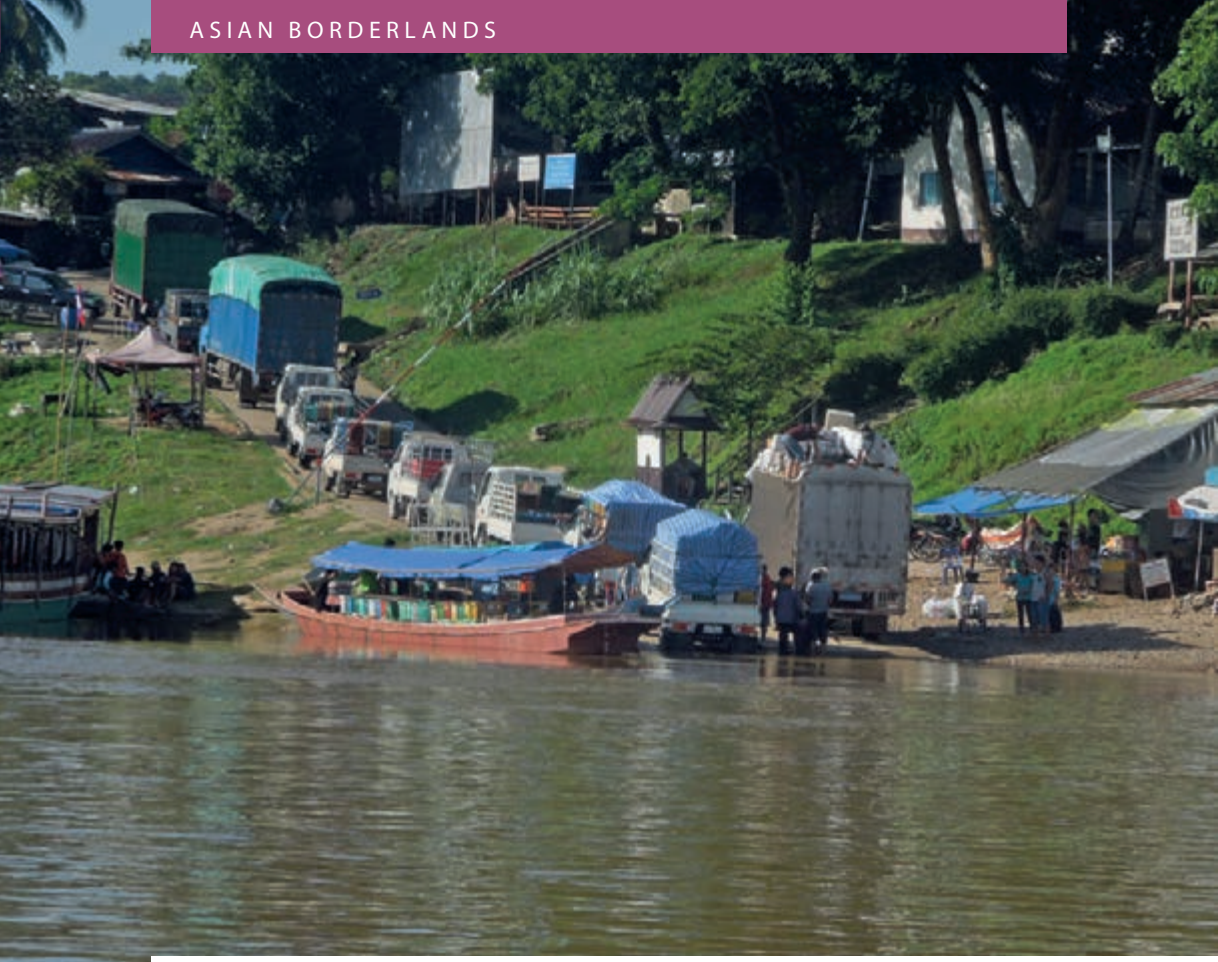
ASIAN BORDERLANDS



Simon Rowedder

Cross-Border Traders in Northern Laos

Mastering Smallness

Amsterdam University Press

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Asian Borderlands

Asian Borderlands presents the latest research on borderlands in Asia as well as on the borderlands of Asia – the regions linking Asia with Africa, Europe and Oceania. Its approach is broad: it covers the entire range of the social sciences and humanities. The series explores the social, cultural, geographic, economic and historical dimensions of border-making by states, local communities and flows of goods, people and ideas. It considers territorial borderlands at various scales (national as well as supra- and sub-national) and in various forms (land borders, maritime borders), but also presents research on social borderlands resulting from border-making that may not be territorially fixed, for example linguistic or diasporic communities.

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Cover illustration: Trucks waiting to be loaded with Thai fruits, Khonekeo port, Bokeo Province, Lao PDR (photo taken by author, 2015)

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Table of Contents

List of Maps and Illustrations

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Acknowledgements

I have been facing the awkward situation of writing a book about cross-border fluidity and mobility, about borderland aspirations and experimentations, in the middle of the new Covid-19 era of national lockdowns and global restrictions of travel and movement. Thus, work on this book took place in two very different realities. All I have been writing *about* took place before the pandemic; but most of the *actual writing* took place during the pandemic. While writing about vibrant life and conviviality in busy borderland markets partly served as a good therapy in times of isolation and loneliness, I was still worried about the current situation of small-scale border-traders in northern Laos and beyond. Moreover, I started to doubt whether continuing to write down their stories would make any sense after all. However, my doubts began to clear a bit when I tried to contact some of my interlocutors via online channels. Although this turned out to be rather difficult, I managed to make some, albeit limited, contact. The few messages I received displayed a high level of uncertainty and anxiety, but at the same time also contained the familiar language of resilience, pragmatism, optimism, and humour, which the reader will find throughout the book. I could also see that some of my interlocutors had already found some flexible solutions. Unable to cross borders by themselves, some ordered from larger licensed retailers and moved their commodities destined for physical marketplaces to online platforms, for delivery or pick-up from their homes.

These very limited and preliminary contacts with voices "from the pandemic" nonetheless encouraged me to keep writing about their stories. Although most of the time it felt like it, this study is not only about the (pre-Covid-19) past, but equally about the present and hopefully about a better future. The traders' stories will live on, and be lived, throughout and after the pandemic. This book is, after all, about everyday local engagement with ever-changing borderland realities. Wishing them only the best, I therefore dedicate this book to all my interlocutors, especially in Luang Namtha province (northern Laos) and in Ban Huay Meng (Chiang Rai province, Thailand). Among them, I have to mention in particular Amnuay and his family in Luang Namtha town. Amnuay's sincere interest in my research, his unfailing helpfulness and his continuous joviality coupled with a good sense of humour has made him a good friend. In times of fieldwork struggles, he still was a person I could talk to. I always had a good time when staying at their place, sometimes staying over for lunch or dinner while gossiping about Thai television. I owe them and all other interlocutors my deepest

gratitude for their hospitality, openness, and, most importantly, for their patience in bearing my stubborn, annoying, and overly curious questions. Without them, this book would have never seen the light of day. I sincerely hope to be able someday to thank them all again in person, toasting them with some *Beer Lao.* I was all the more saddened to learn of the sudden death of two key interlocutors years after my last meetings with them: Kamphaeng in Luang Namtha and the village headman of Ban Huay Meng. Kamphaeng, a good friend of Amnuay, owned a stall at Luang Namtha's provincial market. I will always remember her positive combination of industriousness, vitality, humour, friendliness and warmth. Despite her usual claims to be too busy with her work, I still spent very long mornings or afternoons at her market stall. She usually let me share in her market gossip while continually serving fruits and snacks (until we reached a point where I felt obliged to bring some snacks as well). The headman of Ban Huay Meng, and Chiang Khong's Wiang subdsitrict, was, together with his wife, very supportive in introducing me to other helpful villagers and traders and providing me with further contacts in Laos in the beginning of my research. As the following chapters will show, he was also essential for subsequent important changes in my research path, which eventually inspired me to draft this ethnography of smallness. My memories of our vivid and inspiring conversations still live on in this book.

I would also like to thank some of my long-term academic friends in the region: Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Wasan Panyagaew at Chiang Mai University, Kidnukorn Suebsakun at Mae Fah Luang University (Chiang Rai), Li Yunxia at Yunnan Minzu University, and Liang Chuan at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS). I also thank Dr Gao Li Shi, a retired professor of Yunnan Minzu University, who gave me private lessons in Tai Lue language in Kunming.

The remainder of my acknowledgments are largely confined to people in Singapore, my home until December 2021, which I have not left for almost a year and half at the time of writing. At the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS), I would like to thank Vatthana Pholsena for consistently sharing her rich expertise on Laos; Douglas Kammen for excellent mentorship, always pushing me, rightly, to finish my manuscript, although it still took more time than expected; Itty Abraham for similarly pushing and always providing great advice; and for always having an open ear, Irving Johnson, Jan Mrazek, Hamzah Muzaini, Gerard Sasges, and Mohamed Effendy. I would also like to express my thanks to Oona Paredes, who was very supportive in the early stages of this project, before she moved to the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

My research has greatly benefited from my membership in the Max Weber Foundation Research Group on Borders, Mobilities, and New Infrastructures at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NUS. I particularly thank James Sidaway (Department of Geography), the convenor of this research group, for his enduring support and trust in my research potential. I also thank my fellow research colleagues Shaun Lin Ziqiang (Department of Geography) and Felix Mallin (Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen) for great cooperative work and companionship. Apart from stimulating research, the Max Weber Foundation also greatly supported the logistics of my work. I am particularly grateful for the flexible handling of the already generous travel budget, reallocating it to non-travel purposes during the pandemic and thus financing the great cartographic work for this book designed by Lee Li Kheng. In this regard, my thanks go to Franz Waldenberger, head of the German Institute of Japanese Studies in Tokyo, part of the Max Weber Foundation offices overseas, and Joachim Röhr, its administrative director. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to all the undergraduate and graduate students at NUS who have attended my admittedly reading-intensive seminars on Sino-Southeast Asian frontiers over the past couple of years. Whether they know it or not, their critical discussions, creative comments, and innovative research ideas greatly contributed to the writing of this book. In December 2021, the Chair of Development Politics at the University of Passau in Germany became my new institutional and intellectual home. While again the vivid and insightful discussions with students in my seminars gave me the necessary energy to complete the book project, I would like to thank Wolfram Schaffar, the chairholder of Development Politics, for his support and understanding in the final writing stage.

Preliminary results of my fieldwork, and later parts and chapters of this book, have been presented at numerous conferences, such as, for instance, the 5th *Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network* in Kathmandu in December 2016, the 13th *International Conference on Thai Studies* in Chiang Mai in July 2017, the *AAS-in-Asia Conference* in Bangkok in July 2019, the 11th *International Convention of Asia Scholars* (*ICAS*) in Leiden in July 2019, and the 10th *EuroSEAS Conference* in Berlin in September 2019, and at several workshops at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore (NUS), the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, and Chiang Mai University. I thank the respective organizers and audiences for their critical and constructive feedback. Parts of this book have been also featured elsewhere. Parts of the introduction and much of chapter 4 has been published as "I didn't learn any occupation, so I trade": Untold Stories

of Entrepreneurial Experimentation, Cosmopolitanism and Urbanisation in Northern Laos. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 35(1): 31-64, 2020. A passage of chapter 5 appears as "Railroading Land-linked Laos: China's Regional Profits, Laos' Domestic Costs?" in *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61(2): 152-161, 2020. I thank ISEAS Publishing and Taylor & Francis Group for their respective permissions.

At Amsterdam University Press, I would like to thank the editors of the Asian Borderlands Series, Willem van Schendel and Tina Harris, for their faith in my work and their very useful comments and suggestions on the first draft. Sincere thanks are extended to Saskia Gieling, Irene van Rossum, Victoria Blud, and Jaap Wagenaar for their exceptional editorial work, as well as to the reviewers for their insightful remarks and recommendations.

