

Land grabbing, conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations: perspectives from East and Southeast Asia

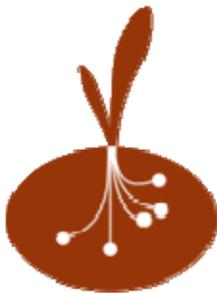
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Gaining and Maintaining Control: Vietnamese Migrants, Cambodian elites and Strategies of Land Control along the Cambodian Borderlands

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Abstract

While the large-scale transfer of land in Cambodia to foreign agribusiness interests has received much critical attention, another set of cross-border land deals has gone relatively unnoticed. In recent years, thousands of Vietnamese have crossed the border into Cambodia and acquired land for the cultivation of rice and farmed shrimp. Though these land deals are small in scale, they involve some of Cambodia's richest farmland and most bio-diverse coastal ecosystems, and thus their cumulative social and ecological impact may well rival that of the much larger and better-known Economic Land Concessions. In this study, we draw on ethnographic research, conducted in a rice-farming area of Takeo province and a shrimp-farming area in Kampot, to explore this phenomenon of small-scale land transfers, developing a comparative case study through which we examine processes of accumulation, exclusion, and incorporation as they play out along Cambodia's border with Vietnam. This paper has two objectives, the first of which is to broaden the discussion around cross-border land deals to encompass both large land concessions and the kind of smaller land transfers now taking place along the Vietnam-Cambodia border. These land transfers, we argue, are driven by dynamics of agrarian change both in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, from which most migrants originate, and in Cambodia itself. In the Mekong Delta, economic liberalization and global market integration have spurred the rapid development of a commercial agriculture sector from a smallholder base. Much like larger firms, Vietnamese farmers face competitive pressures that compel them to expand their operations, and many have looked to Cambodia as a source of cheap land and a new frontier for accumulation and commodity production. This accumulation, moreover, has been facilitated by the recent marketization of land tenure in Cambodia, smoothing the sale and rental of land to Vietnamese migrants. The second objective of the paper is to examine and contrast the dynamics of social and ecological change set in motion by Vietnamese land acquisitions in our two case study sites, looking primarily at inter-related processes of exclusion and incorporation. We argue first that exclusion has been experienced differently in the two sites, ranging from the dispossession of locals in Takeo, as migrants acquire more and more of the region's rice-growing land, to the loss of access to common-pool resources that has accompanied the conversion of coastal mangroves to shrimp ponds by Vietnamese farmers in Kampot. We then turn our attention to the way in which the Cambodian borderlands have been incorporated into new networks of exchange and circulation through these land transfers. We find again that incorporation takes varied forms, as Vietnamese shrimp farmers, bound by the perishable nature of their crop, form an enclave economy enmeshed in existing cold chains that tie them to Vietnam-based processors and exporters, but as rice producers in Takeo - both Vietnamese and Cambodian - exercise more flexibility, exploiting their position on the border to access input and output chains in both countries.

Introduction

“Now everything is changing. No one knows this, but that was always the plan of the Nayk Mien [wealthy people] that got the land here, they want to build factories... They will kick out all the Vietnamese farmers soon. Soon they will all be gone.” (Mr. Sokun, Commune Councillor, Kampot, 28.2.15).

While the large-scale transfer of land in Cambodia to foreign agribusiness interests has received much critical attention, another set of cross-border land deals in that country has gone relatively unnoticed. In recent years, thousands of Vietnamese have crossed the border into Cambodia and leased land for the cultivation of rice and farmed shrimp for export markets. In late 2014 and early 2015, we traveled to the border areas of Takeo and Kampot provinces in Cambodia to investigate these land deals. We expected we would find a novel form of smallholder land grabbing, with foreigners seizing control of the borderlands and dispossessing local villagers (as envisioned by Hall (2011)). Instead, we found land-insecure migrant farmers who lived in constant fear of eviction. While we expected to encounter protest and resistance in the face of Vietnamese land grabs, instead we found Vietnamese tenants desperately asking for help in the face of exploitation by local officials and threats of eviction from landlords and their agents. The Vietnamese, we found, were hardly the archetypal “land grabbers;” in fact, they teetered on the edge of dispossession themselves.

We did find evidence of numerous, large-scale land grabs in these two border provinces, but the grabbers were Cambodian elites, who had taken control of large swathes of “marginal” land – mainly flooded forest – and rented it on to the Vietnamese. This initial grab, however, was only the beginning of a longer process. Rather than ceding control to foreigners, Cambodian elites have used the presence of these Vietnamese migrants to strengthen and consolidate their hold over the land. In doing so, they have managed both to secure a large share of the value of the export commodities currently being produced by the Vietnamese on the land, and to protect their claim to the future value of the land itself.

In this paper, we look to the emerging literature on land control, access, exclusion, and value to challenge the notion that cross-border land deals necessarily entail the transfer of land control to foreign actors. Instead, we argue, such deals can be a means by which domestic elites consolidate their control over the land and their claim to its value, both the value of commodities produced on the land, which they extract through rents, and the value of land as a commodity, which is realized through its eventual sale. We advance this argument in six sections: the first provides a theoretical overview of the literature on land control and value and an outline of our methods and study site; the second looks at how the Cambodian elite seized control of the land, with an eye towards its potential value, both as a means of production and an object of speculation; the third looks at how and why the Vietnamese were settled on the land and how they have served to unlock its productive capacity and generate value for the landlords; fourth, we consider how control over the land has been consolidated through the presence of the Vietnamese; fifth, we examine the roles of other “agents of control,” such as middlemen, in extracting value from the Vietnamese; and the final section looks at struggles that have erupted through Cambodian landlords and Vietnamese tenants, as the former try to extract a greater share of the value produced on the land and threaten to evict the latter in preparation for speculative sales or their own production on the land.

Theoretical overview: Land control and value

The past decade has seen an explosion of interest in the topic of global land deals, or “land grabs.” While much initial work focused on the empirics of the deals themselves – a “land measurement-oriented accounting” of land grabs (Borras et al 2012, p. 851) – attention has now shifted to the

relations, practices, and mechanisms whereby domestic and foreign actors grab land, often in the face of popular resistance or competing claims. In this paper, we follow Borras et al in conceptualizing land grabs as “control grabbing” (Borras et al 2012, p. 850), and focus our attention squarely on the mechanisms by which control is not just asserted – in the context of an initial land grab – but consolidated and maintained over time.

This focus on control builds on the access and exclusion frameworks offered, respectively, by Ribot and Peluso (2003) and by Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011). Access, for Ribot and Peluso, is defined as the “ability to benefit from things” (p. 153), while Hall, Hirsch, and Li define exclusion as its counterpoint, “the ways in which people are prevented from benefiting from things” (p. 7). Standing above access and exclusion are powers and practices of land control, such as “enclosure, territorialization, and legalization processes, as well as force and violence”, which all serve to “fix or consolidate forms of access and exclusion for some time” (Peluso and Lund 2011, p. 668).

