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Thanks to the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson fellowship, I spent two months in the summer of 2016 interning at the Land Issue Working Group (hereafter LIWG) at Vientiane, Laos. LIWG is an NGO promoting awareness and understanding of the social, economic and environmental impacts of land-related projects. Over the past decade, LIWG is devoted to revealing injustices associated with land grabbing in large scale mining and plantation concessions, and hydropower dam development in Laos. In 2016, as Lao parliament is drafting new land policy and land law, LIWG is partly involved in this process, aiming to shape land regulatory regime to be more inclusive, especially for the marginalized rural communities. Given this background, I was very excited to get a 10-week internship in the organization, working as an independent researcher.

As a graduate student in human geography, interested in crafting a dissertation project around Chinese outward expansionism and its subsequent local impact, I have been planning to ground my research in Laos, one of the countries that receive heavy inflow of Chinese capital in recent years. Personally, I had never been to this country before this summer, nor did I speak much local language prior to fieldwork. The internship opportunity at LIWG not only provide me with some institutional holding in Vientiane, and grant me access to its network and resources, but also leave me some flexibility to explore the field and establish my own connections.

During my stay in Vientiane with LIWG, I was able to participate in two projects within the organization, and develop two other independent projects myself. Preliminary outcome of the independent projects, concerning Chinese soft power expansion in Laos, and China-related urban land grabbing in Vientiane, was shared with activists working in Laos through LIWG’s network.

The first project I participated in LIWG is a comparative study between Chinese and Lao land law on rural land appropriation and compensation. As LIWG was heavily involved in providing consultancy service for Lao parliament in the process of drafting new land law and land policy, this project helped the government to detect potential loopholes in drafted documents, and readjust wording of clauses for the benefit of rural community facing land seizure. Together with staffs at Village Focus International, another international NGO working on rural land issues in Laos, I traced the genealogy of Chinese land laws, summarized their major impacts to rural communities, and provided detailed policy recommendation for Lao parliament.

Along with the comparative study of land laws between countries, I also helped LIWG in distributing draft Lao land law and land policy, and facilitate grassroots discussion for consultancy purpose. I shouldered part of translation work to turn related legal document in English, and disseminated the documents within LIWG’s network. By following up on each member group’s feedback on the documents, and actively incorporate scholarly viewpoints on this issue, I was able to generate a detailed critique on the draft documents with my peers at LIWG, which lend strong support to the organization’s consultation work. In meetings with Lao parliament members, we were able to persuade related officials to pay more attention to the land tenure security of marginalized group...
with solid evidence and subsequent recommended revision.

Besides the work directly associated with LIWG, I worked on two other independent research project during my stay in Vientiane. First, I investigate the expansion of Chinese soft power in Laos, particularly in the education sector in Vientiane. Since the normalization of China-Lao diplomatic relationship in the 1990s, China has been sending expat teachers to work in the public bilingual schools in the country to facilitate Chinese language and cultural education. In the end of 2010s, as Lao higher education sector started to take shape, Chinese state tentatively set up language and exchange programs at university level. More recently, Confucius College, as one major communist propaganda tool, was also introduced into this country, based in the National University of Laos. In the course of tracing Chinese soft power in the realm of education, I became interested in the way individual expat teachers and staffs were assembled together to form an oversea propaganda army. Rather than a strictly top-down organization that possess ultimate control over each expat individuals, Chinese state has been actively utilizing the entrepreneurial spirit of its citizens to fulfill its oversea ambition. It on one hand instill its political goal into the everyday teaching practices of the expat faculties by constant supervision in various forms, on the other hand intentionally allow flexibility at individual level, implicitly granting economic incentives that lure expat groups to actively practice and maintain their official work. The situation warrants more analytical attention into the governance techniques of contemporary Chinese state.

The other independent project I conducted concerns the China-related land grabbing in Vientiane since 1990s. The idea of this project initiated the moment when landed in Wattay Airport of Vientiane, as I looked through windows on the plane and saw large chunks of land under construction, which clearly did not fit into the delicate landscape of the city with less than 1 million population. Vientiane is going through a flurry of urban development directed by foreign capital, especially from China. It is creating luxurious malls, high rise residential compound and office buildings in a context that clearly could not host these modern architectures and consume its economy. In tracing the reasons behind the outplaced construction activities, I discovered that the seemingly highly centralized Chinese outward expansion, are interpreted differently by actors at various scales, and hence generating materialized outcomes that follow out of conventional imagination. Firms have been actively engaged in illicit economic activities such as financial fraud and money laundry by making use of Chinese state policies. Yet at face level, the illegality is covered up by a grand narrative of ‘rising China’, in either friendly or aggressive sense.

The information collected during my two months’ stay in Vientiane Laos in the summer of 2016 is extremely helpful for my dissertation project. I have decided to focus it on exposing the grounded, and fuzzy processes consisting Chinese outward expansionism. I am immensely grateful for SKJ Fellowship. Without the generous support from the Jenson family, this could have not been possible.