

Article

# Resistance and Contingent Contestations to Large-Scale Land Concessions in Southern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia

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Academic Editor: Ward Anseeuw

Received: 2 December 2016; Accepted: 21 February 2017; Published: 26 February 2017

**Abstract:** Over the last decade, there have been considerable concerns raised regarding the social and environmental impacts of large-scale land concessions for plantation development in various parts of the world, especially in the tropics, including in Laos and Cambodia. However, there is still much to learn about the various connections and interactions associated with reactions to what are often referred to as “land grabs”, and the ways they are associated or not associated with broader social movements and networks opposed to land grabbing. There is also the need to develop language for discussing these circumstances, something I aim to contribute to in this article. Here, I present four different cases of types of resistance, or what I refer to as *contingent contestations*, to land concessions in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia (two from each country), focusing on the perspectives and associated strategies of smallholder farmers, but without ignoring broader issues. I consider the roles of locals in these contestations, through emphasizing the importance of histories, identities/ethnicities, politics, and geography in determining the types of responses to these land deals that emerge, and the strategies that are adopted for contesting these developments.

**Keywords:** resistance; land grabbing; large-scale land concessions; contestation; Laos; Cambodia

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade or so, a great deal of attention has been given to investigating large-scale land acquisitions in many parts of the world (Borras et al., 2011 [1]; White et al., 2012 [2]; Borras and Franco, 2013 [3]; Oberlack et al., 2016 [4]). Often characterized as “land grabs”, the development of land concessions for plantation development has emerged as a major concern for those studying agrarian change (Borras and Franco, 2013 [3]; Scoones et al., 2013 [5]; Rocheleau, 2015 [6]). Indeed, a large number of case studies situated in various parts of the world, and especially in developing countries in the tropics, have demonstrated that these developments have often resulted in the displacement of small-scale farmers from their farmlands, the loss of common lands and forests important for rural livelihoods, the loss of biodiversity and a reduction in landscape diversity, and various other socio-environmental impacts on rural communities (Hall et al., 2011 [7]; White et al., 2012 [2]; Borras and Franco, 2012 [8]; McMichael, 2012 [9]; Hall et al., 2015 [10]; Gingembre, 2015 [11]), including in mainland Southeast Asia (Barney, 2009 [12]; Baird, 2011 [13]; Delang et al., 2012 [14]; Kenney-Lazar, 2012 [15]; Global Witness, 2013 [16]; Neef et al., 2013 [17]; McAllister, 2015 [18]; Schönweger and Messerli, 2015 [19]; Messerli et al., 2015 [20]). Oberlack et al. (2016) [4], in a recent review article of a large number of case studies in various parts of the world associated with large-scale land acquisitions, have identified the enclosure of livelihood assets, elite capture, the selective marginalization of people already living in precarious circumstances, and the polarization of development narratives as key causes of adverse livelihood changes globally. Competitive exclusion of farmers, the failure

of agribusiness projects, and complex migration and employment shifts are other somewhat less frequent but nonetheless important factors associated with the development of large-scale plantation concessions. Overall, a large number of researchers have expressed considerable concern and dismay about the trend in large-scale land acquisitions (Borras et al., 2011 [1]; Baird, 2011 [13]; Kenney-Lazar, 2012 [15]; White et al., 2012 [2]; Delang et al., 2012 [14]; Neef et al., 2013 [17]; Gingembre, 2015 [11]).

This being the case, it should be of little surprise that considerable attention has recently been given to resistance against large-scale “land grabbing” (Borras and Franco, 2013 [3]; Hall et al., 2015 [10]). While there is a long history of interest in “peasant agency” (Hall et al., 2015 [10]), thinking only about full-on “resistance” is no longer as in vogue as it once was (see Alavi, 1965 [21]; Wolf, 1969 [22]). Neither is it seen as so useful to focus on the binary: resistance versus domination (O’Hanlon, 1988 [23]; Miller et al., 1989 [24]; Manzo, 1992 [25]; Borras and Franco, 2013 [3]; Hall et al., 2015 [10]). Michel Foucault (1978) [26], for example, helped make us conscious of more everyday and mundane forms of power, and James Scott (1985) [27], in his classic book, *Weapons of the Weak*, raised awareness regarding the wide range of possible responses apart from full-on resistance. This includes less risky responses, including foot-dragging, pilfering, evasion, and also more cooperative tactics, such as negotiations, mediation, compromise, conditional agreement, etc. A whole series of essays on everyday forms of resistance in Southeast Asia followed (Scott and Kertvliet, 1986 [28]), as did other scholarship emphasizing everyday forms of resistance in other regions, such as South Asia (see, for example, Haynes and Prakash, 1991 [29]).

Campbell and Heyman (2007, pp. 3) [30] have argued that the domination-resistance axis was overly emphasized in the past. They have advocated investigating what they call “slantwise”, “actions that are obliquely or only indirectly related to power relations.” Still other scholars, such as Ann Stoler (1986) [31], have gone even farther, arguing that the term resistance is not useful, and that it is more relevant to consider transformative processes. Others, however, such as Sherry Ortner (1995) [32] see resistance as a useful concept, as do I, but have nevertheless acknowledged that many past studies of resistance felt overly “romantic” due to the focus on some forms of politics, but without enough attention to “internal conflict” associated with resistance (see, for example, Abu-Lughod, 1990 [33]). In order to provide more realistic accounts of resistance, Ortner (1995) [32] advocated adopting an “ethnographic perspective”. This includes not following what she calls “ethnographic refusal” in relation to “thick” experiences, and to instead openly address the messiness of our research encounters.

The geographers Pile and Keith (1997) [34] have pointed out that resistance is dependent on particular geographies, arguing that it is no longer appropriate to think of resistance outside of space. Sharpe et al. (2000) [35] have also emphasized the importance of geography when considering resistance, and Caouette and Turner (2009) [36] have, more recently, advocated for multi-scalar approaches to examining the ways that resistance occurs. Butz (2002) [37] has emphasized a shift from focusing on everyday forms of material resistance to directing more attention to resisting legitimizing discourses. Others, such as Wang (2007) [38] have argued that hegemony is never achieved, but is instead always negotiated and contested.

While the ways that scholars think about resistance or reactions ‘from below’ to particular phenomena has considerably shifted over the last few decades, from relying on structural perspectives to adopting more relational ones, there remains considerable interest amongst activists and activist scholars in acts of “resistance” (Hall et al., 2015 [10]). Although I too share the concerns of the many scholars who have been thinking about resistance over the last few decades, there remains work to be done in relation to considering the complex and varied processes that loosely come under the umbrella of resistance.

