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From land grab to agrarian transition? Hybrid trajectories of accumulation and environmental change on the Cambodia–Vietnam border

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From land grab to agrarian transition? Hybrid trajectories of accumulation and environmental change on the Cambodia–Vietnam border

Alice Beban and Timothy Gorman

In recent years, thousands of Vietnamese migrant farmers have crossed the border into Cambodia and leased land for export-oriented rice and shrimp production. Based on case studies in two Cambodian border provinces, we argue that these land transfers represent an intersection of broader processes of agrarian change that is re-shaping the Cambodian borderlands into a hybrid socio-ecological zone. Cambodian landlords and intermediaries use unequal access to politico-legal authority and the exclusionary power of the border to leverage control over their migrant tenants, thereby capturing a significant portion of the surplus from the migrants' high-value commodity production systems and potentially creating new trajectories of agrarian transition.

Keywords: agrarian transition; land grabs; Cambodia; Vietnam; border studies

1. Introduction

While the large-scale transfer of land in Cambodia to foreign agribusiness interests has received much critical attention (Grain 2008; Gironde and Peeters 2015), another set of cross-border land deals in Cambodia has gone relatively unnoticed. In recent years, thousands of Vietnamese migrants have crossed the border into Cambodia and leased land for the cultivation of rice and shrimp for export markets. In late 2014 and early 2015, we traveled to the border areas of Takeo and Kampot provinces in Cambodia to investigate these land deals. Our thinking shaped by the recent proliferation of literature on 'land grabs', we expected to see foreigners seizing control of the borderlands and dispossessing local villagers. Instead, we found a much more complex situation, in which Cambodian landlords continued to wield significant power over the migrant Vietnamese whom they had recruited to farm the land. Despite their tenuous position, however, the Vietnamese have introduced high-value commodity production systems that have transformed the social and ecological character of the Cambodian borderlands, allowing for the accumulation of capital by Cambodian elites. In essence, these Vietnamese migrants are the catalysts of a nascent agrarian transformation in which Cambodian elites – by virtue of their continued control over the land – remain key players and beneficiaries.

In this paper, we explore emerging trajectories of agrarian transition as they are playing out along Cambodia's border with Vietnam through the mechanism of land transfers to

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migrant farmers. We integrate literature on border studies and land grabs into the rich history of work on agrarian transition, illuminating the diverse actors involved in cross-border land leasing, the forces driving them to participate in these transfers, and the ways in which transfers contribute to the social and ecological transformation of space in border areas. We argue that the land transfers we observed in the Cambodia–Vietnam borderlands are best understood in the context of broader cross-border flows of people, money and agricultural commodities. While there is a long history of such flows between Cambodia and Vietnam, the current wave of land transfers to Vietnamese migrants has its origins in a recent divergence in the development trajectories of the two countries. Over the past two decades, Vietnam has emerged as a major producer of agricultural commodities such as rice and farmed shrimp for export markets, while Cambodia remains largely dominated by smallholder agriculture that is focused on subsistence, rather than commercial, production (Saruth et al. 2014). As a function of its rapid growth and economic integration, Vietnam has experienced a rapid upsurge in land prices, sending Vietnamese farmers across the border in search of less-expensive land in Cambodia, where they rent land under illegal, short-term (1–5-year) contracts from Khmer elite.

This intersection of agrarian trajectories is re-shaping the Cambodian borderlands into a distinct hybrid socio-ecological zone that reflects the mobile resources of the Vietnamese and the biophysical bases of production in Cambodia. In this liminal space, Cambodian landlords and other intermediaries use unequal access to politico-legal authority and their ability to draw on the exclusionary power of the border to leverage control over their migrant tenants, thereby capturing a significant portion of the surplus produced by Vietnamese farmers and creating a new node of capital accumulation. Inserted within a new set of class and property relations and operating within a physical environment characterized by the relative lack of public infrastructure, these migrant farmers have not simply replicated the intensive production systems which predominate in Vietnam, but have pursued a new transition pathway characterized by more extensive production on rented plots much larger than the typical holdings of farmers in Vietnam.

Following a literature review (section 2) and an overview of our research context and methodology (section 3), we present our case study in three main sections. In section 4, we explore the divergent processes of agrarian transition in Cambodia and Vietnam and the ways in which they intersect through flows across the border, arguing that it is not possible to understand current processes of agrarian change in Cambodia without being attentive to agrarian histories in Vietnam. In section 5, we examine how the influx of Vietnamese re-shapes the Cambodian borderlands into hybrid socio-ecological zones that are tied into the broader agro-industrial ecology of the Mekong Delta, but shaped also by the state of infrastructure and social property relations in Cambodia. Finally, section 6 looks to the possible paths of agrarian transformation now set in motion through the synergistic but tenuous relationship between powerful Cambodian landlords and precarious Vietnamese tenant farmers.

2. Literature review

In recent years, there has been an explosion of scholarship on large-scale land acquisitions (or ‘global land grabs’), defined in general terms as the ‘purchase or lease by transnational corporations’ (typically from the developed north), ‘of large parcels of land’ (typically in the global south), ‘for the purposes of growing food, fuel, or fiber crops for export’ (Hall 2011, 837). Much of this growing literature focuses on the ‘grab’ as the object of analysis – unpacking the drivers, the mix of international and domestic actors involved, and the

implications for local people's control over land, ecologies, resistance and sovereignty (Borras and Franco 2013; Fairbairn 2013; Wolford et al. 2013; Zoomers 2010). By and large, however, the land grab literature has neglected to address debates around agrarian transition and agrarian questions that have been central to peasant studies since its inception (Oya 2013). In this paper, we seek to amend this oversight by focusing on the ways in which land transfers are giving rise to new relations of agricultural production along the Cambodia–Vietnam border and shaping new pathways of agrarian transition. Contrary to the prevailing depiction of foreigners operating from positions of power in 'land grabs', domestic elites continue, in this case, to hold power over their migrant tenants, and both conflict and tenuous cooperation between international and domestic actors shape agrarian change.

As defined by Byres, an agrarian transition is a process by which 'capitalism becomes the dominant mode of production in agriculture' within a particular country or social formation (Byres 1977, 258).¹ The question of how capitalist relations of production become generalized in agriculture has been the central problematic in the study of agrarian change, from foundational work by Marx (1887), Kautsky (1988), Lenin (1967) and Chayanov (1986) to more recent scholarship by Byres (1996), and Brenner (1977) (among many others). The agrarian transition framework has been criticized, quite rightly, as being mechanistic, too narrowly focused on political economy and too Eurocentric (de Koninck 2004). We argue, however, that there is still much to be gained from this approach, especially because it focuses our attention not just on changing relations of production, but also upon dynamics of capital accumulation and class formation that accompany the capitalist transformation of agriculture. While Bernstein (2009) has questioned whether the agrarian transition analytic remains relevant under the contemporary regime of neoliberal globalization, in which capital accumulation is driven largely by financial services and manufacturing, we draw inspiration from recent work on the contours of agrarian transition in Southeast Asia. This work demonstrates the continued importance of accumulation in the agrarian sector and stresses that paths of agrarian change in agriculture are multiple, and compelled by specific, complex forces (de Koninck 2004; Hall et al. 2011; Hart et al. 1989; Rigg and Vandergeest 2012).

