

Book Review: Tappe, O., & Rowedder, S. (Eds.). (2022). *Extracting Development: Contested Resource Frontiers in Mainland Southeast Asia*.

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Michael Kleinod-Freudenberg^{a*} 

^aUniversity of Cologne, Germany

*corresponding author: mkleinod@uni-koeln.de

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Socio-economic development in the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, like in the region as a whole, is very much shaped by state-sponsored resource extraction. The volume *Extracting Development: Contested Resource Frontiers in Mainland Southeast Asia*, edited by Oliver Tappe and Simon Rowedder and published by renowned ISEAS Publishing, addresses this topic from the perspective of the concept of the frontier. Such a perspective is suggested not least by the academic discourse itself, which – especially in its political-ecological orientation – operates with this and related concepts (e.g., enclosure, land grabbing, or ‘primitive accumulation’) to analyze and compare socio-economic and ecological conditions in Southeast Asia and beyond (e.g., Baird, 2011; Barney, 2009; Hall, 2013).

The fact that the Lao People’s Democratic Republic figures prominently in the volume is not only because the editors are proven Lao Studies experts. Rather, as Tappe and Rowedder point out in the introduction, Laos can be considered a prime example of the frontier logic that is primarily defined by the appropriation of resources as cheap input for commodity production (Moore, 2015). This becomes evident in the semi-official guideline of the Laotian government: ‘to turn land into capital’ (*han thi din pen theun*) (Dwyer, 2007; Kenney-Lazar, 2021).¹ Central to this policy is a logic of appropriating land for the purpose of the ‘cheap’ extraction of cash crops, mineral resources, or hydropower. This is accompanied by a fundamental change in social structures (increasing inequality) and ecological conditions (degradation).

1 Hence, a recent call for political ecology to focus on issues of capitalist value was brought forward by, among others, Lao Studies scholar Miles Kenney-Lazar (Kay & Kenney-Lazar, 2017). The authors in turn draw on Robertson and Wainwright (2013).

While the concept of the frontier builds a bridge to questions of capitalist valorization, and thus to Marxian theory of value (see below), the editors emphasize in the introduction the heuristic value of the concept. Consequently, concepts of frontierization (the social co-production of frontiers) (Acciaoli & Sabharwal, 2016; Haug et al., 2020), resourcification (those processes that define something as valuable resource in the first place) (Hultman et al., 2021), and frontier assemblages (the dynamic overlapping of local frontier configurations) (Cons & Eilenberg, 2019), as well as the interplay of institutional and cultural factors, loom large in the volume's investigations, thus contributing to conceptual differentiation. Thankfully (since not necessarily common in comparable publications), these concepts run as a red thread throughout the ten case studies, paired with the – conceptually as well as empirically fundamental – question of how local actors themselves actively contribute to the production and reproduction of such spaces of rapid socio-ecological change. With this comparatively close interplay between empirical work and theory, this volume makes an important contribution.

The individual chapters are consistently rich in empirical detail and systematically illuminate the problem of the resource frontier in mainland Southeast Asia. Among the most notable chapters from the reviewer's point of view is the 'hydro-social' analysis by Surimas and Middleton of the Mekong River in Northern Thailand, illuminating the ontological dimensions of the frontier: Practices, narratives, and knowledges of various actors are seen as forces shaping the Mekong as a frontier. The perspectives of both riverside communities and civil society, as well as the inter-governmental Mekong River Commission and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, are related: While water is recognized as both a resource and a cultural value among the former, the latter conceive of water in terms of ecological modernization, as a purely economic resource to be used efficiently. Also, Rowedder's contribution on fruit cultivation and trade is instructive, as the author vividly demonstrates how the frontier logic is enacted and reproduced in everyday practice, for example, when Lao middlemen mediate between Thai farmers and Chinese buyers based on national stereotypes.