“Control” is distinct from ownership; one may control land without owning it, or one can hold title to land without being able to exercise control. Control is often rooted in the institution of private property (Sikor, 2012). The control of private landowners, however, is not absolute, and remains subject to the regulatory power of the state (which can circumscribe individual control, as by forbidding certain land uses). The degree of control exercised by individuals also depends in part on the strength of state protections for private property. Relationships of land control may be embedded within other social relations, and different “strands” of control may be vested in multiple actors and institutions (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Control, therefore, is typically not a binary – something that one “does” or “does not” have – but exists along a continuum, and rests in the interplay and tension between actors.

Control entails the ability to exclude others and to deny them access to the land or other resources under control. Exclusion may be achieved by physical means, such as through the erection of a fence, which both “keeps some people away from a resource and symbolizes or communicates intent to restrict access” (Ribot and Peluso, 2003, p. 165), or through more complex institutions and social relations. Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011), for example, enumerate four overlapping “powers of exclusion.” These include markets, which deny access to those who do not have the ability to pay; regulation, or the legal means (such as property rights), by which access is assigned to some and denied to others; the exercise of force (either state-sanctioned or extra-legal) as a means of physically preventing others from accessing a resource; and, finally, legitimation, or the ability to justify one’s control over a resource while denigrating the claims of others. Land grabbers vary in their capacity to yield such exclusionary powers; while a state actor may be able to deploy the police or other such security forces as a means of excluding people from, for example, a protected conservation zone, a private landowner may instead only be able to appeal to the courts or to the rhetoric of legitimation in the face of encroachment.

Exclusion, as Hall, Hirsch, and Li have noted (2011) is “a necessary feature of every type of land use and tenurial arrangement,” since “farmers would not raise crops without some assurance that they can hold on to their fields until harvest,” nor would they make “long-term investments in land” without the being able “to exclude others from interfering with enjoyment of the benefits of that investment” (pg. 8). Exclusion, is thus a necessary pre-condition for deriving sustained benefit from the land. But it is not a sufficient condition. There is for example, little to be gained from an empty field, at least in the immediate moment, no matter how well one might exclude others from it.

Deriving benefit – or extracting value – from the land thus requires not just exclusion, but investments of capital and labor in production. Sometimes these investments are made by those who own or control the land, as in the case of agricultural production by owner-operators. Those with control over large parcels, especially those who have established control through an opportunistic land grab, may lack access to the necessary factors of production, and may lack the experience and

technical expertise or market linkages required for profitable cultivation of high-value crops (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

Effective control thus also entails a more positive set of powers: the power to control the access of others, and to cede access to those with the capital, expertise, labor, and market access to work it. This is the essence of the relationship between landlords and tenants; a landlord, or any other actor exercising effective control over the land, permits another party to access and use the land in exchange for some share of the surplus value produced on the land, in the form of rent. As Ribot (1998, p. 314) notes, rent is essentially “a benefit levied upon control,” a transfer from those who must “maintain access” to the land to those who “control access” (Ribot and Peluso, 2003, p. 162). The relationship between landlord and tenant, while potentially beneficial for both parties, is also an inherently conflictual one, as each vies for a greater share of the surplus value produced on the land. Landlords, particularly those with an effective monopoly over the land supply, hold the upper hand in this relationship, but are constantly “caught between the foolishness of taking too little, and the danger of taking too much,” which has the effect of deterring tenants from employing capital in agricultural production and thus increasing the surplus value produced on the land (Harvey, 1982, p. 364).

While cross-border land deals may be a novel phenomenon, they essentially represent a variation of this arrangement; domestic elites who control access to land permit foreign firms with “capital, technology, know-how and market access” (Cotula et al, 2009, p. 15) to cultivate marketable crops on the land in exchange for some transfer of benefits. While large-scale deals involving highly capitalized foreign agribusiness firms have garnered much attention from scholars and activists, there is no inherent reason why those with control over land could not instead transfer access to a number of smaller tenants, especially given the demonstrated capacity for small farmers to engage successfully in the export agriculture in Southeast Asia (Hall, 2011).

The extraction of surplus value through rents, however, is not the only way to benefit from the control of land. Those with effective control over a piece of land may, within the context of the prevailing property regime, sell their control rights to another party, and thus reap the value of the land as a commodity. Many land grabs are motivated by speculative intent – the grabbers seek to capture the future value of the land, with scant concern for its current productive value – and thus much of what is grabbed is not put into immediate use (White et al. 2012); indeed, many large concessions the world over stand idle (Deininger and Byerlee, 2012: 224). In certain circumstances, however, leaving the land idle imperils the control of the grabbers, and places in doubt their ability to cash in on its future value. Unused land may, for example, become a magnet to the landless or land-poor, or become targeted for legal expropriation by states under political pressure to provide land for a restless rural proletariat. For speculating landowners, settling tenants on the land may be an effective means of securing and maintaining control over the land, at least temporarily, with a view towards its eventual sale. In such a case, the priority for landowners is to find pliant tenants who generate income in the form of rents in the short and medium term, but who can be evicted easily when a landowner decides to sell the land or convert it to another, more profitable, use.

Methodology

We undertook this research over two field visits, in November 2014 and February 2015. We focused on two communes in Cambodia which lie on or near the Vietnamese border, Srai Saa¹ in Kampot province, and Phnom Tmae commune in Takeo Province. We selected these communes after a scoping trip identified numerous Vietnamese farmers in these communes settled close to Khmer villages. We interviewed dozens of local Khmer and migrant shrimp and rice farmers from Vietnam, as well as

¹ All place names and personal names are pseudonyms, due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

village chiefs in both villages, Khmer land owners, middlemen, and provincial level fisheries and agriculture officials. Beban, who conducts research in Cambodia and speaks Khmer, focused on interviews with Khmer farmers and authorities, supported by her research assistant Pheap Sokha, and Gorman, who conducts research in Vietnam and speaks Vietnamese, focused on interviews with Vietnamese farmers, supported by research assistants Nguyen Khiem and Tha. In each field village we lodged with local Khmer families, and we also stayed for several days at the provincial border towns. This research was supplemented by interviews in the Vietnamese border town of Ha Tien.

