Chinese Investor Networks and the Politics of Infrastructure Projects in the Eastern Economic Corridor in Thailand

Arratee Ayuttacorn[a]*

[a]Department of Social Science and Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

*corresponding author: arratee.a@cmu.ac.th

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This research examines Chinese investment and the impact of infrastructure projects on the Eastern Economic Corridor project (EEC), a special economic zone linking Thailand with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and China, which aligns with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Drawing on Actor Network Theory (ANT), this study analyzes emerging Chinese investor networks and the resulting negotiations between various actors such as the Thai state, Chinese and Thai investors, and local farmers. Many Chinese investors have moved their production bases to avoid the tax barriers raised by the United States or Europe, as well as to expand their markets in Southeast Asia. The Thai state offers tax benefits to foreign investors, allowing them to import raw materials and machinery from China, making their production costs lower than those of Thai investors. The findings reveal that the neoliberal state facilitates foreign investors through deregulation: enacting city planning laws that permit the establishment of industrial estates in agricultural zones, thus dispossessing farmers of their land. These factories can release toxic waste, thus impacting the local environment and livelihoods of nearby farmers. Thai businesspeople are often unable to compete with Chinese investors to match their bids. In order to maintain their positions in these economic networks, they build affective relations with Chinese investors. In addition, these affective relations attract resistance and indignation from locals dispossessed of land and resources.

Keywords: Actor Network Theory; Chinese Investors; Eastern Economic Corridor; Infrastructure; Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

This research examines infrastructure development projects in the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) in Thailand. It analyzes Chinese investor networks and the role of the Thai state in facilitating foreign investment. The Thai state's deregulation and privatization of infrastructure construction has allowed foreign investors to profit from construction projects, the tax system, and land distribution schemes. This research also explores affective relations among local people, state agencies, and Chinese investors. Such affective relations serve to reinforce and strengthen business networks, as well as attracting resistance to EEC development projects.

The Thai government established the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) development project in three provinces: Chonburi, Rayong, and Chachoengsao. It plans to situate EEC special economic zones as a linkage point for Mainland Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand), which aligns with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Mainland Southeast Asia is linked by the East-West Corridor and the North-West Corridor, which are the main economic routes in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). This connectivity makes Thailand a key logistical hub in the GMS. The EEC provides key seaports to facilitate the distribution of products from Southern China, Laos, and Cambodia. 100% of export products from Laos and 80% from Cambodia pass through EEC ports to other regions (Matichon Online, 2018, August 26). The EEC project is expected to stimulate growth in the economic zones along the route through these three countries.

In 2017, the military government utilized Article 44 and enacted order 2/2017 to establish the Eastern Economic Corridor development project. A committee, with the Prime Minister as chairperson, has the authority to frame policies and approve various development plans, including supervision to push forward the EEC project. The military government passed several laws, including the “Eastern Special Development Zone Act”, to centralize the power regarding decision-making, approvals, permits, and rights or concessions for investors. The newly established *Policy Committee* and *Secretary General* hold this power. It is ‘a state within a state’ system in the EEC area (ILaw, 2019, August 11).

The EEC development project supports targeted industries, including modern automobiles, intelligent electronics, biotechnology, industrial robots, aviation, digital industry, biofuels, and biochemicals (Eastern Economic Corridor Office, 2018). The EEC project is also concerned with building infrastructure and logistical networks. However, Thailand’s lack of technological innovation and financial support makes these industrial upgrades challenging. As a result, the Thai state encourages Chinese investors to invest in targeted industries and infrastructure projects in the EEC. While Chinese corporations, entrepreneurs, and workers seek new opportunities from the “going out” policy, there have been issues of underconsumption, overcapacity, competition in export markets, and scarcity of resources (Lee, 2017, p.1). China’s new labor law limits employer flexibility and increases production costs in China (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022, p. 13).

Several private companies and state-owned enterprises from China have relocated their production bases to the EEC. Overseas production and exports from other countries to Europe and North America help Chinese companies to avoid trade barriers that arise when exporting from China. China sees special economic zones as a way to transfer China's economic success to developing countries, and as beneficial to the host country (Bräutigam & Tang, 2011, p. 71). China's investment in the EEC is worth USD 5.9 bn (Eastern Economic Corridor Office, 2023), which includes the automobile industry (USD 2.8 bn), intelligent electronics, and renewable energy sectors (Bangkok Business News, 2023, July 18).

In late 2020, the Great Wall Motor Company (GWM) from China bought General Motors' factories and relocated their production base for distribution in the ASEAN region (Ruamsuwan, 2021, June 10). At least 10 Chinese EV manufacturers have established themselves in the EEC, and Thailand aims to become a major center for electric vehicle manufacture in Asia (Daily News, 2023, July 6). Chinese EV manufacturers plan to establish subsidiary factories in Thailand for products such as lithium-ion batteries and electronic components for electric cars (Salika, 2023, April 21).

