

# The Deviated Route: Navigating the Logistical Power Landscape of the Mekong Border Trade

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In the past two decades, the Mekong region has seen an increase in infrastructure projects aimed at improving transportation and connectivity between China and neighboring countries. These projects feature border control points, customs checkpoints, and security forces, leading to state control over cross-border trade mobility. Logistical power has gradually penetrated the social life in border trading, selectively facilitating certain groups while excluding others. Despite the overarching influence of state control, local traders still assert their agency in shaping cross-border trade practices. However, the transport and border control infrastructures hindered small-scale trading during the global pandemic and filtered out less economically important goods from cross-border mobility. This paper highlights the dynamic relationship between state control and various actors in cross-border trade in the Mekong region. It calls for an inclusive strategy in developing border infrastructure, aiming to ensure equitable benefit distribution and actively integrate the voices and experiences of those most impacted by these changes into the planning and execution of regional projects.

**Keywords:** Border Trade; China; Infrastructure; Logistical Power; Mekong Region

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## INTRODUCTION

On a sweltering July afternoon in 2020, I parked my car at the main entrance of the second Chiang Saen Port, situated in the Chiang Saen District of Chiang Rai Province in Northern Thailand, patiently waiting for the security guard to let me in. The port, which was built after the first began operations in 2012, was about 10 km east of the town. I had an appointment with Ms. Philai<sup>1</sup>, a port employee, to discuss and gather general information about the port's operations. A long concrete road stretched from the main gates where security guards stopped every vehicle before entering. The only two office buildings appeared empty and

1 For the purposes of confidentiality and privacy, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

quiet. The second Chiang Saen Port was significantly larger than the first, with a larger capacity for handling cargo and vehicle traffic, as well as providing better security measures. When I entered the room, Ms. Philai greeted me from behind a long counter. She invited me to sit on a sofa and began the conversation by drawing circles on a piece of paper, pointing to the largest one and the smaller ones and saying:

Look at this. This is China, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. Our port is right here. These goods, some from European countries and others from across the globe, need to make their way to China. What, in your opinion, would be the best method of transportation? Naturally, the cheapest route, wouldn't it? (Philai, personal communication, 25 July 2020, Chiang Saen Port No. 2)

This conversation reveals keen insights, underscoring the strategic significance of Chiang Saen Port No. 2 within the vast landscape of global trade. Her insights shed light on the complex challenges of navigating cost-effective decisions in the expansive realm of international trade, especially when the port in Chiang Saen stands as a pivotal nexus on the Mekong.

#### LOGISTICAL POWER AND THE DEVIATED ROUTE

The Northern Mekong border regions, specifically those encompassing parts of China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, have been vital trade pathways for centuries. In recent decades, the bustling trade in these regions has undergone significant transformations, shaped by the interplay of state directives, local dynamics, and international trade influences. While towns along the Mekong in Northern Thailand, such as Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen, have witnessed profound shifts in trade dynamics over recent decades, the stories and experiences of local traders and their networks are often eclipsed by grand narratives of regional infrastructure development. This paper aims to explore these transitions, spotlighting the intricate dance between evolving trade dynamics and infrastructural changes by focusing on these local actors.

In particular, the river trade between South Yunnan and the northern frontier of Thailand has transformed the economic dynamics of Chiang Saen, leading many to engage in daily apple trading during the 1990s. However, as national ports aimed to systematize border trade, smaller traders encountered hurdles. Initiatives to formalize trading operations pushed them into channels with heightened state surveillance, as infrastructural changes took center stage.

This paper, therefore, examines cross-border and transborder trade practices between the south of China and the Mekong border towns in Northern Thailand through the concept of “logistical power”. The concept was developed by historical sociologist Chandra Mukerji and recently expanded by anthropologist Xiang Biao— as “logistical power in social life”—the state’s ability to manipulate, transform, enhance, and hinder the circulation of human and non-human goods, things, and information through several forms of standardizing infrastructures ranging from bureaucratic documents and customs rules to more tangible elements like transportation networks, border facilities, and technological systems that facilitate or restrict physical movement of goods (Joyce & Mukerji, 2017; Mukerji, 2010; Olesko, 2020; Xiang, 2022).

In the thriving landscape of Mekong River trade, China's surging market and rapid economic growth have become dominant influences. The growth is bolstered by frameworks such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), which was implemented in 2005 and has since undergone subsequent expansions and upgrades. In 2020 alone, the ACFTA facilitated over USD 731 billion in trade, largely by progressively reducing tariffs (Ayman, 2021). As the Mekong River trade continues its upward trend, these evolving trade agreements and regulations serve to streamline cross-border interactions among neighboring countries. Within this dynamic backdrop, the concept of logistical power becomes pivotal. It offers an invaluable perspective for examining the state's dual role in regulating and influencing the currents of this complex trade network, which has seen significant growth over the past two decades.

Xiang (2022) argues that the state holds two sources of logistical powers: First, logistical provision refers to state investment in developing logistical infrastructure, and second, logistical intervention refers to the state dominating the means of mobility ranging from customs control, national currency, and various personal documents. Building on this framework, China has actively promoted regional economic integration in the past two decades and increased connectivity between Yunnan's border regions and its Mekong neighbors. Initiated in 2010, the bridgehead policy has strategically repositioned Yunnan as a pivotal conduit in China's plan, enhancing transnational ties with its Mekong neighbors in Southeast and South Asia.

In addition, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), an initiative led by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), encompasses countries connected by the Mekong River. A fundamental pillar of the GMS strategy is infrastructure development, which aims to foster economic growth, reduce transportation time, shorten travel distances, mitigate the risks associated with dangerous river and mountain routes, and promote a liberal international market. Given this transformation, since the 2000s, the Golden Triangle, encompassing areas of Northern Thailand like Chiang Saen, has transitioned from its notorious past linked to opium trade on the state's periphery, to a promising hub for investment and river trade development.

