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Politics of Land Grabbing in the Borderland: A Case Study of Chongjom Border Market, Kabcheong District, Surin Province

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Abstract

Chongjom border is a contested area which reflects power-related relationship between center and its marginal space. From deserted borderland in the buffer zone during Khmer Rouge period, Chongjom becomes an emerging 4th ranking of cross-border trading between Thailand and Cambodia, where value of exporting goods have been increased up to 224.05 % in 2013. The politics of changes in land use and property relations change lead to widen of land grabbing in the area. This paper attempts to address a preliminary analysis through an analytical approach from data gathered by in-depth interviews and focus groups of local people, politicians, Thai and Cambodian traders and government officials in Chongjom border and Surin province.

The results indicate that politics of land grabbing plays a vital role on directing border development in which local politicians and government officials are main actors. There are 3 main border markets that have been established and exploited by 3 main political figures in this study. Network of political power in the sub-district, provincial and national level with reciprocal benefits arrangement help to sustain and retain their exploitation of the land over 2 decades. Powerful actors continue their attempts to maintain their interests by using counter-strategies. They are also trying to maintain and regain their political status by getting re-election into the border sub-district office and the provincial office and nominating their family members for an election campaign. One of land grabbing strategy to expand border market is using Cambodian traders to build new contemporary shops over the government stipulated rental area. Land grabbing expansion without proper landscape planning, waste treatment system, and environmental awareness causes environmental degradation and health problems among local people. Incineration without materials separation to remove hazardous materials before combustion is commonly used in the market area. Some of the children in the area already suffer from asthma.

Keywords: Land Grabbing, Border Politics

Introduction

Border is a space of political influences, economic, trading and marketing intertwining which affects both government agencies and local people in the area. The government usually responds directly to rapid changing economic movement and trying to gain more control on transborder labors, socio-cultural changes, and local and global identity complexity by using “top-down” policy. Each level of government agencies has its own power to manage local policy and practice.

Border and borderland complexity lies mainly on human cultural, political, economic activities and security challenges. Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (2005: 634) distinguished four important analytical lenses on border studies: “(1) market forces and trade flows, (2) policy activities of multiple levels of governments on adjacent borders, (3) the particular political clout of borderland communities, and (4) the specific culture of borderland communities.” He also identified two fundamental elements that define border and borderland: human activities and broader social processes including market forces, law, regulations, policies, regional cultures and politics (Brunet-Jailly, 2007: 1).

Border is not only a cross border point but rather an area reflects power relations between central authority and border authority to facilitate an expansion of border town and cross border trading which resulted in cross border production, regional economic cooperation, people and labor movement, interaction between different cultures and socio-cultural adjustment in the borderland (Watchawankhu, 2011: 14-16). In addition, border is also a link of economic prosperity, a site of exception where some activities could be undertaken in the area unlike others and border regulations may be different from somewhere else. Therefore, border needs to be effectively co-managed to facilitate cross-border trading and people movements across the border. Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly and Bruno Dupeyron (2007: 14) state that to control porosity in the borderlands “central governments and their intergovernmental agencies have to work harder at crating networks of cooperation and policy goals common to the borderland.”

Borderlands between Thailand and Cambodia in Neo-liberalism concepts is clearly seen on free enterprise, free competition, reducing government's role and regulation and focus more on individual responsibility to find solutions to their problems (Martinez and Garcia, 2015)

Chongjom border of Surin province is located at Ban Dan Sub-district, Kabchoeng district with a distance of 69 Km. from Surin municipality and 13 Km. from Kabchoeng district office. The neighboring community next to the border is O'Smach village, Samrong district, Odormeanchay province. Chongjom border area was part of the Huay taptan and Huay samran national reserve forest (left side) and then it was announced to be a wildlife sanctuary since December 30, 1995. Chongjom border checkpoint has been upgraded from the temporary cross border trading between Thailand and Cambodia from September 1, 2002 onward. An average of trading value from 2009-2014 between the two countries through Chongjom checkpoint is 1,105 Million Baht per year (33.5 Million USD), value of exporting goods have been increased up to 224.05 % in 2013. Majority of exporting goods from Thailand are fuel, beer, whiskey, cement, LPG gas and importing goods from Cambodia are cassava, used bicycles, used clothes, and lumbers (Surin Custom Office, 2014).