In addition, Chinese waste recycling factories are moving to Thailand because of China's 2018 prohibition on the import of recycled plastic waste. The Chinese state is attempting to reduce air pollution and lessen its impact on the local environment. Therefore, seven million tons of the world's recycled plastic waste are now being redirected to Southeast Asian countries (Matichon Weekly, 2019, April 29). Recycling factories are moving out of China to countries where fewer regulations are enforced. The operation of recycling waste and battery factories raises environmental anxieties among local populations in the EEC.

By facilitating the establishment of special economic zones in their countries, ASEAN governments seek to attract foreign investment, increase exports, boost job opportunities and skills development of workers, and promote technological transfers (Aggarwal, 2007; Farole & Akinci, 2011; Wang, 2013). With "going global" policies, China supports trade, investment, and technology transfers to developing countries by encouraging Chinese state-owned enterprises and private entrepreneurs to make investments outside China. China's overseas investments, including geopolitical and economic expansion in Southeast Asia, both facilitate resource extraction and create opportunities for local communities (Rowedder & Tappe, 2022; Sidaway et al., 2020). China has fostered, in Southeast Asia, the image of a big brother who supports the ASEAN region (Sung, 2019). At the same time, China secures access to the resources of developing countries, e.g. land (Dwyer, 2020), water (Soukhaphon et al., 2021), minerals (Tappe, 2022), rubber, and fruit (Lyttleton & Li, 2017; Rowedder, 2022) through infrastructure development.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

In the *Specter of Global China*, Ching Kwan Lee (2017) uses the concept of varieties of capital to categorize SOEs and private enterprises. She demonstrates that Chinese state capital in Zambia accumulates both profit and other utilities, such as employment creation and enhancing the country's reputation, while private investors focus only on the single objective of profit maximization. However, corporate actors around the world, not only Chinese, are willing to adapt and work with local institutions where the rule of law is strong. In contrast, corporations tend to take advantage of countries where institutions are weak, and laws are rarely enforced (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022).

Previous studies demonstrate that China's development project creates a form of South-South cooperation and a form of exploitation and racialization (Lin et al., 2021, p. 265). Chinese workers in Special Economic Zones in Laos and Cambodia receive higher wages than their non-Chinese counterparts (Laungaramsri, 2015; Nyire, 2012, p. 554), and these differential treatments and benefits undermine worker solidarity (Franceschini, 2020, p. 527). However, in the case of Chinese-owned construction sites in Sihanoukville, both Chinese and Cambodian workers were victims of subcontractors because of contractual traps and wage arrears (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022, p. 45).

In Cambodia, Chinese SOEs' investment in infrastructure is often promoted by ruling elites as a contribution to the socio-economic development of the host country. Local large corporations have more opportunities to enter into joint ventures with Chinese companies (Chheang, 2022, p. 203), which is also demonstrated in the case of Thailand. The China Railway Construction Company (SOE) cooperated with the Charoen Pokphand Group (CP), a large Thai conglomerate, to construct a high-speed rail link between Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, and U-Tapao airports (Forbes Thailand, 2020, May 14). Guangxi Construction Engineering Group (SOE) collaborated with CP Land to develop the Thai-Chinese Industrial Estate Project, or CPGC, to accommodate Chinese investors in the EEC (Than-Settakij, 2020, February 6). Meanwhile, local small and medium-sized businesses have fewer opportunities because of their small capital and inability to compete with conglomerates to work with Chinese firms.

In recent decades, Southeast Asian states have encouraged foreign enterprises to invest in infrastructure in special economic zones. Even though development projects boost international trade, national economies, and economic opportunities, at the same time they have negative consequences. In the case of Sihanoukville, the influx of Chinese investment led to a rise in the crime rate, environmental degradation, and social and cultural tensions (Chheang, 2022). In addition, the political process of infrastructure development projects mobilizes affect, desire, pride, and frustration (Larkin, 2013); sometimes, roads remain unfinished because of corruption (Harvey & Knox, 2015, p. 134). Several studies demonstrate affective relations and political imagination from infrastructure development (Boeck, 2011; Harvey & Knox, 2012; Knox, 2017). Affective relations also create economic opportunities for Chinese investors. The case of rubber investment in Laos shows that Chinese investors use cultural and linguistic affinities to cultivate affective networks with Lao Akha villagers. Social interaction secures profits and further initiates flexibility in land and labor transactions (Lyttleton & Li, 2017).

The studies on special economic zones tend to emphasize the political and economic dimensions of the power of the state (Bräutigam & Tang, 2014; Moberg, 2015; Wang, 2013). Special economic zone projects emerge from political rationality regulated by the state, rather than from citizen demands. The neoliberal state facilitates the flow of capital through privatization, financialization, crisis management, and state redistribution. Wealth and resources are often shifted to the powerful through a process described as accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005, p. 160). The state capitalizes underdeveloped land or privatizes land, and farmers are displaced (Chettri & Eilenberg, 2021; Levien, 2011; 2018). Few studies focus on the formation of infrastructure projects that involve a multitude of stakeholders and their dynamic relationships. The complex relationships among human actors and non-human actors that strengthen and maintain networks are neglected.