In parallel, these free trade connecting routes were well equipped with monitoring tools such as border control points, customs checkpoints, immigration border control, and security forces, which are manifestations of state dominance over mobility. These monitoring tools were implemented to control the flow of goods and people across the routes to ensure that the dominant states' interests were met. Border trade in the Mekong towns Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong of Northern Thailand serves as a case to illustrate how states exercise logistical power.

Nevertheless, infrastructure rarely works the way it was initially designed; instead, infrastructure works in unintended ways and entails unforeseeable outcomes (Kanoi et al., 2022, p. 2; Niewöhner, 2015, p. 8). In this paper, the deviated route concept suggests more than just a physical detour. While it specifically denotes the passage in transborder trade through several small ports along the Mekong River from Northern Thailand to Southern China and beyond, it also encapsulates the nuanced strategies and practices local actors adopt. This symbolizes their agency and adaptability amidst overarching trade regulations and mechanisms associated with logistical power. I argue that traders and logistic companies favor the deviated route over official international ports. This preference stems from their ability to optimize cross-border

trade profits by moving goods through less regulated passages and benefit from customs duties that are either reduced or entirely waived.

However, state power has gradually penetrated cross-border trade by increasing the ability of management forms of transportation and filtering people who could get involved in the trading system while keeping all mobilities under state surveillance. As a result, bridges and ports controlled by states selectively facilitate certain groups of people while others are excluded. In particular, during the global pandemic, these infrastructures immediately hindered small-scale trading within the flow of the Mekong logistic system, filtering out goods and things that were less economically important from the circulation of cross-border mobility.

Employing an ethnographic approach, I spent over 10 months in 2019-2020 embedded in the Thai border towns of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen. During this period, I conducted interviews, observed trade activities, and documented the lived experiences of individuals directly impacted by these changes. I explored the unintended consequences of infrastructures through accounts of traders and trading activities across the Mekong border. Further, I examined what ports and bridges meant for different groups of people and how infrastructure reconfigured social relations before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, secondary data were collected from various sources, including local newspapers, customs offices' websites, journals, and relevant regional research reports, to enrich the analysis and provide a comprehensive understanding of the local trade lifeworld.

In this paper, I first provide the background of the borderland infrastructures in Thai border towns named Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong, focusing on the transport infrastructures, an international port, and a cross-river bridge. I then delve into the trading activities over the past two decades, profiling the key players and capturing their perspectives on the evolving state-influenced landscape. A key component of this exploration is understanding the agencies of local traders, boat operators, and their informal trade networks. These individuals, among others, navigate border trade practices and dealings, ensuring the flow of commodities across the border even in the face of logistical challenges. Finally, I present accounts of small traders sidelined during the pandemic due to stringent controls at the cross-border bridge, highlighting how infrastructure can serve as a selective tool, including certain groups while excluding others.

## CROSS-BORDER TRADE STUDIES

Studies on cross-border trade have explored the complex interplay between socio-economic conditions and local actors that shape the dynamics of these trading activities (Ngo & Hung, 2019; Rippa, 2019, 2020; Rippa & Yang, 2017; Rowedder, 2022; Saxer, 2016; Walker, 1999). In the Greater Mekong Subregion, borders transcend mere geographical boundaries, evolving into vibrant conduits for people, goods, and investments. Lin and Grundy-Warr (2012, p. 958) emphasize this dynamism, noting the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 between Chiang Khong and Huay Xai as emblematic of the region's broader relational geographies, especially with China's significant influence. This perspective aligns with this paper's focus, shedding light on the intricate interplay of state logistical power through trade dynamics, and local

agency in Mekong's trade landscape. Infrastructure, such as cross-border bridges, not only facilitates trade and human mobility but also serves as an effective instrument for the state to regulate, monitor, and exert its logistical power.

In examining the Mekong trading route, the concept of "pathways" also becomes pivotal. As delineated by Saxer (2016), this concept depicts the dynamic and resilient trading lifeworld in the Himalayas, the high mountains of Asia, emphasizing encounters along fluid border spaces. This approach underscores the idea that pathways are better represented as bundles of trading lines rather than distinct areas. Adopting this notion helps in comparing the complex interconnections and exchange systems of other borders with the Mekong trading route.

In addition, scholars have shown that border trade networks are complex, often involving multiple stakeholders and political connections. For instance, Hung and Ngo (2020) highlight the importance of "informal connectivity" and resilience within trade networks as traders frequently create and maintain relationships with local officials to ensure seamless transnational crossings. This intricate web of relationships is further elucidated by Rippa's (2020) study in Tashkurgan, China. Here, he sheds light on how infrastructure development not only impacts cross-border livelihoods but is also emblematic of deeper political processes aimed at rendering China's borderlands and their inhabitants more governable. Particularly noteworthy is Rippa's introduction of the "proximity" concept—a framework that aptly captures the delicate balance among borderland infrastructure, local mobility, regulatory practices, and trader strategies. This perspective is especially crucial when considering the overarching influence China wields on cross-border trade dynamics (Rippa, 2020, pp. 54–56).

Building on these ideas makes apparent that conventional dichotomies, such as formal versus informal trade or state versus non-state actors, might not adequately encapsulate the complexity of trade networks along the Mekong pathway. Drawing on the insights from Hung and Ngo (2020), my analysis delves deeper into the intricacies of Mekong informal trading networks. Particularly, Hung and Ngo (2020) emphasize the significance of informal connectivity and organized informality in *Shadow Exchanges along the New Silk Roads*. Their work sheds light on the profound intricacy of these networks, detailing how traders are part of sophisticated, resilient systems. These systems frequently intersect in both formal and informal sectors, span cross-border regions, and skillfully navigate regulatory challenges. In these networks, traders, border officials, and local authorities often collaborate, underscoring the blurred lines between state and non-state actors, ensuring smoother transnational crossings.

In the Mekong borderlands, these infrastructures are not always entirely dominated by powerful state forces. I conceptualize the *deviated route* as a local response to the state administration's efforts to dominate transborder trade. Walker's (1999) work offers historical context for cross-border trade development and introduces the concept of "collaborative borders", which unveils the complex and subtle cooperation between local initiatives and state authority (Walker, 1999, pp. 111–112). Consequently, informal networks, traders, and other actors actively influence regulations associated with cross-border trade and transportation regimes.