Informed by this work, we stress the open-ended and conjunctural nature of transition dynamics, but we do, however, take issue with the 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Schiller 2003) – analyzing social processes within bounded nation states – that characterizes much transition scholarship. Instead, we focus on the linkages and intersections between contexts, following Bernstein's (2009, 247) observation that the 'trajectories and forms of the transition to capitalism ... where it is deemed yet incomplete are affected by both earlier transitions to capitalism elsewhere'. In doing so, we draw upon recent work on Southeast Asia that shows how migration both derives from and drives agrarian transition (Kelly 2011). Migrants often form an underclass of low-cost, disciplined labor due to their precarious legal status, as Rungamanee (2014) shows in northeastern Thailand, where the availability of laborers from nearby Laos has made possible – and profitable – new forms of cash cropping, fueling transition toward labor-intensive production. But migrants may also contribute to dispossession of in situ populations if they have access to capital, farming knowledge or state backing that enables them to assert claims to land

¹By 1996, Byres' definition had broadened to encompass all the 'changes in the countryside necessary to the development of capitalism' (3). While we appreciate Byres' focus on intersectoral linkages, our present study focuses solely on the agricultural sector, and we thus treat 'agrarian transition' in its more limited formulation.

(Hall 2011). In our case, migrants have greater capital, farming knowledge and access to markets than local Khmer farmers, due in large part to the Vietnamese state's history of extension services and differential insertion into regional and global commodity markets, but their uncertain legal status also renders them vulnerable to threats of deportation.²

In this paper, we also seek to restore a focus on ecological change to the agrarian transition framework. Ecological Marxist theory builds on Marx' notion of 'social relations of production' – the relations between classes of people within a particular economic system – to highlight 'ecological relations of production' – the relations between people and non-human nature, and within natural systems – drawing attention to how capital accumulation takes place not only through exploitative labor relations but through plundering natural resources and re-organizing ecological processes (Hornborg 1998; Moore 2011). Seeing accumulation as not just a social process but an ecological one shifts our attention from the 'grabbing' of land itself to processes of ecological change that may (or may not) accompany such a grab and thus change the land's productive capacity, allowing for the production of an agricultural surplus and the accumulation of capital. Indeed, in Cambodia as elsewhere, land 'grabbed' by domestic or foreign elites is often left barren and uncultivated, and thus, for the purposes of this analysis, the mere acquisition of land is of secondary importance to processes of capital accumulation that may follow such a grab, and to ways in which such accumulation reshapes the nature and ecology of the land itself. Accumulation may take different forms, as Fine (1979) argues, through 'extended reproduction' in agriculture (what we term extensification), where the surplus is reinvested in accumulation of land, or through 'expanded reproduction' (what we term intensification), where surplus capital is reinvested in capital improvements, changing the productive capacity of the land itself.

In this paper, we bring this emphasis on flexibility, transnational dynamics, and ecological change in agrarian transition to bear on the study of cross-border land transfers. Land transfers often entail an ongoing transfer of 'capital, technology [and] know-how' from a more to a less developed country (Cotula et al. 2009, 15) and of raw materials and agricultural commodities in the other direction, potentially opening new pathways of agrarian transition in the countries where land is acquired. We argue that borders provide a privileged vantage point from which to observe trajectories of agrarian change that emerge from these interactions. As nodes of exchange as well as political boundaries in which state or state-linked actors may assert 'powers of exclusion' (Hall et al. 2011), borders are the vanguard of agrarian transition in Cambodia. Although agriculture in most of the country's interior retains a peasant character, its borders with Vietnam and Thailand are notable for the presence of large agribusiness concessions (ODC 2015) and of smallholder cash crop production in cassava (Mahanty and Milne 2016) and rice (ADB 2014). The cross-border trade of these agricultural commodities can in turn stimulate broader exchanges and encourage the spread of new production technologies, thereby producing ripple effects of socio-ecological change beyond border areas.

Production along Cambodia's borders does not, however, simply replicate patterns found in neighboring countries. Instead, we argue that borders are 'hybrid' spaces produced through the intersection of different actors and forces, and, consequently, borderland agricultural production systems combine elements from both sides of the border in new social and ecological configurations. This idea of borders as spaces of socio-ecological hybridity

²Our companion piece to this contribution (Gorman and Beban 2016) focuses specifically on the Vietnamese migrants' attempts to overcome their precarity by developing social networks with local Khmer farmers, migrant brokers and provincial elites.

(Truett, cited in Evans 2006, 353) draws from work on hybrid geographies (Kwan 2004; Rose 2000; Whatmore 2002), building on Rose's argument (2000, 364) that hybrids 'transgress and displace boundaries between binary divisions and in so doing produce something ontologically new'. In combining class elements from both Vietnam and Cambodia and in bringing together some aspects of Vietnamese rice agriculture and shrimp aquaculture, albeit reconfigured for both the larger plots and more limited infrastructure found in Cambodia, the production systems along the border reflect this entanglement of social and ecological relationships. These relationships are, however, far from stable, as the accumulation of capital by Cambodian elites and the potential for large-scale infrastructural investments (either by the Cambodian state or by private investors) may further reconfigure the social and ecological landscapes of the border, and in doing so open up new pathways of agrarian transition.

3. Methodology and context

We undertook this research over two field visits, in November 2014 and February 2015, while engaged in long-term ethnographic fieldwork elsewhere in Cambodia and Vietnam. We focused on two communes in Cambodia which lie on or near the Vietnamese border: Srai Saa³ in Kampot Province, and Phnom Tmae commune in Takeo Province. We selected these communes as illustrative of broader changes in these provinces after a scoping trip identified numerous Vietnamese farmers settled close to Khmer villages. In Phnom Tmae, 47 Vietnamese families farmed rice in the village of 321 Khmer households, and in Srai Saa, about 100 Vietnamese farmed shrimp near the village of approximately 900 Khmer households. Many of the migrants were men whose family remained in Vietnam, but entire families also migrated and set up homes along the river banks near the village. Estimates of the total number of Vietnamese migrant farmers in the border provinces vary wildly; no official statistics are maintained, although a recent Cambodian Ministry of Interior investigation found 1000 families renting 7000 hectares of land along the border (Samean 2015). Our research suggests that these numbers vastly underestimate the scale of the phenomenon. A Provincial Department of Agriculture (PDA) official estimated that thousands of Vietnamese rent land in the border areas of Takeo province alone (PDA Takeo 26 February 2015), and Cambodian land brokers said that the numbers are still expanding as new areas of mangrove and swamp land are opened up for rice farming (Employee of Cabinet Minister land plot, Takeo, 24 February 2015). Although the precise numbers are unknown, the importance of this issue is evident in the political tensions surrounding it in Cambodia. The opposition party recently accused the ruling party of ceding Cambodia's territory by allowing 'land-hungry' Vietnamese across the border, and both countries' governments have reacted by banning land rentals to Vietnamese farmers in border areas and vowing to 'protect Cambodia's soil' (Naren 2015).