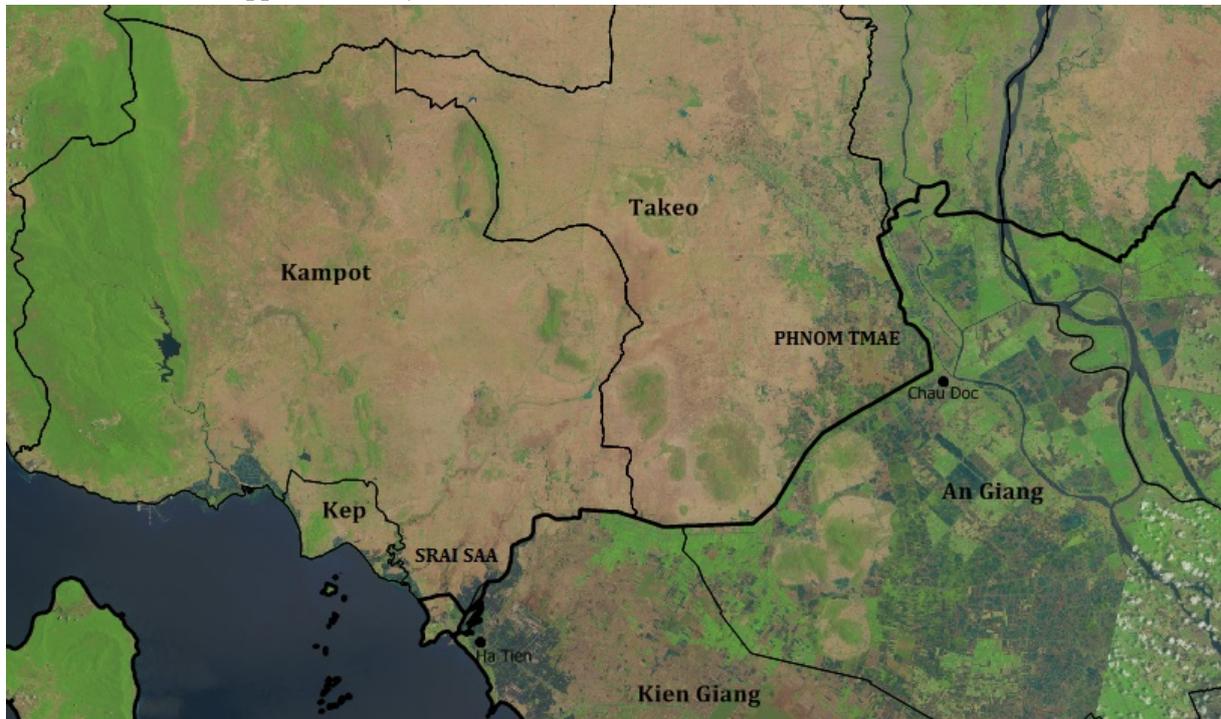


Figure 1: Study Sites

Kampt

Srai Saa commune lies about a 15 minute motorcycle ride from the Prek Chak - Xa Xia border crossing, which is linked by major roads to Phnom Penh, Kep, Kampt, and the nearby city of Ha Tien in Vietnam. The village has experienced rapid population growth, and the population now stands at over 900 households. Most people in the village cultivate a single crop of rainfed rice per year, and some households own “chamkar” farming land on which they grow fruit and other crops, and graze buffalo and cattle. There are limited wage labor opportunities in the village, and the biggest employer is the mango trade; over 300 people take mangoes over the border from Kampt to a nearby market in Vietnam. Many young people also cross the border daily for work in construction or in factories in Vietnam. The village itself is bisected by a canal, which separates the main residential and rice-growing area from the saltwater shrimp farms of the Vietnamese migrants. In total, there are about 100 Vietnamese shrimp farmers in the village; most are men, but we also met married couples, some with children. The total area of shrimp ponds was estimated at about 1300 hectares, with individual farms ranging from about 7 or 8 hectares to 30 or 40 hectares. There was also one large shrimp farm operated by a company from Ho Chi Minh City, which was cultivating more than 200 hectares of ponds.

The shrimp farming area itself is a wide expanse of saltwater ponds, surrounded by dirt embankments. The area has no roads, but is crosshatched by canals, on the banks of which lie the thatched huts of the Vietnamese shrimp farmers. Every migrant household we visited in this zone had at least one small boat, which they use to both get around their immediate environs and to make

frequent trips back across the border to Vietnam; from here, the border is often only minutes away, and is bisected at multiple places by canals, which flow into the Giang Thanh river and provide easy access to Ha Tien. Many of the migrants we spoke to cross the border frequently, sometimes multiple times per day, to stock up on food, drinking water, and gasoline, to sell shrimp and buy inputs for their farms, or simply to socialize in Ha Tien's many cafes.

Takeo

In Takeo province, we focused on a village in Phnom Tmae commune, with a population of 321 families. The village is only 30 minutes by boat from the border, from which the Vietnamese city of Chau Doc can be easily accessed, but the bumpy dirt roads take about 1.5 hours to reach the Tinh Bien border crossing. Some villagers trade goods across the border, and many migrate to Thailand and Vietnam for seasonal and more permanent jobs in factories, farms and construction. Most people in the village cultivate one to two crops of dry season rice on an average of around 1-2 hectares of good growing land close to the village. The village chief estimated that land has become more unevenly distributed in recent years, particularly since the switch to high-input hybrid rice varieties in the mid-2000s, with around 10 village families owning more than 10ha, and 20 families landless.

There are no official statistics on the number of Vietnamese in the area, but the military police officer overseeing the Vietnamese cultivation area noted that "there are so many, ten thousand or more in Takeo I think." (PM, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 25.2.15). He estimated that there are four communes in the area with around 70-200 Vietnamese farmers in each, with many more Vietnamese farmers in the other border districts of Prey Chhlosar and Angkor Borei. In our study village, there were 47 Vietnamese families currently resident, farming rice on a large expanse of lowland criss-crossed by a network of canals reaching from below the village toward the border. Similar to the Vietnamese shrimp farmers in Kampot, the Vietnamese rice farmers all have small boats, which they use to travel around the canals and make frequent trips back to their homes just across the border. The social and geographical ties to Vietnam are even more pronounced among the Vietnamese farmers in Takeo, as the vast majority of them come from towns directly over the border in An Giang province, and can easily visit home in an hour's boat travel. The canals are also busy with Vietnamese trader boats selling household and agricultural goods, and collecting rice to sell back across the border.

In both Kampot and Takeo, the border zone comprises a porous, intermediate space. Thousands of Cambodians cross the border for work in Vietnam every day; inter-marriages are common, as are family networks that span both countries; and cultural and language brokers who speak both languages act as intermediaries for land transactions. Cross-border social networks are particularly strong in the Takeo commune, which during the 1980s-90s was a trade route for illicit goods such as cigarettes from Thailand to Vietnam. Several former traders who speak Vietnamese have now become central contact points for the Vietnamese migrant farmers. The constant flow of goods and people across this bustling and porous border belies, however, a dark and contentious history. The Vietnamese annexation of the Mekong Delta and the callous mistreatment of Khmer workers during the construction of the nearby Vinh Te canal by Gia Long in the early 19th century still smolder in Cambodian historical memory, while the Vietnamese side is dotted with monuments to the Vietnamese victims of the Khmer Rouge, who launched brutal cross-border raids in the late 1970s. Anti-Vietnamese sentiment remains palpable in Cambodia, as evidenced by the nationalist rhetoric of opposition leader Sam Rainsy, violent street demonstrations in Phnom Penh, and a recent census and deportation campaign targeting ethnic Vietnamese.

Grabbing control, grabbing value: Cambodian elites and the initial land grab

Any land grab is, in its essence, an attempt to capture value, either the value that can be produced on the land or the potential value that can be realized through the sale of the land itself. Value is thus central to any land grab, as “no one wants to establish social relationships with respect to things of no value” (Humphrey and Verdery, 2004:12). In this section, we explore the land grab as an effort to seize and maintain control over current or future value, tracing the recent history of land tenure change in the study areas to understand the means by which domestic elite initially excluded others and took control of the land.