Not surprisingly, in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in environmental and social problems and conflict in Laos and Cambodia associated with the development of large-scale economic land concessions for plantations, especially for rubber, but also for other “boom crops” (Barney, 2009 [12]; Kenney-Lazar, 2012 [15]; Delang et al., 2012 [14]; Neef et al., 2013 [17]; Global Witness, 2013 [16]; Borras and Franco, 2013 [3]; Baird, 2011 [13]; 2014 [39]; Dwyer, 2014 [40]; McAllister, 2015 [18]). Baird and Le Billon (2012) [41] and Baird (2014) [42] have argued that the responses to

large-scale land concessions for rubber in southern Laos are heavily influenced by the positionality<sup>1</sup> of the people involved, and associated “political memories”, or memories of past wars and other conflicts. Barney (2009) [12] has demonstrated how rural Laos is often imagined as a “resource frontier”, and McAllister (2015) [18] has illustrated how local people in Laos often appropriate state discourses to resist unpopular land concessions. A key point is that reactions to land grabbing are highly contextual, based on a complex array of past experiences and individual and social memories (see, also, Borrás and Franco, 2013 [3]). This all suggests that there remains value in conducting research about resistance, although the literature appropriately cautions us to avoid past pitfalls.

Usefully, *The Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS)* recently published a double Special Issue focusing on the diverse forms of resistance that occur “from below” in response to dispossession associated with large-scale land grabbing (see Hall et al., 2015 [10]). In the introductory essay to this collection, Hall et al. (2015 [10], pp. 467) emphasize that resistance to land deals is “vastly more varied and complex than is usually assumed.” They also make the important point that, “Cumulatively, these diverse forms of resistance represent both opposition to imminent dispossession and claims to land sovereignty and autonomy” (Hall et al., 2015 [10], pp. 477). Indicative of this, Martiniello (2015 [43], pp. 653) argues, when writing about Uganda, that “escalating rural social protests manifested in both everyday, hidden practices of resistance and moments of open, militant contestation are aimed at (re)establishing and securing access to means of social reproduction” while also pointing out that “these struggles cumulatively embody claims of land sovereignty and autonomy vis-à-vis capitalist markets and the state.”

One important point made by Hall et al. (2015 [10], pp. 483), in relation to the Special Issue, is that, “This collection draws attention to a spectrum of reactions to land deals which extend far beyond resistance per se, and collectively constitute the ‘politics from below’ of the global land grab.” Indeed, Hall et al. (2015) [10] want to look far beyond simple responses to land grabbing that might be classically considered to constitute resistance. Indicative of this, Mamonova (2015 [44], p. 607) makes the case, based on case study material drawn from the Ukraine, that local people frequently “show tolerance and peaceful acceptance” when faced with land grabbing, a point also emphasized by Borrás and Franco (2013) [3]. Although the case studies that are the focus of this article demonstrate that many people are resisting land grabs, the idea that resistance is best thought of as contingent contestations actually supports Mamonova’s findings, as some people are able to adapt or even thrive under conditions when large-scale land acquisitions are occurring, and thus responses are bound to vary. For example, landless peasants may find it easier to make a living when large-scale agribusiness develops in an area and provides them with regular employment as laborers; as compared to situations when only small-scale farmers are found in a particular area (see Franco et al., 2011 [45]). This can result in what Hall et al. (2015 [10], p. 472) refer to as poor-on-poor conflict associated with land deals. Moreover, even in cases when locals are very unhappy with large-scale land acquisitions, it should not be assumed that resistance will always emerge, or that it will take similar forms when it does. While many people in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia are indeed contesting land concessions, the nature of resistance is contingent on particular intertwined and mutually dependent factors. While it cannot be expected that resistance will always occur, it would be equally inappropriate to assume that it would not, especially when concessions directly impact on local livelihoods.

Although most of the articles in the *JPS* resistance to land grabbing collection are focused in Africa and Latin America, much has been written about resistance to development projects in Asia (i.e., Tsing, 2005 [46]; Price and Singer, 2015 [47]), including large-scale plantation-based land concessions (Hall et al., 2011 [7]; Baird and Le Billon, 2012 [41]; Borrás and Franco, 2013 [3]; Li, 2014 [48]; McAllister, 2015 [18]; Sampat, 2015 [49]; Bedi, 2015 [50]). Of particular relevance, Kerkvliet (2014) [51] has written

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<sup>1</sup> Positionality refers to both the fact of and the specific conditions associated with a particular social situation (Crang and Cook, 2007 [52]).

about the large number of complaints that have been made since the beginning of the 2000s related to what is perceived as unjust land confiscation in Vietnam. He brings in “rightful resistance” theory, developed by Kevin O’Brien (1996 [53]; 2013 [54]) and O’Brien and Lianjiang (2006) [55] in particular reference to protests in China. They consider rightful resistance to be linked to challenging the state when rights are promised but not delivered. Kerkvliet (2014 [51], pp. 21), however, has a somewhat broader view on what constitutes rightful resistance. He summarizes the type of rightful resistance that he encountered as referring to:

“ordinary people with similar grievances in the same locality [who] use legal means to beseech high authorities to make local officials stop mistreating them and do as the law stipulates and the government has promised.”

Kerkvliet observed that while some protesters demanded that the law be abided by in Vietnam, what he found did not fit the “rightful resistance” pattern. Instead, sometimes protesters made demands without consideration of the law, either non-violently or violently, thus pointing to more diversity in the forms opposition to land grabbing.

You-tien Hsing (2010) [56] has provided a rich and nuanced overview of land contestation<sup>2</sup> in urban China, demonstrating that there are diverse strategies for contesting land dispossession. Some have applied forms of what could be considered “rightful resistance”, resistance focused on emphasizing the legitimacy of their positions, including in relation to the law in China, sometimes combining protests with litigation as well as various forms of negotiation in order to strengthen what Hsing (2010 [56], pp. 84) refers to as “villagers’ territorial autonomy,” or strong but not complete control of particular territories. Also writing specifically about urban land dispossession, although this time in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam, Erik Harms (2012) [57] has observed that while many people faced with displacement to make way for new large urban development projects have strongly resisted inadequate compensation levels for themselves, those same people often, rather paradoxically, praise similar projects in other parts of the city as being “beautiful”, thus reaffirming the same state planning perspective that the Vietnamese government emphasizes when promoting such projects, thus ultimately leading to a sort of state hegemony enabled through a discourse that is centered on highly quantified monetary values rather than other values and issues.