This viewpoint underscores the historically grounded and somewhat ambiguous distinction between state actors and local actors in regulating border trade. Exploring the dynamics of cross-border trade, I also draw upon Rowedder's (2022)

concept of “smallness,” which emanates from his study on small-scale traders in Northern Laos. His lens challenges conventional classifications, revealing that in the realm of cross-border trade the boundaries between state and small traders—large-scale and small-scale, as well as formal and informal—are not clearly delineated. Customs, immigration, and border patrol officers, for instance, showcase a symbiotic relationship with traders, blurring the lines between large-scale and small-scale operations (Rowedder, 2022, p. 31). Such findings resonate with the intricate trading environments I have observed, where actor roles and relationships are multifaceted, constantly evolving, and defy easy categorization.

Expanding upon these viewpoints, this paper demonstrates that multiple actors engaged in both formal and informal Mekong border trade possess the resources and expertise to overcome state customs barriers and optimize the exploitation of regulatory loopholes. These actors adeptly navigate diverse regulations and shape transportation conditions to facilitate the efficient movement of goods across borders. In this analysis, the 'state' extends beyond a mere distant governing entity. I investigate it as an intricate nexus of power and governance, actively manifested through infrastructural projects, policies, and trade frameworks in the Thai border towns and beyond. This perspective aims to unravel the state's multifaceted interventions in local trade landscapes, emphasizing its dynamic interplay with local actors, and challenging traditional binaries between state and non-state activities.

In the subsequent section, I delve into the borderland infrastructures, illustrating how the state asserts its power, reshaping the pre-existing local trade lifeworld. The state's exertion of power is through both tangible infrastructure and strategic policies. Collectively, these measures emphasize the state's power in shaping regional connectivity and the dynamics of the borderland.

### LOCAL LIFEWORLD OF TRADE IN THE MEKONG BORDERLANDS

Historically, Mekong residents engaged in cross-border river and overland trading with the Ho, Yunnanese from South China, using horse caravans to transport diverse goods, including iron pots, silks, and tea, through Northern Laos to Thailand, often in exchange for opium (Halpern, 1961, p. 27; Reinach, 1901). The caravans traded with several ethnic groups such as the Khmu, the Hmong, the Yao, the Karen, the Lao, and the Tai people (Halpern 1961, p. 28).

While barges and pirogues linked Mekong's remote villages, larger barges faced navigation challenges during dry seasons (Berman, 1998, p. 9; Halpern, 1961, p. 33). Villagers typically used motor pirogues for travel, transport, and fishing. Meanwhile, wooden barges facilitated commercial river traffic, with cargo vessels from Chiang Khong heading to Northern Laos or from Chiang Saen towards Yunnan. While Mekong River rapids hindered large boats, skilled riders could navigate smaller pirogues through these treacherous areas.

After the Cold War-era border closures due to political tensions, cross-border trade with China resumed in the 1990s, paving the way for regional development through economic liberalization (Walker, 2000, p. 126). A number of transport infrastructure projects were proposed to the GMS countries supported by the ADB; millions of dollars in loans and private funds were granted to GMS projects: in particular



the development of transport, energy, trade, and tourism (Berman, 1998, p. 8). In addition, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has repositioned Yunnan from the southwestern periphery of the state to a “bridgehead” connecting China to Southeast Asia (Summers, 2013, p. 1). In October 1994, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and China signed an agreement to open the Lancang River for navigation, fostering new ports and enhanced regional connectivity (Lazarus et al., 2006, p. 22).

The North-South Economic Corridor is pivotal for enhancing land-based connectivity in the Greater Mekong Subregion. The International Highway R3A, connecting Bangkok to Kunming via Laos and inaugurated in December 2008, boosts land trade, while initiatives like the upper-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement amplify river trade and strengthen regional transportation ties.

Building on the theme of regional connectivity, Zhou (2013) highlights how Tengchong County in Southwest Yunnan reinvented itself as a crucial global trade nexus. By leveraging its trading history, the local government promoted and repositioned Tengchong as the bridgehead between China and Southeast Asia. The state plays a significant role in collaborating with private entrepreneurs to promote the Burmese amber trade in Tengchong. The local government's tolerance of illicit amber trading is demonstrated in Rippa and Yang (2017), as the Myanmar market heavily depends on Chinese demand (Rippa & Yang, 2017).

Similar to Thai border towns like Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen, after an ‘experimental’ shipment of apples from Jinghong to Chiang Saen had been implemented in 1995, the volume of imports from China rose dramatically from 500 tons in 1991 to 40,000 tons in 1995 (Berman, 1998, p. 10). Shipments along the Mekong River route have significantly increased, leading to proposals for improvements in navigation by blasting rapids and shoals for more extensive vessel transportation. The upgraded route is also linked to upgraded ports and road networks in downstream countries, including Thailand and Myanmar. Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridges No. 1 and No. 2 were built in 1997 and 2006, respectively. Additionally, the Chiang Saen Port No. 1 was built in 2003 by the Thai government, followed by the Chiang Saen Port No. 2 in 2012. A year later, the land route was connected via the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 in Chiang Khong town. Over the past 20 years, Southern China and neighboring countries such as Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have constantly strengthened their connectivity through transport infrastructure development.

Along the Laos and Thailand borders, special economic zones emerged. In 2007, the Lao government leased about 10,000 hectares in the Tonpheung district to the King Roman Group, a Chinese enterprise. This zone in Northwestern Laos now houses a casino, entertainment complex, and a modern Chinatown with amenities like a hospital and school (Rippa, 2019, p. 253). Similarly, Thailand established its special economic zone in 2016 in Chiang Rai, delineating Chiang Khong for logistics, Chiang Saen as a port, and Mae Sai as a trade hub.