This research examines the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) development project in Thailand as infrastructure comprising heterogeneous networks of human and non-human actors (Latour, 2007; Law, 1992). Actor Network Theory (ANT) is employed as a methodological and analytical tool to identify the various actors involved, such as the Thai state, Chinese and Thai investors, and local farmers. Non-human actors, namely cultural elements and affective relations, play a crucial role in Chinese capital networks. ANT describes a dynamic process in which all actors are interwoven, assembled in social groups that are mediated for their mutual benefit. A translation process is used as an analytical tool to assess the associations, displacement, and negotiations that establish relations between actors and entities. The translation of actors is achieved through Callon's four moments: *problematization, interessement, enrolment,* and *mobilization* (Callon, 1984, p. 203). However, special economic zones could not be operated without the power of the state, which establishes networks of infrastructure, such as roads and energy supply (Moberg, 2015, p. 172), and encourages foreign investment. Therefore, a political economy approach is integrated to explain the power of the state in the privatization of infrastructure construction, the tax system, and land distribution for the EEC's establishment.

This study exemplifies the synthesis of a political economy and ANT approach to examine Chinese capital networks in the EEC. ANT translation provides methodological tools to follow the focal actors, and to explore the negotiation processes within networks. The political economy approach examines the role of state and policy implications that facilitate foreign investment. This research also explores the potential role of affective relations as a non-human actor that does not only strengthen the network, but also initiates the resistance to Chinese capital networks.

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative data were collected via in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observation. Actor Network Theory provides the methodological tools to follow the actors (Law, 1990) in Chinese capital networks. I interviewed members of the Chambers of Commerce, Chinese investors, and local NGOs at the beginning, and then moved on to other actors, namely, Thai business owners, real-estate developers, and local communities and farmers in Chonburi, Rayong, and Chachoengsao. It is necessary to trace the interactions between human actors and non-human actors, which are cultural elements, and affective relations, and to explore lines of association that allow networks to function (Ruming, 2009, p. 454).

I developed a semi-structured interview guide through the objectives of the study, including the role of the state, the deregulation of laws, an EEC map, land use changes, the negative impacts of the EEC, and affective relations among actors. The open-ended questions in the guidelines are flexible enough to be adjusted during and after interviews to accommodate the current situation. Interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes for in-depth interviews and from one to two hours for focus groups, depending on the information furnished by the respondents. Most of the interviews were conducted in Thai, while a few interviews with Chinese investors were done in Chinese via a translator. The interviews continued until the data were saturated and reflected interesting findings. Finally, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews and 12 focus group interviews with key respondents.

The data were analyzed using content analysis with a systematic coding system (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). An initial coding set was developed from the interview guide; all relevant codes were sorted into categories and then grouped into themes, respectively. The four moments of the ANT's translation process: problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization, are the main themes of analysis. Secondary data from documents, official websites and social media were also reviewed and included in the coding scheme.

The remainder of this paper consists of three parts. First, I explain the role of the Thai state in its privatization of infrastructure projects and revision of its laws to facilitate foreign investment in the EEC area. Second, I describe Chinese investor networks in order to understand their establishment through a translation process. The third part portrays affective networks between locals, Chinese investors and the state. Affect serves to create opportunities for local businesspeople as well as to prompt resistance to development projects in the EEC.

PRIVATIZATION OF INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS AND DEREGULATION OF LAWS

The EEC project entails the construction of infrastructure and a logistics network to make connections within countries and regions. The infrastructure includes land, water, and air transportation, which comprises high-speed trains, double-track railways, three-lane motorways, Map-Ta-Phut Port Phase three, Laem Chabang Port, Sattahip Commercial Port, and U-Tapao International Airport to facilitate travel and product transportation and services. Investment for the first five years (2017–2021) is a joint venture agreement between the public and private sectors with a budget of USD 42 bn for pilot projects in three provinces. In addition, the government has invested more than USD 14 bn to support the industrial sector and develop tourism, with another USD 5.5 bn focusing on the development of four new cities: namely, Chachoengsao, Pattaya, U-Tapao, and Rayong (Eastern Economic Corridor Office, 2018).

For infrastructure investment, especially transportation routes in the EEC, the Thai state allowed the private sector to participate in joint ventures with state enterprises as Public Private Partners (PPPs). The private sector takes responsibility for infrastructure construction; after a project is completed, a concession will be granted to the private sector. The government therefore pushes these projects along the PPP EEC Track to reduce the workflow of the tender process. These new regulations speed up working processes from 40 months to 10 months (EEC Office, 2019). Major projects in the EEC accelerated by the government are the U-Tapao International Airport Development Project, the Sattahip Commercial Port Development Project, the high-speed train from Bangkok to Rayong, the Laem Chabang Port Development Project, and the Map Ta Phut Port Development Project.