Lastly, managing tedious months of writing would have been impossible without the continual support of my lovely family—especially in these unprecedented times under Covid-19. My wife was part of this book project from day one, even accompanying me in the early stages of fieldwork in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (Yunnan province, China) and Chiang Rai province (Thailand). While writing in Singapore, she always provided necessary doses of moral and emotional support, encouragement, and love. She also, rightly, did not spare me from straight, critical, and provocative questions while providing new inspirations and ideas. However, the greatest gift I could ask for, especially for going through the difficult time of a pandemic, is our three-year old son. His genuine curiosity and joy have been a much-needed engine and motivation for eventually finishing my work. While I do not expect him to read my book anytime soon (or at all), I truly hope to take him to northern Laos. There, he will probably ask, and answer, much better questions than I have tried in this book. My parents in Germany would be proud of him as they finally would not need to listen to the same questions from me anymore, as they have patiently done throughout numerous lengthy video calls, providing much-needed virtual support and hugs. For now, while waiting for even better questions, the reader of this book needs to bear with any errors, oversights, or misunderstandings, for which I take sole responsibility.

Notes on Language and Transliteration

Due to the tri-national character of my fieldwork, it was imperative to attend to vernacular terms in (Mandarin) Chinese, Lao, and Thai language. Consequently, interviews were mainly conducted in the national languages of the country in question (unless otherwise indicated), sometimes infused with Yunnanese dialect (a Mandarin dialect) and Tai Lue in China, and Tai Lue and Tai Yuan in both Laos and Thailand. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

To visualize the multilingualism and linguistic dexterity of my informants, inherent to this studied borderland, I have decided to use the respective Chinese, Lao, and Thai scripts, followed by a romanized transliteration in italics. Exceptions are names of places (e.g., Jinghong, Luang Namtha, Chiang Mai), which are only written in English without italics. I have also integrated some vernacular terms (e.g., the Thai term *kamnan* referring to a head of subdistrict and village) into my English writing, without non-English script and translation. In these cases, I provide the respective script and translation only for its first usage. For the sake of standardization and convenience, I also write dialectical terms (e.g., Tai Lue and Tai Yuan) in the script of the respective national language.

Regarding transliteration, for Chinese words I use the standardized Hanyu Pinyin (in short, pinyin) system. Transliteration rules for Thai and Lao words are not as standardized as for Chinese words. For Thai language, I have mainly followed the Royal Thai General System of Transcription published by the Royal Institute of Thailand. One major deviation is my use of *j* instead of *ch* when transcribing the Thai letter จ. Its pronunciation comes closer to "j" as in "jungle." It is also used to avoid confusion with *ch* as the transcription of the Thai letters ช and ฉ which resemble in their pronunciation the English "ch" as in "China." For vernacular terms already well-established in English scholarship, I have retained the more common transliteration (such as *muang* instead of *mueang* for เมือง).

In view of the absence of any standardization of the transliteration of Lao words, I have taken the liberty of mainly following the aforementioned Thai system. One notable difference is the transliteration of the Lao letter ຍ (resembling ย in the Thai alphabet, transcribed as *y*) as *ny* if used in the initial position. If referring to historical and present places, the official naming is mainly retained (such as in Lan Xang, Huay Xai, or Houaphan province).

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Introduction

Abstract
The introduction sets the scene by critically reflecting on prevailing scholarly and public representations of Laos within the wider Yunnan-Laos-Thailand borderlands. Moving away from the underlying deep-rooted entanglement of self-fulfilling representations of space, ethnicity, and state, I outline in detail an alternative ethnographic account of borderland trade dynamics that revolves around different facets of *smallness*. I develop the argument that it is the lens of *smallness* that enables an ethnographically grounded exploration of northern Lao small-scale traders' actually lived transnational worlds of cross-border mobilities, social relations, commercial experimentation, and aspiration. The introduction is rounded off with extensive and reflective remarks on my fieldwork trajectory and methodology, discussing the strengths and logistical challenges of navigating through three different national contexts.

Keywords: Laos; borderland; scholarly representation; smallness; transnational world; cross-border trade

> Well, Laos is an elongated land of less than a hundred thousand square miles bounded by Thailand on the west and touched by Burma on the northwest, by China to the north, by Vietnam to the east and southeast, and by Cambodia on the southwest. The Mekong River, which marks most of the twelve-hundred-mile western frontier with Thailand, is placid but considerable, a little longer than the Mississippi. Up beyond the green gorges of the southwest Chinese province of Yunnan, its headwaters are fed by the melting snows of Tibet. And until recently the Lao kingdom of the river's middle reaches was nearly as isolated as the Roof of the World, and not half so well publicized. […]. Anywhere from a million to four million people live in Laos, depending on who is making the estimate. But it is agreed that they are dreamy, gentle, bucolic, nonaggressive people, Buddhists of the Little Vehicle who live in bamboo-and-thatch houses on stilts, wading tranquilly in their marshy paddies, fishing in the lazy rivers, and worshipping in

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> the curly-roofed pagodas. They are content. They live in a subsistence economy, and generally there is enough rice to go around. The Lao gentleness traditionally has enchanted the foreign visitor, particularly one not trying to go anywhere or do anything in a hurry.
>
> Oden Meeker, *The Little World of Laos*

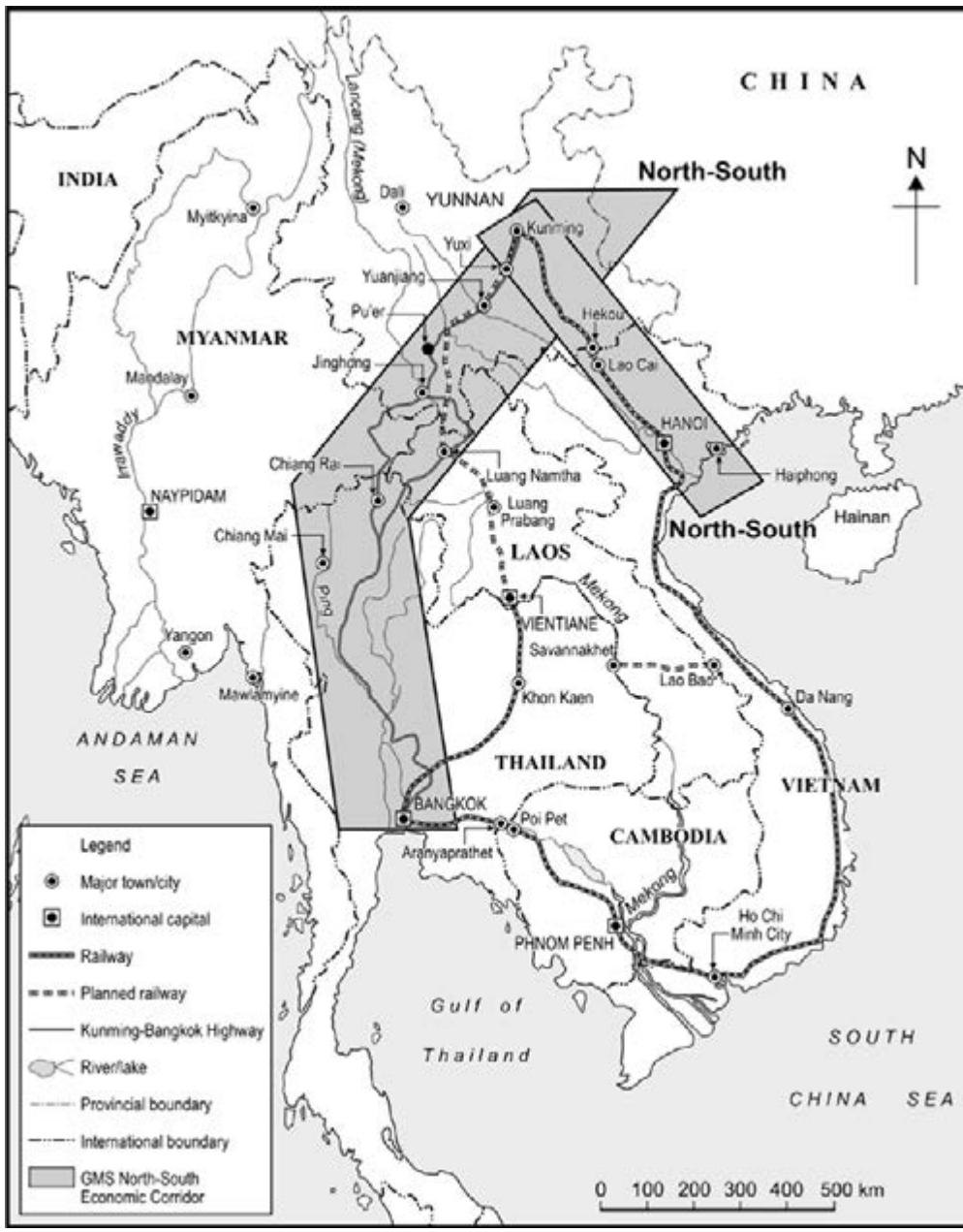
At the crossroads of the "Kunming–Bangkok Highway" and the "Kunming–Vientiane Railway" (or "China–Laos Railway," opened in December 2021), the northern Lao province of Luang Namtha is developing into a central regional node of transportation and logistics in the borderlands of southwestern China (Yunnan Province), northern Laos, and northern Thailand (Chiang Rai Province). Its unfolding role of linking together the markets of China and Thailand by rail and road fully aligns with various geoeconomic visions projected onto Laos by different actors over the last two decades—be it the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Corridors, or the Lao government's promotion of the country's transformation from a land-locked to a land-linked nation. Currently mapped as the central intersection of the GMS North–South Economic Corridor, established in 1998, northern Laos is now envisioned by China as a central node of the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, initiated in 2010[1] and subsequently integrated into its grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In other words, northern Laos (and Laos in general, for that matter), has indeed become a prominent and visible spot on large-scale, top-down mappings (and academic studies) of neoliberal development and global connectedness in mainland Southeast Asia.

However, local voices from the ground are largely missing in this picture. This book fills this gap. I attend to small-scale traders based in Luang Namtha province and explore their transnational worlds of cross-border mobilities, social relations, commercial experimentation, and aspiration. Hailing from diverse social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, they flexibly cross borders to trade a wide range of everyday Chinese and Thai consumer goods. The key argument of this book is that their commercial activities are largely built on the trope of *smallness*.

What I call *smallness* refers to the traders' conscious strategies and interiorized habits of framing and performing their transnational economic practices in a self-deprecating manner, thereby reinforcing the apparent

1 Then known as the "Nanning-Singapore Economic Corridor"; see, for instance, Wong and Keng (2010).

1 Regional overview with GMS North-South Economic Corridor



Map by Lee Li Kheng

2 Luang Namtha Province

Map by Lee Li Kheng

ordinariness and triviality of their trade in mundane commodities and their minuscule regional economic standing.[2] Drawing on rich ethnographic case studies, the following chapters will show how the traders' *smallness* ranges from mocking their own economic inferiority vis-à-vis Thai and Chinese fruit traders, to narratives of downplaying and downscaling their trade activities at marketplaces, to low-key appearances at large international trade fairs in China. Careful examination of their discourse and performance

2 When referring to these discourses, practices, and strategies deployed by the traders, which constitute the central concept of the book, I write *smallness* in italics.

of *smallness* and insignificance reveals remarkable transnational social and economic skills, paired with a high degree of versatility, ingenuity, experimentation, and resilience. Skilfully reproducing, and blending in with, the geoeconomic reality of being squeezed between larger and powerful markets and economies of Thailand and China, they turn the notion of national economic weakness into transnational strength.