One of the challenges associated with the literature regarding resistance is that the vocabulary available to represent the wide variety of ways that people have resisted large-scale plantation-based land concessions is insufficiently nuanced, or tends to not adequately demonstrate the variety of “responses from below”. In addition, there remains a tendency to fall into the binary trap associated with resistance and non-resistance, even if many know better (see Hall et al., 2015 [10]). Thus, the first main point I hope to demonstrate in this article is that considerable resistance is occurring against large-scale plantation land concessions, but that it is not always well publicized or reported on by academics, activists or in the media, a point also made by Borrás and Franco (2013) [3]. Drawing on lessons from past research, we need to think about resistance itself as *contingent contestations*. The value of applying this term instead of simply “resistance” is that it helps avoid implying binary situations of resistance or non-resistance, as the terminology immediately evokes the idea that resistance is dependent on particular circumstances or conditions, and can shift in various ways over space and time. This understanding, in turn, justifies applying a “place-based analysis”—analysis that emerges based on particular spatial assemblages—to such contestations, an approach that seems especially relevant for geographers. Essentially, the idea of *contingent contestations* is intended to demonstrate that contestations do occur, but that they do not always occur in the same ways or even at all, and this is because these contestations are contingent or dependent on various factors, including (but not limited to) the ones emphasized in this article: histories, identities/ethnicities, politics and

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, *contest* can be a verb meaning “to dispute,” and *contestation* means “an act, instance, or state of contesting.”

geography. These conditions influence the presence/absence of contestation, the nature/types of contestations, and their outcomes (including varying degrees of success and failure). All three of these are undoubtedly important, as is demonstrated by the long tradition of research focused on the conditions required for spawning contestations, and predicting the likelihood of success (see, for example, Marx, 1867[1887] [58]; Gramsci, 1971 [59]).

The second main point that I wish to make relates to the linkages between resistance or contingent contestations and social movements. Kevin Malseed (2008) [60], in a perceptive article about everyday forms of Karen resistance in Burma during the 2000s, asked how we should think about forms of resistance that are not linked to social movements with close ties to international or global networks. He did this because some of the Karen resistance that he was observing were not linked to international social movements, and thus were not well-known outside of more local geographies. Should we think of these forms of resistance as social movements, when they are unstructured, unnamed, and not linked to regional or international activist networks? This article engages with this question, by considering how people are contesting large-scale plantation concessions affecting their lives, but who are not at all, or only loosely or partially connected to broader networks opposed to “land grabbing”, such as those led by Via Campesina (Borras, 2004 [61]).

In engaging with the ideas outlined above, I consider four particular examples of what I consider to be contingent contestations—disputes that are dependent on particular circumstances—to large-scale plantation concessions in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia, ones that have emerged in particular contexts and have been less heavily influenced by global discourses and more by local concerns. In particular, I emphasize the importance of histories, identities/ethnicities, politics and geography in determining the types of strategies that locals adopt. To be clear, these four case studies hardly represent all possible forms of contestations to land grabbing; instead they demonstrate the wide variety of strategies that locals are adapting outside of the framework of regional and global networks opposed to land grabbing.

## 2. Methods

This study looks at four particular places, two in southern Laos and two in northeastern Cambodia. These cases were observed when generally investigating large plantation concessions in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia, not with the intended purpose of finding examples of contestation, but rather to better understand the overall circumstances associated with these concessions. I have been studying all aspects of these plantations, from local conditions to connections with other places and people, including the roles of social movements.

Due to the potential sensitivity of my research, I conducted fieldwork in all four areas discretely. In particular, I was careful not to endanger my research subjects by speaking with them about sensitive issues in front of government officials or plantation company employees. I also watched carefully for signs of awkwardness or concern on the part of my informants, something that requires considerable attention to detail, and also many years of experience working in Laos and Cambodia. I traveled to each area and spoke with the local people. I visited Meuy Village only once for a day, and spoke to a group in the village, the village headman, and the main family that came into conflict with the eucalyptus plantation there. I also interviewed the head of Birla Lao in Savannakhet City twice, in 2014 and 2015. I visited other villages affected by Birla Lao eucalyptus plantations in Savannakhet Province on three occasions in 2014 and 2015, and I interviewed a former Lao employee of the company in detail in 2012. I made three short visits to Yeup Village, once in 2014 and twice in 2015. However, I previously met with one of the leaders of the protest outside of his community in 2012, and conducted a long interview with him then. He was not in Yeup Village any of the times I visited in 2014 and 2015, but I spoke with him on the phone on multiple occasions in 2015 and 2016. I also met him again outside of his village, in 2016 and in early 2017. In 2015, I spent three days in Talao Village interviewing various villagers, including the former commune or sub-district chief, a prominent activist, and various other villagers. However, I knew many of the villagers there before visiting, which helped facilitate informal

discussions, as I spent time there in 1996 and 2000. I also spoke with a longtime Cambodian friend originally from the village but now living in the provincial capital of Ratanakiri Province about the land situation in the village before traveling there. In the village in Veun Sai District, in mid-2015 and early 2017, I met a leader and had detailed discussions with him about activism there. He was open with me because I have known him since 2000. In 2014, I interviewed a number of women and men from a neighboring village about the same issue.

Although I interviewed some government officials and company representations, the sensitivity of the plantation concessions in question did not allow me to do this systematically, since I did not have the official paperwork needed to access most government officials or Vietnamese rubber company employees.

Crucially, the people living in all four locations speak Lao language, with all the villagers in three of the locations being ethnic Lao (including the two locations in northeastern Cambodia). Only the inhabitants of Yeup Village, who are ethnic Katu, are not ethnic Lao, but they speak Lao fluently. This made communication easy, as I speak Lao and I am quite familiar with the Lao dialects spoken in both southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia.

Although the research benefitted from my 25 years of living, working and conducting research on natural resource management issues in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia, this sort of research does run the risk of missing the voices of less powerful and more timid people. Although I was aware of this from the outset, and tried to identify these voices when in the field, I was only partially able to remedy this weakness. I believe, however, that the interviews I conducted generally generated high quality discussions, and that they were useful for revealing the voices of the many people I met during investigations.

In all but the fourth case study, I received permission from my informants to name the villages involved, as they hope that my research can potentially help to raise awareness about the circumstances they are facing, and gain support for their efforts.