Large infrastructure development projects in the EEC are joint-venture agreements between Thai and Chinese SOEs. For example, the high-speed train mega-project involves cooperation between the State Railway of Thailand (SRT), the Charoen Pokphand Holding company, Italian-Thai construction companies, the Chor Karnchang company, and the China Railway Construction Company (CRCC), which is the world's largest high-speed train company (SOE) (Forbes Thailand, 2020, May 14). The Port Authority of Thailand (PAT) selected several private investors: the Gulf Energy Development Company, the PTT Tank Terminal Company, and the China Harbor Engineering Company, a subsidiary of an SOE, to construct Laem Chabang port.

EEC planning operates under the Eastern Special Development Zone Act, 2018. The Eastern Economic Corridor Office of Thailand together with the Department of Public Works and Town & Country Planning have revised the maps. Land use revisions changed agricultural land designations into industrial areas. The goal is to support land use development for the next 20 years, covering an area of 1,326,600 hectares in three provinces (Prachachat Thurakit, 2020, August 7). Although the EEC town plan has clearly defined types of land use, the new mapping allows some types of factories, which were previously banned, to be established on agricultural land. These factories include waste treatment factories and waste landfill and recycling plants, which release toxic chemicals into the environment and affect the health of local people in the community. Moreover, the Department of Industrial Works cannot thoroughly regulate and control these recycling factories. Local people in Rayong province observed that the factory owner had strong connections with the authorities (interview, local community member, 10 December 2020).

The military government has reduced regulations and revised city planning laws in the EEC area. It aims to facilitate the establishment of industrial plants, including waste disposal plants, incinerators, landfill and recycling businesses. The numbers of these factories have been increasing in the EEC and neighboring provinces, from 148 factories in 2018 (Matichon Weekly, 2021, January 6) to 725 factories in 2020 (EnLaw, 2021, October 8), after China banned the import of recycled plastic waste in 2018. The Thai state allowed high volumes of plastic waste, up to 552,912 tons (Seub Nagasathien Foundation, 2023, February 28), to be imported to respond to the demands of Chinese investors in 2018 (Thai PBS, 2020, August 11). Waste disposal businesses are being established, and electronic waste and plastic scrap are regularly smuggled into Thailand (Manager Online, 2021, September 11).

CHINESE INVESTOR NETWORKS

Chinese companies do not only invest in infrastructure projects in the EEC, they also relocate their car production bases to Thailand. The main objectives include avoiding tax barriers in the USA, reducing production costs such as labor and raw materials, and opening new markets in Southeast Asia. Chinese investors create networks among themselves and with powerful Thai corporations to extend their businesses from electric vehicles to lithium-ion batteries, tire manufacture, real estate businesses, and fruit exports.

The Great Wall Motor Company (GWM), a private Chinese company, bought a General Motors (GM) factory in 2020 and changed the production base of GM and Chevrolet cars to GWM for distribution in the ASEAN region (Ruamsuwan, 2021, June 10). Chang-An Automobile and GAC AION, New Energy Automobile Company (SOE), are now approaching the Thai authorities to invest in an EV manufacturing and battery factory in the EEC (Manager Online, 2023, April 9).

The Charoen Pokphand Group (CP) started its automobile business in 2013 through a joint venture with Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation Ltd (SAIC), a Chinese SOE, forming SAIC-CP for production and distribution under the MG brand. In 2019, CP Group entered a joint venture with Foton Motor Group, a subsidiary of the state-owned enterprise Beijing Automotive Group (BAIC), to establish a manufacturing and distribution company related to automotive technology, including marketing and management. It aims to enter the top three market in Thailand (Positioning, 2019, May 7).

Chinese investors have moved their electric vehicle production bases to Thailand, and they are expanding markets in Thailand and the ASEAN region. Domestic auto parts manufacturers should also benefit from electric vehicle production. However, major car manufacturers import auto parts from China or buy spare parts from Chinese factories. When a car manufacturing company has set up a factory, the supplier factories that produce various auto parts such as glass, wiring, seat belts, steering wheels, and water pumps for the parent factory will move from China. These supplier factories will be relocated in the same area as the parent factory to save on transportation costs (interview, an officer of the Board of Investment of Thailand, 7 April 2021).

Electric vehicle production needs support from a battery factory, so it also moves its production base to the EEC. Global Power Synergy Company, Pure Energy Company and Rojana Industrial Park in cooperation with EVLOMO from the USA established a lithium-ion battery factory in the EEC area. The Pure Energy Company formed a joint venture with Amita Technologies from Taiwan, in which Amita has a 70% shareholding (Than-Settakij, 2021, May 7). This group established a battery factory on the Blue Tech City Industrial Estate, Chachoengsao Province. Blue Tech City Industry requires a change of land use from an agricultural area to an industrial area. The Pure Energy Company built a battery factory in this settlement. Therefore, this creates conflict with the community over land use issues and raises concerns over environmental impacts.