Hence, this book invests the widely accepted, self-explanatory, and naturalized representations of the smallness and isolation of Laos—for example, as a "small, mountainous, land-locked state in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia" (Sims 2020, p. 272)—with new ethnographic substance and complexity. This is an important intervention because more than 60 years after Oden Meeker's[3] observations in his *The Little World of Laos*, with which I opened this introduction, the common representation of Laos (since 1975 Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lao PDR) as a small and tranquil country with friendly and frugal people remains largely, and disturbingly, the same. In such a representation, the status of a small, geopolitically weak nation, officially categorized as a "Least Developed Country" by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), is often juxtaposed with the essentialized tropes of simplicity, purity, and beauty. While rooted in legacies of external representation, this picture has become an integral part of Laos's own nation branding, prominently reflected in the slogan "Simply Beautiful" championed by the Tourism Marketing Department.[4] Primarily advertised to the outside world, it caters to and reaffirms imaginations of this "uniquely laidback" country's "untouched beauty." Here meant for touristic consumption, the promoted "[a]we-inspiring landscapes filled with wonder, waiting to be explored," rooted in "[a]n ancient land of timelessness, serenity and tranquility," are elsewhere at the heart of the vision of Laos as a lucrative resource frontier, again almost exclusively geared towards external investors. The associated developmentalist mantra of "turning land into capital" (Dwyer 2007; Kenney-Lazar, Dwyer, and Hett 2018)—of commodifying land and natural resources and granting an increasing number of Special Economic Zones (SEZs)—has been flanked by the governmental vision of transforming Laos from a land-locked to a land-linked country. Besides commodifiable land and natural resources, the evocation of Laos's land-linked geography likewise constitutes an exploitable frontier readily serving larger transnational flows of commodities and capital.

3 Oden Meeker was the first representative to Laos of the US humanitarian organization CARE in 1954 and 1955.

4 See the official tourism website: https://www.tourismlaos.org (accessed 14 May 2021).

It is through these larger development schemes for selling land-richness and land-linkedness that the relative smallness of Laos again becomes visible; Laos is commonly articulated as a weak and passive victim helplessly exposed to its larger political and economic neighbours, especially in regard to China. Consequently, recently burgeoning scholarship on China's rising influence in Southeast Asia, remarkably still employing the stereotyped representation of China as a dangerous dragon (e.g., Emmerson 2020; Strangio 2020), continually retells the story of encroaching Chinese investment and infrastructure, which is most visible in northern Laos and has been studied most prominently in relation to exceptional spaces such as the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone and the Mohan–Boten Economic Cooperation Zone at the China–Laos border (Nyíri 2017, 2012; Tan 2017; Laungaramsri 2015, 2019; Rippa 2019, 2021).[5] Often conceptualized as Chinese "enclaves" (Nyíri 2017, 2012; Laungaramsri 2019), these zones, emblematic of Chinese modes of development or "high modernism" (Sims 2020), prompt concerns of Laos losing, or "commodifying," sovereignty to China (Laungaramsri 2015), leading to China's "soft extraterritoriality" in Laos (Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011, p. 1256). Will Doig (2018, p. 53) puts it more drastically in his account of China's regional railway ambitions, arguing that "Laos, to varying degrees, has relinquished its national sovereignty in exchange for modernization, giving China jurisdiction over a substantial amount of its land." In particular, the Chinese development dynamics in the border town of Boten in the northwestern province of Luang Namtha have received much attention, given the town's tumultuous history. Emerging in 2007 as a shady, Chinese-run casino complex, Boten grew notorious for organized crime and even murder, until the casinos were shut down in 2011. One year later, a new Chinese investor, the Yunnan Haicheng Industrial Group Holdings, took over. Abandoning the border casino model altogether, the focus shifted to trade, logistics, tourism, finance, and real estate development, culminating in the euphemistic rebranding of the development zone as "Boten Beautiful Land Specific Zone" in 2015, then officially endorsed by the governments of China and Laos as a central hub of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Boten will constitute the first stop in Laos of the China–Laos Railway, the flagship project of the BRI in Laos.

Apparently, the fascination among observers for this exclusively Chinese pocket of urban and infrastructural development, sticking to Beijing time and operating with Chinese currency, has not abated; accounts of the Chinese

5 Unabated interest in development zones in various Asian borderlands is reflected in a recent volume edited by Mona Chettri and Michael Eilenberg (2021).

influence in Laos, or, which have recently become more prominent, the BRI and the railway project in Laos, need to include some sensational remarks on the remarkable trajectory of Boten (Doig 2018, pp. 20-24; 45-51; Strangio 2020, pp. 102-105), as it is exemplary for "another curious byproduct of China's hyperactive growth" (Doig 2018, p. 22). This increased infrastructural proximity to and economic dependency on China is complemented by the aforementioned Kunming–Bangkok Highway.[6] Opened in 2008, it links the markets of China and Thailand through a 228-kilometre section traversing Laos's northwestern provinces of Luang Namtha and Bokeo. This has reduced the journey time overland between China and Thailand to only three to four hours—dramatically transforming a journey which easily took several days in the past, as Andrew Walker (1999) describes in his account of cross-border traders across China, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand more than two decades ago. It is now possible to cross over to Thailand and China in the same day, my interlocutors in Luang Namtha used to emphasize again and again.

However, Laos's intensified regional connectedness—celebrated by the government and its development/investment partners as key to national poverty alleviation and prosperity and on the ground perceived both with anxiety and aspiration—is commonly translated by observers as a consolidation of the national reality (or representation?) of marginality and vulnerability. Laos's conflicting "peripheral centrality" (Brown 2018) has been contextualized with a longer history of being a contested, externally created space (Ivarsson 2008) that served military, geopolitical, and geoeconomic strategic interests of larger regional powers "through the history of capitalist development, spatial integration and colonial expansion in Southeast Asia" (Brown 2018, p. 229). Laos has been assigned shifting roles as "buffer state or battleground" (Toye 1968), "from buffer zone to keystone state" (Tan 1999) or "from buffer state to crossroads" (Pholsena and Banomyong 2006), with dramatic and traumatic consequences such as a decade of unprecedently heavy bomb raids committed by the United States (1964–1973) and

6 Officially opened in March 2008, the Kunming–Bangkok Highway, which is in reality a network of different national highways and roads rather than a single international highway, usually refers to the Lao branch (R3A road, part of Asian Highway AH3) of the overall overland transportation corridor between China and Thailand (R3). The latter is also paralleled with a section through Myanmar (R3B road, part of Asian Highway AH2). The 228-kilometre R3A section traverses northwestern Laos and links the Chinese-Lao border (Mohan/Boten) with the Lao-Thai border (Huay Xai/Chiang Khong). Road construction started in 2004 and ended in early 2008. However, it could not be finalized until December 2013 when, after several delays, the much-awaited "Fourth Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge" linking Huay Xai with Chiang Khong across the Mekong River was officially opened to traffic.

chronic underdevelopment and poverty. Therefore, Sebastian Strangio (2020, p. 106) argues that "[d]espite possessing all the accoutrements of modern nationhood, the country has remained weak and vulnerable to outside encroachment, especially along its porous periphery." Brian Eyler (2019, p. 162) similarly concludes that "even though Laos qualifies in every aspect as a modern nation-state, its interior and periphery remain as contested spaces highly vulnerable to the machinations of both neighboring countries and global powers."

These are external accounts of Laos's persistent relative smallness—remaining economically and politically small, or even becoming smaller, vis-à-vis its larger neighbours, Thailand and China, precisely because of improved connectivity to the latter. The established past and present status of Laos as a "small country" also appears to hold the key to its foreign policy. Hiroyuki Kishino (2017, p. 91), a former Japanese top diplomat, and ambassador to Laos from 2013 to 2015, consequently asks "how a small country behaves among big countries." His answer is "balanced diplomacy," which builds on Laos's "wisdom as 'buffer state'":

> The country conducts itself heedfully so as not to create a bone of contention and not to be caught up in a struggle. It keeps a low profile, and it saves its breath. It is always mindful of not making any country its enemy, and handles extremely carefully issues in which countries of vital importance to Lao PDR are involved. (Kishino 2017, pp. 97-98)

Towards an Ethnography of *Smallness*

Leaving behind the world of diplomacy and foreign policy, of abstractly viewing national states as actors, this book pays more profound, largely needed ethnographically grounded attention to emic notions of *smallness* among small-scale traders in northern Laos. Taking a cue from Andre Gingrich and Ulf Hannerz's (2017) suggested anthropological studies of "small countries," I attend to *smallness* "from a native's point of view," showcasing "an 'emic' comparative dimension of the ways important routine practices, standard speech behavior, or other cultural references indicate how people in one way or another refer to their country as somehow smaller than elsewhere" (Gingrich and Hannerz 2017, p. 6). However, as the following chapters will demonstrate, I do not merely refer to vernacular negotiations and translations of *smallness* as a given fact or national reality—a historical, geographical, geopolitical, and geoeconomic inevitability. I rather explore

smallness as multifaceted repertoires of local discourses and practices that make sense of, and tactically frame, everyday local lives and livelihoods, both of which are intimately tied to transnational connectivity and involve the continual mental and physical crossing of borders. While they demonstrate notable trading skills and sophisticated transnational networks, the traders constantly belittle the scope of their commercial activities, stressing their lack of professionalism and their economic insignificance, especially compared to large-scale trade companies. Moreover, they dismiss the high degree of their cross-border mobility and knowledge as merely ordinary, as it would be simply part and parcel of local life. Notions of localness (ທ້ອງຖິ່ນ *thongthin*), ordinariness or commonplaceness (ທຳມະດາ *thammada*), and unprofessionalism (ບໍ່ເປັນມືອາຊີບ *bo pen mue asip*, or ບໍ່ເປັນອາຊີບ *bo pen asip*)[7] are the key constituents of their vernacular transnational worlds of *smallness*, in line with which the subsequent chapters of this book are mainly organized.

In order to conceptually approach the empirical discrepancy between observed notable transnational trading skills and overheard discourses of insignificance, this book draws on the notion of "banal cosmopolitanism," in which borderlands play a vital role. For Michel Agier (2016), borderlands and their "border situations" are central to constituting an "ordinary cosmopolitan condition" (p. 8), a term he uses "in the sense of a lived experience, everyday and ordinary, an experience of sharing the world" (p. 75). Similarly, in his *Cosmopolitan Borders*, Chris Rumford (2014) conceptualizes borders as "workshops of cosmopolitanism." In the case of Luang Namtha, borders, as a fertile ground for cosmopolitan practices, are omnipresent in facilitating the local everyday reality of transnational connectedness—not only of mobile cross-border traders, but of local residents in general. This is most apparent for local marketplaces whose commodityscapes are inherently transnational, almost only comprising household and food supplies from Thailand and China, and to some degree from Vietnam. This mundane realm of quotidian practices of selecting, purchasing, and consuming transnational commodities entails the key dimension of the locally ingrained, "banal" cosmopolitan condition: continual comparison along the lines of essentialized national differences. Local consumption thus inevitably builds on a transnationally informed choice, weighing up Chinese products against Thai products. Trivial as it might sound, this underlying nationally framed

7 ອາຊີບ *asip* literally means "occupation" or "profession." Chapter 4 will examine in more detail how most of the small-scale traders in northern Laos frame their activities in non-occupational terms, stressing that they would not be engaged in the proper profession of trade.

comparative dimension is present throughout various local life situations in this borderland in which "[t]he 'other' country (or group of countries) is more or less ubiquitous in the local imaginary, as a latent reference to be activated any time" (Gingrich and Hannerz 2017, p. 7). Anssi Paasi, a prominent advocate for comprehending globalization flows spatially in their socially practiced territoriality (e.g., Paasi 1998, 2002, 2009), contends that "these [boundary-making] practices are always part of broader social action and have typically been based on the processes of 'Othering', i.e. the construction of symbolic/cultural boundaries between 'us' and 'the Other'" (Paasi 2005, p. 18). These practices of "Othering" still often run along nationalized lines, as Paasi shows for the Finnish-Russian border (1996). Paasi's (1998, p. 85) referencing of Michael Billig's (1995) "banal nationalism" guides also my focus on the decidedly national dimension of transnational connectivity and banal cosmopolitan practices. I relate Billig's (1995, p. 8) central argument of a "continual 'flagging', or reminding, of nationhood" in mundane contexts of everyday social life to a cosmopolitan understanding of borderlands (cf. Agier 2016; Rumford 2014), where *cosmopolitanism* refers to the awareness of, and capacity to handle, locally inherent transnational connectedness through practical negotiations of differences mostly framed along national lines.