The following section delves deeper into the Chinese apple trade that flourished in the Thai border town of Chiang Saen during the 1990s. It highlights the shifts and experiences of local communities affected by transportation infrastructure projects, such as ports and bridges. This examination thereby sheds light on the intricacies of these dynamic interactions and highlights the influence of logistical power.

## THE HEYDAY OF THE CHINESE APPLE TRADE AT CHIANG SAEN DOCK

When I asked people in Chiang Saen town about Chinese trade, they often started the conversation by telling me their memories of the Chinese apple trade at the Chiang Saen dock. The narrative goes back to the early 1990s when they directly interacted with Chinese merchants and saw Chinese vessels coming into their hometown. Similar to the written interviews recorded in several Thai research reports on local economic development in Chiang Saen, their accounts have much in common with the lively atmosphere of the apple trade and the vibrant riverbank fruit markets. An account of a retired district administrator narrating his reminiscences about Chinese apples caught my interest (Kotawinn, 2006, p. 40; Wichai et al., 2006). He was once invited to a welcome dinner hosted by Chinese delegates. Local merchants, government officials, and Rotary<sup>2</sup> members were invited. As a special gift, the host provided Chinese apples for all guests. The unique combination of green and yellow attracted everyone's attention, and they took those apples home to show their friends and family (ibid., p. 40).

The village chief of Sob Ruak, the largest Tai Yai community in Chiang Saen town, shared a similar experience. In the early 2000s, before Chinese cargo ships boomed in Chiang Saen, traders from Thailand and Laos profited by importing Chinese fruit and commodities. The chief had been in the border trade business for many years and claimed to be the first to import apples from China to Chiang Saen. He used to run the trade with his Tai Lue friend in Xishuangbanna, China, and opened a warehouse in 1993. After the trans-border trade boomed here, he sold everything to his friend and returned to Chiang Saen to continue his business (Pichit, personal communication, 17 June 2020).

In 1994, the Chinese apple trade saw substantial growth and lasted several years. During this time, transportation was limited to small and medium-sized cargo boats carrying 4,000 to 5,000 cartons of apples. Men in Chiang Saen town found work as porters, loading apples from the boats onto the dock and earning daily wages of THB 400 to 500 (around USD 15). Many Chiang Saen residents became Chinese apple and pear traders, buying apples from Chinese merchants in the morning and selling them for a profit in the evening. A successful business could be run with just a table, chair, beach umbrella, calculator, and cash (Kotawinn, 2006, p. 41).

Small traders in Chiang Saen formed groups of two to three people and purchased all the Chinese apples on the vessel. They negotiated prices on the boat, which changed daily based on supply. After agreeing on a price, the Thai trader paid the Chinese merchant in Thai baht and hired Thai porters to transfer the apples from the boat to the dock at the cost of THB 2-3 per box (Kotawinn, 2006). Customs officials collected the duty fee on the spot from the Thai traders. Soon after, other Thai buyers purchased the apples for retail in other markets across Thailand. They negotiated prices with the Thai traders and hired porters to load the apples into their vehicles, either using trollers or their own pick-up trucks. The Chiang Saen dock transformed from a peaceful border dock to a bustling trade market. Apple traders and related

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2 Rotary Clubs in Thailand are part of a global network of community-based service organizations committed to humanitarian services, ethical standards, and promoting goodwill.



businesses often described the time as “sanook”, meaning fun; the dock was alive with neon lights and people bustling about all night.

Nonetheless, the thriving apple trade started facing fluctuations in the late 1990s. In the subsequent paragraph, we explore how the infrastructures play a role in generating volatility within the town.

### THE DEVIATED ROUTE: LOCAL RESPONSES TO TRADE CHALLENGES

Since 1998, the trading competition has sharpened. There were more supplies of apples and peaches imported from China. The Thai traders could not profit by selling all in one day; they needed to put leftover apples in the warehouse. The selling time extended from a day to a week, and many imported apples and peaches gradually rotted. This forced the traders to sell without profit. The daily cash-running business changed to long-term credits payment or installments.

According to an overview of local business in Chiang Saen, many Thai retailers no longer came to pick up goods in person; they preferred to communicate via telephone (Wichai et al., 2006). Small apple traders began facing cash shortages and business losses due to bad debt. Only a prominent business trader had the capacity to purchase goods from the large vessels and sustain the trading operations at Chiang Saen. These prominent traders garnered more trust from Chinese merchants, which allowed them to access longer-term credit compared to smaller traders. Therefore, many smaller traders have been forced out of the game; they subsequently transitioned into local market merchants or searched for other careers. The apple trader gradually shifted from wholesale to retail sales along the riverbank. Besides apples, items in their shops included Chinese snacks, beans, dried plums, and dried seaweeds. Still, the number of customers was declining day by day.

It can be said that the booming apple trade was relevant to the Mekong navigation project that started in the 1990s. The Mekong countries, including Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have made an agreement for commercial navigation on the Mekong-Lancang River. China led the project to demolish rocks blocking shipping routes from Simao, China, to Luang Prabang, Laos. In 2001, the project blasted islets in Laos and Myanmar, facilitating large cargo boats (weighing 500 tons) departing from Xishuangbanna in Southwestern China, passing Laos and Myanmar, and then arriving at the Chiang Saen border town within one to two days. As a result, the large-scale river trade from China via Myanmar and Laos was far greater than the trading route between Thailand and Laos that used to depart from Chiang Khong to Luang Prabang (England, 2006). Also, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement has played an essential role in facilitating apples and several kinds of Chinese vegetables into Thailand.