Large tire manufacturing companies from China have moved to the EEC, including Linglong, Zhongce, General Rubber, Prinz Chengshan, Huayi group, and Sentury Tires. Chinese companies in the EEC now comprise the largest number of tire manufacturers in the region. They do not only produce tires for the domestic market, 90 percent of their production is exported to Europe and America. Tire companies have relocated their production bases to avoid tax barriers in the USA. Another reason is raw materials, as Thailand is a source of natural rubber production (interview, an officer of the Board of Investment of Thailand [BOI], 7 April 2021). An interesting point is that the demand for natural rubber in the country is higher because of the relocation of tire companies. But the price of rubber in the country is very low. In 2019, the government released a "One Kilometer, One Village" policy to use rubber as a material to build roads to raise the rubber price. The project expects to use 1.4 million tons of natural rubber to build roads in 75,032 villages in 77 provinces. But in the same year that the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Interior investigated and suspended this project, he said that it ran the risk of corruption (Manager Online, 2022, May 26).

Huayi Group, a Chinese SOE, produces tires for trucks. It was established on Lakchai Muang Yang Industrial Estate in Rayong province. Huayi Group cooperates with a Thai businessman of Chinese Hokkien descent, Mr. Lakchai Kittipol, owner of Lakchai Rubber and the Thai Hua Rubber Company. These rubber companies are large agents that control the latex and rubber market and sell rubber to Huayi Group and Sentury. Lakchai encourages Chinese companies to make investments in Lakchai Industrial Estate, so that he can quickly expand the industrial estate area to accommodate Chinese and Japanese manufacturers. He aims to increase domestic rubber production to one million tons in 2024 (Bangkok Business News, 2019, April 24).

Interessment from Moving to the EEC

Chinese investors face problems with their businesses in China as they encounter trade wars with the USA and Europe. Business competition in China and the going out policy have encouraged Chinese investors to relocate their production bases overseas. Moving to the EEC in Thailand is an indispensable point that Chinese investors must pass to satisfy their interests. They form networks among themselves to set up clusters of businesses, e.g., for electric vehicles. Chinese capital networks receive benefits in the form of tax exemptions, cheap raw materials, cheap labor, and expanding into new markets in Southeast Asia.

When Chinese automobile assembly plants move to the EEC, this kind of investment does not support small or medium-scale Thai businesses. Chinese companies import steel and auto parts such as axles, clutches, and bearings from China, and then assemble cars in Thailand. The cost of imports is lower than domestic spare parts because of tax exemptions. China's production costs are also lower because there is industrial mass production in China, using cheap raw materials. In contrast, there are no large auto parts producers in Thailand. Small-scale factories cannot compete with Chinese companies because the cost of production is higher. Chinese factories take less time to assemble cars and their selling prices are lower than those of Thai factories. Chinese capital also has advantages in terms of upstream and downstream control (interview, a group of Thai businesspeople from Chonburi, 7 December 2020).

With large-scale production in Thailand, Chinese companies send products back to China and distribute them to other countries in Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. Moving the production base to Thailand lowers transportation costs, and as automobile and spare parts production increases Chinese investors benefit because of the advantage of a strong supply chain, so they choose Thailand as their distribution base. Chinese brands' "made in China" is transformed into "made in Thailand", through which they can avoid tax barriers when importing their products into the USA and Europe. Even though the GDP growth of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) in 2019 stood at 5–7%—which was higher than Thailand's GDP growth of 2.4% (SCB Economic Intelligence Center, 2022)—Chinese investors are interested in investing in the EEC area because it provides good infrastructure, and the logistics system is convenient for transporting goods.

Enrollment: SMEs and the Real Estate Sector

As the EEC mainly focuses on large-scale foreign investors, the Thai government attracts multinational companies that invest in industries related to innovation and advanced technologies, such as aviation and electric vehicles. To receive tax support and promotion from the Thai government, the size of investment must be at least USD 1.4 million. A factory must be established in a specific area, such as an industrial estate. In this case, Thai investors complain that the investment of Thai companies in the EEC is hardly supported by the state, especially for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) such as hotels, construction companies, and plastics factories. Small-scale investors cannot access tax exemptions or import benefits. Government policy only invites large-scale foreign investors, that cooperate with large corporations in Thailand such as the CP Group and Chor Karnchang company (interview, a group of Thai businesspeople from Chonburi, 7 December 2020).