Serious ethnographic attention to the "ordinary" and unspectacular on-the-ground realities of everyday lived and practised land-linkedness, otherwise fervently propagated and spectacularized by the Lao government, works against the tendency whereby scholars have tended "to privilege cosmopolitanism in its philosophical sense at the expense of more vernacular types which seem to be open to the accusation of banality" (Falzon 2009, p. 37). Central to the cosmopolitan lifeworlds this book attempts to delineate is the self-stereotyped essentialization of the relative national smallness of Laos. Though on the surface it probably thwarts governmental campaigns to foreground the country's regional centrality, it serves as a device to make sense of Laos's regional economic and political standing of underdevelopment, which becomes all the more visible precisely through the promoted land-linkedness of infrastructural cross-border connectivity and proximity. As mentioned above, in the case of the transnational trading worlds of small-scale traders in Luang Namtha, this general banal cosmopolitan, as well as a national habitus of self-mockingly deriding Laos's backwardness and inferiority, is coupled with discourses and practices of belittling their transnational mobility, skills, and knowledge. Their rhetoric of both national and occupational *smallness* should not be merely taken at face value, as a fatalistic and passive expression of their chronic state of lagging behind

their regional neighbours; instead, such rhetoric often actively serves as a strategic tool to enable and sustain transnational commodity flows and networks with notable success, as the following chapters will show in more ethnographic detail.

At this juncture, I should point out two important caveats. The term *smallness* is entirely of my own choosing. It thus does not claim to offer a direct or literal translation of an equivalent vernacular concept, but rather serves as an umbrella term with which to work out, and bring together, various instances of downplaying or "banalizing" transnational connectedness, mobility, and trading skills, all intimately tied to the internalized, at times tactically used, notion of Laos's insignificance and inferiority. Bringing together vernacular key phrases such as *thammada* (normal, ordinary), *thongthin* (local) and *bo pen mue asip*/*bo pen asip* (unprofessional), my etic linguistic approximation of *smallness* is meant to be a conceptual guide with which to thoroughly examine the transnational worlds of cross-border traders in northern Laos. Moreover, writing this study of transnational trade as an ethnography of *smallness*, I need to be cautious about using heavily-laden, larger concepts and grand narratives, especially regarding my use of the term *cosmopolitanism* as outlined above. While I do indeed find it useful to reflect upon parts of my empirical material through the lens of critical cosmopolitanism, this book is not primarily a book on cosmopolitanism. I develop and apply non-normative and practical notions of cosmopolitanism mainly for the case of local marketplaces in Luang Namtha, as outlined in chapter 3. This chapter's position precisely in the middle of the book mirrors the central role of these marketplaces in the transnational worlds of both cross-border traders and local residents. They display in their spatial and material organization, and resulting social practices, an overall setting which I attempt to conceptually grasp through cosmopolitan notions. At the very least, the latter helped me to rethink and further make sense of the cross-border trade practices and mobilities previously observed and described in the preceding chapters. Thus, as reflected again in the largely chronological organization of the chapters, the marketplaces were also central to the book's underlying trajectory of ethnographic fieldwork. As all my various case studies, full of biographies and traders' practices and circulations of commodities, intersect there in some way or other, marketplaces spatially ground the workings of transnational flows and in turn serve as conceptual grounds for better understanding them. With longer stays in and around marketplaces, I began to conceptually combine notions of banality and cosmopolitanism which paved the way for me to draft my study of Luang Namtha's traders' transnational worlds as an

ethnography of *smallness*. Importantly, the conceptual engagement with cosmopolitanism in this book has gradually emerged within (almost halfway through) long-term exploratory fieldwork, and not from a working hypothesis already formulated at the outset. *A priori* conceptual preoccupation with cosmopolitanism, already arousing certain epistemological expectations, would, I argue, obscure and distract from the multifaceted, and at times probably counterintuitive, unexpected, or surprising realities of borderland discourses, practices, and performances. Hence, it would yet again perpetuate their invisibility in academic representations of (Sino-)Southeast Asian borderlands that often centre on (and are distracted by?) larger, less "banal," conceptual discussions, such as notions of transborder or transnational ethnicity. Working towards an innovative ethnography of transnational trading worlds along the lines of *smallness*, this book takes issue with those larger scholarly representations of Asian borderlands in general, and the Yunnan–Laos–Thailand borderland in particular.

Taking Issue with Worlds of Larger Representations

The borderland of Yunnan, northern Laos, and northern Thailand is naturally linked by the Mekong River and has been strongly connected culturally, economically, and politically. Tai-speaking groups, particularly the Tai Lue, were historically among the most mobile populations travelling and trading across this area and still are widely scattered across the region.

In China, the Tai Lue are subsumed with other Tai-speaking peoples under the overall ethnic category "Dai" (傣族 *daizu*), constituting one of the 55 official national ethnic minorities (少数民族 *shaoshu minzu*) in addition to the Han Chinese majority. Historically constituting the predominant ethnic group in their "homeland" of Sipsongpanna (before the 16th century known as Muang Lue, "the polity of the Lue"), which was incorporated in 1953 into the People's Republic of China as the "Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture" of Yunnan province, the Tai Lue with their population of 316,151 (roughly 28% of the whole prefectural population) are now the second largest ethnic group, behind the Han Chinese majority of 340,431 (30% of the population).[8] In Laos, which represents itself as a multi-ethnic country, the Tai Lue population is estimated at 126,229 people in the latest national census of 2015, constituting 2% of the national population (Lao

8 These numbers are obtained from the Xishuangbanna section of the Chinese national census of 2010.

Statistics Bureau 2015, p. 37). Liew-Herres, Grabowsky, and Wichasin (2012, p. 8) estimate that Tai Lue account for roughly 20% of the population in the northwestern provinces of Bokeo, bordering Thailand, and Luang Namtha (especially in Muang Sing) near the border to China. For Thailand, they estimate about 400,000 Tai Lue, mainly living in the northern provinces of Lamphun, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Phayao, and Nan (Ibid.)

This region's commercial history has been most prominently studied in the context of Yunnanese caravan trade networks. While Andrew Forbes (1986, 1987) specializes in the Yunnanese caravan trade with northern Thailand in the 19th and 20th centuries, Ann Maxwell Hill's (1982) doctoral dissertation deals with historical and present migration patterns of Yunnanese into northern Thailand (with Chiang Mai as her main research site), and is the foundation of her more general study on ethnicity and trade among the Yunnanese in Southeast Asia (Hill 1998). Chiranan Prasertkul (1989), studying the Yunnanese trade in the 19th century, suggests that Yunnan was part of two major socio-economic systems, one dealing with Chinese polities and the other with neighbouring non-Chinese polities in Southeast Asia. Due to the availability of Western sources, emerging from the increased interest in the regional trading opportunities expressed by French and British colonialists, especially in the period from 1830 to 1860 (Giersch 2006, pp. 161-162), most of the historical evidence of a flourishing interregional trading network stems from the 19th and 20th centuries. Because of this temporal confinement to the late colonial era, the aforementioned scholars admit that much work needs to be done to retrace the antiquity and the historical genesis of overland trade in general, which probably "extend[s] back as far as Tang Dynasty times (618–907 A.D.) and even before" (Forbes 1987, p. 3). Acknowledging the antiquity of Yunnanese long-distance trade, C. Patterson Giersch (2006, p. 166) sees in the period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries a "commercial revolution": "This Yunnan-Southeast Asian trade connection was an ancient one, but never before had so many local producers been incorporated into regional trade as buyers and sellers."

These caravan trade routes mainly traversed a region which David K. Wyatt (2003, pp. 28-29) identifies as the "Tai World"[9] of lowland valley

See 2010年西双版纳州第六次全国人口普查主要数据公报 ("Bulletin of the Main Data of the Sixth National Census of the Population of Xishuangbanna Prefecture 2010"), available on the website of the Xishuangbanna Statistical Bureau: https://www.xsbn.gov.cn/tjj/67466.news.detail.dhtml?news_id=1161784 (accessed 15 November 2021).

9 David K. Wyatt uses "Tai World" as a historical term, mainly to contextualize his history of Thailand; it refers to the premodern period of the cultural, religious, social, economic, and

settlements emerging at the fringes of the Southeast Asian empires at the beginning of the 13th century, which subsequently became more visibly institutionalized through the foundations of various larger Tai polities in the 13th and 14th centuries (e.g., Sipsongpanna or Muang Lue, which were already established in the late 12th century, Lan Na in present northern Thailand, Lan Xang in present-day Laos, the Shan States in present eastern Myanmar). The complex socio-political organization of different Tai principalities later drew the attention of colonial ethnographers and travellers (Archer 1889, 1896; Bock 1884; Colquhoun 1885; Le May 1927), influencing subsequent ethnographic studies of their customs, religion, language, agricultural techniques of wet-rice cultivation, and the social and political organization of the Tai polity itself, the *muang* (Condominas 1990; Tambiah 1976; Turton 2000). Amidst the cultural and linguistic similarity among different Tai subgroups, scholars began to attempt to study the ethno-cultural and -historical particularity and distinctiveness of single Tai groups such as the Tai Lue (Moerman 1965, 1968; Hsieh 1989; Sethakul 2000; Keyes 1992). Based on this scholarship, it can be stated in general that the Tai Lue are mostly sedentary wet-rice farmers in lowland river valleys, who speak and write a Tai language which is quite close to the northern Thai language,[10] and follow Theravada Buddhism, in combination with non-Buddhist elements such as the worshipping of local guardian spirits (e.g., Renard 1990). Besides their agricultural sophistication and high level of socio-political organization, they also played a significant role in regional Sino-Southeast Asian trade dynamics, with multi-ethnic marketplaces at their core (Hill 1998, p. 64). Sun Laichen (2000) also highlights the role of Tai traders in his doctoral dissertation on "Ming-Southeast Asian Overland Interactions." He cites detailed trade regulations in Tai law codes, various Tai sources referring to the aristocratic involvement in trade, the formation of caravans, the

political expansion of different Tai domains with the gradual emergence of larger political entities, most notably Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, with the latter conventionally considered as the forerunner of a later newly centralized kingdom of Siam. The "Tai World," characterized by cultural and linguistic commonality, economic interdependence, but also political fragmentation due to complex family alliances and intrigues, was subsequently partitioned by the kingdoms of Siam and China and the British and French colonial powers, and finally by the newly founded nation-states of Thailand, Burma, China, and Laos. Consequently, Wyatt stops referring to the "Tai World" when dealing with the territorial consolidation of Siam and colonial powers from the mid-19th century onwards.