### 3. The Case Studies

It seems worth emphasizing that the overall political context in Cambodia is quite different than in Laos. Although both countries are run by authoritarian governments, Laos has a one-party communist political system, and severe limitations are put on political and civil society organization. In addition, all media in Laos is strictly controlled by the state. In Cambodia, however, there is a multi-party democracy, and there are fewer restrictions on civil society, and the media is not as controlled by the state. State oppression is still, however, common including state sanctioned violence, and this has weakened civil society, which often dares not oppose the state (Baird, 2016 [62]). However, the overall political environment is still much more open than in Laos.

Table 1 provides an overall summary of the four case studies that follow. This summary is intended to make it easier to conceptualize and comparatively analyze the case studies.

**Table 1.** Summary of the four case studies.

| Location   | Company and Plantation Type  | Achievements/ or Results of Contestation                                  | Key Contestation Strategies   | Contingent Factors  |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| Meuy Village, Champasak District, Champasak Province, Laos | Birla Lao Company, Eucalyptus, 160 hectares in Champasak District, 40,000 ha in total announced in 2006 (15,000 ha planted in total) | Stopped part of the plantation  | Individual direct action and narrative justification                | History based on cultural norms linked to ethnicity and geography           |
| Yeup Village, Thateng District, Xekong Province, Laos      | Cong Ty Cao Su Nghi Lao-Viet (LVF) company (Lao-Viet Company), Rubber, 5000 ha in 2006 (all planted?)                                | Took control of part of the plantation to leverage favorable resettlement | Group direct action and networking with central government agencies | Political history, identities/ethnicity, political networking and geography |

Table 1. Cont.

| Location  | Company and Plantation Type  | Achievements/ or Results of Contestation   | Key Contestation Strategies  | Contingent Factors                           |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Talao District, Andong Meas District, Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia | Hoanh Anh Andong Meas Co., Ltd. (HAGL), Rubber, 9755 ha (although amended to make smaller) sub-decree reclassifying land in 2011 (partially planted) | Regained control of strategic 10 ha of land for flood protection and future settlement | Group direct action and security from flooding narrative justification                             | Security from flooding history and geography |
| Veun Sai District, Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia                    | S.K. Plantation (Cambodia) Pte., Rubber, 8000 ha (although amended to make smaller since then), 2012 (nothing planted)                               | Totally stopped the plantation up to now   | Individual strategizing and group direct and indirect action, as well as direct political advocacy | History, identities, politics and geography  |

### 3.1. Meuy Village, Champasak District, Champasak Province, Southern Laos

I have been interested in the eucalyptus plantation development activities of Birla Lao Company in Savannakhet Province, southern Laos for many years, and so in July 2015 I visited the only village in Champasak District, Champasak Province, where the company had planted eucalyptus trees: Meuy Village, which is located inland from the Mekong River in a rural part of the district. Aditya Birla Lao, a giant firm from India, was granted a 40,000 ha eucalyptus plantation concession in Laos in 2006, and the company established Birla Lao to manage the concession. I knew of Birla Lao's operations in Savannakhet Province (see Baird and Barney, 2017 [63]; Manorom et al., 2017 [64]), and a former employee of Birla Lao told me in 2012 that there had been considerable conflict between Birla Lao and villagers in Savannakhet. I wanted, however, to know about the circumstances in Champasak. I was unaware that there had been conflict in Meuy Village, but I was aware of problems in Savannakhet so I was open to the possibility that the plantations in Champasak might also be contested. My first stop in the village, since I did not know anyone there, was a small shop at the side of the road, where a number of locals had gathered. We bought some drinks and started asking about villager experiences with Birla Lao. The village headman happened to be passing by, and the shop owner called him over. He provided some details about the circumstances. First, he made it clear that he was not the village headman five years earlier when Birla Lao started operating in the village. He also explained that Birla Lao has 160 ha of eucalyptus in the village. He said that the district government granted the "empty" (*pao vang* in Lao) land to Birla Lao without consulting with villagers. In fact, the area was an important forest for villager use. "We only received minor benefits", he said. "They gave us a little cement, 20 sets of student chairs and desks, and one water pump [for the loss of the forest]," he continued, with a clear sense of loss. "They [Birla Lao] pay the district [government] US\$50/hectare, but we didn't see any of it."<sup>3</sup> He went on to explain that locals previously relied on the forest for livestock grazing, wood cutting, and the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), including wild mushrooms (*het pho*, *het lang nyok*, and *het pouak* in Lao). "It was a big forest," he commented, "but it was cut down to grow eucalyptus. We didn't want it to be cut down." He was clearly unhappy with the plantation, the company, and the district government. He said, "In other districts, the villagers decide [on what developments are allowed], but in Champasak the government decides." Then an old woman in the back spoke out, making one short strong statement, "We don't eat mushrooms anymore." The community was clearly not positive about the plantation.

After the village headman left, the woman who owned the shop suggested that I cross a stream near the village and visit the family living on the other side. "The man who stood up against the eucalyptus plantation is there," she told me. I followed her advice. After crossing the stream and walking a distance, we found Mr. Meng and his family eating lunch under a small open shelter in the middle of their rice field. They had only recently finished planting their rice seedlings. Meng was immediately friendly, and when I asked him about him leading opposition against Birla Lao he

<sup>3</sup> The amount paid, and to whom, cannot be confirmed.

chuckled and acknowledged that he had indeed opposed the plantation. “They planted village land, not government land,” he immediately insisted. “Birla Lao took a tractor right across my rice paddy land . . . They planted eucalyptus on the land where I was going to expand my rice fields. I warned them not to do that, but they didn’t listen. So I pulled out the eucalyptus seedlings.” He continued, “Then the district [government officials] came down after the company complained to them. They took me to the district center for questioning. I told them that they planted on my land. I explained that it was my ancestor’s land, and that it was always intended for rice paddy expansion in the future.” He was released without penalty.