In both Kampot and Takeo, the land grabbed by domestic elites in the early 2000s was frontier land; frontier in the sense of a geographical space beyond the cultivated land of the village; frontier as the imaginary of wild, uninhabitable space; and frontier as actual place made and re-made with booms and busts and stories of murky entrepreneurial characters and hopeful landless poor who trek outward to find their fortunes (Tsing, 2005). Local farmers said that before the elites took control of the land, it was “wasteland.” The shrimp farming zone in Kampot was “salt forest” not suitable for rice farming. In Takeo, the lowland was previously “prey smau” (grass forest), “an area of wild grass, as high as a person, and some small trees” (Khmer male shop owner, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 24.2.15). The land in Kampot lies near the sea and is affected by the tides, consisting of brackish wetlands not easily used for rice. The freshwater wetlands in Takeo lie further from the sea and the land is more easily converted to rice paddies. In both areas, attempts to cultivate the land and dig canals during the Khmer Rouge regime were not sustained, and through the 1980s, the area was hardly used for production. In Takeo, some farmers ventured out to farm flooded rice on the lowland in the late 1980s, encouraged by the prime minister’s radio speech appealing to people to move to new lands and increase rice production (Village chief, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 24.2.15). Many people, however, did not maintain their crops. The land was too far from the village, and the area was infested by snakes in the wet season and rats in the dry season (Khmer woman farmer, 30s, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 25.2.15). In Kampot, a handful of villagers briefly experimented with extensive shrimp cultivation on the lowland (after two sharply dressed Vietnamese came to the village and said the land was perfect for shrimp), but this too failed after a 50 year flood carried off all the shrimp in 2000.

While a combination of environmental agency (in the form of snakes, rats, and floods) and a lack of capital and knowledge to invest in the lowland areas rendered the commercial value of these areas minimal to local farmers, they had use value as common use areas. In Takeo, small fresh water canals constructed in the Khmer Rouge era were used for washing buffaloes and fishing; and in Kampot, the swamp land with small shrubs was used for cattle grazing and gathering firewood. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the potential commercial value of these areas caught the eyes of domestic elites, setting in motion land grabs in both places.

In Takeo, a large European Union-sponsored development project to expand irrigation for rice cultivation funded construction of a large network of canals throughout the lowland area during the late 1990s. At that time, several provincial elite with ties to national elite in Phnom Penh sent representatives to the village to buy and claim large areas of the lowland during the canal construction. The village chief recalls that the commune chief contacted him to help identify villagers that had previously claimed land for flooded rice cultivation. These farmers were given small payments; others who used the land but did not cultivate rice received no compensation. Locally issued land titles (from the commune-level authorities) were arranged for the buyers. The elite buyers included the Provincial Chief and relatives of a senior cabinet minister, as well as local (district and commune level) political elite and entrepreneurs. A handful of local farmers also kept control of their fields in the lowland area. The land had value to these elites because they knew about the proposed irrigation project, and the

potential this would bring for commercial agriculture, as one farmer from the village described:

“When the oknya [honorific signifying person with ties to political elite] and powerful people came, they paid about one hundred dollars for one hectare. Almost nothing... They bought so much land, some of them bought hundreds of hectares. Because they have bulldozers, they can easily excavate the land for rice. When the EU first started building [the canals], that’s when they came, their middlemen came. They knew that it would improve the rice growing here, and they have networks with people in Phnom Penh, they knew that the canal would be built.” (Khmer male farmer, 50s, Phnom Tmae commune, takeo, 25.2.15)

This farmer and others in the village explained that most people didn’t resist the land deal at the time, as the land they had claimed had limited value “because they weren’t making much profit off it.”

In Kampot, a similar imbalance of access to information and capital meant that the lowland area was bought up in the mid-2000s by a group of ‘nayk mien’ [rich people] from Phnom Penh and Kampot city. Unlike in Takeo, where land was grabbed with an eye towards its increasing capacity for agricultural production, here elites sought to acquire ‘marginal’ wetlands in expectation of their future value as non-agricultural land. Unknown to local farmers, the whole lowland area was part of a swathe of border land slated to become a Special Economic Zone when Cambodia began granting SEZs in 2005. Mr. Sokun, a commune councilor and land broker in the village, recalls that “the [rich buyers] didn’t know what they wanted to do with [the land], they just bought it to speculate on because they knew that this land is in the SEZ and would go up in value”. The middlemen made some shadowy deals with local authorities and farmers, purchasing some of the land for up to \$500/ha from people who had experimented with farming shrimp or lived nearby, while surrounding common land was seized without compensation. As in Takeo, there was little overt resistance, partly because the land had limited commercial or livelihood value for local farmers; “farming the land took too many resources, and it was risky if there was flooding. We had all lost money. So they sold.” (Sokun, Kampot, 26.2.15).

There was also a much greater element of coercion in the Kampot case; the investors worked through village and commune level authorities to legitimize the land sale as ‘state land’ to push people into giving up the land for little or no compensation, and the deals were secretive, as these Khmer farmers described: “Everyone had to agree. The authorities said that it was state land, so if we agreed to sell they would give us some compensation, and if we didn’t agree to sell they would take it anyway. We got \$500 for 2ha. We were only allowed a maximum of 2ha per person.” (Khmer female farmer, Kampot, 8.11.14). As another farmer explained: “I didn’t get any money when they sold the land to the company, because it was the authorities that sold the land and I didn’t know anything about it.” (Khmer male farmer, 70s, Kampot, 7.11.15)

In both Takeo and Kampot, Cambodian elites were able to establish control over a large portion of the border zone due to inequalities in access to capital, political authority, and information, particularly about state development and land-use plans. These acquisitions were also driven by differences in value, as elites were in a far better position than local villagers to realize the potential value of the land. The land that they acquired, though it was not prime rice-growing land, did have a value to local people, who used it for farming, grazing, and collection of common-pool resources. Local peasants, however, either lacked the capital needed to invest in land improvements and in new forms of production, and thus realize the effective value of the land, or simply did not have an interest in farming the land, or lacked information regarding its future use and the capacity to capitalize on that value. The effect of such grabs was not to render the local peasantry dependent on elite land grabbers, as they continued to have access to the rice-growing land from which they derived their primary

means of livelihood, but to effectively exclude them from the value that would be generated when these formerly “marginal” lands were converted to the production of agricultural commodities.

Enter the Vietnamese: Settling migrant tenants to extract surplus value

The mere act of grabbing control of large parcels along the Vietnamese border did not, in the short-term, produce any direct benefit for these Cambodian elites. While elites had grabbed land in Takeo with a view towards its new capacity to support dry-season rice production, due to the construction of irrigation canals, these absentee landlords were not in any position to cultivate the land themselves, nor was there any evident demand to rent the land among the local population. Most of the locals in Phnom Tmae with whom we spoke had better quality rice-growing land nearer to the village, and had neither the capital nor labor power to expand their farms on these newly irrigated fields. In Kampot, the land was unsuitable for agriculture, and it was unclear what, if anything, it could be used for. A small number of locals had attempted, but failed, to raise shrimp on the land, and others told us that they were rice farmers and had little interest in aquaculture.