10 "Northern Thai language" refers here more correctly to the *kham muang* (คำเมือง) language and the Tai Tham or *tua muang* (ตัวเมือง) script of the Tai Yuan who constitute the Tai majority of present northern Thailand. They call themselves rather *khon muang* (คนเมือง), the "people of the *muang*."

appearance of merchants in epics, and also Chinese sources referring to periodic Tai markets as proof for the significance of trade in Tai societies (Laichen 2000, pp. 191-194). Regarding the Chinese observation of local Tai periodic markets, Giersch (2006, pp. 162-168) argues that in fact, Han Chinese, who gradually moved into the borderlands, adopted preexisting Tai five-day periodic markets that were already locally established from the 16th century, or even earlier. Importantly, this points to inherent local economic structures, especially in the case of Sipsongpanna (see also Liew-Herres, Grabowsky, and Wichasin 2012), which were subsequently integrated into the Yunnanese long-distance trading system.

Numerous scholars have interpreted the new dynamics of neoliberal regional economic opening-up since the 1990s, which have led to new degrees of cross-border openness and connectivity across the region, as reviving this premodern fluid and borderless "Tai World," transgressing the grid of arbitrarily drawn boundaries of modern nation-states. This revitalization of historically rooted connectivity among different Tai groups has indeed been mostly studied in relation to the Tai Lue (e.g., Davis 2003, 2005; Panyagaew 2008), but also the Tai Yai (Siriphon 2007, 2008), and especially in the sense of a regional revival of a specific Tai Theravada Buddhism (Cohen 2000a, 2001; Han 2013, pp. 108-126; Kiyoshi 2000; Panyagaew 2010, 2013; Kang 2009). In this scholarship, cross-border trade flows are often reduced to the circulation of mostly cultural commodities, with border-crossing Tai Lue Buddhist monks as central carriers, creating a possible pan-Tai ethnoscape, for instance, in terms of facilitating the distribution of new formats of modern Tai Lue pop music (Panyagaew 2008; Davis 2005), potentially creating a "symbolic geography" of revived "premodern flows" (Davis 2003, pp. 181-189). Recalling the aforementioned historical context, featuring a wide range of different local and regional actors—both "highlanders and lowlanders" (Giersch 2006, p. 166) and Yunnanese long-distance traders—trading at multi-ethnic marketplaces (Hill 1998, p. 64), this ethnicity-based assumption of revived "premodern flows" seems to arise from a quite disturbingly modern understanding of and emphasis on ethnic identities constructed as part of newly created nation-states.

In this ethnic translation of new globalization dynamics as (re-)emerging transnational "ethnoscapes," comprising "landscapes of group identity" (Appadurai 1996, p. 48), cross-border trade activities are viewed primarily from an ethnic angle. Within the logics of the notion of transnational Tai communities, cross-border trade is thus understood as a major vehicle for shaping the "Tai World" by carrying symbols and meanings of Tai ethnic identity across national borders. Curiously enough, studies on Tai Lue traders

dealing with more "mundane" commodities such as agricultural or household products are virtually absent, for they could, one might assume, undermine the logics of an "ethnoscape" since those commodities are by definition ethnically neutral.[11] Andrew Walker (2009, p. 21) accordingly warns that

> [t]o some extent, the transnational Tai community is a compelling construction only to the extent that it is abstracted from more quotidian and socially embedded concerns. This abstraction can result in a culturalist orientation in which a hollowed-out politics of identity displaces a more grounded engagement with livelihood struggles and aspirations.

Sharing his concern about compelling but hollow abstractions, this book goes beyond scholarly expectations about representational worlds of the Thailand–Laos–Yunnan borderland by attending to the locally grounded, quotidian transnational worlds of small-scale traders of various Tai and non-Tai ethnicities in the northern Lao province of Luang Namtha. As Nigel Thrift (2008, p. 18) put it in his "non-representational theory," "social scientists are there to hear the world and to make sure that it can speak back just as much as they are there to produce wild ideas—and then out of this interaction they may be able to produce something that is itself equally new." Similarly trying to trace the "geography of what happens" (Thrift 2008, p. 2), instead of reifying a "symbolic geography" (Davis 2003), my study is guided by these deliberately open questions: How do traders themselves perceive, articulate, and live their worlds of transnational connectivity, mobility, and relations? How do their understandings of their borderland livelihoods contribute to a different conceptualization of this particular border region, and (Asian) borderlands in general? And, if it is still significant: to what extent do the latter overlap with or deviate from scholarly ethnic mappings ("Tai World") and official politico-economic regional cartographies such as Economic Corridors of the GMS or the BRI?

To answer these questions, I deem the lens of *smallness* more suitable, and more empirically relevant, than abstract and representational notions of transnational ethnicity. It illustrates how larger dynamics of infrastructure and development are concretely translated into, and in turn produced by, local discourse and practice—and associated individual personal experiences, hopes and fears—on the ground. Being closer to actually lived cross-border

11 A notable exception is Antonella Diana's 2013 study on Tai Lue small-scale traders trading rice and corn across the China–Laos border; that study, however, mainly focuses on instrumental notions of ethnicity in studying the traders' "border strategies."

mobility, it captures the traders' practice of highlighting the ordinariness of transnational connectivity. It foregrounds their underlying, unadorned pragmatism of daily navigating the borderland economy of new (and old) transport infrastructure, commodity flows, marketplaces, and rotating trade fairs. Through careful ethnographic observation of the ways in which small-scale traders utter and perform *smallness*, I reveal previously unvoiced trajectories involving high levels of risk-taking, new aspirations, creative flexibility, mobility, and mostly self-taught transnational trading expertise that illustrate their indispensable role in this borderland economy. Operating at small scales, they are nonetheless closely linked to different state agencies, such as customs, immigration, and border patrol. Furthermore, they are often approached by larger (state-owned or private) companies because of their extensive local cross-border contacts and knowledge, enabling them to skilfully exploit the economic geographies of both state-sanctioned subregional infrastructure projects and more informal cross-border arrangements. Therefore, it is difficult, if not unproductive, to draw clear lines between the state and petty traders, large-scale and small-scale commerce, or formal and informal cross-border practices. Despite, or rather because of, their invisibility, Luang Namtha's small-scale traders are the glue that holds this borderland economy together.

Cross-Border Traders in Laos: Unheard and Invisible in Scholarship

Smallness or informality of entrepreneurship has been studied elsewhere largely as a phenomenon of post-socialist transformation, particularly in post-Soviet states (Mandel and Humphrey 2002) giving rise to (often female) "shuttle traders" or "suitcase traders" crossing newly emerging national borders within a post-Soviet world and also crossing into newly accessible markets in neighbouring Europe, Turkey, and China (Mukhina 2014; Eder and Öz 2010; Golunov 2017; Yükseker 2004; Karrar 2019; Alff 2015). Small-scale entrepreneurialism and trade has been also studied for post-socialist Asian economies such as Vietnam (Leshkowich 2014; Horat 2017) and China (Hsu 2007). Regarding Vietnam, there has been an increasing interest in the changing dynamics of marketplaces (Endres and Leshkowich 2018), paralleled by a burgeoning scholarship on small-scale traders and markets on the China–Vietnam border, which reopened in the 1990s (Endres 2015; Grillot 2016; Turner 2013; Chan 2013; Endres 2019; Grillot 2018; Bonnin 2018).

One could argue, provocatively, that the centrality of Vietnam in studies of entrepreneurship and trade in mainland Southeast Asia, with the

comparative tendency to look at China, is rooted in the somehow biased presumption of a certain cultural entrepreneurial predisposition, first rooted in Chinese culture before it gradually influenced Vietnamese society as well (see, for example, Heberer 2003). Apart from stressing cultural similarities, comparative studies of China and Vietnam also seem to be attractive for comprehending socialist transformations in Asia in general (e.g., Chan, Kerkvliet, and Unger 1999; Gillespie and Nicholson 2005).[12]

The virtual absence of Laos in studies of entrepreneurial smallness and small-scale traders might also be tied to the assumption of the inherently urban dimension of trade and entrepreneurship. Mainly concerned with (allegedly) rural areas, scholarship on current developments in Laos largely discounts potential urbanization dynamics beyond the cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The late Grant Evans, having previously studied agrarian change during the first two decades under the socialist period (Evans 1988, 1995) highlighted the lack of studies of urban Laos as early as 2003, writing: "While many researchers understandably have their sights set on minorities in the mountains or the hinterland, some of them would also do well to look at the cities. The future ineluctably lies there" (Evans 2003, p. 205).

Largely embedded in the "peasant economy" of Laos, the scholarly focus on contemporary Laos concentrates on the transformation from a subsistence economy towards a capitalist market economy (e.g., Rigg 2005). The resulting transition towards a cash crop economy involves resettlement policies and land concessions (e.g., Goudineau 1997; Baird and Shoemaker 2007). Regarding the latter, studies often focus on livelihood changes undergone by upland ethnic minorities, especially in northern Laos, whose centuries-long practice of swidden agriculture has been slated for eradication by the Lao government. The resulting involuntary dynamics of migration and mobility have been well documented, compared with the significantly smaller scholarship of somewhat voluntary or spontaneous mobility (e.g., Bouté 2014; Lyttleton 2006), increasingly focusing on the gendered dimension of mobility (Kusakabe et al. 2015).

Representative of the scholarly reflection of dynamics of change, Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena (2017) identify in their edited volume *Changing Lives in Laos* three larger themes: the political power of the state, agrarian change and migration, and new forms of social interactions. Regarding the latter, they mention the causal relation between mobility and migration on the one hand and rising urbanization and multi-ethnicity of localities

12 However, a recent edited volume includes Laos, as well as China and Vietnam, in its comparative analysis of what the authors call "the socialist market economy in Asia" (Hansen, Bekkevold, and Nordhaug 2020).

on the other hand. What is less prominently studied in this volume are the changes in the consequential occupational structure. Increasing degrees of mobility, whether of voluntary or involuntary character, have also been attributed to dynamics of occupational diversification involving more non-farming activities, signalling processes of "deagrarianisation" and "depeasantisation," as well as a "progressive delocalisation of work" (away from the conventional analytical unit of the village) (Rigg 2005, p. 151). While Rigg's corresponding case studies include waged labour in the garment, agricultural, and domestic work industries, trade or retail of non-agricultural commodities is not mentioned. There is brief reference to traders who are said to buy agricultural surplus from the studied households, but this is not elaborated on any further. This is probably owing to the persistent focus on predominantly "rural households," paradoxically ignoring urbanizing localities while emphasizing urbanization elsewhere (Rigg 2005, pp. 81-83).

In view of the relatively narrow focus on the role of emerging small-scale entrepreneurs and traders in other post-socialist states in Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia and Laos, a special issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* (2016, Vol. 57, No. 2) importantly sets out to illuminate "'under-the-radar' cross-border livelihoods in mainland Southeast Asia" (Taylor 2016, p. 152, fn. 2). However, this promising endeavour to foreground otherwise obscured commercial dynamics in post-socialist Southeast Asian borderlands ultimately reflects the strong rural bias in (Southeast Asian) borderland anthropology: amidst the preoccupation with rural and supposedly remote areas, largely focusing on uplands and their ethnic inhabitants, newly emerging urban dynamics are, curiously, almost always overlooked. With the notable exception of Vanina Bouté's (2017) work on the rise of urban space in the form of provincial capitals and newly-established district administrative centres in northern Laos, it seems that Laos is not yet on the radar of studies attending to newly emerging (urban) entrepreneurship in (post-socialist) Southeast Asia.