We investigated both rice and shrimp aquaculture production systems because these have been at the heart of agricultural expansion in Vietnam's Mekong Delta in recent years. We interviewed dozens of local Khmer and migrant shrimp and rice farmers from Vietnam, as well as village chiefs in both communities, Khmer landowners, middlemen, and provincial-level fisheries and agriculture officials. Beban, who conducts research in Cambodia and speaks Khmer, focused on interviews with Khmer farmers and authorities, supported by her research assistant Pheap Sokha; and Gorman, who conducts research in

³All place names and personal names are pseudonyms, due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

Vietnam and speaks Vietnamese, focused on interviews with Vietnamese farmers, supported by research assistants Nguyen Khiem and Nguyen Thong Tha. In each field village we lodged with local Khmer families, and we also stayed for several days at the provincial border towns. Due to the politically sensitive nature of this research, we made initial contact through a Vietnamese farmer whose family Gorman knew from his research in Vietnam, and then relied on opportunism and the snowball method of acquiring interviews, as well as seeking out interviews with local authorities, traders and landlords.

Our first study site, Srai Saa village in Kampot Province, lies near the border crossing of Prek Chak–Xa Xia, in close proximity to the Vietnamese city of Ha Tien (Figure 1). Most people in the village of around 900 households cultivate a single crop of rain-fed rice per year, and some households own ‘chamkar’ farming land on which they grow crops, and graze buffalo and cattle. Many households are also involved in the transport of fruit, especially mangoes, to Vietnam. The village is bisected by a canal, which separates the main residential and rice-growing area from the saltwater shrimp farms of the Vietnamese migrants. These shrimp ponds take up about 1300 hectares, with 100 individual farms ranging from seven to 40 hectares, and one commercial farm of 180 hectares. In contrast, the neighboring Khmer rice farmers cultivated small farms of around 0.5–2 hectares, with a handful of larger landowners emerging in the village.



Figure 1. Map of research sites.

Our second study site, Phnom Tmae village in Takeo Province, has a population of 321 families. The village is only 30 minutes by boat from the border, but lies more than 90 minutes by road from the nearest land crossing. Some villagers trade goods across the border, and many migrate to Thailand and Vietnam for seasonal jobs in factories, farms and construction. The area is subject to inundation in the rainy season, and villagers cultivate one to two dry-season rice crops on parcels averaging 1–2 hectares. The land farmed by the Vietnamese migrants lies in a large depression that stretches from the village toward the border. Because this area floods more readily than the villagers' main farmland, the Vietnamese farm a single crop of rice, on parcels ranging from five to 30 ha. There is no shrimp farming in this area.

4. Divergent and intersecting transition trajectories

Both case study sites in Cambodia are located within the broader hydrological and ecological complex of the Mekong Delta, through which they are tied into relations of physical and biological exchange with southern Vietnam. But the connections between these contexts are not just biophysical. The Mekong Delta was once an integral part of the Cambodian kingdom, and cultural and economic ties persisted after Vietnamese took political control over most of the delta in the eighteenth century. Between the 1860s and 1950s, the two countries were reintegrated both politically and economically under French colonial control, and were targeted for export-oriented production of agricultural commodities (including rice, coffee and rubber) and tied into international markets and circuits of capital that flowed through the colonial entrepôt of Saigon.

With the end of French rule in Cambodia (1953) and the creation of an independent North and South Vietnam (1954), the countries' development trajectories once again diverged dramatically. While both countries were engulfed in the so-called 'Vietnam War' during the 1960s and early 1970s, that period also marked a transformation in Vietnamese agriculture, as the American and South Vietnamese governments invested heavily in the dissemination of Green Revolution technologies in the Mekong Delta. These investments allowed Vietnamese farmers to grow two, or even three, crops of rice per year, but also rendered them reliant on high-yielding varieties, chemical fertilizers and irrigation (Combs 1999). The ecological basis of intensive agriculture persisted even after Vietnam's reunification in 1975 and the attempted introduction of socialist relations of production in the Mekong Delta by the Hanoi government. In Cambodia, on the other hand, the end of the Vietnam War marked the beginning of the Khmer Rouge genocide and the decimation of the country's productive capacity. Vietnamese troops finally invaded Cambodia in 1978 and, over a decade-long occupation, attempted to re-organize Cambodia's agrarian economy in a manner strongly influenced by Vietnamese socialism, though without the significant investments in irrigation or the reliance on Green Revolution technologies (Slocumb 2010).

The withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989 set in motion a significant divergence in the development trajectories of the two countries. Vietnam introduced a host of economic reforms in the late 1980s to early 1990s, collectively known as *Doi Moi*, or 'renovation'. These reforms re-introduced markets in agricultural commodities such as rice, and redistributed farmland to individual households. In the Mekong Delta this created a large class of smallholder farmers cultivating between one and three hectares (Gorman 2014) and set in motion a rapid transition toward commercial, export-oriented agriculture throughout the 1990s. Consequently, the region has once again become a major rice exporter (as it was under the French) and is also a major producer of new

commodities, especially of farmed aquaculture products such as *basa* catfish and marine shrimp. While the shift to commodity production in the Mekong Delta – complemented by significant state investments in infrastructure, credit provision and agricultural extension – has produced broad-based gains and contributed to poverty reduction in the region, it also introduced new dynamics of class formation and unequal patterns of accumulation. Some successful farmers have reinvested an agricultural surplus in the accumulation of land and capital, but most smallholders are, as Akram-Lodhi (2010, 578) observes, ‘progressively unable to compete under the market imperatives of an increasingly capitalist agricultural sector, and face challenges’ – chief among these rising land prices – ‘in constructing a livelihood that offers at least the possibility of a relative improvement in their position’.