In short, elites had managed to grab control of the land, but the defining feature of a “land grab” - the transformation of social relations towards outward-oriented commercial agriculture (Borras et al., 2012) - was not yet in place. In this section, we describe how the efforts of landlords to derive value from the land set in motion this process of social transformation, resulting in the recruitment of Vietnamese farmers and their settlement on the land, and ultimately in the creation of an enclave economy, geared towards the production of agricultural commodities - shrimp and rice - for export through Vietnam and onward to global markets. The result of this transformation, we argue, has been twofold: on one hand, it has resulted in the creation of surplus value on the land, through the application of Vietnamese labor, capital, and expertise, and thus provided benefits for both Vietnamese migrants and Khmer landlords; on the other hand, it has resulted in the near total exclusion of local Khmer peasants from the production and marketing of these commodities, and thus their exclusion from the value generated on their former lands.

Before the land could be put into production, it first needed to be engineered and improved. In the case of Takeo, following the completion of the canal (which was funded by foreign donors), the large land owners who had bought up the land transported bulldozers up the canal by barge, and leveled out the land, filling in ponds and clearing trees and shrubs. In Kampot, where the land grab was driven by speculation around the eventual conversion of the border area to an SEZ, it was unclear what kinds of improvements could be made on the land, and to what productive use it could be put in the meantime. The landlords apparently discussed several options for the land including a coconut plantation or leaving the land idle in the short term, and were finally convinced to prepare the land for shrimp cultivation by local commune councilor and entrepreneur Mr. Sokun, who encouraged the landlords to prepare the land by clearing the flooded forest, digging canals and shrimp ponds, and constructing embankments.

Sokun was inspired by his own forays to Vietnam, where he had seen successful shrimp farms, and he offered to recruit Vietnamese farmers to settle on the land, in exchange for a 10% share of the rent. As he recalled:

“I got the number of the Oknya in Phnom Penh and I called him and said my idea to him. I said that this land is perfect for raising shrimp, and I would look after it for him, I would get the farmers to rent the land and prepare the land for him. Then the Nayk Mien wanted to see it, so I took photos of the shrimp raising in Vietnam and met with the Vietnamese farmers, and I showed them to him. I explained that shrimp is good on this

land, and we can get a fast benefit, in 2-3 months. He agreed, so I organized the land clearing and he paid for the proper ponds to be dug and the canals.”

Improvements of the land were thus followed in both sites by the active recruitment of Vietnamese tenants. The Vietnamese farmers were recruited by a network of middlemen and ‘cultural brokers’ (Press, 1969), primarily Khmer men who had experience as traders in Vietnam and spoke some Vietnamese. The commune councilor Sokun in Kampot, and a man employed by the landlords to oversee the tenants in Takeo told us about trips across the border to recruit tenants. “I go right to their homes” said the man in Takeo, “to make sure they are good people and will pay the rent and farm the land properly” (Employee of Cabinet Minister land plot, Takeo, 24.2.15). Many Vietnamese also came of their own accord, hearing about the opportunity to rent land through word of mouth from friends and relations. Demand for the land has been, in both cases, robust. Indeed, local land brokers told us that currently all the available land is leased out, and they were actively looking to bring new areas under production along the border.

The Vietnamese demand for land is driven by the dynamics of the Vietnamese agricultural sector, and in particular by the pressures felt by smallholder producers as they attempt to compete with larger commercial operators and expand the scale and intensity of their operations (Akram-Lodhi, 2005; Prota and Beresford, 2012). Over the past two decades, Vietnam has experienced rapid economic liberalization, reintegration into global markets, and the introduction of private land-use rights that can be bought, sold, and rented. In the Mekong Delta region, which lies just across the border from Cambodia, these changes have produced an agricultural boom, driven by the production of export commodities like rice and farmed seafood. While smallholders have benefitted from this boom, they have also struggled with rising input costs and falling profits, due in part to ecological dynamics which lead, especially in shrimp production, to gradual declines in output as land becomes exhausted from intensive use.

Faced with narrow profit margins and intense competition, many smallholders in Vietnam have sought to expand their operations, but this path has been blocked by the extremely high price of agricultural land. Interviewees reported that one hectare of shrimp-growing land in Vietnam could cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000 USD, while a hectare of prime rice-growing land could cost upwards of \$30,000 USD, making the acquisition of land prohibitively expensive for most small farmers. Renting land is an option, at rates of about \$350 USD per year for a hectare of shrimp-farming land and about twice as much for rice-farming land. Even at those prices, however, land is in short supply.

What the Vietnamese found in Kampot and Takeo was land that was both cheap and abundant, relative at least to Vietnam. Most shrimp farmers we spoke to in Kampot were renting between 10 and 30 ha, at an average price of between \$100 and \$150 USD per hectare. As one farmer from Kien Giang province effused, “if you come here, you can see that the land is very wide. Here you can get a big piece of land and you can grow a lot of shrimp. If your shrimp succeed, you can make a lot of money. But in Vietnam the land is small, and it’s very expensive.” He had just arrived in Cambodia a few weeks earlier, following his father who had done the same a few years before, and he was renting 8 hectares of land for about \$1000 per year. Most rice farmers in Takeo that we spoke to were renting between 5 and 20 hectares, and paying on average about \$200 to 250 USD (although rents were calculated in tons of rice, not cash). As one farmer explained, “I have 8ha of land I rent here. I can get up to 8t/ha, and I pay 1.3t/ha rent [approximately 250 USD]...In Vietnam we have to pay 15 million Dong [about 700 USD] to rent a single hectare.” (Vietnamese male farmer, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 25.2.15)].

The high price of land in Vietnam, not only brought Vietnamese farmers to Cambodia in search of a cheaper alternative, but also provided them with the capital to expand their operations. With the privatization and marketization of land-use rights in Vietnam has come their effective financialization,

and many of the farmers we spoke to had taken mortgages out against their holdings in Vietnam, either from informal money lenders or relatives or from the state-run Agricultural Bank, while others had sold their land outright. Most thus came equipped not just with years of experience in shrimp aquaculture or intensive rice production, but with access to significant sources of capital, allowing them not just to rent land in Cambodia, but to invest in seed stock, machinery, pesticides, antibiotics, labor, and other inputs necessary for the commercial production of rice and shrimp. Vietnamese rice farmers also benefitted from years of exposure to state-funded extension services, which have heavily promoted the cultivation of improved varieties. As one Khmer farmer complained, “the Vietnamese knew how to do dry season rice better than us Khmer, because they have experience doing IR in Vietnam. In Vietnam, when the rice has a problem, they have extension services from the government that come and give them advice and support to know what to do to solve the problem. But for us, I’ve never seen someone from the department of agriculture come to help us and give advice.” (Khmer male farmer, 50s, Phnom Tmae Commune, Takeo, 24.2.15).