Due to the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement, the previous unregulated apple trading system has completely changed. The fruit trade between Thailand and China is currently regulated by the customs regime. The source of fruits must be declared, and the receiver must be reported clearly. Consequently, the proliferating number of cargo vessels coming down from China led to the construction of the first Chiang Saen port on the Mekong River. Situated in the old town area, this port began operations on 1 October, 2003. Consequently, small traders found themselves

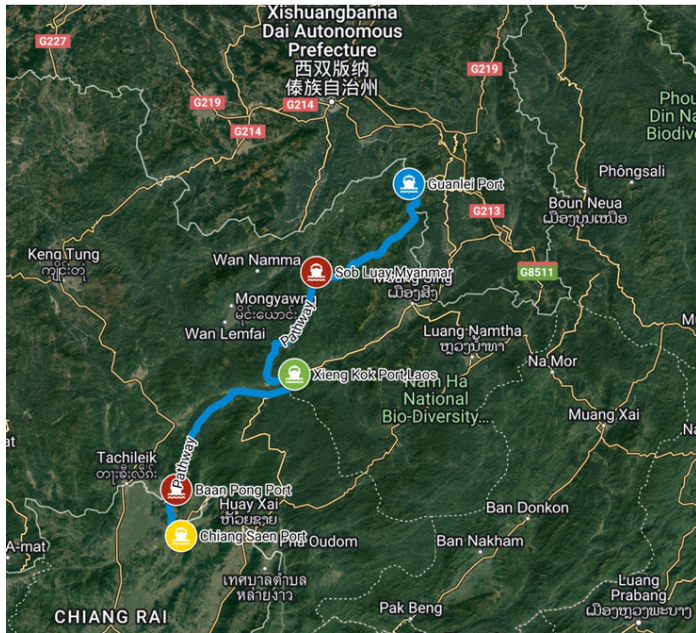
excluded from the border trade system, while local porters faced reduced earnings due to the growing presence of Myanmar porters who provided a more competitive labor market. This heightened competition resulted in lower wages for Thai porters. Following the opening of Chiang Saen Port No. 1, Myanmar workers became the majority at the port.

The Chiang Saen port, which is located on the Mekong River, serves as an example of the state's infrastructure power, or the ability to penetrate civil society and cross-border trade activities through logistics policies (Mann, 1984, p. 113). This is achieved through various means, such as the collection of taxes, control of vessel mobility, and regulation of goods circulation. In this sense, the port and bridge can be seen as tools the state uses to monitor and regulate the movement of goods and cross-border trading activities by providing infrastructure and enforcing regulations. Thus, the intensification of logistical power has reinforced infrastructure power by making the circulation of goods more transparent, locatable, and traceable. By closely monitoring the flow of goods, the state can more efficiently regulate trade activities, often leading to increased taxation, tariffs, and regulations. This ultimately enhances the state's ability to exert control and despotic power (Xiang, 2022).

As China developed its borderland infrastructure, Mekong transborder large-scale traders have adapted to the restructured customs zones to participate in international trade. Along the Mekong River trade route, prominent ports include Jinghong, Menghan, Simao, and Guanlei, all situated within China. Myanmar and Laos also benefit from increased river trade; their important ports include Wan Seng and Wan Pong within Myanmar and Xiengkong Port in Laos. After the first Chiang Saen port started operation in Northern Thailand in 2003, the Thai government claimed it was necessary to expand the transborder river trade capacity. This is due to the high number of ships crowded into the port and the number of trucks congested on the street. They then built the Chiang Saen Port No. 2, which was about 10 km away from the old one. The first port later closed after all relevant offices moved to the new port.

The second port opened in 2012, and was about 40 times larger than the first. It is situated on the Mae Nam Kok estuary (Kok River) of the Mekong River, is farther east, and vessels need to travel longer to reach it. I was told that at the feasibility assessment stage, the Maritime Department of Thailand had suggested having the port built on the Kok River (Philai, personal communication, 25 July 2020, Chiang Saen Port No. 2). The main reason is that the area is within Thailand's territory rather than the international Mekong River. This would provide full authorization for Thai officials. In addition, the Thai government believed that the second Chiang Saen International Port would become an effective port for international trade between Thailand and China. As such, the Thai government invested in highway projects connecting the port to the airport in Chiang Rai and to a seaport in Bangkok.

The river trade route from the Thai border to China mostly passes through Laos or Myanmar. However, not far from Chiang Saen, there is a small port named the Soah Loi ferry checkpoint or Sob Luay in Thai; the port was mostly mentioned whenever I interviewed any informant about cross-border trade. Sob Luay port is in the Wa Self-Administered Division within Myanmar's Eastern Shan State Special Region 4; the port is a significant transit point for Thai cargo ships from Chiang Saen heading to China. It is about 200 km from Chiang Saen port.



**Figure 1.** Map illustrating the trade route from Chiang Saen, Thailand, to Guanlei port, China, along the Mekong (Base-map source: Google 2022)

Sob Luay port attracted traders because of the cheaper transportation costs due to an agreement on waived borderland customs between Myanmar and China. At Sob Luay port, goods are unloaded and transported by truck into Yunnan through the “240-hill” border checkpoint between Myanmar and China before being distributed to several destinations within China. Yet, the Mekong border trade agreement regards it as an unregulated pathway. The Sob Luay port has not yet been officially recognized as an international port for commercial trade between Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and China. Thus, it is difficult to estimate the volume of commercial goods along the route, and it is challenging to implement customs regulations due to its location.

This deviated routing has been used to avoid customs duties. For example, the practice involves shipping goods to Thailand and transporting them to Myanmar to avert tariffs on goods shipped directly to China. Other common practices include transborder shipments, where goods are sent to a third country, where they are then consolidated with other products and shipped to their final destination. This practice is often used to bypass trade barriers and take advantage of lower tariffs in the third country. Traders often employ tactics such as under-invoicing, where they declare goods at values lower than their actual worth to minimize taxes and customs duties. Additionally, misdeclaration of the type, quantity, or value of the goods is also part of many other methods. These practices suggest that smuggling activities can occur at various points along the Mekong River. This happens not only at ports but also in other areas, such as remote areas with fewer customs and immigration control, which makes it more challenging for the government to detect and prevent. In addition, border warehouses play a crucial role in storing and consolidating goods before

they are transported across the border, or temporarily holding them before they are transported into the inner areas of the country. It is also possible to repackage and rebrand goods in warehouses before re-shipping them to their final destinations, concealing their true origins.