When I told Meng that I would keep his identity anonymous, his response surprised me: “The district [government] knows that the company inappropriately tried to take my land. If I had done something wrong, I would be in jail. I am not afraid to be identified. I was correct.” Here, we can see that Meng is invoking a narrative that partially but not entirely fits with the “rightful resistance” that O’Brien (1996) [53] introduced, and Kerkvliet (2014) [51] more recently discussed in relation to Vietnam. While “rightful resistance” is generally thought of as resistance that is justified based on promises made by the state but not delivered, this case points to a moral understanding of what lands belong to villagers and which ones do not, both on the part of villagers and local government officials. So, there was a sort of rightful resistance, but one related to land tenure norms, identities, histories, and geography. Meng was able to use standard understandings of land tenure amongst lowland Lao farmers to make his case with the district government. Indeed, moral justification can be important for contesting land grabbing for boom crop concessions, especially when discursive claims can be made for long term occupation. Local understandings are the foundations for various contingent contestations, oppositions based on place-based circumstances. However, these kinds of efforts are not always successful, and are dependent on context, including the willingness and ability of villagers to articulate them, and the receptiveness of government officials. There are also other important factors, such as the individual connections and political histories of those making localized moral arguments (Baird and Le Billion, 2012 [41]; Baird, 2014 [42]). In this case, Meng said his family also benefited from being able to claim that they had occupied the land in the area “for over 100 years.” Ultimately, Meng was successful in gaining his land back, and stopping the company from expanding its operations into other villages in the district (the company was subsequently prohibited from expanding to other villages in the district by the district government). Acts of villager resistance to land concessions have been reported on by the media in Laos before (Ponnudurai, 2014 [65]), but as generally suggested by Borrás and Franco (2013) [3], there are undoubtedly many more unreported cases, of which the example of Meuy Village is but one. Meng has no connections to networks of people contesting land grabbing, either in Laos or beyond.

### *3.2. Yeup Village, Thateng District, Xekong Province, Southern Laos*

The situation in Yeup Village, Thateng District, Xekong Province, Southern Laos is quite different from what we encountered in Meuy Village. Yeup Village is located a number of kilometers north of the road between the district center of Thateng and the provincial capital of Xekong Province and is not inhabited by ethnic Lao people, as is the case for Meuy Village. The residents are from the Austroasiatic language-speaking Katu ethnic minority group. During the 1990s, as described by Evrard and Goudineau (2004) [66], there was a large amount of internal resettlement of mainly ethnic minorities living in mountainous areas to lowland areas or from remote areas to adjacent to major roads. This was done for various reasons, but mainly to try to stop swidden agriculture and “sedentarize” upland populations near spaces perceived to be conducive to “development” and “modernization”.

In 1996, Yeup Village was resettled to their present location in the midlands of Thateng District, from the remote uplands of Kaleum District, also in Xekong Province. The community created a circular village at the new location, with a traditional communal house in the middle of the village, similar to how they spatially organized their village when they lived in the higher mountains. They continued doing swidden cultivation, but in a somewhat less mountainous region than where they previously

lived. However, things changed in 2006 when a 5000 hectare plantation land concession was granted to Cong Ty Cao Su Nghi Lao-Viet (LVF) company (referred to here as Lao-Viet Rubber Company), a subsidiary of the Vietnam Rubber Group. The company began planting rubber near Yeup Village. The full story is complicated, but in short, the village headman is believed to have received some benefits from the company in return for signing away almost all the agricultural and forest land of the village. Although the headman originally denied wrongdoing, a document signing away the land with his signature on it eventually came to light, causing him to resign from his position in disgrace.<sup>4</sup> However, the damage had been done, and by the time the villagers realized what had happened, their farmland had been seized, cleared and planted with rubber seedlings, leaving the 92 families in the community with no agricultural or common lands. All they had left was the land where their houses are located.

The Lao organization, the Lao Biodiversity Association (LBA), first reported on the problems with rubber plantation development in Thateng in 2008 [67]. At the time, the villagers were already experiencing serious social and environmental problems associated with being displaced from their land (LBA, 2008 [67]), although all the information included above comes from my own fieldwork. After LBA's research was completed, some villagers came together and petitioned the National Assembly in the capital city of Vientiane for their land to be returned. They evoked the idea that they had supported the communist revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. They also spoke about their plight on a radio program in Vientiane. Provincial authorities were angry that the villagers went over their heads, and some leaders were arrested in 2012 and forced to sign papers promising to stop resisting. One young villager, who was a former soldier, refused to sign and was beaten badly and tortured by police before finally being released two weeks later. The protesters were temporarily suppressed, but locals had no agricultural land, and thus only very limited means for making a living. The issue could not be suppressed for long.

A portion of the families (known in the village as the 37 family group) succumbed and started to work as rubber tappers and weeders for the same company that displaced them, thus achieving a situation that looks very much like what Karl Marx (1867[1887] [57]) referred to as "primitive accumulation", and what David Harvey (2003) [68] more recently referred to as "accumulation by dispossession". These families are able to survive as rubber tappers, but are apparently not particularly happy with their present situation.

The other group (known in the village as the 55 family group) were, however, too bitter about the loss of their land to work for the Vietnamese. Instead, they adopted other temporary strategies for surviving. This included "borrowing" land from a neighboring ethnic Souay community, Yokthong Village. In such cases, they were not charged any rent, but were expected to build bunds and develop the land for future agricultural opportunities. After one or two years, once the land had been improved, the "borrowing" Katu had to return the land to the original owners, who benefited from the improvements made (Baird and Fox, 2015 [69]). Villagers have also been relying on other ways of getting by, such as hiring out labor to surrounding communities.

Once it became clear that it would be difficult to gain their land back, since it had all been planted with rubber, the villagers started advocating for resettling to another location with sufficient farmland. The district government initially encouraged the villagers to go out and find another piece of land where they could resettle. The villagers found a couple of places that they thought would be suitable. One was inside a provincial protected area and was ruled out by the district government. The other was contested by a nearby community and so that idea was also abandoned. As options for moving disappeared, the villagers became more frustrated, desperate, and active. Crucially, however, they were only very loosely linked to networks in Laos opposed to land grabbing, and they had absolutely no connections outside of Laos.

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymous villager activist from Yeup Village, Pakse, June 2012.

The villagers felt that the local government was dragging their feet, and that the Lao-Viet Company was also doing nothing to resolve the problem. Therefore, the group of 55 families in the village decided—without any advice from outsiders—to force action. In November 2014, the 55 families occupied a large area of rubber trees adjacent to the village. The exact size of the area is uncertain, but is reportedly 120 hectares. The villagers entered the plantation and each family hammered a small wooden sign onto one of the rubber trees, in order to claim different pieces rubber plantation for individual families. The signs said things like, “Mr. Thao is the owner of this land” or “Reserved. Mr. Vin is the owner of this land” (see Figure 1 for an example).



**Figure 1.** Photo of one of 55 signs in the villager-occupied rubber plantation near Yeup Village, Thateng District, Xekong Province, southern Laos.

