations. For example, if the village chief asks the company for a mobile phone to take pictures they wouldn’t buy it, even if it was only 100,000 kip [\$12.5], but the Vietnamese would.” Sun Paper managers were frank in their recognition that “the people aren’t supportive because they didn’t receive any benefits.”

Over the duration of the project, the district government’s support for Sun Paper diminished. At first, the district government pressured villagers to give up land, as they had for Quasa-Geruco, even providing police and military escorts for the company’s bulldozer operators at times. Such support quickly dwindled once the immediacy of the project and the orders to secure land from upper levels of government wore off. When villagers began to block the company’s efforts to clear land, the district government stood to the side due to their weakening relationship with Sun Paper. Eventually, Sun Paper’s land problem became serious enough that they turned to alternative models. The district government allowed Sun Paper to directly lease household or village land. They began approaching villages on their own but had limited success. Many villages were uninterested and turned the company away immediately. In the absence of state power, Sun Paper was not able to convince and coerce villagers into parting with their lands.

Sun Paper’s deteriorating relations with the local government were on full display in the company’s failure to secure any of the land they were granted in Nong district. The company spent \$16,000 surveying land in this district that neighbours the Vietnamese border, but ultimately came up empty-handed. There were different explanations – the government planned to use the land for a new government office or it was allocated to another plantation company – but they all pointed to the government’s increasing reluctance to secure land for Sun Paper. Other provincial officials believed that the Vietnamese government lobbied the Lao government to prevent a Chinese company from acquiring land so close to the Vietnamese border. Frustrated with the government for not securing sufficient land for them, Sun Paper wrote an official letter to MONRE, the ministry responsible for granting and managing land concessions, in Vientiane, instead of making

these complaints directly to the district government, calling by phone like Quasa-Geruco. Thus, they even sought to deal with their problems from the top down.

## 5 | COMPARATIVE PLANTATION SOVEREIGNTIES

The comparative experiences of Sun Paper and Quasa-Geruco in seeking access to land for plantation development are illustrative of how sovereignty is relationally produced. Both companies were granted large land concessions by the central government. This “state land” was to be transferred to plantation capital based on the understanding that the central Lao government has the rights and powers to manage the country’s lands, meaning that they have full sovereignty over lands that can be granted to private capital. The situation is reminiscent of Ong’s (2006) graduated sovereignty in that the state has created zones of special exception for foreign capital, but in this case being fragmented plots of plantations rather than a contiguous special economic zone. However, the central government did not have unimpeded, a priori control over such lands and thus could not directly transfer them as state land concessions. They had to extend central state sovereignty over such territories in relation to a variety of other actors – provincial, district, and village levels of state authority, village community members, and the plantation companies.

Moreover, the central government could not produce sovereign control independent of plantation companies. The success of companies like Quasa-Geruco played an important role in solidifying relationships that support centralised authority through their own engagement with relations of sovereignty, thus co-producing a form of sovereignty conducive to centralised state territorialisation and resource capital accumulation. In order for foreign resource companies like Sun Paper and Quasa-Geruco to access such lands, they have to not only embed themselves within Lao relationships of sovereignty, but actually shape them to their advantage. The comparative analysis of both companies shows that they were unevenly able to do so in large part because of their differential understanding of the relationality of sovereignty in Laos.

Sun Paper, for example, operated as if the rural territories of Laos were governed according to the principles of absolute, centralised state sovereignty, believing that if the central government granted them a concession of land then the property was as good as theirs – local officials and land-using communities were supposed to follow orders from above. They failed to recognise that district officials, village leaders, and peasant farming households govern rural lands and forests with a degree of de facto autonomy from upper levels of government. Villagers and their leaders were hesitant to concede the lands that supported their livelihoods with little provided in return while district officials were similarly ambivalent about coercing villagers into doing so. Quasa-Geruco, in contrast, understood the importance of developing close relations with all levels of government, especially district officials and village leaders, thereby solidifying the linkages between various elements of an otherwise fragmented state to shore up the central state’s – and thus the company’s – effective control over land.

Geographical and historical differences also shaped the differential relations of sovereignty produced. The contemporary remnants of relations developed via geopolitical historical connections between Vietnam, China, and Laos played an important role in shaping the relations that companies can call on. Quasa-Geruco benefited from high-level relationships set up by the state-owned VRG and also the oft-repeated political discourse in Laos that their project’s success stemmed from the Lao–Vietnamese friendship. Sun Paper, in contrast, as a private Chinese company, did not have the same sorts of relationships to call on or guide its project. Unlike Quasa-Geruco, they were not familiar with the Lao governmental structure, which is largely modelled after Vietnam. Finally, they were operating in an area of Laos that is in the cultural and political shadow of Vietnam, crisscrossed by the historic Ho Chi Minh trail that Vietnamese troops used to transport goods, personnel, and weapons during the Indochina Wars.

As important were the ways in which Quasa-Geruco and Sun Paper strategically engaged with the state. Quasa-Geruco established close relations with all levels of government, especially the district, understanding the important role it play in acquiring land as well as securing control over it. They established these close working and personal relations with government officials via open-ended and extensive corruption. They formed a relationship in which their plantation project was in the material and financial interest of both the company and government. Unlike Sun Paper, they understood that their concession contract, survey maps, or even concession plot certificates did not guarantee access and control over land, but that such control had to be produced through a combination of consent, coercion, and repression. Once these relations were established, Quasa-Geruco frequently operated independently and without regard to legal limits on their project, assured that they would not be penalised because of the favours that the district owed them and the political cover that the Lao–Vietnamese friendship provided.