In the trading landscape of Chiang Saen, the interplay between Saxer's (2016, p. 105) 'pathways' and the intricacies of 'shadow exchanges' (Hung & Ngo, 2020) reveals a complex socio-spatial tapestry characteristic of the Thai-Lao-Myanmar Mekong borderland. Through this lens, the deviated route becomes more than a mere trade corridor, but a nexus of infrastructure, river dynamics, regulations, entities, and formal and informal trading networks. As skilled traders and brokers navigate these realms using 'shadow exchanges', they adeptly work within the precarity defined by space, time, and agency (Ngo & Hung, 2020, p. 25). This confluence of formal and informal actors forms a rich web of exchange, socio-economic ties, and adaptability, capturing the essence of life along the Mekong's deviated routes.

However, as the Chinese government starts to intensify its control over the area, the deviant route experiences fluctuations. The subsequent section explores how the transportation routes and facilities impact trade activities.

#### **TRANSNATIONAL TRADE IN FLUX: FROM APPLES TO CHICKEN FEET**

I was told that the new port experienced a steady influx of trade and consistent profitability in its first five years (Philai, personal communication, 25 July 2020, Chiang Saen Port No. 2). The highest number of cargo boats entering the port reached a hundred daily. After that, however, the number decreased yearly; the lowest number was three cargo boats per day in June 2020. Since the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 opened in 2013, traders have preferred to transport fresh fruits over land since they were delivered faster and kept in better quality because of less manpower required for loading. The freight truck generally takes less than a day to reach China's border, while it would take almost two days or more via ships.

Although fresh fruit freight numbers were down, other goods made up for the loss. The commercial items changed yearly, such as frozen chicken feet, chicken offal, whole grain, sugar, and rubber. In particular, the port facilitates exports from Thailand and transit shipments from other parts of the globe. However, Chiang Saen port was hit hard by the closures of Sob Luay port and Guanlei port in 2016. It was officially reported that the Guanlei port was under renovation. However, Philai, a port employee, told me a rumor about an international meeting on regional Mekong trade. All relevant Thai government officials attended this meeting along with Chinese officials. Thai units proudly presented the monthly data of entering and exiting cargo boats headed to China. When Chinese officials saw the figures, they were all surprised. There were far more cargo vessels passing through Chiang Saen port than they had in hand for the cargo vessels entering China! Since then, their records have been inspected, and relevant Chinese officers have been examined extensively (Philai, personal communication, 25 July 2020, Chiang Saen Port No. 2).

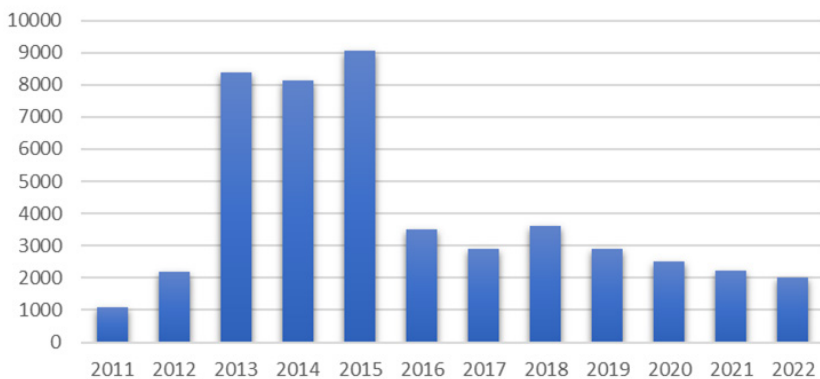
In addition, Myanmar's and China's customs policies are essential to determining commercial goods' type and volume. The closure of Sob Luay port in July 2016 significantly affected the Mekong River trade. Local Thai newspapers published many

articles showing photos of hundreds of Chinese and Laos cargo boats parked along the Mekong riverbank, waiting for the revival of cross-border trade. I noticed it seems quite common for the public to know how traders often take advantage of custom duties waived by exporting goods to China via the Sob Luay port; even the local Thai newspaper used this headline in July, 2017: “China has placed tight restrictions on Thai commodities wearing Myanmar sarongs entering China–Chiang Rai border trade has shrunk to three billion baht in the first five months of the year.”<sup>3</sup>

It was reported that the major export products included fuel, livestock, mango-steen, rice, fresh longan, cement, beverages, and agricultural products. Thai goods were exported to China via the Laos or Myanmar trade zones, with frozen chicken feet products being very profitable export items. However, after China placed a tight restriction on imported frozen products that must transit through Guanlei port, it immediately hindered the flow of the Mekong border trade. Since 2016, Sob Luay port and Guanlei port operations have been inconsistent because of political instability in Myanmar and strict import regulations in China. Nevertheless, the Thai Ministry of Commerce claims that the Sob Luay port is in the process of becoming an international commercial port.

Data from Chiang Saen Port No. 2 between 2011 and 2022 provides a clearer picture of the state's exertion of logistical power. The ship volume surge from 2013 to 2015 following the port's inauguration suggests an optimistic trade outlook. However, events like Sob Luay's 2016 closure and China's heightened vessel scrutiny from 2017 show the state's influential role in shaping logistical flows. Despite free trade agreements with China, the actual trade dynamics highlight China's dominion over Mekong's trade pace.

**Ship volume, Chiang Saen Commercial Port,  
Fiscal Year 2011-2022**



**Figure 2.** A Chart Showing Ship Volume at Chiang Saen Port. (Port Authority of Thailand, Fiscal Year 2011-2022).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Translated from *Thansettakij* [Economic Base Newspaper], Year 37, No. 3,278, 13-15 July 2017. <https://www.thansettakij.com/business/177726>

<sup>4</sup> The Thai fiscal year starts in October.



The Mekong cargo boat could transport 100 tons on average in the dry season, but it could reach 300 tons per vessel in the wet season. In general, the size of Lao and Myanmar cargo boats ranged from 50 to 200 tons gross, while Chinese cargo barges ranged from 200 to 500 tons gross. Chinese cargo barges mainly transport dry goods such as whole grains, sugar, and plastic pellets. Several traders share freight spaces on the Chinese vessel to optimize trading profit and save transportation costs.