The Vietnamese laborers who were actively tapping the by-then mature rubber trees did not initially take much notice of the signs, and continued to tap, but in response, the villagers started turning the Vietnamese rubber collecting dishes over to prevent further tapping. The Vietnamese tried to turn them back, but after the villagers flipped them over again, the Lao-Viet Company realized that they could not continue to tap there. Later, a representative of the company visited the village to demand that the plantation be returned. The villagers said that they would be happy to do so once their outstanding land problems are resolved. This could be done by either returning a large amount of land to the community, or by relocating the community elsewhere. It seems that the main reason that there was not a severe state backlash to the villagers this time, whereas there was earlier, is because before it was possible to identify key resistance leaders. This time, however, the 55 families all participated, without an obvious leader being identifiable. This made hard oppression much less viable. Also, the company may be hesitant to oppress ethnic minorities who supported the revolution.

Crucially, unlike Meuy Village, various villagers from Yeup Village told me that they took over the plantation to leverage action by the government and the company. As one villager put it, “The rubber is already there and we do not want to tap it. We have threatened to cut the trees down if there is no action. However, our goal is to force the government and company to find us a suitable place to

relocate.” While those in Meuy were able to articulate their long-term attachment to the land as a way to create a moral justification for resistance, in Yeup the moral argument is focused on villagers’ inability to access land to support their livelihoods, and the lack of efforts by the company and the government to find a place where they can have access to enough land to support themselves. Both rely on variations of “rightful resistance” discourses, but each case is focused on a different type of moral imperative, perceived government responsibility, and thus argumentation.

I first visited Yeup Village in 2014. Villagers I met there were surprisingly open. When I returned to the village two more times, once in May 2015 and again in July 2015, I learned more about the situation. During the July 2015 visit I became aware of the occupation of the rubber plantation. The villagers told me that they could easily control the area because it is directly adjacent to their village. I spoke to some of the villagers again in November 2016 and January 2017, and they were still occupying the land. Most recently, I was informed that the provincial police had visited the village in order to prepare documentation that would allow the villagers to officially relocate if the provincial government can find them an appropriate place to move. The villagers who have taken control of part of the rubber plantation have made it clear that they are ready to accept the plantation if they are offered a good place to resettle, which further demonstrates the contingent nature of their contestations.

The relationship to the land of the people, and the resultant strategy that villagers chose, are quite different in Yeup Village than what we have already read about in Meuy Village. The people of Meuy are much more attached to their place than the villagers of Yeup, as they have mainly all lived in the village for long periods or generations, but both have been affected by plantation company land grabbing. In Meuy, individual action made a difference, but within a broader environment where other locals supported the actions of the individual involved. In Yeup, however, some success has been achieved through attracting the attention of central government officials at the central level. The National Assembly, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the central government police became aware of the conflict, and villagers believe that this networking with the central government has resulted in the provincial and district government being much less willing to directly oppress the villagers. The central government has also encouraged the local government to look for ways to solve the village’s land problems, as not doing so might result in the district and provincial governments being reprimanded by the central government. “We are glad that the central government knows about our situation now. Letting them know about what is happening reduces the risk to us,” pointed out one villager. In addition, the villagers are from families of former ethnic minority pro-government revolutionaries, and this has benefited them politically, especially with central government officials (see Baird and Le Billon, 2012 [41]; Baird, 2014 [65]).

### *3.3. Talao Village, Andong Meas District, Ratanakiri Province, Northeastern Cambodia*

Talao Village, in Andong Meas District, Ratanakiri Province, northeastern Cambodia, located on the north side of the Sesan River and more than 20 kilometers to the west of the district capital, is populated by people who identify as ethnic Lao, but the Lao of Cambodia are considered to be an ethnic minority, whereas they are the ethnic majority in neighboring Laos (Baird, 2016 [70]).

As with Yeup Village, in Laos, Talao Village has been badly affected by the development of a large rubber plantation, this time a 9755 hectare concession granted in 2011 to a powerful Vietnamese company, Hoang Anh Andong Meas Co, Ltd. (a subsidiary of Hoang Anh Gia Lai Co., Ltd.) (referred to as HAGL here). HAGL is not only a major player in rubber agriculture and agri-business in northeastern Cambodia, but also has massive plantations on the Lao side of the border in Attapeu Province, Laos (Kenney-Lazar, 2012 [15]; Global Witness, 2013 [16]; Baird and Fox, 2015 [69]). HAGL’s rubber plantations have been heavily criticized in recent years, due to the large amount of land dispossession that the plantations have caused, and also due to heavy environmental impacts (Global Witness, 2013 [16]), and the World Bank Group’s Compliance Advisor Ombudsman investigated HAGL in Cambodia after people from 17 communities in O Chum and Andong Meas Districts (including Talao Village) in Ratanakiri Province, with the support of local non-government organizations (NGOs)

in Ratanakiri, and Phnom Penh-based Equitable Cambodia, filed a complaint against the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a funder of HAGL in Vietnam, for allegedly grabbing their land without consent (Woodside, 2014 [71]; Cuddy, 2015 [72]).

The situation in Talao Village is, not surprisingly, more complicated than it will be possible to demonstrate here. However, through a series of government facilitated discussions and negotiations in the 2000s, HAGL was able to gain control over most of the common forests and lands of the village, as well as some of the community's agricultural land. This was facilitated through the commune (sub-district) chief, who was unprepared for the circumstances, and did not realize the amount of land that was going to be lost. He did receive a small amount of money from the company, but from discussions with him in July 2015, it seems likely that he felt that he had no choice but to allow the company to operate. The land dispossession experienced in Talao Village, as in many other villages in Cambodia, has been facilitated through the government's redefinition of village forest land into being either State Public or State Private land, with the former being eligible for the government to give to companies as large-scale economic land concessions (Baird, 2013 [73]).<sup>5</sup> HAGL then moved in and rapidly cleared the forest and planted the land. By the time the villagers realized what was going on, most of their former communal lands, which the government had claimed as State Private land, had been taken by HAGL.

The villagers were upset when they realized what was happening, but they did not know how to respond, at least initially. The villagers were especially concerned about an approximately ten hectare piece of land near the village that is naturally elevated higher than village land. They were interested in that land because they had previously relied on it for refuge during periods when heavy flooding affected the Sesan River, which they are located adjacent to. "I remember fleeing there when the big floods came. It was the only place nearby not under water," explained one villager. As discussed in detail by Baird and Barney (2017) [63], the problem has especially been exasperated because the village has experienced serious riverbank erosion in recent years, due to the downstream impacts of hydropower dams upriver in Vietnam, including the Yali Falls dam. About ten houses have been forced to relocate in recent years due to this heavy erosion. Others are expected to be moved as the erosion continues. The history of the village made the upland piece of land especially important, both as a refuge from floods in some years, and as a possible location to resettle due to riverbank erosion. The geography of the land, and its importance in villager human security, thus became a key factor.