The conspicuous absence of traders and entrepreneurs in contemporary Lao studies is notable against the background in which allegedly remote, non-urban upland areas can look back at a long history of involvement in regional trade networks. In the case of Luang Namtha, Olivier Evrard (1997, p. 12) states that this province "has for centuries been a place for trade and movement to and fro. Numerous mule trails, nowadays simply footpaths, once criss-crossed the province linking Siamese, Burmese and Chinese border posts, together with those of [neighbouring] Oudomxai province." In his seminal study *The Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma*,

Andrew Walker (1999, p. 25) aims to unpack "the myth of Lao isolation" by highlighting Laos's significant historical role in regional trading networks and argues that the period of restricted mobility and closed borders between 1976 and 1988, following the victory of the Pathet Lao and leading to the country's political and economic isolation, was "something of an anomaly in Lao history" (1999, p. 62). Importantly, he adds:

> [h]owever, for many observers of contemporary developments, this restrictive decade has become a powerful and timeless motif of long-standing Lao isolation. The historically brief experience of closed (but *not* completely closed) borders has, it seems, written Lao peripherality deep into contemporary consciousness. [...] Journalistic and academic images of Lao isolation and vulnerability do not sufficient justice to the historical depth of its experience in managing external connections. (Walker 1999, pp. 62-63)

It seems that this "contemporary consciousness," described by Andrew Walker almost 20 years ago, still influences the (scholarly) perception of Laos wherein there is little room for extensive ethnographic attention to cross-border trade and traders, transnational mobilities, or urban dynamics. Tellingly, in cases where there is indeed peripheral mention of cross-border trade, Walker's highly influential work is still often the sole text referred to.

The Heavy Weight of "Zomian Baggage" in (Sino-)Southeast Asian Borderlands

Yet, at the same time, the scholarly prominence of the uplands of Laos and Southeast Asia in general has increased, largely through the influential spatial constructs of the "Southeast Asian Massif" (Michaud 2000) and "Zomia" (Van Schendel 2002; Scott 2009) which put the lesser-studied interstitial uplands of China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia back on the academic map. Initially developed by Willem van Schendel as a way of transgressing and scaling up arbitrarily drawn areas and nation-state boundaries, it is James Scott's subsequently advanced, and extensively debated, Zomian trope, describing uplanders' historically rooted culture of state evasion, that has attracted a large audience.[13] His anarchistic understanding of Zomia reflects a certain

13 Willem van Schendel's Zomia originally covers the highlands of Tibet, Kashmir, northern and eastern India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts), Myanmar, southwestern

tendency among overly ethnic conceptualizations of transnational spaces (recalling notions of a "Tai World" mentioned earlier) or borderlands, which are often set against the state. Different forms of ethnic minority resistance practices and strategies of "rejection/withdrawal/escape/hiding in response to power exerted by governments" (Leepreecha, McCaskill, and Buadeng 2008, p. 7), previously studied within national contexts, are now being projected onto a larger transnational scale in order to serve as the underlying coherent feature of the new regional upland construct of Zomia. This binary between oppressive lowland state apparatus and upland freedom-seekers dismisses any possibility of other forms of encounters between lowland and highland domains and significantly limits the scope of regional interconnection within Zomia.

As this dichotomy has been already extensively discussed in criticism (Jonsson 2010, 2012, 2014, 2017; Brass 2012), and its historical accuracy and implied universal validity questioned, challenged, and nuanced (Lieberman 2010; Ma 2013; Formoso 2010; Giersch 2010; Tappe 2018, 2015; Pholsena 2017), I do not want to engage in yet another lengthy discussion on Zomia here. What should be noted, however, is that although Scott's largely historical argument of highlanders' state-evasion strategies ends in the early 1950s, with the rise of more sophisticated state technologies and policies of "enclosure" and "engulfment" (Scott 2009, pp. 10-12), the Zomian trope remains highly appealing to scholars working on contemporary livelihoods in Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands (Michaud and Forsyth 2011; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015; Turner 2013, 2012), while also inspiring new applications as "maritime Zomias" (Hong 2016; Bourdier et al. 2015) as well as "Inner Zomias" within nation-states (Bourdier et al. 2015).

For instance, Jean Michaud's and Tom Forsyth's (2011) edited volume *Moving Mountains: Ethnicity and Livelihoods in Highland China, Vietnam, and Laos* contains studies on local livelihood strategies of different "highland minorities" (including the Tai Lue) that emphasize their culturally embedded agency. While importantly linking diverse livelihoods to a fluid and situational notion of ethnicity, comprising flexibly shifting identities and practices, the

China (Yunnan and Sichuan provinces), Thailand (besides the north also western Thailand along the border with Myanmar), Laos, and Vietnam. The geographical span of James Scott's Zomia is more or less the area of Jean Michaud's "Southeast Asian Massif," first mentioned in 1997, comprising "south-west China, northern and eastern Burma, northern Thailand, eastern Cambodia, northern and central Vietnam, and nearly all of Laos" (McKinnon and Michaud 2000, p. 5). Jean Michaud, with the support of Margarete Byrne Swain and Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, expanded the notion of "Southeast Asian Massif" in their *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the South-East Asian Massif* (2016) by the uplands of northeast India, Bangladesh, peninsular Malaysia, and Taiwan.

different case studies are, in the end, strongly framed by notions of subtle and hidden forms of resistance—thereby demonstratively borrowing from James Scott's episteme of peasant resistance (Scott 1985, 2009). Elsewhere, Michaud (2010, p. 208) refers to the historically prevailing transregional economic connectedness between highland areas and political lowland centres, but later reduces the "current appeal" of Zomia to Scott's notion of "friction of terrain" (i.e., highlanders' safety through inaccessible terrain) which might soon vanish through modern global forces of all-encompassing infrastructure, communication technology, trade, migration, and tourism.

This concern about the erasure of the "friction of terrain" is relevant as long as the highlands need to be seen as a genuinely different and contrasting socio-cultural hideaway from state and global forces. If it does not stress resistance, this assumed tension between marginal, traditional ethnic uplanders, on the one hand, and forces of modernity and globalization promoted by the "state," on the other, informs the understanding of ethnic economic activities and agency as necessarily different vis-à-vis the "state." For instance, studying the involvement of different ethnic groups (largely, but not limited to, the Hmong) in the Sino-Vietnamese small-scale cross-border trade between the provinces of Yunnan and Lao Cai, Sarah Turner (2013) advocates their creation of "upland development alternatives" or "upland trading-scapes" through which "local people possess the agency to 'do things differently' from hegemonic development approaches" (Turner 2013, p. 15). Hence, while not necessarily describing instances of resistance to or evasion from the state, ethnic trade practices are still mainly understood through the prism of clearly bounded relations between upland margins and lowland state centres, the latter gradually being supplemented by forces of neoliberal globalization, against which they develop "upland alternatives" conceptualized along notions of agency, indigenization of modernity, everyday politics, and resistance (see also Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015).

In this vein, the "state," while not explicitly studied, is still conceptually needed to ultimately make sense of ethnic agency as an alternative, necessarily different source of identity and practice. This only attests to Philp Abrams's (1988, p. 61) early observation "that the state, conceived of as a substantial entity separate from society has proved a remarkably elusive object of analysis." While not denying empirical evidence of negative, and sometimes disastrous and conflictual, effects of national or regional development policies on the local livelihoods of various ethnic groups (triggering different kinds of responding mechanisms on their part), the aspect of cooperative dynamics, at least in principle, should not be excluded *a priori*. By keeping open this possibility, the dynamically changing nature of the

"state" itself is also factored in. Embracing Sherry B. Ortner's (1995, p. 190) call for richer and more nuanced ethnographies to "reveal the ambivalences and ambiguities of resistance itself," Holly High's (2014) ethnography of local engagements with poverty reduction programmes in southwest Laos focuses on the complexity of individual desires which "can produce resistance to the dominant assemblage, but [...] also inspire normativity and aspirations for conformity" (2014, p. 15). The notion of desire also features prominently in Oskar Salemink's (2015) study on Vietnamese "highlanders," the Mon-Khmer-speaking ethnic group of the Bru in particular. In critical and blunt response to Scott's "Zomia," he writes:

> I encountered hardly any Highlanders who did not wish to partake in the promise of modernity, especially in the guise of consumer goods. In spite of processes of marginalisation, dispossession and exclusion, as well as inter-ethnic tension, the desire for goods and prestige paradoxically link Highlanders firmly to state- and market-driven development programs (Salemink 2015, p. 394).

That I have arrived at this brief, by no means exhaustive excursus to Zomian representations of ethnic borderlands only demonstrates that it is almost impossible to avoid an engagement with Scott's Zomia thesis if studying parts of upland Southeast Asia. Whether critiquing or subscribing to it, or creating new "Zomias" and "Zomians," scholarship on upland Southeast Asia, often in different borderland contexts, seemingly needs to somehow relate to and position towards Scott's work (that also includes me, apparently). As Harold Brookfield (2011, p. 494) predicted, "[n]o-one will again write about the people of this and other 'marginal' regions without reference to these ideas." Thus, the underlying spatially configured epistemology of lowland state hegemony and ethnic upland people—the "tribal zone" or "tribal slot" (Jonsson 2017)—is being constantly sustained as an academic playground to justify new production of scholarship. That "Scott's analysis of the Southeast Asian hinterlands until about 1950 is a representation [...] that allows the readers to come into a sense of self, other, and world in a single move" (Jonsson 2014, p. 2) might be symptomatic of a certain scholarly convenience: letting research be guided by, and correspond to, the impulse to fit social, spatial, and temporal representations, resulting in neat and coherent narratives. Hjorleifur Jonsson (2014, p. 5) thus urges that

> [p]ractitioners [of anthropology] should try to undo and counter some of the reckless appropriation of others' lives, stories, and identities for

> projects of scholarly achievements and factionalism that brush aside questions of the politics of producing knowledge through representations of social life.

In this book, I intend to do just that. I trace the actually "lived borderworlds" (Dean 2020; Sadan 2013; Van Spengen 2000) of Luang Namtha-based small-scale traders—through their eyes. While aware of the danger of simply creating yet another borderland representation, I cautiously use the notion of "transnational worlds" to explore the traders' subjective ways of navigating different scales of geographies of cross-border trade, combining the local "little world of Laos," frequent border-crossing ("borderworlds"), and transnational dynamics at the same time, all played out through language and practices of *smallness*.

In striving to emancipate from the "Zomian baggage" weighing on the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands, going beyond binary representations of state centres and marginal ethnic subjects, a look into Andrew Walker's (1999) pioneering work is again instructive. Introducing the notion of "collaborative borderlands," Walker (1999, p. 112) reveals "complex and subtle collaborations between local initiative and state power." More than 20 years later, the time is ripe for a renewed "micro-sociology of borders" (Ibid.) between Yunnan, Laos, and Thailand, which is not overly obstructed by representational narratives of the "Southeast Asian Massif" and "Zomia" or celebrations of a revived borderless ethnic "Tai World."

Looking beyond Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands is equally rewarding. For instance, Tina Harris's (2013) *Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions* is a similarly designed multi-sited ethnography of small-scale traders in a tri-national borderland. Following traders and tracing trading routes between Nepal, China (Tibet), and India, it foregrounds their own flexible practices of place-making along a spectrum of differently experienced and produced mobility and fixity, outlining "alternative mappings" of actually lived economic geographies which, depending on the particular context, might deviate from or coincide with state discourses. I am similarly engaged in an ethnographically informed confrontation with competing spatial and temporal representations and likewise invest in making connections between ordinary daily life and larger transnational and global dynamics of change. However, my ethnography is not primarily tied together by discourses and practices of place-making, but it introduces the analytical lens of *smallness*—as discourse, practice, and performance—to understand the social poetics of this transnationally interlinked borderland in its mundaneness, largely from the Lao (Luang Namtha) perspective.