As the state intensifies its control over customs, duties, and borders, it not only influences what is traded but also determines who engages in trading and through which infrastructural pathways. These stricter regulatory measures reshape the trade dynamics, pushing traders to adapt and find new strategies to overcome these challenges. Thus, many Thai shipping company owners prefer to register their boats in Laos, Myanmar, or China with help from their business partners or trusted local nominees. This registration strategy is believed to serve two purposes: It offers the advantage of reduced customs duties and, additionally, may enhance security given that the predominant stretch of the Mekong River shipping route runs through Laotian and Chinese territories.

Supporting these observations are shipping statistics representing the number of vessels passing through the Chiang Saen port. In 2012, Chinese vessel transits stood at approximately 229, but this dwindled to 90 by 2017 and further to just 19 by 2018. On the other hand, Laotian vessels maintained a steady presence, with an average of about 3,000 transits annually. Meanwhile, Myanmar vessel transits exhibited an increasing trend: From 123 in 2013, it surged to 313 in 2017, and further to 446 in 2019.<sup>5</sup> Such data underscore the adaptability of traders to state regulations and highlight the resilience and informal networks inherent to Mekong trade.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic gained momentum in early 2020, border regions worldwide faced unprecedented challenges in trade and transportation, including the Mekong trade. In the following section, I delve into the fluctuations in transportation and the effects of border closures during the pandemic.

## THE PANDEMIC HIT BORDER TRADE HARD

The classification of boundary checkpoints in Thailand plays a pivotal role in regulating cross-border movements and trade. According to the Thailand Immigration Act, these checkpoints are categorized into Permanent Crossing Points, Temporary Crossing Points, and Border Trade Checkpoints (Ministry of Interior, 2023). To curb the spread of COVID-19, the Royal Thai government announced the closure of all land border checkpoints throughout the country on 20 March, 2020, allowing only one permanent border checkpoint between each country to remain open in each province. In Chiang Rai, out of 17 checkpoints, only two remained open: The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 at Chiang Khong-Huay Xai and the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge No. 2 at Mae Sai-Tachileik. These two permanent checkpoints were open for cross-border cargo trade only. However, a week later, the Chiang Rai

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5 Data for 2017-2019 were collected during the author's fieldwork at Chiang Saen port. Data for 2012 were adapted from *The use of Chiang Saen Commercial Port services* (Number of boat trips that use the cargo loading service in 2012) by Marine Department Statistics, 2012. Retrieved from <https://md.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/สถิติและผลการดำเนินงานท่าเรือพาณิชย์เชียงแสน-1พ.ย-31.ค.-55.pdf>.



provincial government announced reopening four checkpoints along the Mekong River to facilitate cross-border trade. The allowed checkpoints included the Chiang Saen International Port No. 2, the Ha Chiang Port (which is run by a private company), the Chiang Saen Livestock Port, and the Chiang Saen pier at the old town. However, they were only open for the export of essential daily commodities.

In Chiang Khong, the import and export of commercial goods were only permitted to be transported through the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 by freight truck. However, I was told that the process had become more complicated due to the public health measures in place to combat COVID-19 (a member of the Chiang Khong Chamber of Commerce, personal communication, 10 December 2021). For instance, only one person was allowed on a tractor-trailer. The Lao authorities had also changed the regulations for freight trucks, requiring a Thai driver to drive the truck across the bridge and then leave the trailer at the Lao checkpoint, where a Lao driver would take over and drive it towards the Chinese border in Boten. The Thai driver was then required to drive the tractor back to Thailand within a day. The restrictions on drivers have significantly increased transportation costs for Thai exporters.

Hiring new Lao transportation companies to drive towards the Chinese border doubled the price. In addition, it increased the risk of accidents due to drivers' poor driving skills and lack of experience on the R3A international highway. A Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce member told me that many accidents have occurred, causing significant damage to exported goods, mainly fresh fruits like durian and longan, which have placed a heavy burden on Thai export companies. He emphasized that a high level of proficiency is required for driving in the mountainous areas towards China's border (personal communication, 10 December 2021, Chiang Khong).

Furthermore, previous cross-border agreements were suspended during the pandemic. Lao traders also suffered from increased customs duties during this time. Having insufficient purchase orders made it difficult for small local suppliers to export by freight truck. Large suppliers could deliver goods in large quantities once, whereas small suppliers had to wait for sufficient purchase orders or search for available freight space to share. The border closure has been a death knell for small shops. The strict regulations implemented by Thai officials have shut down their operations, as only truck deliveries via the bridge are allowed. Many small shops opt to continue doing business by asking for their goods to be shared on a freight truck. However, when large shops have already received their purchase orders and filled their trucks, small shops are left without an opportunity to share space.

### **A BRIDGE: A BARRIER FOR SMALL BUSINESS**

Before the pandemic, the Mekong border was bustling with daily trade activity. Small Lao traders crossed the border to buy inexpensive goods, small Thai family-run shops provided daily necessities, and boat operators transported goods and local passengers. Larger-scale trade was mainly delivered to China, while small-scale businesses operated across the border between Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. Typically, small-scale exporting across the border was exempted from strict customs control. The exported commodities valued under THB 50,000 (approximately USD 1,400) are less

regulated; the small cross-border boat or small cargo boat is the primary means of transport for small-scale trade.