In Takeo, where Khmer and Vietnamese farmers are both engaged in rice production, the impact of these differences was obvious. While we observed tractors at many of the Vietnamese-run farms, as well as sprayers, pumps and other machinery, we only saw two Khmer farmers with tractors in Phnom Tmae. And while Vietnamese farmers reported, on average, yields of around 8-10 tonnes per hectare on the lowland fields, the Khmer farmers with lowland fields said their yields were frequently less, around 6-8 tonnes per hectare. These differences were sometimes attributed to cultural factors, as both groups told us that Vietnamese farmers were harder-working and more skillful than their “lazy” Khmer counterparts, but some acknowledged the importance of differences in access to capital. As one Khmer villager explained, “we don’t do the rice there because we don’t have the money, or the technology to do it. I don’t have a tractor, I don’t know the methods”. (Khmer male shop owner in Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo).

This marriage of land, capital and labor has allowed the landlords to derive value from the land, and in doing so, has dramatically shifted the social and ecological relations on the land. Economically, these areas have become enclaves, oriented entirely across the border for inputs and outputs. In Kampot, a fisheries official estimated that there is about 4 tonnes of shrimp every day from Cambodia that goes to Vietnam (Khmer male fisheries official, Kampot, 8.11.14). In Takeo, all hybrid rice produced in the area crosses the border; even Khmer villagers producing this rice told us that they did not eat it because it didn’t taste good, but instead sold it all to traders who took it across to Vietnam. From Vietnam, the shrimp and rice is exported around the world as Vietnamese product. All the Vietnamese farmers we talked with – in both Kampot and Takeo - traded not only their outputs through Vietnam, but also bought all their inputs – farming inputs and personal groceries – from across the border. Labor networks also generally excluded Khmer. This was not due to intent to exclude Khmer per se, but rather due to the small-scale of individual farms: the majority of Vietnamese farmers were smallholder family farmers using household labor. When labor needs were high – such as harvest and spraying – most Vietnamese farmers recruited their extended family to stay with them for short periods, or hired Vietnamese laborers.

For the Vietnamese then, this arrangement allowed them to retain more of the surplus produced on the land than they could in Vietnam. And for the landlords, the Vietnamese bring in enhanced value through their superior production on the land, and enhanced value of the land itself through land leveling and clearing. In the enclave economy created, two groups – Vietnamese producers and Cambodian rentiers (including landowners and assorted middlemen) – divide up the surplus, while local Khmer are excluded from any share of the value generated on these lands. They are effectively excluded not just from control over the land itself and the production activities on the land, but from any opportunity to benefit from the production that takes place on the land through labor or trading opportunities. This case therefore shows how actors that lack control over land or capital have been

effectively excluded from the new forms of value generated on the land.

Indirect control: Policing access through the Vietnamese

While establishing Vietnamese tenants on the land had the immediate goal of generating income for elites, and for the middlemen and intermediaries working on their behalf, it also had the effect of reinforcing the long-term control of these elites over the land. As with many other “land grabs” in Cambodia, the ones which occurred in our study sites had taken place against a background of tenure insecurity and ambiguity. What differentiates this case from that of a standard Economic Land Concession (ELC), however, is that the typical concessionaire is able to draw more directly on the coercive and regulatory powers of the state in order to exclude others from the land. Whereas a concession might have formal approval from the highest level of government, and whereas a concessionaire (foreign or domestic) may be able to call on the police or security forces in evicting previous users from the land and keeping them off the land, the elites in our cases have little in the way of legal documentation for the land under their control, and are limited in their practical ability to exclude non-authorized users from the land.

As Peluso and Lund (2011: 669) remind us, “while the initial ‘grab’ is important, it only marks the beginning of a process of gaining (or grabbing) access.” Thus we must look at the ways in which land grabbers “hold onto the land,” how they consolidate control, over time. The challenge of consolidating control is particularly acute in the case of speculative land grabs, as was the dominant form in Kampot. The same political-economic factors that make it relatively easy to grab land in Cambodia – minimal land taxes, unclear property rights, competing notions of land access and property – also makes Cambodia a difficult place to maintain control over land (Diepart and Dupuis, 2014). Customary notions of land acquisition by the plough have been in place from ancient periods of sovereign kingship to the post-Khmer rouge era, with people claiming use access to land through clearing the land for cultivation. (Springer, 2013). As many large concessionaires have realized, leaving the land idle invites settlement and cultivation, by locals, by migrants, and even by other elites. There are also strong customary notions of land acquisition by the plough in Cambodia, dating from the ancient periods of sovereign kingship to the post-Khmer rouge era, which legitimize such claims to land access (and control) through clearance (Springer, 2013), and new regulations (Order 001)² have put in place a legal framework to expropriate and redistribute idle land, lending official recognition to such norms.

The weakness of effective protections and norms around private property make it imperative for elites to exercise effective day-to-day control over the land. In both Kampot and Takeo, elite landowners have addressed the problem of control by bringing Vietnamese migrant farmers onto the land as tenants. Settling the Vietnamese tenants onto the land has had a double benefit for the landlords: not only were they able to extract rents from the Vietnamese tenants, many of whom also made further improvements to the land by continuing to clear grass and trees, and levelling the land, but the presence of the Vietnamese also allowed the landlords to maintain control over the land, as the occupation by the Vietnamese and the active cultivation of cash crops on the land effectively excluded others from the possibility of occupying the land. In effect, the Vietnamese tenants have become ‘agents of control’; they themselves have neither property right to the land, but they do have the ability and incentive to monitor and control use of the land by other actors, in particular local villagers. In doing so, the Vietnamese indirectly reinforce the control of elites over this land, and prevent other actors from establishing their own, competing uses of or claims to the land.

² Order 001, issued on 7 May 2012, is the Government order Measuring Strengthening and Increasing Effectiveness of ELC Measurement’.

In Takeo, this ‘access control’ (Ribot and Peluso, 2003) has included setting the terms by which Khmer smallholders on neighboring plots were able to access their land to harvest. The only way to bring the large mechanical harvester to the rice fields was to transport it by barge along the canal, but since the land of the Khmer was set back from the canal, they needed to traverse Vietnamese farms to harvest. This created tensions, as one woman explained: “We have some problems with Vietnamese...with crossing the land, about the control of access to the land. Sometimes when we need to take the harvester to my land further back from the canal, the Vietnamese farmer in front won’t let me do it because it will go over his land so I have to go all the way around and that costs more.” (Khmer female farmer and café owner, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 24.2.15). We asked this woman how she tried to resolve the situation, and she said she could do nothing about it; “I can’t do anything because all the Vietnamese farmers get together and they don’t want to waste even a bit of their harvest by creating a path for the harvester.... The village chief doesn’t do anything and police don’t help.”

The Khmer villagers that we spoke to did not know who the landlords were and could not contact them to plead their case, and found no sympathy from people in positions of local authority – the Village Chief, the chief of the border zone military police – many of whom were receiving various forms of informal taxation from the Vietnamese (as we discuss in Section 4). In the absence of a direct presence by the landlords, or any intervention by local authorities, the Vietnamese have come to yield *de facto* control over the access of others to the land, and have zealously guarded against even minor incursions, in effect forestalling any attempt by local villagers to use the land for any purpose, no matter how innocuous.