Sun Paper, in contrast, assumed that state land and sovereignty was a given, that the land they were awarded in their contract and survey maps had become their leased property. They failed to realise that villagers held claims to such land

and the importance of getting the district on their side to resolve land conflicts with villagers in the company's interest. While their support from the central government afforded them strong district-level support at first, following orders passed down to them from above, district efforts to acquire land for them tapered off in the face of village resistance. Additionally, the company was slow to develop their plantations immediately after land was allocated to them as they did not fully understand how little weight their property claims on paper had until they were materially bolstered with trees in the ground. This was compounded by the company's reluctance to "take care" of district officials and village leaders and the geographical and social distance that they maintained.

The four elements of a relational approach to sovereignty outlined earlier in the paper can deepen understanding of how Sun Paper and Quasa-Geruco differentially accessed land. First, as an anti-essential form of power, sovereign control over state land for plantation development did not inherently pre-exist in Laos. Relations of sovereignty in Laos have been historically produced over time through war, revolution, state and party-building, and more recently through efforts to attract foreign investment. Foreign capital is now entangled in and co-producing relations of sovereignty. Second, the production of sovereign control over land in Laos has largely been in the interests of centralised state territorialisation and foreign capital accumulation, but only because of the power such actors hold within sovereignty relationships. However, when the relations of sovereignty oriented toward state territorialisation and capital accumulation break down, as in the case of Sun Paper, other forms of peasant-oriented sovereignty can emerge, even if they never become dominant. Third, the production of sovereignty in relation to plantation concessions involved relationships of a wide range of actors with connections to such a site – national, provincial, and district governments, village authorities, villagers, and community members. Fourth, the cases demonstrate the importance of a fine-grained analysis of social relations and sovereign power over spatial fields, such as the importance of personal relations between company and district officials or the practice and geographies of company offices.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have advanced the argument that sovereignty, the effective extension of authority over spatial fields (Agnew, 2009), is a relational field of power – it is produced as a result of entangled relationships between unequal social actors such as various elements of the state, rural land using and managing communities, and land investors. Complex, variegated, and fragmented spaces of sovereignty are produced and transformed by a range of contested and consensual relations among heterogeneous actors. Such arguments build on the critical literature on sovereignty (Agnew, 2009; Emel et al., 2011; Lunstrum, 2013; Ong, 2006; Sidaway, 2003), which holds an implicit understanding of sovereignty as an ontologically relational form of power, in which sovereignty is not a power held but relationally produced across variegated spatial fields. However, such relationality has not been explicitly defined in such terms and nor has it been conceptually theorised as a mode of analysing how authority is consensually and contentiously produced in particular places. This paper has made such a relational approach to sovereignty explicit and further theorised it by integrating the insights of relational geography.

In applying such an analysis to the production of plantation territories in Laos, this paper has focused on the ways in which sovereignty is relationally produced in the interests of state territorialisation and capital accumulation. However, such an analysis also has important implications for other orientations of sovereignty, such as towards peasant or indigenous control over land and territory. When capital- and state-oriented forms of sovereignty break down, alternative forms of sovereignty can be expressed, allowing peasants to resist the dispossession of their agricultural and forest lands. Thus, there is a dialectic relationship between state–corporate powers of dispossession and those of peasant resistance. When Sun Paper was unable to co-produce state- and capital-oriented sovereignty, peasant communities targeted by the Sun Paper plantations had greater opportunities to resist than those targeted by Quasa-Geruco. The differential relations of sovereignty that underpin dispossession for resource extraction has important implications for the possibilities of peasant resistance and greater community sovereignty over land, resources, and food production. This does not mean that peasants have no agency in such processes, but that they can and do sense when political opportunities to strike emerge.

Although this paper has focused on the specific case of plantation concessions in Laos and thus speaks more to literature on the political geography and political ecology of resource extraction and land dispossession, its theoretical insights have broader significance for political geographical work on sovereignty across various contexts and cases. Despite the heterogeneous variety of regimes and forms of sovereignty across the globe (Agnew, 2005; Sidaway, 2003), investigating the historical and contemporary relations that have underpinned their production, expansion, and reproduction over time will be useful for gaining a deeper understanding of how sovereignty operates in practice and in particular spaces and places. Such an approach can also reveal the ways in which marginalised and oppressed actors are not only pursuing alternative and counter-sovereignties but also working to reshape relationships of sovereignty toward their own goals and interests.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Stacy (2003), a legal scholar, has coined the term “relational sovereignty,” but employs it in a narrow sense to suggest that national states and the international community can and should share sovereignty to improve human rights conditions in dire situations.
- <sup>2</sup> “Why Laos.” <http://www.investlaos.gov.la/index.php/why-laos> (accessed 26 June 2018).
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.mekongtimberplantations.com/about.html> (accessed October 2019).
- <sup>4</sup> This is not in breach of their contract but does indicate how slowly their project has developed in relation to their own objectives and QSG’s project.
- <sup>5</sup> Both companies were operating after the first moratorium on large-scale land concessions was issued by the Prime Minister in 2007, which made it politically acceptable for government officials to question the impacts of land deals.

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