Since 2011, infrastructure project on 214 road improvement and 4 lanes expansion has been implemented from Chongjom border market to the border checkpoint in order to connect with 68 road in O'Smach to Siemreap province to support ASEAN communities in 2015. In addition, Surin and Oddarmeanchay co-signed the sister city project for mutual cooperation and development. Surin is also proposed to be part of the Emerald Triangle plan on tourism cooperation between Thailand, Lao PDR and Cambodia (Surin Provincial Commercial Office, 2011: 1).

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The politics of changes in land use and property relations change lead to widen of land grabbing in the area. This paper attempts to address a preliminary analysis through an analytical approach from data gathered by in-depth interviews and focus groups of local people, politicians, Thai and Cambodian traders and government officials in Chongjom border and Surin province.

Politics of Chongjom border market

Politics of land grabbing plays a vital role on directing border development in which local politicians and government officials are main actors. There are 3 main border markets that have been established and exploited by 3 main political figures in this study. The first Chongjom border market, had been established in 1992 by one of the Surin member of the House of Representative. It located 1,700 meters from the border and rented from the Forestry Department for 30 years with a condition to renew the contract every 10 years. This market was operated for 16 years, and then forced to shut down by the authority under security, illegal goods and weapons smuggling. One of the informants said

“They (the market owner) did not pay tax and did not renew the contract with the Forestry Department. Then there was illegal lumbers, drugs and illegal weapon smuggling which the soldiers confiscated near the market office. Moreover, there were a lot of pirated goods. When in drought season, they did not allow the soldiers to get some water from their property. There was some investment conflict between them and some high ranking officers, so at that day, the armed authority closed the market entrance and forced traders to move out. The officers were there for a week to ensure that nobody went in and the market had shut down permanently.”

More than 100 Cambodian traders was moved to temporary stalls set up near the road for a couple months and then moved to the second market approximately 2.1 km. away. The owner of the second market was also a local politician with tight connection to the local authority in the area. Trading at the second market was not successful, not so many customers and the buildings were not suitable to stay.

“The second market was built before the first market was shut down, so most of the Cambodian traders moved to this market. But there was no parking space and the shops made from galvanized iron, therefore it was very hot. The PAO was already built 60 rooms for their market, closed to the second market. Mr. Ming persuaded Cambodian traders to move to the PAO market. The owner of the second market was murdered a couple years later. His wife is now running the market and rents the rooms out as a storage for second hands blankets.”

After a year at the second market, most of the Cambodian traders have moved to the current Chongjom border market runs by the Surin Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). The market has been subleased to a private company, whose owner is a close relative to the political figure in the PAO. Chongjom border market is now renowned for second hand clothing and bicycles, local vegetables and fruits from Cambodia and became one of the popular tourist destinations in Surin.

Network of political power in the sub-district, provincial and national level with reciprocal benefits arrangement help to sustain and retain their exploitation of the land over 2 decades. Powerful

actors continue their attempts to maintain their interests by using counter-strategies. They are also trying to maintain and regain their political status by getting re-election into the border sub-district office and the provincial office and nominating their family members for an election campaign. For example, the first market owner, after several attempts to get re-election to the member of House Representative, he was successfully re-elected. But only for a short period, then there was a coup d'état, and the house of representative was overthrown. Even in a short period of time, he can manage to reach a final deal with the Forestry Department and renew the land rental contract then have it refurbished and reopen his old market again in 2014. Unfortunately, this market is unable to draw traders' attention to move back, though some traders paid for a rental space, none of them move to trade there. In early 2014, this politician nominated his son to the sub-district or Tambon Administrative Office (TAO) where the current or the third Chongjom border market is located. His son got elected and became the president of the TAO. Then the bureaucratic procedure against the first group has begun.

Political impacts in the area causes by two opposite local politicians. The first political group is now managing Chongjom border market and has been accusing of avoiding tax payment to the Tambon Administrative Office in which the second group is now in power. Tax payment problem has been brought up to the governor of Surin province, according to the TAO president;

“In the meeting with all leaders of provincial offices, the governor said that to expand Chongjom border market, our TAO will earn more income from taxing, then when I told them TAO never ever got any taxes from the market, they were stunned.”