Small- and medium-scale Thai companies in the EEC that cannot access the tender process of infrastructure development projects seek to form networks with Chinese investors. At the same time, Chinese investors also find Thai partners for joint venture agreements in order to facilitate their business operations. Sino-Thai businesspeople mention that large Chinese construction companies need Thai partners that can oversee the rental of a warehouse, coordination with the Board of Investment (BOI), construction permit issuance, documenting contracts, trading for export, marketing and accounting, and a law office. Chinese companies tend to recruit Sino-Thai businessmen because they are of Chinese descent, speak Chinese, and can engage with Chinese culture (interview, a group of businesspeople from Rayong, 2 April 2021). At the same time, Sino-Thais are willing to create affective relations for future transactions.

Most Chinese construction companies import machines, steel, and equipment from China because it is cheaper and tax free. Cheaper construction materials such as concrete products, cement, bricks, stone, and sand can be provided by Thai companies. Chinese companies prefer to cooperate with domestic construction companies owned by those of Chinese descent who can supply large volumes of materials at the lowest prices (interview with sales manager of a construction company in Rayong, 2 April 2021).

Chinese investors who invest in the EEC area are not only large industrial groups situated in industrial estate areas. They extend their networks to include other businesses, such as Chinese restaurants, and dormitories for technicians and workers from China. Chinese investors are interested in real estate in Pattaya, Chonburi, and Rayong Province. The expansion of Chinese business into real estate sectors is occurring in Chiang Mai: they create joint ventures with Thai citizens, selling condominiums or houses to Chinese customers (Siriphon, 2019, p. 277–278; Siriphon & Li 2022, p.8). One Thai respondent, who has been working in the real estate business for more than 20 years, mentioned that it is easy for Chinese investors to obtain visas and move to Thailand. They can hold real estate as complete ownership, which is different from buying real estate in China. Ownership is made through a payment to acquire leasehold rights within a specific time frame. The tenant has no ownership of the property. It is a lease from the Chinese government for a period of 70 years. Thailand's Condominium Act allows foreigners to own 49% of a residential area. The Chinese have the right to own property, and they can buy and sell ownership and bequeath it to their descendants. Chinese citizens therefore prefer to buy condominiums in Thailand. However, foreigners cannot buy land or houses, but they can hold property through a registered company in Thailand if the nominee or shareholder is a Thai citizen (interview, a real estate broker, 27 June 2021).

After moving to the EEC, Chinese investors who are developers of residential projects in China seek joint investments with Thai partners in order to purchase land. Thai investors become nominees, while Chinese investors work on management. In some projects, Chinese investors do not buy the land themselves, but use a joint venture agreement with Thai landowners who swap their land for shares. Then, land ownership is transferred under the name of the company. Chinese investors make investments in construction works, setting up showrooms and marketing plans. When a project is finished, the land value is increased. Thai investors also profit from that increased value (interview, a real estate broker, 27 June 2021).

In addition to real estate investment for profitable sales, Chinese investors who own factories in industrial estates also buy property to accommodate employees. Some Chinese investors cooperate with Thai partners, who have previously made investments together, to run hotel businesses. For example, a Chinese investor, who established a tire factory 10 years ago on Lakchai Rubber Estate, bought a resort near Mae-Phim cape to accommodate Chinese workers. He has a joint venture agreement with Thai Hua rubber companies, and he was encouraged to invest in extending an industrial estate project. Later, this group expanded their investment to a five-star hotel development (interview, businesspeople from Rayong, 24 June 2021).

Chinese capital networks enroll Thai investors who are of Chinese descent to be business partners. With joint venture agreements, Chinese investors can extend their business into real estate development and the agricultural sector, while Thai partners become actors who facilitate business operations. However, those Thai investors accept their roles to profit from Chinese capital networks, and they attempt to negotiate by trading land or raw materials, and enlarge the scale of their investment. Crucial elements for the enrollment process are Chinese language skills, and cultural affinities toward networking and negotiating link all the actors together. Sino-Thai investors demonstrate aspects of affective relations and cultural engagement to strengthen their relationships.

Mobilization in the Agricultural Sector and the Financial System

Chinese capital networks have extended their business into the agricultural sector, especially Thai fruit. Durian is popular among the Chinese. It is exported to China through fruit packing houses. Durian prices have been increasing in recent years. In 2021, the value of durian exports from Chanthaburi province to China exceeded USD 1.1 bn (Thairath Online, 2021, June 2). A fruit packing company buys durian from farmers and then exports it to China. A logistics system for fruit transportation has been developed using large refrigerated vehicles that go directly to China. Chinese investors have been investing in this business for around 10 years; there are many hundreds of packing houses in just one district of Chanthaburi province. This investment has been supported by Thai partners who deal with contracts and domestic payments, but the packing house is Chinese-owned and even uses a Chinese name (interview, a group of Thai farmers in Chanthaburi, 22 June 2021).

Currently, durian is popular among farmers. Durian farming areas are 2–3 times larger than in the past: one durian tree earns about USD 1,400–1,700 per annum. Therefore, farmers prefer to cut down rubber trees and plant durian instead, because of the low price of rubber. The Chinese invest in durian orchards and hire Thai gardeners who take care of the durian trees. Some durian orchards are large-scale, covering more than 160 hectares. Chinese investors can distribute durian through their connections in China. In contrast, Thai people cannot export by themselves because they lack connections in China (interview with Thai businesspeople, 23 June 2021).