In Cambodia, on the other hand, decades of conflict ensured that the country was largely bypassed by the Green Revolution, and agriculture in much of the country’s interior retains a peasant character, in that it is predominantly non-mechanized, labor intensive and oriented mostly toward meeting the subsistence needs of the household (ADB 2014; Ovensen et al. 2012). There is, however, a significant agribusiness sector, concentrated in concessions that now cover large parts of the upland provinces, and there are pockets of intensive, commercially oriented agriculture along the borders with Vietnam and Thailand (Ovensen et al. 2012). But there is little state support for infrastructure and extension, and smallholders’ access to secure property title is limited (ADB 2014). While the Cambodian government officially aims to once again become a major rice exporter (RGC 2010, 2014), the peasant households who produce most of the country’s output face a growing threat of dispossession, driven by population increases and by growing land concentration in the hands of elites. This process of elite land concentration works through several mechanisms including informal deals, often brokered by village or commune authorities who receive a pay-off for signing communal or state land areas over to higher level politico-business elite under verbal agreements or ‘soft’ (commune-level) land title (CCHR 2013; Work and Beban 2016); and formal Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), through which the Cambodian government grants large parcels to domestic and foreign elites.⁴ As a result of these formal and informal processes, an estimated 28 percent of rural families are currently landless (Phann et al. 2015), while many others have lost the ability to use forest or other land to which they previously exercised customary access.

Elite land consolidation is especially intense along Cambodia’s borders, where land tenure is generally more insecure than in the interior (Hughes 2007), and where the trend of establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) (Eilenberg 2014) creates an incentive for elites to acquire land in the hope that it is designated as an SEZ and experiences a consequent rise in value. Both of our research sites – Phnom Tmae in Takeo Province and Srai Saa in Kampot – have experienced such processes of elite land consolidation, though under different conditions and for different motives. In Phnom Tmae, the lowland area between the village and the Vietnamese border was once ‘an area of wild grass, as high as a person, and some small trees’ (Khmer male shop owner, Takeo, 24 February 2015). The conditions of production shifted dramatically in the late 1990s, when the European Union funded a 120-km-long network of canals throughout the lowland area. Soon after these plans were made, several well-connected elites – including a senior provincial official and relatives of a senior cabinet minister – sent representatives to the village to buy up large holdings of low-lying

⁴ELCs now total more than 2 million hectares (owned by around 250 companies), compared to the 3.1 million hectares of agricultural land owned by 1.9 million farming families (Diepart and Dupuis 2014).

land. As one farmer from the village described: ‘They knew that [the canal] would improve the rice growing here, and they have networks with people in Phnom Penh, they knew that the canal would be built’ (Khmer male farmer, 50s, Takeo, 25 February 2015).

A similar process of elite land concentration played out in Srai Saa during the 2000s, as elites snatched up a large area formerly covered by flooded *Melaleuca* forest. While the land had been unsuitable for rice farming, villagers used it to collect wood and to graze their buffalo, and some had even cleared patches of forest to dig shrimp ponds in the late 1990s, though these efforts were dashed by a major flood in 2000. In the mid-2000s, a group of ‘*nayk mien*’ (rich people) from Phnom Penh and Kampot city worked through state elites to claim large portions of forest land near the border. A local land broker recalled that ‘the [rich buyers] didn’t know what they wanted to do with [the land], they just bought it to speculate on because they knew that this land is in the SEZ and would go up in value’ (Sokun, Kampot, 28 February 2015). Thus, the initial acquisition of land consolidated control of the resource base in the hands of elite actors. This provided the conditions for a transition toward capitalist relations of production but did not in itself set a transition in motion. Instead, land in both study sites stood largely idle. In this way, these informal land grabs parallel a common phenomenon around large concessions; while state elite and *Oknha*⁵ may be able to ‘grab’ land from peasants through regulation and force, they may lack the desire, capital, expertise and technology to cultivate the massive land holdings themselves (Dwyer 2015).

The ‘solution’ to this problem has been, at least in the case of the ELCs, to bring in foreign investors with the capital and expertise necessary to bring the land under production. Many ELCs are, in fact, directly awarded to foreign concessionaires, and even domestic ELCs often involve joint ventures, sub-contracts or informal agreements with foreign companies (ODC 2015). As we argue below, the current case represents a parallel process, albeit one which involves smaller, informal land grabs near the border and the transfer of that land not to foreign agribusiness, but to migrant tenant farmers from Vietnam. In sum, we see the influx of migrant farmers as a catalyst for the development of capitalist relations of production on the land, and by extension the production of a marketable surplus and the accumulation of capital. This accrues largely in the hands of the landlords and other Cambodian elites, rather than among the tenant farmers themselves.

5. Socio-ecological intersections along the border

Land transfers catalyze social and ecological transformation, shaping new social relations of production (Kenney-Lazar 2012), and fundamentally changing the biophysical environment (Borras and Franco 2013). But these socio-ecological relations are not just a ‘foreignization’ of space, whereby newly capitalized enclaves of commercial production mirror those of the investor (Zoomers 2010). Rather, as we explore in this section, cross-border land transfers emerge from the *longue durée* of Cambodia–Vietnam interlinkages, creating a hybrid space – an entanglement of human and nature across political borders that produces distinct social and ecological formations.

5.1. *The tie that binds: border as space of opportunity*

The Cambodia–Vietnam border has a violent and contentious history, but it is also a space of opportunity, in which enterprising actors take advantage of cross-border disparities for

⁵Term denoting business people who donate at least USD 100,000 to the government.

personal gain (Schoenberger and Turner 2008). Thousands of Cambodians cross the border for work in Vietnam every day; inter-marriages are common, as are family networks that span both countries; and cultural and language brokers who speak both languages frequently act as intermediaries for land transactions. In Kampot Province, the in-migration of Vietnamese was spurred in the early 2000s by an enterprising local commune councilor and entrepreneur, who we here call 'Sokun'. Sokun told us that he heard the landlords discuss several options after acquiring the land, including developing a coconut plantation or leaving the land idle in the short term. Sokun convinced the owners to prepare the land for shrimp cultivation, and encouraged them to clear the flooded forest, dig canals and shrimp ponds, and construct embankments. He then used his extensive cross-border experience and Vietnamese language skills to set himself up as a broker, retaining 10 percent of the migrants' rental payments in exchange for mediating the transactions and overseeing the land plots. We observed a similar dynamic and set of actors in Takeo, as land managers, acting on behalf of the absentee owners, took advantage of their cross-border ties to recruit Vietnamese (Employee of Cabinet Minister land plot, Takeo, 24 February 2015).