In Kampot, access control by the Vietnamese is manifested in two forms: vigorous defenses against theft from shrimp ponds and negotiated agreements over access by local Khmer for the purpose of fishing. Several Vietnamese shrimp farmers mentioned problems with theft, but the most severe tensions swarmed around the one large, corporate-owned shrimp farm, which relies almost entirely on hired labor. As the manager of the farm explained, they had once hired local Khmer for some jobs, but “they would come back at night and sneak in to steal from the ponds, or they would tell other people which ponds had the most shrimp, and then they would come and steal.” After these incidents, the company no longer employed Cambodian laborers, and a guard tower still stands above its ponds as evidence of such concerns. Such incidents point to at least some level of tension between Khmer and Vietnamese - or at least Khmer laborers and Vietnamese employers - and echo accounts from Vietnam, where the theft of shrimp from ponds is rampant (Vu 2011).

In Kampot, however, they seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, most of the Vietnamese we talked to were comfortable leaving their ponds unattended, as when they cross the border into Vietnam to trade. The reason for this high level of this trust lies in the access arrangements which local Khmer have negotiated with the Vietnamese. As one local Khmer woman explained to us, the Vietnamese permit villagers to access their shrimp ponds under strictly limited conditions. Villagers may, for example, only remove certain varieties of “natural” fish, not the shrimp (and sometimes crab) species that the farmers actively stock and cultivate, but saltwater fish that are carried into the ponds when farmers take in water for shrimp cultivation. These fish are only to be used for consumption, not sale, though the Khmer sometimes sell them at the local market anyway. Access is strictly limited to locals, not outsiders. As our interviewee explained, “anyone can fish here, as long as they know the owner... if he knows our face it's okay. Through such arrangements, the Khmer are able to maintain limited access to these lands, if not the high-value aquaculture commodities produced on them, but do so at the price of recognizing the Vietnamese as the rightful users of the land, and by extension legitimize and strengthen the control of Khmer elites over the land.

Agents of control: Middlemen and cultural brokers

While Vietnamese tenants are able to effectively control the access of local Khmer to the land that they farm, their access to this land is in turn controlled by a set of intermediaries, all of whom are in a position to extract rents. Many, but not all, of these intermediaries serve as agents of the absentee landlords, whose need for a network of on-the-ground staff to collect supervise and monitor Vietnamese tenants creates opportunities for particular local people, primarily those already in positions of local power and authority, to benefit from the migrant presence.

One group are the middlemen who collect land rent on behalf of the landlords. In Kampot, two local commune officials play this role. They are shadowy figures whose names elicit a mix of fear and resentment by Vietnamese and Khmer farmers alike. One Vietnamese farmer explained their heavy handed control:

“I rent 27ha of land. Sokun [the middleman] takes money for land, passport documents and boarding fee. I have a contract for five years. For one pond, I pay 44 million dong. And for a smaller pond, 45 million dong. Another man Ngim takes the money for the second pond. They control the industry here together, and they divide up the ponds when they collect the money.” (Vietnamese shrimp farmer, Kampot, 9.11.14)... They came to get the money from me yesterday. They threatened me, they said if I didn't pay now I would have to leave this week before my contract is out. So I paid... “

The commune official/middleman Sokun was notoriously difficult to contact, and we were led on several “wild goose chases” around the village by Khmer villagers who did not want to tell us where he lived, and asked us not to say that they talked with us. When we finally made contact, we realized that we had been past his house several times before: It was immediately noticeable as the largest house in the village, with a new SUV car outside, a tractor in the shed and various pieces of machinery scattered around the yard. Sokun explained in enthusiastic detail how he used his language ability, knowledge of commercial shrimp farming and cross-border social networks to create a new position for himself as a cultural broker. He boasted that, “I can speak Vietnamese so it's easy for me to control the rentals. I knew people in Vietnam and let them know about the land being available and they spread the word around.” This position came with the lucrative benefit of 10% proceeds from the Vietnamese leases. “I never used to be rich like this”, he said, waving his hand around to indicate his car, tractor, and new house.

In Takeo, the day-to-day control of the land was managed by an elderly man and his wife, who introduced himself as a ‘relative of [name of a senior cabinet minister],’ a major landowner and politician based in Phnom Penh. He explained that the land deal here was a boon to him and several other relatives, as he drew a small monthly salary in exchange for living on the canal amongst the Vietnamese, and was also able to extract other unofficial fees by mediating access to inputs and outputs. For example, he worked closely with the chief of the military police (PM) overseeing the canal area, and the border guards, to mediate access to the main canal. We learned that previously a contractor from Vietnam had transported his harvesting machine across the border at harvest time, but this year the PM, border guards and the cabinet minister's relation had blocked his access by threatening to charge him astronomical fees, and they told the Vietnamese tenants that they were required to use Khmer harvesters. This created a monopoly for the one local contractor, a local woman who made money as an informal money lender, and purchased several harvesting machine. She explained that “I have to pay \$400 per season for the barge to take the harvesters on the canal, and then I pay a fee to the PM and the Cabinet Minister's relation”, and then I can charge each farmer”.

Other people in positions of authority – police, military police, border officials, village and commune officials, and others – were also active in controlling land access, effectively raising the

price of land access for the Vietnamese as they squeeze money from the Vietnamese farmers through informal immigration and trading payments. Many Vietnamese complained to us about the cost of all these payments: “I have to pay for canal water, for lodging and for immigration. 11 million dong. And a \$10 security fee for the PM and \$10 for the police. I rent land for 75 million dong. I also have to pay to bring my tractor across the border, \$200/year, and more if I bring it back and forth more than once.” (Vietnamese male farmer, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 25.2.15)

This example demonstrates the ability for the land grab to not only enhance the wealth and power of the landlord, but also entrench the power of local elites – including government officials – who often become the middlemen between land grabbers and local people. Even those who exercise only indirect control over access, such as border guards, are able to extract rents from the Vietnamese by threatening to impede their ability to cross the border, or to move inputs and outputs freely. The Vietnamese’ migrant status adds to their vulnerability; they occupy an ambiguous legal position, as some possess paperwork and pay immigration fees at the border, but most do not have passports.

The authorities themselves did not seem to know whether the Vietnamese were legally allowed to be in Cambodia or not. The village chief in Takeo told us, “I don’t know about the law... but they do it the official way, they pay at the border for being here.” (Village Chief, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 25.2.15). Even a Provincial Department of Agriculture official in Takeo seemed unsure of the legal status: “I’m not sure if the renting is legal or illegal, but they do it according to the contracts, with the landowners.” (PDA Takeo, 26.2.15) This ambiguity allows the Vietnamese to slip over the border, but it also means that the Vietnamese ability to access the land is dependent upon a continual negotiation with officials, and gives Cambodian officials and landlords the power to threaten the Vietnamese with eviction. Migrants showed us “passports” and “visas,” little more than scraps of paper, which had been issued to them by local officials and border guards. Written in Khmer, and thus unintelligible to the Vietnamese, these generally consisted of little more than a few lines of text listing the migrant’s name and the duration of his or her rental contract.