However, during the pandemic, small Thai suppliers faced difficulties running their businesses as their regular orders came from small Laos traders. Waranya has operated a wholesale grocery shop for ten years at the border trade checkpoint in Chiang Khong and struggled throughout the Thai-Lao border closure. She was unable to deliver goods via freight truck and attempted to negotiate with officials to use small Lao boats instead (personal communication, 10 June 2020, Chiang Khong). However, this approach was unsuccessful as the officers insisted that the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 was still open to trade:

They say the bridge is just over there, but for small shops with small purchase orders, it's impossible to deliver our goods by freight truck. The large suppliers have orders for things like 100 cartons of detergent powder and 100 cartons of orange juice bottles, but for us, our orders are just one carton of juice and a dozen bars of soap. How can we possibly compete with that and get our three dozen boxes of detergent across the border? (Waranya, personal communication, 10 June 2020, Chiang Khong)

In times of crisis, the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge No. 4 in Chiang Khong became a focal point for selective access. Officials used the bridge's location as a justification to deny Waranya's request, as only certain groups were permitted land freight transportation across it. During the pandemic, the bridge's regulations strictly allowed only freight trucks, excluding other vehicles and pedestrians. This selective facilitation had ramifications beyond just small suppliers. Jobs within the trading system, such as boat operators, Tuk Tuk drivers, porters, and small Lao traders, faced significant disruptions.

Similarly, in Chiang Saen, border trade was only permitted through the International Chiang Saen Port. Lao cargo boats are forced to dock along the riverbank as the Lao government prohibits all river-crossing activities. As a result, Thai boat operators can only deliver goods to the King Roman Casino international pier. However, every day small Lao boats continue to smuggle goods from the Thai riverbank across the border to Laos, as the Thai government allows the delivery of essential goods for locals. Despite the continued operation of the Chiang Saen International Port, cargo boats rarely passed through the port due to the border closure in China.

The flow of border trade was maintained through selected borderland infrastructure such as the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and the international port. Small-scale traders struggled to maintain their businesses, resulting in many people losing their means of livelihood. The bridge only facilitates freight transportation, while cross-border boat operations were utterly ignored. The crisis has exposed how the bridge shapes border trade relationships. Small traders typically rely on boat operators for commodity transportation, while larger traders mainly use the cross-border bridge to export to China. In Chiang Khong, only the flow of trade through the bridge was selected during the border closure, not the flow via boat operators.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of the rapid growth of river trading from South Yunnan to the northern border of Thailand, many residents of Chiang Saen became daily apple traders and workers. National ports, however, have reduced small traders' business channels as they try to organize and regulate border trade. Due to this, border trade activities were forced to enter the formal channel and were exposed to state monitoring via the river port and the cross-border bridge. As a result, in the past 20 years, the boom and bust of border towns have been entangled with infrastructure networks and their unpredictable outcomes.

The infrastructure networks ran parallel, informally, and legally regarding the Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong border trade. As part of the Mekong border trade promotion, the marginal border town was repackaged as a special economic zone, investing considerable sums in transportation infrastructure to claim a connection with China. Customs officials, local private chambers of commerce, and the Thai port authority frequently claim that the value of border trade contributes substantially to the country's export figure. The cross-border bridge and international river port provide an advantage for economic development in general, but it does not ensure equal access for all. It only allows specific users whose equipment meets fixed technical standards and conditions to connect with the borderland infrastructure. Additionally, they must comply with any regulations, which may vary between the states. By doing so, users are exposed to regulators and granted permission to be monitored and controlled without a choice.

However, the deviating route along the Mekong borderland reveals that various actors possess a certain capacity and expertise to manage the movement of goods and resources. Despite the presence of state-provided infrastructure, traders, and other actors actively seek ways to optimize their profits by navigating and circumventing regulations in unstable political areas. Their capabilities and expertise in managing the movement of goods and resources allow them to surmount complex regulations and customs procedures. This provides them with an advantage over state customs regulations when it comes to moving goods across borders.

As highlighted by Hung and Ngo's (2020) exploration of formal versus informal trade dynamics, transborder trade in the Mekong does not fit neatly into categories of legality or illegality. These gray areas challenge traditional distinctions and emphasize the intricate nature of border trade dynamics. The export of legal goods outside the authorized channel allows traders to benefit from lower transportation costs and reduced customs duties. The Sob Luay port operates in the Wa autonomous zone, facilitating the flow of commodities and making Thailand–China trading possible via the unregulated passage. The informal trade pathway unofficially filled China's high demand for livestock and other products (Smith et al., 2018). Freight shipping was another option for exporters when the truck freight transportation cost was too high. For proficient traders, the 'unprofitable port' and 'unofficial port' have become part of the efficient transport route to bypass state control.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, logistical power became more evident and difficult to resist and avoid. The states of China, Laos, and Thailand are strengthening their logistical power by sealing and closing their borders. For the wholesalers and

large-scale traders, the Chiang Khong Bridge and Chiang Saen Port became an alternative passageway for their trading business. Still, the most influential conditions affecting circulation were Chinese import-export regulation and the purchasing demand of Chinese customers. From my observation, smaller-scale traders face considerable challenges, verging on exclusion in the border trading market. The Chiang Khong Bridge completely overrides the cross-border boat operator systems. The pandemic control strategy allowed the state to intervene in border trade and penetrate people's social lives at an unprecedented scale, marking a significant break from the past (Xiang, 2022, p. 3). During the crisis times, this heightened control greatly impacted society, affecting daily life and the global supply chain.

In summary, the findings of this study challenge the prevailing narrative of seamless connectivity through regional infrastructure projects. They uncover a complex interplay between formal state channels and the adaptive networks of borderland traders, often overlooked in mainstream narratives. This research shows how rigid infrastructure and regulatory frameworks often fail to accommodate the dynamic nature of transnational trade, underscoring the indispensable role of informal networks and small traders in sustaining the flow of goods and facilitating border trade between Northern Thailand and Southern China. The study brings to light the limitations of large-scale infrastructure projects in enhancing the quality of life for local traders, suggesting that such infrastructures can paradoxically alter livelihoods, introduce new regulatory bodies, and disrupt or even override pre-existing local trading systems. This transformation not only changes trade dynamics but also shifts the distribution of benefits, often at the expense of smaller traders. Thus, these findings underscore the necessity for a more inclusive approach to infrastructure development in border areas, ensuring that the benefits are equitably shared and that the voices and experiences of those living at the forefront of these changes are not only heard but actively integrated into the planning and execution of regional projects.



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### DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.