The Vietnamese, on the other hand, took advantage of cross-border disparities in land prices that put them in an advantageous situation vis-à-vis their Cambodian counterparts. As one shrimp farmer in Kampot effused,

the land here [in Cambodia] is very wide. Here you can get a big piece of land and you can grow a lot of shrimp. If your shrimp succeed, you can make a lot of money. But in Vietnam the land is small, and it's very expensive. (Vietnamese shrimp farmer, Kampot, 6 November 2014)

Most shrimp farmers we spoke to in Kampot, for example, paid between USD 100 and 125 per hectare per year,⁶ roughly a third of what they would pay in Vietnam, and most were farming relatively large plots of between seven and 15 hectares. Most Vietnamese rice farmers in Takeo rented between five and 20 hectares, paying around USD 200 to 250 per hectare.⁷ The Vietnamese could also muster substantial sources of capital by selling or borrowing against the value of their holdings in Vietnam. The same shrimp farmer explained that he mortgaged [cầm] 0.8 hectares of land in Vietnam for 120 million Vietnamese đồng (approximately USD 6000) and now rented eight hectares of land in Cambodia for USD 1000 per year, exponentially increasing the amount of land under cultivation.

5.2. *Hybrid border ecologies*

The Vietnamese have essentially become agents of ecological change, reshaping the ecological relations of production in border areas through both the introduction of new farming systems and the adaptation of these systems to Cambodia's physical environment and its property regime. Some of the ecological changes that have occurred in the border areas – namely the clearing and drainage of formerly 'wild' lowland areas – began before the arrival of the Vietnamese. In Takeo, elites took advantage of the EU-sponsored canal development by buying up the land and used bulldozers to clear trees and fill ponds in

⁶These prices are low relative to prime agricultural land in Cambodia, because the land is marginal land that could not be brought under cultivation profitably by most local Khmer and (in the case of Takeo) could only sustain one crop per year due to flooding and pest problems.

⁷Rents in both areas were paid in cash, and the rate was set at the start of the contract rather than a share-cropping arrangement.

readiness for rice production, while in Kampot the landlords themselves transformed the flooded forest into shrimp ponds. In both sites, however, the Vietnamese have continued to restructure the physical environment by clearing trees and leveling land, and, more importantly, they have brought new practices of rice agriculture, new chemical and technological inputs, new forms of genetic material, and new systems of aquaculture production based on the cultivation of farmed species such as black tiger prawn (*Penaeus monodon*) and whiteleg shrimp (*Litopenaeus vannamei*). This re-shaped hybrid borderland is tied to the Vietnamese Mekong Delta not just by its biology and ecology, but by the exchange of commodities as well; each day, about four tonnes of shrimp crosses the border from Cambodia (Khmer male fisheries official, Kampot, 8 November 2014), and all the hybrid rice harvested by the Vietnamese in Takeo crosses the border, destined for both domestic consumption in Vietnam and export.

These new ecological relations of production were presaged in some way by local developments and innovations; in the rice-growing areas of Takeo, some Khmer farmers were already experimenting with high-yielding rice varieties from Vietnam in the late 1990s (before the Vietnamese migrants arrived) but this remained limited by the lack of irrigation, extension services and available capital. The Vietnamese, in contrast, have introduced a new system of high-productivity dry-season rice production using pumped irrigation, high-yielding varieties with a short growth cycle of three months, inorganic fertilizer and pesticides, and mechanized planting and harvesting, producing 'twice as much yield as the Cambodians' (Khmer male, 50s, Takeo, 25 February 2015). Our interviewees (both locals and migrants) reported an average yield of 8–10 tonnes/hectare for the Vietnamese farmers compared to 6–8 tonnes/hectare for the Khmer farmers.⁸ As one Khmer villager explained, 'we don't do the rice there because we don't have the money, or the technology to do it. I don't have a tractor, I don't know the methods' (Male shop owner, Takeo, 21 February 2015). Vietnamese rice farmers also benefitted from years of exposure to state-funded extension services, which have heavily promoted the cultivation of improved varieties. In contrast, Cambodia's funding for smallholder extension is minimal, as one Khmer farmer complained,

In Vietnam, when the rice has a problem, they have extension services from the government that come and give them advice and support to know what to do to solve the problem. But for us, I've never seen someone from the department of agriculture come to help us and give advice. (Khmer male farmer, 50s, Takeo, 24 February 2015)

This asymmetry is reinforced by the two countries' differential integration into global and regional markets. For example, when it joined the World Trade Organization in 2004, the Royal Government of Cambodia – unlike Vietnam – committed to a 'no subsidies' policy to support its agricultural sector (WTO 2003). This essentially means that the peasantry in the two countries are not navigating in the same macro-economic context.

The resulting complexes of agricultural practices and agro-ecological systems, while made possible by the inflow of capital, inputs and knowledge from Vietnam, are also shaped and constrained by the state of infrastructure development and social property relations in Cambodia. In contrast to the Vietnamese state's massive public investments in the Delta region (in electricity, roads, irrigation and flood-protection levees), Cambodia

⁸These numbers are high and may be inflated due to inconsistent local measurements, although a recent study estimated average yields of 4–6 t/ha, up to 7 t/hectare for Khmer dry-season rice farmers in Takeo (Ovensen et al. 2012), and farmers across the border average 7.7 t/hectare for the winter–spring crop within a triple-cropping system that does not benefit from floods and silt deposits.

has one of the lowest rates of electrification in Southeast Asia (at 31 percent of households; World Bank 2015), and flood protection is minimal (Yu and Fan 2011). In the rice sector, the land rented by the Vietnamese was low lying and prone to flooding; without protective dikes like those in Vietnam, they could only cultivate one dry-season crop. Though the scale of their rented operations in Cambodia (generally 10–20 hectares) was much larger than the small farms they left behind in Vietnam, the migrant rice farmers we spoke to lamented that the land could only be cultivated for a single growing season, rather than the two or three crops that could be grown just across the border. During the rainy season, when the land was inundated, the migrants had to seek out other livelihoods; some went back to Vietnam to work what land their families still had or to perform casual labor, while others stayed in Cambodia to eke out a living fishing on the submerged fields.

Similarly, shrimp farming in Kampot has taken on an extensive character far different than that which predominates just across the border in Vietnam. Marine shrimp are produced using two methods: an extensive method that uses purchased shrimp fry stocked at relatively low densities (with limited applications of antibiotics and fertilizer) and an intensive method that uses higher stocking densities, purchased feed, and mechanically operated pumps and fans to aerate ponds, requiring higher capital outlays and potentially producing higher levels of water pollution (Lan 2013). While both forms exist in Vietnam, the intensive form has, in recent years, become predominant. This is especially true in the area around Ha Tien, just across from our research site in Kampot. While the Vietnamese side of the border is dominated by large, industrial shrimp ponds – with their incessant whirl of electrical aerator fans – the Vietnamese migrants in Srai Saa are instead pursuing extensive production, since the area lacks electricity and since many of the migrants lack the necessary capital for such intensive operations.