Farmers are concerned that the export market will be uncertain in the future because the Chinese invest in exporting fruit by themselves. Chinese investors therefore control all prices and export markets. Chinese logistic companies started to import cheaper Vietnamese durian, as the cross-border railway facilitates fruit trade between the two countries (PPTV, 2023, May 31). Thai businesspeople who export fruit lack comparable capital and markets, even though Thai farmers have knowledge and expertise in durian cultivation. Thus, Chinese investors hire Thai experts to take care of durian orchards. Some Thai farmers feel anxious about their future when their knowledge about durian cultivation is transferred to Chinese people so that they can cultivate tasty durian in China. Other farmers consider their durian to be of the best quality, and fear that its price will decline when products are oversupplied to the market (interview with a group of Thai farmers in Rayong, 24 June 2021). The Straits Times (2019, September 7) reported that a Chinese private company was attempting to grow durian in Hainan province, but cultivators were challenged in locating suitable farming areas and encountered difficult weather conditions for the crop. Chinese companies then sought to lease large plots of land near Vientiane, Laos, to establish durian plantations with the aim of exporting the fruit to China (Zang, 2021, March 18).

I have demonstrated that marketing in China is controlled by the Chinese. Real estate projects in Thailand also work in a parallel way. Residential development projects, joint ventures with Chinese investors, do not make a profit for the Thai banking system. Most Chinese investors bring money from China to invest in Thailand, but marketing and sales activities happen in China. Buyers in China sign a contract and pay in China. When a project is nearly completed, a Chinese salesperson informs the customer, who then signs a contract and is offered a free package tour to Thailand to see the actual property. Each package tour is arranged for 100 or 200 customers and is operated and facilitated by Chinese companies. The office in Thailand is just an operational unit working on Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and construction approval. Most financial transactions are in China. Cash flow and the mortgage system therefore do not operate in Thailand (interview, a real estate broker, 27 June 2021).

Chinese investors are dominant actors in capital networks, and they identify themselves as representatives of Thai counterparts. The benefit to Thai investors depends on Chinese businesspeople. Thai investors become passive actors who are mobilized by Chinese investors. It is difficult for Thai investors to compete with the Chinese or leave the network because they cannot find a market in China. Therefore, Chinese networks will still endure as long as all actors benefit.

AFFECTIVE RELATIONS FROM EEC INFRASTRUCTURES

EEC infrastructures reduce spatial barriers, enhance flows of capital, and distribute products to the market. Chinese capital builds an economic network through the connectivity of infrastructures. However, infrastructures have negative consequences that mediate and transform people's lives. The result of EEC mapping demonstrates affective relations between local people and industrial zone development.

For example, the establishment of a new recycling factory in the local community provoked villagers' resistance in the area because of their concerns about the environmental impact. On 24 January 2021, around 300 villagers in Bor Thong District, Chonburi Province, gathered to resist a plastics recycling factory. Villagers protested 14 times because they wanted to protect the agricultural area and the environment (Siamrath Online, 2021, January 24). This factory has applied for permission to run a business, but approval for a factory license is still pending (interview, a group of Bor Thong villagers, 3 April 2021).

The impact of the new EEC mapping released in 2019 has led to change in land use, regardless of the reality of areas such as the Bang Prakong River coastal area, Khao Din Subdistrict, Chachoengsao Province. This area is designated as industrial development land, even though it is situated in the largest area of mangrove forest, which is ecologically very rich. Another area is the border area between Chachoengsao and Chonburi provinces, which is fertile agricultural land and constitutes an important aquaculture area of the country. According to new EEC mapping, it is designated as land for special target industries in a special economic zone, and land prices have dramatically increased since then. Problems arise when a landowner sells land to the Blue Tech Industrial Estate project in Khao Din Subdistrict. In my interviews, farmers narrate that they used to rent land for agriculture and aquaculture, but they cannot continue farming because the lease was terminated. Therefore, 20 families of tenants gathered to prosecute the landowners. According to land rent law, a landowner who wishes to sell land must inform the tenant, who may wish to purchase the land. In this case, landowners secretly sell their land without notifying their tenants; therefore, the tenants ask for compensation (interview, a group of Khao Din villagers, 5 December 2020).

Another case of land expropriation is the Inland Container Depot (ICD) project or Dry Port in Nong Teen Nok Subdistrict, Ban Pho District, Chachoengsao Province. This project was initiated by the Eastern Economic Corridor Committee in 2019; the land in question consisted of 288 hectares that was originally agricultural land. After the enforcement of EEC mapping, it became a light green area, which is still agricultural land but can now accommodate some types of industrial activity. At present, Nong Teen Nok villagers have rejected the expropriation of this land for container terminal construction, which would expand from Laem Chabang, Map Taphut, and Sattahip Port (Manager Online, 2019, January 29). The project would block the waterway, causing flooding and affecting the livelihoods of villagers. Most of the farmers are tenants; few landowners actually participated in the public hearing process. If the ICD project is implemented, farmers would be dispossessed of their land and resources (interview, a group of Nong Teen Nok villager, 5 December 2020).