After that, a process of negotiation between the two political groups has begun, but up to present, there is no concrete evidence of taxpaying between two offices. Tax revenue from over a decade of delayed tax payment might help local development long ago. The Kabchoeng District office is also asking PAO for a list of traders in the market, according to one of the deputy district chief, he asserts:

“We have been requesting the PAO for a list of traders in the market for such a long time, I just got it in the middle of March this year (2014). The list contains 830 shops and names of trader, majority of them are Cambodian.”

According to the PAO's information, there are 830 rooms for shop renting in the market with a total of 764 tenants, of which 733 people are from Cambodia and 31 are Thais. Therefore, Thai traders occupy less than 4% of shops in the market. Market building in the borderland leads to changing the landscape of land use, which results from border economic development related to land ownership system, land possession, and resources access to investment of some particular group. Rapid development of the border market favors high profile investors and on a contrary, has decreased an opportunity of poor local to compete with the formers.

Environmental pollution from Chongjom border market

The dispute over tax payment is also leads to waste management in and around the border market area. Normally, Tambon Administrative office (TAO) will be responsible for waste collecting and disposing in their vicinity area including Chongjom border market. But due to tax payment withholding, the TAO is not managing the waste disposal in the market. The area in front of the market, there is only once a week of waste collecting in the area. Local food stalls and restaurant owners complain of waste residue and smell from food and vegetable rotten in the trash bins and near the road.

The unplanned expansion and poor management of Chongjom border market has caused environmental problems which affect Chongjom residents and Ban Dan people. For example, ineffective waste management results in health problems affected from air pollution, dust, lack of clean water supply.

The most massive environmental impact affects Dan community is water and air pollution. Waste management in the market is not properly manage, which causes high volume waste disposal remaining in the area and a canal around the market. Improperly operates small incineration plant and open air burning cause air pollution and dangerous health conditions to Ban Dan People. There is a single plant for burning wastes in the market area with capacity of 2 tons waste disposal daily but the plant is out of order for a quite some time. Therefore, waste is burn in an open air every night, but still cannot get rid of all waste each day. A lot of waste residue scatters around the market area are commonly seen near the building site.

Open air waste burning in the market at night produces a lot of smoke, dusk, and pollutants such as Dioxin and Furans. Environment Canada (2015) asserts that

“open burning of garbage poses health risks to those exposed directly to the smoke. It especially affects people with sensitive respiratory systems, as well as children and the elderly. In the short term, exposure to smoke can cause headaches, nausea, and rashes. Over time, it can increase the risk of developing heart disease.”

One of Dan village headman confirmed that;

“My son has developed a symptom of asthma recently. We have to go to sleep at our rice field hut far from the Dan community to mitigate the effects of air pollution to my son. A lot of people mostly youngsters and elders here have asthma.”

Land grabbing expansion without proper landscape planning, waste treatment system, and environmental awareness causes environmental degradation and health problems among local people. Incineration without materials separation to remove hazardous materials before combustion is commonly used in the market area.

Waste dumped in and near a canal also causes contamination of the water which is used as a source to produce tap water for the community. Ban Dan people explain that the cost of public toilet use is quite high for Cambodian traders in the market, instead of going to public toilet; they put human faces in a plastic bag and throw away into the canal around the market. Garbage disposal provided by the managing company is rarely seen in the market. Tourists cannot find the trash can, which result in more waste in the public area.

Moreover, high volume of second hand clothes and blankets has been washing in a canal continuously with heavy use of detergent and bleach over several years. Water in a canal join the river that use as a resource of fresh water to produce tap water for Ban Dan community. After the water is heavily polluted, they is no cooperation plan from the residents, the market and other authorities involved to clean up the polluted water. Instead, they came up with a new plan to get fresh water from the Dan reservoir near the border. The water pipe is directly connected from the reservoir to the new tap water producing facility behind the temple. The new water supply system has not yet operated due to some defective operating system waiting to be repair from the contract holder.

Land grabbing strategy in Chongjom border market

The expansion of Chongjom border market directly affects Ban Dan community on environmental pollution. In terms of renting this marketing plot, there is invasion of land use. Surin PAO used more space than it was licensed. Historically, in October 3, 2008, it was officially reported that invasion of using the 904 plot as the waste storage where it used to be under possession of Ban Dan School and caused disputation between the two organizations. Later, the 904 plot was issued to the Treasury Department, and then rented out to the PAO for approximately 20 Rai (20 Rai 2 Ngarn 56 Tarangwa). In comparison with aerial photographs over Chongjom market, the land at the back has been encroached. There are many buildings built in unlicensed area.