The changes wrought by the Vietnamese – working upon a physical environment shaped by the action (and inaction) of the Cambodian state – have transformed the land- and water-scapes of the border in ways that do not simply mirror processes of environmental change across the border, and are distinct as well from neighboring regions in Cambodia, thus re-shaping hybrid agro-ecologies. In Kampot, the shrimp ponds that have displaced flooded *Melaleuca* forests now lie distinct and separate from the nearby rice paddies of the Khmer villagers, but are tied to the broader aquacultural complex that now dominates much of Vietnamese Mekong Delta, even as the border itself delineates an ecological boundary between intensive and extensive production (Figure 2). In Takeo, the borderlands have been leveled and stripped bare of trees, traversed now by mechanized tractors, fed by pumped irrigation water, and planted with short-duration dry-season rice just like the fields across the border (Figure 3). However, when the rainy season comes, the rice fields recede and the area becomes a shallow, temporary lake, in sharp contrast to the more rigidly managed hydrology of neighboring An Giang province in Vietnam, where large dikes block the flood and allow for the continuous cultivation of rice throughout the year.

5.3. *Restructuring social relations along the border*

The influx of the Vietnamese has not only transformed the landscape of production, but has also produced a hybrid set of social relations of production in the border communes, combining class elements from both sides of the border in new configurations. In this section we describe these main class actors – Vietnamese and Cambodian – and the ways in which they interact within this new set of hybrid social relations.

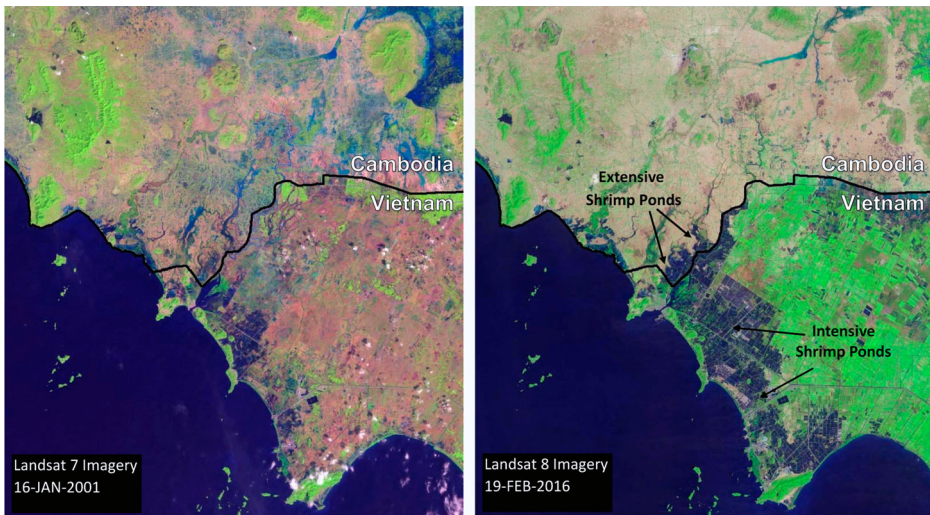


Figure 2. Satellite imagery of Srir Saa commune (Kampot) in 2001 and 2016.

5.3.1. *Migrant tenants*

In both sites, Vietnamese migrants have replicated some of the on-farm relations of production that predominated in their places of origin. The Vietnamese migrants in Takeo, for example, generally owned their own tractors, which they used to prepare the land, and relied upon family labor for most stages of the production cycle (taking advantage of the close proximity of their home villages across the border in An Giang province). As is common in Vietnam, they hired in labor (and machinery) to perform two crucial tasks: the spraying of pesticides, and harvesting. Shrimp farmers generally did not hire any outside labor, as the need for labor inputs in extensive shrimp farming is not high; farmers reported that a single individual or a couple could manage 20 or 30 hectares of

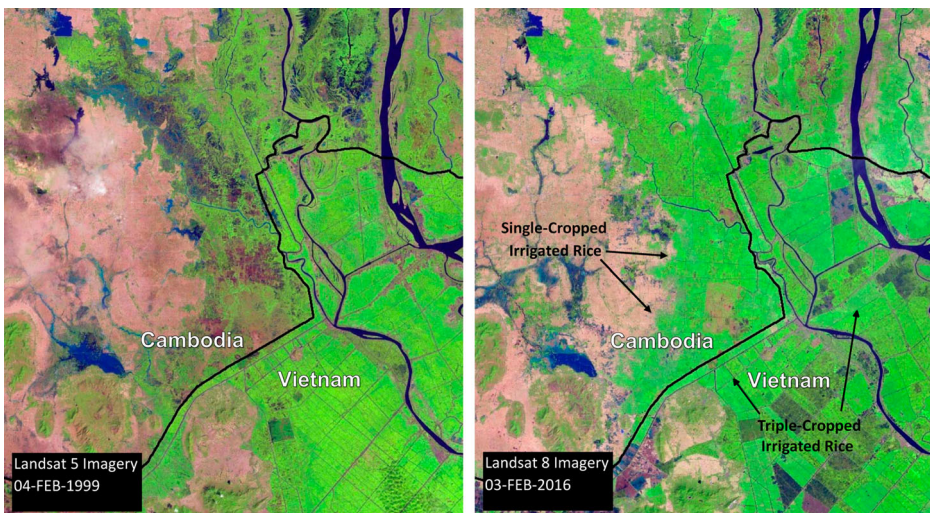


Figure 3. Satellite imagery of Phnom Tmae commune (Takeo) in 1999 and 2016.

ponds. The exception to this rule was the one large (~180 hectares) commercial farm operating in Kampot, which relied on a team of wage workers brought in from Vietnam.

The Vietnamese migrants' ability to recreate familiar social relations of production was limited, however, by the lack of electrification and flood protection. Any surplus they amassed through production in Cambodia was therefore either reinvested in renting more land or sent back to Vietnam for education, home construction and other forms of consumption. The migrants' tenure insecurity in Cambodia also dissuaded them from making investments in 'landesque' capital – that is, improvements to the landscape that last beyond one crop cycle and are intended to improve yields, such as irrigation, soil improvement and stone clearance (Blaikie 1987). In Vietnam, they possessed secure land-use rights, and thus had a strong incentive to invest in physical improvements to the land; in Cambodia, they possessed only informal contracts (sometimes unwritten) with landlords and their illegal status meant they could be dispossessed at a moment's notice, rendering their long-term presence on the land uncertain and compelling them to hand over a sizable portion of the surplus to landlords (through per-hectare rental payments) and to intermediaries (through monetary informal fees).