Struggles over value: Landlord / Tenant relations in the land grab

Vietnamese tenants are not just locked in a tense, conflictual relationship with intermediaries and authorities, but with the landlords themselves. The relationship between the landlord and tenants is synergistic but precarious. It is precisely the marriage of Cambodian land and Vietnamese capital and expertise that has allowed the production of lucrative export crops and generated value for both landlord and tenant. Landlords, moreover, have the advantage of making money without actually being directly engaged in capitalist agriculture or taking on the risk from the production of export crops. This relationship, however, has the character of an intermediate stage; if the advantages of the Vietnamese - skill, market linkages, and technological capital - could be replicated, the landlords could cut out the Vietnamese and engage in large-scale production themselves. Likewise, if another actor (such as a large foreign firm) could bring even more resources to production, they could generate even more in the way of rents for landlords. Finally, many of the landlords had initially taken control of the frontier lands for speculative reasons, and are actively looking for opportunities to sell the land and reap the value of their investment.

Each of these scenarios, however, requires that the Vietnamese be expelled from the land, and thus the threat of eviction looms large over them. The structural imbalance between landlords and tenants, present in any rental arrangement, is particularly salient here. In part, this imbalance is due to the vulnerability of the Vietnamese as migrants, but it is exacerbated by the ambiguous and informal nature of rental arrangements between the Vietnamese and the Cambodian landlords. Some farmers had no written rental contract. This was often due to a long-term relationship of trust between the parties, but also gave the land owners more power in the relationship. One Khmer landowner

explained: “I don’t have a contract, because if we did a contract then I wouldn’t be able to take the land back when I wanted it. This way, I can take it back when I want.” (Khmer woman farmer, 40s, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 24.2.15) This maintains optimal flexibility on the part of the landowners – allowing them to bring the land into direct cultivation or to sell the land to a third party.

The Vietnamese are also weakened in their negotiating power and made vulnerable to threats of eviction by the harsh realities of the cropping calendar. Farmers (especially shrimp farmers) must sink significant expenses into the land and production at the beginning of the cropping season, and do not see returns on this investment until the harvest; for this reason, farmers are tied to the land and must desperately maintain their access if they are to have any chance of recouping their expenses. For these reasons, the mere threat of eviction can be yielded as a weapon and used by landlords to gain concessions or higher rents from tenants.

The tension that this vulnerable position creates was evident in both Takeo and Kampot. In Takeo, several smaller landowners who rented land out to the Vietnamese told us their plans to take back the land to farm themselves. Ironically, the Vietnamese have increased their vulnerability through their success: Khmer farmers have learned from the proximity of the Vietnamese and enhanced their own capacity to use the land, as well as amassing some capital through rents levied on the Vietnamese tenants, and benefitting from the land improvements. One woman explained this confidence through increased access to technology and capital:

“Now Khmer farmers have learned how to do the modern rice farming techniques so they want to do it themselves. And now some people have machines too, they have made a bit of money and want to farm themselves.” (Khmer woman farmer, 30s’, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 24.2.15)

The Vietnamese are undermined in their efforts to maintain their access to the land by the informal nature of their contracts with the Cambodian landlords; as the military police officer in Takeo explained, “The [contracts] are just between the land holder and the Vietnamese farmers. They don’t go through an authority.” The Vietnamese would thus have little recourse to seek assistance if the Khmer landlords do not honor their contracts. The village chief in Takeo explained their vulnerability succinctly: “If the Khmer landholders want to take the land back, the Vietnamese won’t do anything. Where would they go to complain? They’re in Cambodia.” (Village Chief, Phnom Tmae commune, Takeo, 25.2.15). A

As we found in our first research trip in November of 2014, a similar dynamic was also unfolding in Kampot. There, Vietnamese farmers were visibly distressed about the possibility of being evicted from the land and rumors circulated amongst both Vietnamese and Khmer farmers as to what the landlords might do in the future. A few days before we arrived in Kampot, the middleman Sokun had called several of the Vietnamese migrants who had recently completed rental contracts. Speaking now in his capacity as a local official, he shared some alarming news. The Cambodian government, he said, had decided that they were living in the area illegally and planned to deport them. They had one week to leave voluntarily, after which they would face eviction and deportation. Word of this ultimatum spread quickly among the migrants, and as we arrived, they were in a state of desperation. As one shrimp farmer explained, “people are just crying, because they they’ve put a lot of money into their ponds, and they haven’t even harvested yet. And if they have to go home, they have nothing. They’ve mortgaged their land or sold it to come here.” When we asked him what he would do if he had to go back to Vietnam, he just shook his head. “I mortgaged all my land,” he said, “but I guess I can go to Ho Chi Minh City or to Binh Duong and try to find work there.”

When we returned to Kampot for our second research trip in February of 2015, we found the

Vietnamese still on the land, but tensions remained high. After our last visit, some of the tenants had made direct contact with the landlord, who assured them that they could stay on the land until further notice. This reprieve allowed them to harvest their ponds and continue with cultivation, but there was lingering uncertainty about how long they could stay. These fears proved well-founded. On our last day of research, Sokun produced a small map of the area, carefully unfolding it to show us a yellow highlighted line running through the lowland. “Now everything is changing”, he said excitedly. “No one knows this, but that was always the plan of the Nayk Mien that got the land here, they want to build factories. I heard that they are getting electricity in here soon. There is a Malaysian company putting in capital, and companies I think from China too. They plan to do intensive shrimp farming here. They will kick out all the Vietnamese farmers soon. Soon they will all be gone”. (Sokun, Kampot, 28.2.15)

Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated the ways land control by Cambodian domestic elite land grabbers has been maintained, and even consolidated, through temporary transfers of land to Vietnamese migrants in Cambodia. Putting the land under cultivation can serve to legitimate and strengthen control, as well as excluding others from direct physical access to or use of the land in question, and obtaining value from the land. Migrants with limited legal and informal rights are vulnerable and can be more easily excluded in the future. This case demonstrates that strategies to forestall expropriation and maintain control over the land may overlap with strategies to extract value. Putting the land in use, settling people on it, transforming it, are not just means of extracting value from the land, but of excluding other would-be land users. The control over the land was therefore established and maintained by delegating some control to others.

While the literature on “land grabs” tends to portray foreigners involved in land transactions as occupying a position of power relative to both local populations and national government, this case demonstrates that migrants may occupy an ambiguous zone. The relation between the landlords and the Vietnamese farmers is – for now – one of mutual dependence: a necessary relationship if money is to be made from the land in the meantime and control is to be maintained. But this relationship is highly tenuous and now changing. The irony of this relationship is that the success of the Vietnamese commercially is also their undoing, for as they improve the land further and increase their yields on the land, the land owners look to take back the land to cultivate themselves or install larger, more lucrative tenants.

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About the Author

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