Coming to Terms with my Research Motivation/Imagination

My oft-repeated concern with paying serious attention to the everyday lived, vernacular worlds of cross-border traders arises from the fact that I was initially quite immersed in the academic "Tai World." Adopting the ethnic Tai lens, my original research design was to trace the transnational ethnic Tai Lue dimension of small-scale trade relations and networks across Yunnan, Laos, and Thailand. The overland link between Thailand and China through Laos, now officially labelled as the Kunming–Bangkok Highway, has fascinated me since 2008, when I studied Chinese language and International Relations at Yunnan University in Kunming as an exchange undergraduate student. I became aware of this overland route due to rather pragmatical considerations. Before my studies in Kunming, I had already lived in Thailand for two years. Relying on cheap ways to travel up to Thailand to visit my friends there, my Thai classmates recommended I take the bus, down to Yunnan's Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, crossing into northern Laos (Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces), and finally to Chiang Khong in Thailand's Chiang Rai province. Having taken this trip several times, I realized that this journey overland, taking about 20 hours from Kunming to Chiang Khong (and more than 30 hours to Bangkok), was by far the most popular way for Thai students at universities and colleges in Yunnan province (and even beyond) to visit home. My numerous journeys along this road, during which I could observe, besides students, international tourists, Buddhist and Muslim pilgrims, entrepreneurs, traders, and farm workers, triggered my further research interest in Yunnan–Southeast Asian interactions—working on the history of Yunnanese caravan trade with Southeast Asia and, subsequently, on Yunnan's provincial authorities' current policies to establish this border province as a geopolitical and geoeconomic "bridgehead" (桥头堡 *qiaotoubao*) between Southwest China and Southeast Asia. While working on the latter, I was increasingly exposed to a general hype around connectivity between Yunnan and Southeast Asia (mainly Thailand), actively boosted in Yunnan and Thailand by travel agencies, the media, business groups, and academics.

One key dimension via which this newly enabled infrastructural connectivity was advertised and celebrated is the notion of commonly shared Tai Lue ethnicity, promoted most visibly in the context of touristic ethnic commodification, especially in Xishuangbanna, but also throughout northern Thailand. Frequently travelling between Xishuangbanna and Chiang Rai while reading scholarship on a reviving "Tai World," I readily assumed the rising importance of transnational Tai Lue cultural and

economic networks. I thus translated my own cross-border mobility, while consuming Tai "symbolic geography" (Davis 2003), into a transnational ethnic Tai Lue "trading-scape" (cf. Turner 2013). That I started my initial field research in academic institutions in Kunming and Chiang Mai only reflects the prevailing politics of the academic production of knowledge of the "Tai World," or the "Thai-Yunnan Borderlands,"[14] in which "ethnographic work emanating from north Thailand has been crucial and pivotal" (Tapp 2015, p. 10). However, when I eventually got off the comfortable international overland buses, although still equipped with a heavy baggage of secondary literature, I soon faced an ethnographic reality on the ground that did not uphold overly ethnic representations of cross-border trade.

In a sense, this book traces how the lens I initially applied— that of (Tai Lue) transnational ethnicity and identity—has set the stage for a different (probably unexpected or counterintuitive) course of fieldwork that gravitates gradually towards northern Laos and foregrounds the central and vital role of small-scale traders in linking Chinese and Thai markets. This intellectual trajectory affirms George Marcus's (2011, p. 23) central tenet of multi-sited ethnography: "The conceptual apparatus and design of a research project is derived not from academic literatures or theories, but from ethnography itself by working through a selected subjects' or group's para-ethnographic [...] take on a problem cognitively shared with the ethnographer."

Journeying the Field

This book draws on 15 months of extensive multi-sited fieldwork, carried out between February 2015 and January 2016, January/February 2017, and August/September 2019. While covering parts of Yunnan province, northern Laos (Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces) and northern Thailand (Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces), my research gradually came to focus on Luang Namtha province.

As mentioned before, I entered the "field" through regional academic landscapes in Kunming and Chiang Mai. While I met scholars at Yunnan University (Center for Studies of Chinese Southwest's Borderland Ethnic

14 This designation originates from the "Thai-Yunnan Project" at the Australian National University (ANU), launched in 1987, following the 3rd International Conference on Thai Studies in Canberra in the same year, which was established by the late Gehan Wijeyewardene and, after his death in 2000, significantly shaped by the late Nicholas Tapp as its director.

Minorities), Yunnan Minzu University (Yunnan Provincial Institute for Ethnic Studies) and the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS), I was affiliated with the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University. Becoming familiar with the local and regional public and academic discourses and scholarship, I eventually obtained promising keys that would open further doors for my actual field research on (Tai Lue) cross-border trade networks on the ground. Contacts in Kunming repeatedly suggested that I attend regional trade fairs in Xishuangbanna. A Tai Lue graduate student at Chiang Mai University drew my attention to Ban Huay Meng, a Tai Lue village in Chiang Khong district, Chiang Rai province, which is engaged in cross-border trade of fruits across the Mekong River. However, underlining the unpredictability and serendipities of exploratory fieldwork, these two entry points into a neatly assembled potential Tai Lue trading-scape opened the door to a different ethnographic endeavour: exploring the transnational worlds of Lao small-scale traders, centrally yet invisibly operating between Xishuangbanna and Chiang Rai. Studying trade fairs in Xishuangbanna and fruit cultivation and trade in Ban Huay Meng both led me to Luang Namtha province, where increasing numbers of households experiment with promising improvements in regional connectivity to China and Thailand. Having initially taken note of their cross-border practices during fieldwork in China and Thailand, my subsequent research gradually zoomed in on Luang Namtha, where I was slowly becoming acquainted with highly mobile fruit traders, shopkeepers and their local suppliers in and around marketplaces, and traders regularly attending trade fairs in Xishuangbanna and beyond. They cover a wide spectrum in terms of age (mid-20s to late 50s) and ethnicity (Tai Dam, Tai Nuea, Tai Lue, Tai Yuan, Phunoy, Haw—i.e., of Yunnanese descent), come from different social and economic backgrounds, and have arrived at their current involvement in trade activities out of different motivations. While I first, somehow accidentally, became aware of them through my own cross-border mobility between Yunnan and northern Thailand, I was later able to explore this vibrant borderland economy at first hand through their cross-border mobility.

Obviously, getting down to their everyday lived transnational worlds required much travelling, as well as time and patience. Establishing a rapport with cross-border traders was challenging, given the overall climate of suspicion, cautiousness, and distance. While I was browsing around the marketplace day after day over a prolonged period, carefully observing and trying to get involved in some first conversation, numerous potential interlocutors were unsure what my actual position and role might be, often conceiving of me as a businessman or investor potentially interested in

cross-border commerce. Hence, many initially refused to talk to me or were very cautious about disclosing any information. It often required a high degree of explanation and trust-building to develop meaningful relations with my interlocutors, which eventually worked out in most cases, although not always. I was then generally able to accompany them through participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and situationally emerging conversations. The latter was employed most frequently as many traders constantly claimed not to be available for an interview as they were too busy with their work. I had to realize quite quickly that scheduling interviews via phone or text message simply did not work, although I was almost always told to do so, largely out of politeness. However, when I simply showed up at their shops or market stalls, I easily ended up chatting with the traders for hours, even if they always felt the need to highlight, or complain, how busy they were. Saying this, all that happened was that more snacks were shared, which often led to having some drinks together. I thus learned not to frame our encounters and conversations as a formally planned interview. Over time, I could establish trustful relations that led to invitations to some of the traders' homes or to birthday parties and weddings, enabling more informal situations that provided me with much richer material. Some true, long-term friendships would emerge—especially with Amnuay, which is reflected in his presence throughout all subsequent chapters. Having eventually managed to gain some trust, I was still generally asked not to record our conversations. My analysis thus mainly relies on notes written during or, when the situation did not allow this, shortly after my conversations. On the other hand, most of my informants agreed that I use their real names or nicknames in my writing. In cases where they requested anonymity, I have changed their names accordingly.

I need to point out that most of my increasingly cordial relations with interlocutors evolved into relationships that were still rooted in keeping some "healthy distance," a mutual agreement not to infringe each other's privacy. I soon sensed that they were more comfortable and confident when they knew in which situations and contexts they could expect me to be present and interact with me, and in which not. Therefore, I decided to stay mainly at guesthouses in town. This line between our private lives and our working relationship could, of course, be flexible; over time, I could participate in some family events and ceremonies, for instance. However, this was nevertheless possible precisely because of this line, however loosely drawn. Through this sort of mutual concord between research subjects and ethnographer, I advanced the latter's "role of stepping in and out of society" (Powdermaker 1966, p. 19). Moreover, staying at guesthouses

allowed for the necessary adaptability for navigating between *in situ* and *en route* ethnography, studying both local sites and cross-border movement and mobility whenever the opportunity arose. My stays were always temporary—"always on the go"—continually changing sites in order to trace my interlocutors' cross-border journeys, as there was often no space left in the trucks of traders picking up fruits in Thailand or attending fairs in China, for instance. At the same time, Luang Namtha town became my base, a necessary spatial grounding which let me participate in the gossip of town and helped me to get to know numerous transient sojourners—besides tourists and businessmen, these also included cross-border traders taking a rest on the way to or from China, Thailand, or destinations within Laos. Knowing where I stayed when I was in town, interlocutors also visited me at my accommodation. Interestingly, many traders related my itinerant way of living to their own cross-border mobile lives, sometimes even expecting me to stay in hotels and guesthouses—as they would do the same while on trips to other provinces in Laos or across the border in Yunnan and Chiang Rai provinces. Some also readily recommended places to stay within their transnational world of trade.

However, my own transnational world of multi-sited cross-border ethnography, which spanned three nations and was continually under construction, was in its practical and logistical realization somewhat constrained. I spent much of my time dealing with border-crossing formalities, handling immigration and bureaucracy issues. While I could obtain a first-hand account of the political reality of border regimes in this border region, I was always reminded of my limited cross-border mobility compared to most of my Lao interlocutors. Their local China–Laos or Laos–Thailand border passes, which entitle them to cross both international and local border crossings on a daily basis, are not available to foreigners from any third country, like me. I thus had to rely on a limited number of international border crossings open to passport holders, which often made it impossible to accompany traders on their cross-border trips as they often used local crossings. I could not keep up with their high degree of flexibility and spontaneity in crossing borders. During my stays in Luang Namtha, for instance, it frequently occurred that I needed to reschedule or cancel meetings with interlocutors as they were again on the way to, or had already arrived in, Thailand and China. I often learned via phone calls about their impromptu cross-border itineraries, which sometimes changed on a daily basis. Probably the most painful experience of my suboptimal cross-border mobility was when I decided to follow Lao suppliers of Chinese commodities across the border to China—travelling separately and alone through the international border

checkpoint in Mohan while they crossed through a local border crossing near Muang Sing (Panghai/Chahe crossing). The plan was to meet up in Mengla, about 60 kilometres from the Muang Sing crossing and 40 kilometres from the Mohan crossing. However, upon arrival in China, after slowly going through the bureaucracy of border-crossing formalities, I learned that my interlocutors were already on the way back to Laos. Furthermore, being channelled through a few internationally open border checkpoints meant I was soon known to respective border officials, which often led to some degree of interrogation and scrutiny. Although it was usually not difficult to smooth these interactions by joking around in the national language of the country I was in, these exchanges were at times draining.

Apparently, my linguistic proficiency was central to establishing these relations. Being fluent in Thai and Chinese, and increasingly in Lao, while also proficient in the northern Thai dialect (*คำเมือง kham muang*), some Tai Lue language, and Yunnanese dialect (云南话 *yunnan hua*) not only gave me relatively easy access to interlocutors in three different national contexts, but also helped me to trace their linguistic dexterity in readily switching between languages. Although I ambitiously attempted to enter the "field" in Ban Huay Meng with some Tai Lue language skills, acquired during my first month in Kunming, I quickly realized that in the context of Ban Huay Meng's aspirations of becoming a regional and national "fruit village" (see chapter 2), it was the national language that mattered on the ground, capable of reaching a much wider range of economic actors. Several village traders were also able to speak some Chinese, thus only demonstrating the trans*national* dimension of their daily business, again going beyond the notion of trading-scapes being necessarily determined by ethnic ties. As the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, this linguistic dexterity between Thai, Lao, and Chinese, which I could participate in relatively easily, is a prominent feature of this borderland region and arguably most visible in northern Laos, where elements of vocabulary from Thai and, in particular, from Chinese have already found their way in everyday language. With this in mind, I pay close attention to vernacular terms in all three national languages, which I also deliberately display in my writing in their respective Chinese, Lao, and Thai scripts to underline the incessant flagging of national language—as part of an ingrained "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995; see my remarks earlier in this introduction).