5.3.2. *Landlords*

In both research sites, a small number of absentee landlords with provincial and national connections furnished most rental land to the Vietnamese migrants, with holdings of 100 hectares and up. These landlords were themselves not actively engaged in the management of their land, working instead through local intermediaries (whose role we explore below), and though they have financed significant investments in physical improvements (namely the digging of shrimp ponds in Kampot), they are generally not re-investing this in agricultural production. Instead, they extract a surplus from the Vietnamese through monetary rental payments, which they generally redirect to either non-agricultural production or elite consumption.

In Takeo, however, another set of landlords are more directly involved in production on the land and may serve as agents of agrarian transition. We met around 10 well-off locals, generally cross-border traders, who were able to amass land holdings of several dozen hectares of rice-growing land in the early 2000s, and to hold onto it – unlike other Khmer peasants in the village – due to their greater stocks of capital that meant they were not desperate to sell, and to their knowledge of Vietnamese dry-season rice farming gained during their forays across the border. These more modest landowners have generally retained a portion of the land to farm themselves, while renting out the remainder to the Vietnamese. Like the larger elite landlords, these owner-operators have been able to extract a portion of the surplus from the Vietnamese through monetary rental payments at similar rates to the large landlords, but unlike their urban counterparts, they have been reinvesting that surplus into their own agricultural production.

5.3.3. *Intermediaries*

The social relations of production include not only the landlords and tenant farmers, but also various brokers, local authorities, border patrol agents and police that act as intermediaries between the landlords and the farmers. Several entrepreneurial local businessmen and local authorities have amassed personal wealth through this role. As one Vietnamese migrant explained,

I rent 27 hectares of land. Sokun takes money for land, passport documents and boarding fee ... I pay [about USD 4000 total for two ponds]. Another man Ngim takes the money for the second pond. They control the industry here together. (Vietnamese shrimp farmer, Kampot, 9 November 2014)

These intermediaries constitute an emerging class of local elite in the border areas that are re-investing capital into production. In Kampot, Sokun proudly showed us his shed that housed a new tractor and a variety of farm equipment, and he pointed out the rice fields he had recently purchased around the village with money he earned from his share of the Vietnamese' rental monies. At the conclusion of the interview, he even invited us to join him in purchasing some land farther from the border. (We declined). As Sokun and other middlemen use the money they extract from the Vietnamese to buy up farmland in their village, this drives a process of accumulation and social differentiation, potentially setting in motion a broader transition to commercialized rice farming.

5.3.4. *Peasants*

Beyond the Khmer land brokers and the few local landlords in Takeo, local Khmer are generally excluded from these emerging production systems. The Vietnamese farmers rarely required local people's labor; the larger Vietnamese shrimp company in Kampot did hire local villagers in the past to monitor the ponds, but they discontinued this practice after they had problems with theft. They now hire Vietnamese laborers from across the border. The Khmer villagers were therefore not only excluded from these new relations of production as tenants and laborers; they were also excluded from the land to which they previously had customary access, due to the Khmer elites' environmental transformation of the land from seasonally flooded swamp forest (which peasants previously used for grazing, forest product collection and seasonal deep-water rice cultivation and freshwater fishing) to shrimp ponds, canals and dry-season rice fields. These shifting ecological relations of production lead to further shifting social relations of production within the Khmer villages, as mechanization provides a pathway for elite accumulation among a small group of intermediaries and local landowners. Only in Takeo did we see diffusion of improved seeds and cropping methods into the Khmer rice farmers' fields, due both to the border's proximity and to interaction with the migrants, while the majority of peasant producers lose access to the sustaining resources of the flooded forest, and some Khmer farmers voiced their concerns that they would have to deal with salt-water intrusion and chemical pollution into their rice fields in the future.

This social configuration of migrant tenants, elite landlords, intermediaries and marginalized villagers displays aspects of hybridity analogous to its ecological configuration. The production systems are tied across the border through numerous economic, labor and ecological networks, and the knowledge and capital resources of the Vietnamese migrants give them some power in negotiating their tenancy conditions. Yet the political economy of production is clearly rooted in Cambodian class relations, and the Khmer elite landlords use the Vietnamese's migrant status to reinforce their vulnerability as tenants, as we discuss in the final section.

6. **Power, property and precarity along the border**

The border is not just a node of interaction and exchange, but also a mechanism of exclusion. The Vietnamese deal with both the everyday threat of exclusion as landlords and

intermediaries seek to squeeze them for a greater share of the surplus, and the long-term threat of eviction as landlords look to cultivate the land themselves or to seek out more highly capitalized actors. Moreover, the ambiguous legal position of the Vietnamese – as migrants without legal authorization to live and work in Cambodia – renders them vulnerable to exclusion along the border, as they seek to maintain both the transnational mobility vital to their livelihoods and their tenuous access to their rented fields.

6.1. *Tenants, migrants and the dual nature of exclusion*

As tenants, the Vietnamese migrants are locked into a contentious – but simultaneously productive – relationship with the Cambodian landlords. In this case, the power imbalance inherent in any landlord–tenant relationship is exacerbated (in the favor of the landlords) by both the migrant status of the Vietnamese, none of whom held visas or other official paperwork permitting them to reside or work in Cambodia, and by the ambiguous, informal nature of the rental agreements executed between the migrants and the landowners (or their representatives). In some cases, there was no written rental contract at all; this was often due to a long-term relationship between the parties, as some farmers in Takeo had rented land repeatedly since the early 2000s. This lack of formal documentation, however, also gave the landowners more power in the relationship. As one Khmer landowner explained: ‘I don’t have a contract, because if we did a contract then I wouldn’t be able to take the land back when I wanted it. This way, I can take it back when I want’. (Khmer woman farmer, 40s, 24 February 2015). The Vietnamese migrants’ lack of linguistic competence, unclear legal status and unfamiliarity with the ‘rules of the game’ in Cambodia means they have no legal protection for their land claims. The village chief in Takeo explained their vulnerability succinctly: ‘If the Khmer landholders want to take the land back, the Vietnamese won’t do anything. Where would they go to complain? They’re in Cambodia’ (Village Chief, Takeo, 25 February 2015).

Beside the landlords, various people in positions of authority – police, military police, border officials, village and commune officials, and others – control the movement of migrants and their goods across the border. The border is thus enacted as a means of exploiting the migrants and capturing a greater portion of the surplus. The Vietnamese negotiate ever-increasing informal border fees as they cross the border almost daily to purchase inputs and transport their produce to markets in Vietnam. Local authorities and intermediaries also demand shadowy payments for ‘passports’ and ‘boarding fees’, none of which convey any government recognition. Local elites and border patrol also control migrant access to farming inputs. For example, in Takeo we learned that a contractor from Vietnam previously transported his harvesting machine across the border at harvest time, but in 2015 the local elites and border guards blocked the Vietnamese contractors’ access by threatening to charge him exorbitant fees. They then told the Vietnamese tenants that they were required to use Khmer harvesters. This created a monopoly for the one local contractor, an informal money lender who owned several harvesting machines. She explained that ‘I have to pay USD 400 per season for the barge to take the harvesters on the canal, and then I pay a fee to the [local head of the Military Police] and the [land broker]’, and then I can charge each farmer’. In this way, local elites use the exclusionary power of the border to enrich themselves, and heighten the precarity of the Vietnamese.