Villagers in Talao warned HAGL that they were not willing to give up this high land, since it was crucial for them during flood periods. However, the company managers did not listen, and ordered the land cleared and planted with rubber. In the meantime, some local NGOs in Ratanakiri Province had begun organizing villagers, including those in Talao, but they did not have a particularly strong presence in the village or the area more generally. However, this work, combined with a general sense of frustration and desperation by villagers about not only losing hundreds of hectares of land, including most of their common lands, but also their place of refuge when it floods, caused the villagers to act on their own, even if they did not have the explicit support of the village head and commune chief. Indeed, it was the particular local circumstances that resulted in mobilization, not outside social movements or broader networks opposed to land grabbing.

One day, without warning, villagers from Talao walked to the area and uprooted the rubber seedlings and pulled out the fence posts that HAGL had put in to enclose the contested piece of land. Since most of the villagers in Talao were present, HAGL dared not try to stop the villagers, who were ultimately successful in retaking the piece of land. Moreover, in the few years since then HAGL has not tried to reoccupy the land.

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<sup>5</sup> Lavers (2012) [74] has pointed out that common lands used by villagers have also been declared to be state lands by governments in other countries, with his focus being on Ethiopia.

There have also been NGO-led efforts at a higher scale to pressure HAGL, through a complaints process linked to the International Finance Corporation (IFC), to give a number of villages some of their land back, and also to compensate them more appropriately for their losses. This represents yet another level or scale of contestation, although one that I do not have space to elaborate on here. The point is that villagers from Talao engaged in contingent contestation to HAGL's plantation development plans, even if they have so far only been able to strongly push for the return of a small portion of their lost land. They have been in contact with some outsiders, but ultimately their most important action was based on strictly local concerns, ones that outsiders were not aware of. Thus, broader networks had very little influence on their action to regain control of the ten hectare piece of land.

#### 3.4. *Veun Sai District, Ratanakiri Province, Northeastern Cambodia*

The fourth case study involves ethnic Lao villages in Veun Sai District, Ratanakiri Province, northeastern Cambodia, which are located adjacent to the Sesan River, downstream from Talao Village.<sup>6</sup> This case further demonstrates the nature of contingent contestations to land grabbing, and the way that local organization and action outside of national, regional and international networks sometimes operates.

When I visited Veun Sai District in 2014, I was not aware of how resistance against a large rubber plantation concession there had developed. However, in July 2015, I returned to one of the villages and met Mr. Sing (a pseudonym), a village leader. I have known him, although not well, for many years, since I was involved in studying the impacts of the Yali Falls dam in Vietnam on downstream areas of Cambodia in 2000 (Wyatt and Baird, 2007 [75]). He is connected to anti-dam networks in Cambodia and beyond, but he has no connections with networks associated with advocating against land grabbing. Sing had been quite sick for a few years, but when I met him in July 2015 and again in January 2017 he was feeling somewhat better. He treated me as an insider and explained some crucial events and strategies.

Sing explained that when the 8000 hectare concession was granted to S.K. Plantation (Cambodia) Pte. of Singapore, he—as a member of the village administration—was obliged to meet the central level government officials who came to the village with the investors to examine the concession area. They also planned to measure and demarcate the land. After the concession was approved through a sub-decree in 2012 (Vanderbrink, 2012 [76]), Sing learned in advance that company representatives would be visiting the village, and he started organizing other villagers. There was no civil society involvement. Sing prepared a large number of villagers to wait at a particular place in the concession area. He told them to bring clubs, knives, and sticks with them, although there was no intention to injure anyone. When the outsiders arrived, Sing met them and pretended to have no objections to the concession. He guided them to the concession area. On the way, he phoned one of the villagers waiting at the prearranged location. They spoke in Lao, which none of the guests could understand. Sing signaled for the group to cut them off on their way to the concession area, and to show strong displeasure with the concession. They did exactly that, causing the officials and guests from the capital city of Phnom Penh to back-off. As they were retreating, Sing did more damage by suggesting to the outsiders that they were dealing with “uncontrollable” and by implication uncivilized ethnic minorities, and that they should be especially wary of such “dangerous” people. For those from Phnom Penh, this narrative was particularly effective, as it played on the feelings of fear and suspicions that many lowland Khmer people have towards indigenous ethnic minorities, such as the Jarai, Tampuan, Kreung, Brao, Kavet, Kachok and Bunong. Although they were ethnic Lao people, they appeared to the stereotyping lowlanders to be from one of these feared communities of “*Phnong*” (a pejorative for upland minorities in Khmer). “They might try to cut you”, Sing suggested to the group, referring to the club and knife wielding protesters they had encountered earlier. This left the officials and company

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<sup>6</sup> To protect the identity of the village leader, I am not able to reveal the name or the exact location of the village.

representatives scared, and they rushed for their vehicles. The village headman showed us a few cement posts that the company had left behind. "I am keeping them as souvenirs," he chuckled.

Another act of contestation by ethnic Lao villagers in another village downriver, Hat Po, was also, as I learned, orchestrated by Sing from behind the scenes. He had met a villager from Hat Po, who told him that "we have lost all our land", and that "nothing could be done to protect the land from the rubber concession." Sing told the Hat Po man that he was stupid (*ngo* in Lao), and then proceeded to direct him on how to solve the problem. The company had sent people to measure the land, and they had also delivered sawn wood to build wooden accommodations for the plantation workers to stay in. They had already built a few basic structures, and were preparing to build more. Sing told the Hat Po villager that first the villagers needed to meet to plan their resistance. The Hat Po man responded that they could not meet, as the village headman and commune chief there had already been paid off by the company, and would therefore block any attempt to organize a meeting. Sing had a plan. He said that the villagers should organize an animist religious ceremony related to village spirits. This would be a way to get villagers together without alarming the village headman and commune chief, who he expected would not attend. The plan worked perfectly and allowed for organizing to occur in opposition to the concession. Sing told the Hat Po man to inform each family to bring five liters of gasoline with them for a protest in the next couple of days. People who refused to participate would be shunned.