However, multilingual dexterity does not necessarily mean extensive talkativeness. Ironically, the constantly observable tendency among Lao traders to downplay and trivialize their trade activities, as part of their repertoires of *smallness*, often found expression in their taciturnity. Browsing

through my fieldnotes, my repeated remarks of "awkward silence" remind me only too well of my initial struggles to conduct longer and meaningful conversations (at least, those perceived as such by me). I often got stuck in a situation in which my interlocutors stressed over and over that there would not be much to say about their borderland lives and practices. The conversations probably became awkward for both sides as I ended up trying to compensate for moments of silence with incessant questions, leading to the equally awkward situation of my emerging monologue. It took me some time to learn to have silent conversations and to understand that the ethnographic spectacularity lies in my interlocutors' borderland narratives of unspectacular ordinariness and insignificance. Over time, I slowly managed to shift to another mode of conversation, desisting from asking the larger questions and being open to gaining large insights from "small talk," seriously engaging with the banality of borderland trade and transnational connectedness. Readers might initially feel that the observations in the following chapters are indeed trivial; however, it is this alleged triviality that, over the course of the book, opens up a grounded ethnographic account of the local translation and production of larger dynamics of transnational connectedness. Thus, I arrive at these insights through the language of *smallness*—both as initial empirical observation and subsequent analytical lens—and not through largely formulated representations and grand narratives.

Outline of the Book

The book sketches the transnational worlds of cross-border traders in northern Laos through the notion of *smallness* in five ethnographic core chapters, contextualized with an introduction and conclusion. Organized to reflect the spectrum of fluid cross-border mobility and the spatially fixed sites for handling transnational connectedness—thus combining *en route* and *in situ* ethnographic fieldwork—the chapters cover the main ingredients of the traders' transnational worlds: regional trade fairs, commodity flows, and marketplaces. To foreground their vernacular vocabulary of actually living their transnational worlds, the title of each chapter incorporates a central catchphrase that is also its point of departure. While they may sound too trivial even for part of a title, the phrases reflect the unfiltered essence of the transnational worlds of *smallness* this book aims to convey to the reader.

The book can be organized roughly in three parts: cross-border movement and transnational commodity flows (chapters 1 and 2), spatial groundings

in localities of northern Laos (chapters 3 and 4), and overall reflections (chapter 5, together with the conclusion). Mirroring my epistemological journey in the field, chapters 1 and 2 approach this borderland from its Chinese and Thai ends respectively. Regional trade fairs in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture and the transnational trade of Thai fruits radiating from a Tai Lue village in northern Thailand might from the outset appear to be central nodes of a transnational ethnic Tai (Lue) trading world. And indeed, at the trade fairs, traders from Luang Namtha frequently stressed their ethnic affinity with China's Tai Lue population, often bluntly stating that they were Tai Lue. However, though the group contained diverse ethnicities (mostly Tai Dam, but also non-Tai groups), almost none of them was in fact Tai Lue.

In chapter 1, I develop the argument that the trading households from Luang Namtha, selling mainly Thai commodities at those trade fairs, tactically mirror the attempts by Chinese local officials and entrepreneurs to advertise and commodify Yunnan's—and particularly Xishuangbanna's—geographical and ethno-cultural proximity to its Southeast Asian neighbours. Cross-border ethnic groups such as the Tai Lue, subsumed under the Chinese ethnonym "Dai," are key to Yunnan's geopolitical and geoeconomic project of developing the Sino-Southeast Asian frontier. The creation of tangible and symbolic tourism landscapes and commodityscapes resembling Southeast Asian surroundings is a central part of this project. Blending in and experimenting with this local Dai context, Luang Namtha's traders cultivate a sense of cultural intimacy with Chinese Tai Lue customers through employing colloquial Tai Lue vocabulary in a casual and cheerful tone—stressing, for instance, shared food customs—resulting in long-lasting local networks based on notions of close friendship and (fictive) kinship, which are central to their economic success at these trade fairs. They play their active part in inserting themselves into the representational logics of a reviving transnational "Tai World."

By contrast, in the context of transnational trade of Thai fruits from a Tai Lue village in Thailand to China, it is the emphasis on national difference, and not ethnic affinity, that enables the cross-border fluidity and mobility of traders and commodities. While this village's cross-border trade network is geographically and culturally embedded in historical processes of Tai Lue cross-border exchange and mobility, I demonstrate in chapter 2 that the villagers' remembrance of the latter, potentially leading to a transnational ethno-cultural Tai Lue identification, does not necessarily determine their current everyday economic practices. Instead of highlighting co-ethnic bonds across borders, Thai fruit growers and traders, mobile Lao middleman

traders, and Chinese end consumers articulate a vernacular discourse revolving around the notion of graded Thai fruit quality. This notion of quality is highly contested and subject to fierce negotiations across the border, bringing about confrontations over different quality conceptions, especially between much more confident Thai suppliers, on the one hand, and highly demanding Chinese buyers on the other. Mobile Lao cross-border traders appear to have a major stake in this transnational trade as middlemen mediating between Thai and Chinese traders' quality contestations. Central to this is their often-observed discourse and practice of reserving high-quality fruits for the Chinese market and mediocre fruits for the Lao market. The two cross-border movements of Thai fruits are thus facilitated by this (re)articulated and (re)performed asymmetry of economic development, here concretely expressed in the national distribution pattern of graded fruit quality. In this way, Lao cross-border traders purposely reproduce a frontier of starkly stereotyped economic, developmental, and cultural differentials, always highlighting Laos's economic inferiority.

These two first chapters illustrate what the book is essentially about: it traces how Lao cross-border traders mirror, in discourse and practice, different large-scale representations, mappings, and dynamics of this borderland economy. Importantly, this grounded ethnography of transnational connectivity does not attempt to understand its protagonists through representations, but instead pays attention to how they perceive, pragmatically act upon, sustain, and produce as well as challenge those representations. Here, their practised *smallness* is a craft of blending in—blending in smoothly within different contexts and representations of this multifarious borderland. Inconspicuously, yet pragmatically and tactically "playing by the rules" of different social and economic environments, such as the symbolic geography of a "Tai World" or the geoeconomic reality of Laos's relative *smallness*, these traders and their trajectories of entrepreneurial experimentation might indeed be invisible within larger borderland narratives of transnational ethnicity or top-down mappings of infrastructure, which often tend to focus on symbolic appearance instead of actual practices.

The second part (chapters 3 and 4) embeds those cross-border trade strategies of flexibly blending in with different borderland representations and mappings in the locally cosmopolitan context of northern Laos. Attending to marketplaces and individual biographies and narratives of traders in Luang Namtha, these two chapters elaborate the locally ingrained habits, discourses, and practices of handling quotidian transnational connectedness through the modality of *smallness*. Establishing Luang Namtha's past and present role as a regionally important and dynamic intersection instead of

a national periphery, chapter 3 examines this province's municipal markets in their spatial and material organization, as sites where transnational commodity flows and trade intermediaries, vendors, customers, and travellers from multi-ethnic and multi-national backgrounds intersect and interact on an everyday basis—leading to what I conceptualize as locally rooted "banal cosmopolitanism." As already mentioned previously in this introduction, I adopt a practical—and not normative—understanding of actually lived cosmopolitanism and focus on the "banal" realm of simultaneously local and transnational mundane commodities for everyday use (almost exclusively from Thailand and China). I refer to the shopkeepers' and traders' cosmopolitan capacity to conceive and manoeuvre the overall transnational dimension of their local social and economic lives. Browsing through these marketplaces, this chapter demonstrates that again, as in the case of transnational Thai fruit trade, the cosmopolitan handling of transnationality is, seemingly paradoxically, rooted in clear articulations and negotiations of national differences and boundaries.

In chapter 4, I foreground in more detail individual narratives of experimentation that lie behind the cosmopolitan outlook of local marketplaces in Luang Namtha province. I seek to explain, drawing on Holly High's (2013) notion of an "experimentarian ethic," the phenomenon of an increasing number of retailers from economically, socially, and ethnically diverse backgrounds all trading Chinese and Thai commodities at marketplaces and beyond. Their individual trajectories reveal instances of entrepreneurial experimentation and accomplishments rooted in notable degrees of transnational knowledge, experience, mobility, and skill. Yet closer examination is needed to render the former visible as these narratives are not explicitly formulated as success stories, but instead framed in a markedly self-deprecating manner, downplaying the scale and professionalism of the traders' economic activities. By analogy with my usage of "banal" in the previous chapter, they banalize their transnational economic standing as merely "ordinary" (ທຳມະດາ *thammada*). Besides this articulated ordinariness and implied insignificance, many traders outline their involvement in trade as non-occupational, as they have not learned any proper occupation or skills in a formal setting. One the one hand, cross-border traders euphorically stress the new convenience and practicality of handling transnational connectivity; on the other hand, they often explain their involvement in trade rather negatively as a consequence of various constraints and limitations, most often in terms of lacking education. This narrated weakness and insignificance, yet allowing in practice for successful experimentations, might be one reason for their virtual invisibility in scholarship on contemporary socio-economic issues in Laos, as mentioned before.

After these four chapters have ethnographically grounded and complicated the representational worlds of borderlands ("Tai World," Zomian borderworlds) and "little Laos," therefore contributing both to (Asian) borderland studies in general and Lao studies in particular, the third part engages in some reflections. Chapter 5 returns to my initial discussion of China's growing influence in the region, in northern Laos and beyond. Here, I critically reflect on the inescapable expectation to write first and foremost on China's assertive infrastructure push under the BRI label when studying current developments in (northern) Laos. In an effort to reverse this epistemological hierarchy of superimposing the lens of BRI infrastructure, I have decided in this book to foreground the ethnographic material which gave rise to the empirically closer and conceptually innovative lens of *smallness*. I start by discussing the productive dimension of uncertainty and change as an integral part of the traders' everyday operation of their transnational worlds. Their engagement with the now intensified, but not unprecedented, Chinese footprint in the region needs to be understood against the backdrop of their resilience, versatility, and resourcefulness in continually finding new venues for economic experimentation—and in living with, and actively impacting on, China-driven developments. Ultimately bringing my ethnographic observations into dialogue with prevailing discussions on China's rising influence, I flesh out how Luang Namtha's traders, and local residents in general, translate, reproduce, or challenge larger Chinese ideological vocabularies and visions of modernity, development, infrastructural connectivity, and globalization as their own aspirations, hopes, dreams, and fears. This nuanced attention to the diversity of quotidian accounts of and concrete engagements with neighbouring China reveals a wide and intricate spectrum of inspiration, admiration, aspiration, pragmatic choices, disillusion, envy, resentment, and contempt, which might not find its way into conventional external comments on China's inroads into Laos.

The conclusion recapitulates northern Lao cross-border traders' different facets and repertoires of conscious strategies and interiorized habits of *smallness*. It reflects on how an ethnography of the allegedly banal and trivial can shed significant light on larger dynamics of globalization, neoliberal development, geopolitics, and infrastructure intersecting in the borderlands of China, Laos, and Thailand. I discuss how this lens of *smallness* can contribute to new understandings of, and research agendas for, conventionally ethnicized hinterlands, uplands or borderlands in Southeast Asia and beyond.

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