The ultimate exclusionary power of the border lies in the threat of deportation, a danger which became very real to the migrant shrimp farmers in Kampot during the course of our fieldwork. When we arrived in Kampot for our first field visit in 2014, Vietnamese farmers were visibly distressed about the possibility of being evicted from the land. A few days

before we arrived, the middleman Sokun had phoned several of the Vietnamese migrants who had recently completed rental contracts. Speaking now in his capacity as a local official, he shared some alarming news. The Cambodian government, he said, had decided that they were living in the area illegally and planned to deport them. They had one week to leave voluntarily, after which they would face eviction and deportation. Word of this ultimatum spread quickly among the migrants, and as we arrived, they were in a state of desperation. As one shrimp farmer explained, 'people are just crying, because they've put a lot of money into their ponds, and they haven't even harvested yet. And if they have to go home, they have nothing. They've mortgaged their land or sold it to come here'. When we asked him what he would do if he had to go back to Vietnam, he just shook his head. 'I mortgaged all my land', he said, 'but I guess I can go to Ho Chi Minh City or to Binh Duong and try to find work there' (Vietnamese male migrant, 40s, Kampot, 7 November 2014). When we returned to Kampot for our second research trip in February of 2015, we found the Vietnamese still on the land, but tensions remained high. After our last visit, some of the tenants had made direct contact with the landlord, who assured them that they could stay on the land until further notice.

In January 2016, the Vietnamese government announced it was banning Vietnamese citizens from renting land in Cambodia to avoid further inflaming border tensions. This ban is likely to do little to stem the tide of land-hungry migrants across the border, which is driven by the structural disparities between the two countries. However, this does send a signal to would-be migrants that the Vietnamese government will do little to help its citizens if they become embroiled in land disputes across the border, further increasing their precarity.

6.2. *Future trajectories: looking past the Vietnamese*

The relationship between the elite Cambodian landlords and the Vietnamese tenants is synergistic and, for the time being, mutually beneficial, but it is unstable; if the advantages of the Vietnamese (skill, market linkages and technological capital) could be replicated, the landlords could cut out the Vietnamese and engage in large-scale production themselves, bring in more capitalized tenants, or sell the land and reap the value of their investment. Each of these scenarios, however, requires that the Vietnamese be expelled from the land, and thus the threat of eviction looms.

In Takeo, the displacement of at least some migrants by Khmer elites seems a likely outcome. There, two distinct classes of landowners have emerged: the elite absentee landowners and the emerging 'mid-size' local landowning class. The relationship between the absentee elite landowners and their Vietnamese tenants appears to be fairly stable; the landlords seem satisfied with maintaining their status as a rentier class, and we did not see any evidence that they would take over the land themselves or look to settle other tenants onto the land. However, several of the mid-size landowners told us that they planned to take back the land they currently rent out in order to farm it themselves. Ironically, the Vietnamese have increased their vulnerability through their success: the Khmer mid-size landowners have learned new techniques from watching and talking with the Vietnamese and thereby enhanced their own capacity to use the land; these landlords have also amassed considerable stocks of capital from the rents levied on the Vietnamese. As one small landlord told us, 'I have a plan in two years' time to take the land back Because now my sons are already big so I can take the land back and they can farm it' (male farmer, 50s, Takeo, 24 February 2015). One woman explained her confidence in taking the land back through increased access to technology and capital: 'Now Khmer farmers have learned

how to do the modern rice farming techniques ... and now some people have machines too, they have made a bit of money and want to farm themselves' (Khmer woman farmer, 30s, Takeo, 24 February 2015).

The Vietnamese have not only provided the local landlords with rent and knowledge, but they also made further improvements to the land that have increased its value, as another woman explained: 'People rented to the Vietnamese because the land wasn't well prepared; it wasn't level, and the soil was acidic. But now the Vietnamese have prepared the land well so now people want it back' (Khmer woman farmer, 40s, Takeo, 25 February 2015).

In Kampot, future agrarian transformations seem to rely on neither the current tenants nor the landlords as the agents of production and source of capital. Rather, there were rumors afoot that the landlords would soon develop the SEZ and evict the Vietnamese in favor of a large foreign agribusiness concern, capable of making the necessary investments to convert the shrimp-farming area to intensive, industrial production. We could not gain any definite information on these plans, but on our last day of research, Sokun produced a small map of the area, carefully unfolding it to show us a yellow highlighted line running through the lowland. 'Now everything is changing', he began excitedly,

No one knows this, but that was always the plan of the Nayk Mien that got the land here, they want to build factories. I heard that they are getting electricity in here soon. There is a Malaysian company putting in capital, and companies I think from China too. They plan to do intensive shrimp farming here. They will kick out all the Vietnamese farmers soon. (Sokun, Kampot, 28 February 2015)

If the potential investments in electrification do transpire, this may push the current Vietnamese tenants out of the picture, opening the door to a different class of highly capitalized farmers that could take advantage of the electricity to engage in intensive shrimp farming. What this specter of the SEZ shows is that 'the transition' is in fact in transition – the original plan of the landlords was not agricultural commercialization, but industrialization and urbanization. But now capitalist agriculture and aquaculture offer an alternative pathway to accumulation. This path may have been blazed by the Vietnamese, but it does not require them.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how the presence of Vietnamese tenant farmers creates conditions for the development of productive forces in agriculture along the Cambodian borderlands. We offer our study as an attempt to enrich the classic literature on agrarian transition with insights from recent work on land grabbing and border studies. First, we argue that it is not possible to understand current processes of agrarian change in a country where land grabbing is occurring without being attentive to agrarian histories in the 'grabber' countries and the specific structural forces and individual agency that sets the countries on course for collision. Second, we draw attention to the distinct socio-ecological relations produced when these agrarian trajectories intersect – a hybrid zone that combines class and ecological elements from both sides of the border in new configurations. Third, the border matters in these interactions as a site of both opportunity and potential exclusion. We argue that – contrary to both the prevailing depiction of foreigners operating from positions of power in 'land grabs', and the classical rendering of 'agrarian transition' as driven by processes within a bounded nation state – domestic actors use unequal access to politico-legal authority and their ability to draw on the exclusionary power of the border as a form of leverage, by which they extract a substantial surplus from the Vietnamese.

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