The vast majority of the village families ended up protesting against the concession as hoped. There were just about ten workers there at the time, none in senior positions. The villagers chased them away. They then proceeded to pour gasoline on the structures and wood that the company had prepared. Everything went up in flames, and it has been over two years since anyone at Hat Po Village has seen any sign of S.K. Plantation (Cambodia) Pte. While strong declines in global rubber prices over the last few years may have made the Singaporeans less enthusiastic at trying to move ahead with clearing and rubber tree planting (Russell, 2015 [77]), it is also undoubtedly true that villager opposition influenced the company's decision to at least temporarily abandon their plans.

It took more than two years for anyone from S.K. Plantation to return to the area, but the villagers were not complacent during the interim. Sing had some informal discussions with socially influential individuals in his village and a neighboring village, urging them to occupy pieces of land in the heart of the concession. By the time someone from the company returned in 2016, 105 families from two villages, plus a number of other villagers from other affected communities, had cut down trees and established an average of three hectares of swidden cultivation fields per family, field houses and in some cases cashew tree and other plantations in order to secure the land. When the company's representative arrived, he asked Sing, through a translator, who had approved this occupation of the land. Sing responded that there were no rubber trees there yet, so the villagers still considered the land to be theirs. In addition, later on Sing told senior officials from the ruling Cambodian People's Party that villagers would not vote for them in future elections if the government allowed the concession to proceed. This warning was apparently transmitted to senior party leaders. He stated, in early 2017, "The company is going to have a hard time gaining control of the land now that it has been occupied. I don't think they will ever be able to take it over." Crucially, the strategist behind the resistance has never been identified to the company, the government, or broader networks opposed to land grabbing.

This case demonstrates the importance of individuals working on strategizing behind the scene, but also the ability of them and others to collectively organize. As Sing put it, "It is easy to break a single chopstick, but it is much more difficult to do so if many chopsticks are put together." Here, we see a very different kind of contestation compared to what has already been presented in the three previous case studies. This case has been heavily contingent on the instigator of the actions keeping his identity secret. I asked Sing where he came up with his ideas. He explained that he was inspired by villagers he had met during study trips to Thailand and a dam in southern Cambodia years earlier. "Some people who went on the trips [from Cambodia] just went for the money or for fun, but I learned a lot and put what I learned to use later," he explained. So he was influenced by lessons he learned

through an NGO network, but that network was related to dams, not land. Crucially, the work he did was nuanced to take local and political context into account.

#### 4. Conclusions

The four case studies presented above all indicate the contingent nature of contestations to large-scale plantation-based land concessions. The first case, from Meuy Village, shows how individual action was crucial for gaining success, and how narratives linked to history, identities and geography were essential for achieving success. Lao people have long recognized that those who own rice paddy land have legitimate rights to forest land adjacent to it. This understanding is related to Lao identity, the history of gradual rice paddy development, and particular geographies associated with such development. It was utilized to resist eucalyptus planting. The second case, from Yeup Village, demonstrates how collective action and gaining support from central government agencies has been important, and how histories, ethnicity, politics and geography have been critical, albeit in different ways than in Meuy. In this case, the people adopted a strategy related to direct resistance, but also associated with political networking with the central government, and their history as ethnic minorities who supported the communist revolution in the past. In that they do not have a long history of living at their present village location, they are much more amenable to relocating than other communities with long histories of residence in particular locations. However, their potential for relocating is highly dependent on geography, especially provincial government approval, and they will have to relocate within the boundaries of Xekong Province. For the third case, in Talao Village, collective action has again been important, as have history and geography, although again in different ways than the other cases. For them, the history of serious Sesan River flooding in their village, and the particular geography of the land they reclaimed being located at a higher elevation than other surrounding areas, were crucial for mobilizing the villager resistance that occurred. Finally, the case of Veun Sai District demonstrates the importance of individual strategizing ultimately necessary for collective action, as well as the roles of histories, identities/ethnicities, politics and geography in advocacy successes. The key person who developed various strategies utilized particular fears of ethnic Khmers toward “ethnic minorities” to scare officials away, ethnic practices related to spirit appeasement to create space for organizing resistance, threats related to political election losses to affect politicians, and the geography of direct occupation of contested space to gain the upper hand against those granted the contested land concession. All the case studies demonstrate the importance of thinking about resistance as contingent contestations, forms of resistance dependent on particular contexts and circumstances at various scales.

One of the first lessons that emerges from the case studies is that villagers in mainland Southeast Asia, even when faced with oppressive political systems, do frequently take various actions to contest land grabbing linked to large-scale tree plantation concessions, even if these varied contestations have been contingent on various factors. Even though the varied nature of contestations to land grabs is already well known (see Borrás and Franco, 2013 [3]; Hall et al., 2015 [10]), there is still much to be learned about the particular ways that this is occurring in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia, as resistance there is contingent on various place-based factors. This is one of the reasons for this article. In addition, this article demonstrates the need to pay attention to particular spatialities, histories, identities and the politics associated with contestations.

A second lesson is that contesting rubber and eucalyptus plantation concessions is not always easy or largely successful, but in all the cases presented here, at least limited victories have been achieved, and in some cases there have been major successes. These sorts of achievements have received less attention than they deserve (Borrás and Franco, 2013 [3]). There has been a tendency to look for resistance through international social movements and networks of people, such as Via Campesina. The cases presented here, however, have all been outside or at least largely outside of international social movement networks, and have instead been based more on grounded experiences, such as the forms of everyday resistance for land and human rights that Malseed (2008) [60] described amongst

Karen at the village level in Burma. Still, they should be considered social movements, just not ones operating at different scales and without many or any national, regional or international links.

Finally, it is important to better understand the variety of contingent forms of resistance that occur (Borras and Franco, 2013 [3]; Hall et al., 2015 [10]). Thinking of resistance as various forms of contestations—ones contingent on histories, identities, politics and geography—moves us closer to a vocabulary that is representative of what is actually happening on the ground. This does not mean that the term resistance should be entirely abandoned, but because it tends to evoke binary conceptualizations of resistance and acceptance, we need to use other language alongside it, so as to better articulate particular positionalities and experiences. In this way, we can better examine specific contested plantation-based land concessions, and the particular contingent strategies associated with contesting them.

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks to all the villagers in Laos and Cambodia who provided information about their particular circumstances. The article is based on research conducted as part of research support by NASA grant No. NNX14AD87G. Thanks to Jefferson Fox for leading the project. Thanks also to Miles Kenney-Lazar, Nga Dao and Peter Swift, and two anonymous referees for providing useful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Any remaining deficiencies are my own.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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