Furthermore, Cole's concise political-ecological analysis of maize cultivation in Northeastern Laos tackles the complex interplay of political objectives (anti-opium policy, sedentarization, etc.), structural changes in agricultural production (high maize demand in Vietnam), and various actors in Laos and Vietnam in the rapid conversion to maize in the Lao-Vietnamese border area. Vietnamese traders emerge as important frontier-building actors here, as they bridge the 'last miles' in the network and open additional production sites. Crucial also is Tappe's illumination of a rarely treated and under-researched phenomenon: artisanal tin mining conducted within the framework of local subsistence strategies, both in ethnographic detail as well as historical depth, going back to the beginnings of the colonial era. One conclusion here is that local actors reproduce the frontier by moving back and forth between the level of private household and industrial labor along a continuum of informality.

But also the remaining chapters make for valuable and informative reads thanks to their empirical grounding. Fujita provides in-depth insights into the transformation of livelihoods and the ecosystem among "middle-income peasants" (see also Dayley & Sattayanurak, 2016) in the wake of the expansion of commercial rubber

cultivation in Thailand's Northeast. Focusing on Laos' national master plan for land allocation, Suhardiman and Kramp tackle "the interplay between the state's territorialization approach [...] and the reshaping of frontier dynamics which (un)make the Lao uplands" (p. 130). Ponce further considers the ambivalent, sociologically revealing relation between 'being modern' and 'being comfortable' in resettlement villages of Northwestern Laos in the context of a Chinese hydropower project. Cheang provides a succinct account of the nature and effects of Chinese investment in Cambodia, taking the port city of Sihanoukville as an insightful case study. Htun then presents a similar account of Chinese investment in Myanmar, including vignettes on various pertinent projects. Finally, Tappe's tin extraction theme is taken up again by Mierzejewski's discussion of China-Myanmar frontier governance as seen from a proclaimed 'bridgehead' of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Province of Yunnan.

While the contributions focus on a wide variety of frontiers (fruit, rubber, corn, hydropower, tin, land, etc.) at different levels, overarching themes run throughout the volume, such as the regional dominance of Chinese political economy, cross-border processes of trade and governance, and the complexity of concrete empirical configurations and negotiations. In terms of a critical assessment, only two aspects should be briefly pointed out here that concern not only this volume but empirical work on frontiers in general. Firstly, while various resources are subject to in-depth investigations, aspects such as nature conservation or tourism – while so central to socio-ecological, cultural, and political-economic transformation – are absent, although quite similar socio-economic mechanisms are at work (e.g., 'expropriation' or tourism's own distinct frontier logic). The second weak spot is directly related to one of the volume's central strengths, which is its conceptual added value: The centrality of the frontier concept notwithstanding, its peculiar theoretical thrust – especially its relation to capitalist value in general (and thus necessarily to the global level) – remains underdeveloped, as the question of how the respective resources are turned into cheap inputs to maintain capital accumulation is hardly explicitly addressed. While the case studies do show the active involvement of local actors in frontier economies, they remain silent about how exactly these actions contribute to the *cheapening* of resource extraction – that is, in which sense these contexts actually represent frontiers, which ultimately would require the authors to tease out their position in the overall, global M-C-M' movement of capital (Marx, 1976).² This is an ambitious task no doubt, but one set by the thrust of the frontier concept itself. One could thus ask more concretely: How do local actors actively participate in the cheapening of (access to) natural resources and human labor? Or more generally: How do certain institutions, practices, and ideas relate to global circuits of capital, that is, valorization? In this way, the explanatory potential of the frontier concept would become even more fruitful for empirical analysis, and vice versa. Further work thus remains to be done here. Overall, the present volume represents an important contribution and signpost in this regard, which is of interest to Southeast Asian Studies scholars as well as students of political ecology from various disciplines and with diverse regional foci.

2 For examples of how this can be done, see the historical studies of the initiator of the 'world-ecology' conversation, Jason W. Moore (e.g., Moore 2010a, 2010b, 2012).



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Kleinod-Freudenberg is academic coordinator at University of Cologne's Global South Studies Center. His work focuses on the political ecology of Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly ecotourism and animism in Laos, as well as on socio-ecological theory and transformation studies.

► Contact: mkleinod@uni-koeln.de