DISCUSSION

The Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) was established by the Thai state as a linkage point to connect Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand (CLMVT) to the BRI. The BRI aims to facilitate transportation linkages, politics, trade and monetary flows across the region (Summers, 2016). This study demonstrates that the political power and influence of the Thai state underpins the infrastructure of the EEC project to facilitate networks of Chinese investors. The military state privatizes infrastructures, revises mapping, and offers tax exemptions to foreign investors. This study reveals that the EEC project supports transportation linkages, trade and monetary flows for Chinese SOEs, and large-scale Thai corporations. The EEC project neither increases exports, nor enhances currency circulation, nor reduces production costs for medium and small-scale Thai investors.

EEC infrastructures create new regional connectivity and facilitate Chinese capitalist expansion. Chinese investors form business networks among themselves, then shift production bases to the EEC. Sino-Thai investors possessing land or cheap material resources are enrolled into these networks. Therefore, trade and monetary flows are between the Chinese, while Sino-Thais become nominees and gain less benefit from Chinese economic networks. Chinese investment has extensively expanded from manufacturing into the real estate and agricultural sectors, leading to land grabs or land appropriations. The case of the Northern Economic Corridor in Laos (Dwyer, 2020) and the BRI project in Kazakhstan (Sternberg et.al., 2017) also show the problems of land dispossession by Chinese entrepreneurs.

This study builds on previous studies (Boeck, 2011; Harvey & Knox, 2012; Larkin, 2013) analyzing the affective mobilization of local communities arising from the negative consequences of new infrastructures. New EEC mapping permits the establishment of industrial estates, including battery and recycling factories in agricultural zones by Chinese private companies. The dispossession of land and the environmental impacts of these factories provoke contestations from local communities.

In this study, Actor Network Theory (ANT) offers not only insights into analytical aspects but also methodological tools to follow various actors in Chinese capital networks. Translation processes reveal the negotiations among all actors. Cultural affinities and affective relations comprise the devices that strengthen and maintain networks. Therefore, only Sino-Thai investors are selected and enrolled into these networks. ANT analyzes how these networks are formed and maintained, but it neglects the power of the state that facilitates Chinese investor networks. Therefore, a political economy approach is employed to investigate government intervention in business networks, offering tax benefits and revising laws to facilitate Chinese investments.

CONCLUSION

Chinese investors have established networks among themselves and relocated their production bases to the EEC and Thailand. The case of large-scale vehicle factories shows that Chinese manufacturers buy auto parts from Chinese networks settled in the same area. Therefore, Thai auto parts companies do not benefit from the automobile industry, which the Thai state professes to support.

The Thai state offers a business climate and tax benefits to attract Chinese investors. Chinese manufacturers can import raw materials and machines from China, so that they can benefit from lower production costs compared to their Thai counterparts. Therefore, Thai companies cannot compete on price with the Chinese. Chinese investment in the EEC does not promote good economic outcomes for Thai industry. They make joint venture agreements with Thai investors only in those cases where they cannot operate businesses by themselves, such as buying land or cheap raw materials.

Cultural affinities are very important for the enrollment process and maintaining economic networks. Chinese investors enroll Sino-Thai partners who can speak Chinese and understand Chinese culture to join trade networks. Chinese investor networks also employ cultural ties to expand their networks into several business sectors, including real estate and agriculture. This study demonstrates that all actors in the network always negotiate for their own benefit, especially Thai investors who have less power. Thai investors attempt to enroll into these networks, even though they become mere nominees.

The neoliberal Thai state does not only privatize infrastructure development projects, it also deregulates city planning laws that change land use categories to expand industrial areas for foreign investors. Plastics recycling factories, inland container depots, and industrial estate projects are permitted to be established in communities, and they result in land grabs and environmental problems. Local communities have called for revising the EEC map through public participation.

The Department of Industrial Works and Pollution Control Department should inspect recycling factories, enforce environmental laws, and promote a surveillance network for disposing of hazardous wastes. In addition, the Ministry of Commerce should control the prices of domestic raw materials, such as rubber prices, and promote export markets for fruit such as durian, for Thai investors. The Office of the Board of Investment (BOI) and the Ministry of Commerce should revise the rules for tax exemptions on the import and export of certain types of goods, and encourage foreign companies to use domestic products.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arratee Ayuttacorn is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the Department of Social Science and Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. Her research interests include cultural studies, aviation, gender, resource management, public health, and Indian studies.

- Contact: arratee.a@cmu.ac.th

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