Figure 1: Chongjom Border market in 1995-1997



Figure 2: Chongjom Border market in 2014

In January 20, 2010 Surin Treasury Office investigating report found that the Surin PAO used more space than the lease defined. Thus the office requested the PAO to follow the contract of land hire by demolishing the buildings located outside the rental area within 30 days. However, the request has not been accepted and processed up to the present. The Surin Treasury Office's reports in September 23, 2010 reveal that the Surin PAO built 350-400 temporary 4 square meters rooms for rent. But in the PAO's document in 2014 also reports that there are 830 rooms from 45 allotted locks.

In 2012, the Surin PAO's annual fiscal minute reports that the PAO generated 2,442,100 Thai Baht (31 Mil. USD) from its tenure a private company who rented out the rooms and space in the market. The PAO then paid 63,864 Thai Baht (1,935 USD) as the rent of the leased plot number 904 and other fees to Surin Treasury Department. Interviews with traders in Chongjom market result that the private company administrating the market earned from daily, monthly rentals, annual fee, electricity, hygienic management, leasing change fee, and other fees around 31 million Thai Baht each

year. Thus the rental income of PAO is counted 7.87 percent of the administrative company. That means the treasury office's rental income is counted 0.20 percent of the administrative company and it is calculated 2.61 percent of the PAO's rental benefit.

One of land grabbing strategy to expand border market is using Cambodian traders to build new contemporary shops over the government stipulated rental area. Cambodian traders interviewing confirmed that:

“The market management member approached us and asked if we would like to rent more shop. Then when we showed our interests, they will take us to the site and drawn a square of room the same size of what we have, then *if* we agreed, we paid money and built our own shop, using our money. We asked our family members to come and do business here. Monthly rental fee is still much cheaper than in Rong Gluea, Aranyaprathet. We don't want a permanent building because we will have to pay for higher rental fee. What we have high concern on fire. The market was on fire in 2013, many of us lost our goods on fire.”

Cambodian traders interviewed usually using their social networking of families and friends to find a market space to run their businesses. Some of them have 2-8 shops operate by their immediate family members and in-law in Chongjom border market. A trader said:

“I just came here 4 months ago, I don't have a space to set up a business, my relative lets me share half of her shop to start my business.”

After years of land encroachment in the Treasury office's stipulated rental area, PAO applies for the whole area of 92 Rai 3 Ngarn 48 Tarangwa rental land from the Treasury Office. Public hearing was done in August 9, 2013 and a new master plan of Chongjom border market has been submitted to the Treasury Office with the PAO budget of 500 Million Baht (170 Mil. USD) which has been approved recently.

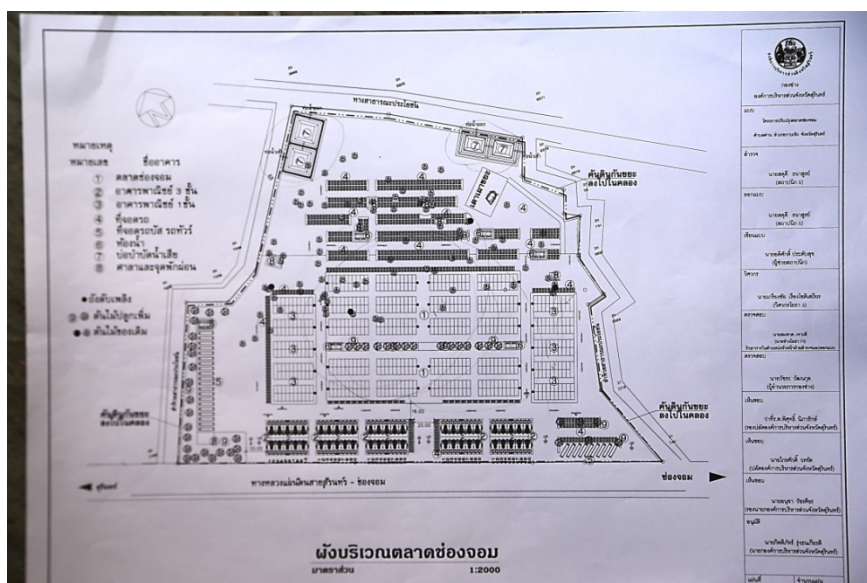


Figure 3: A new master plan of Chongjom border market



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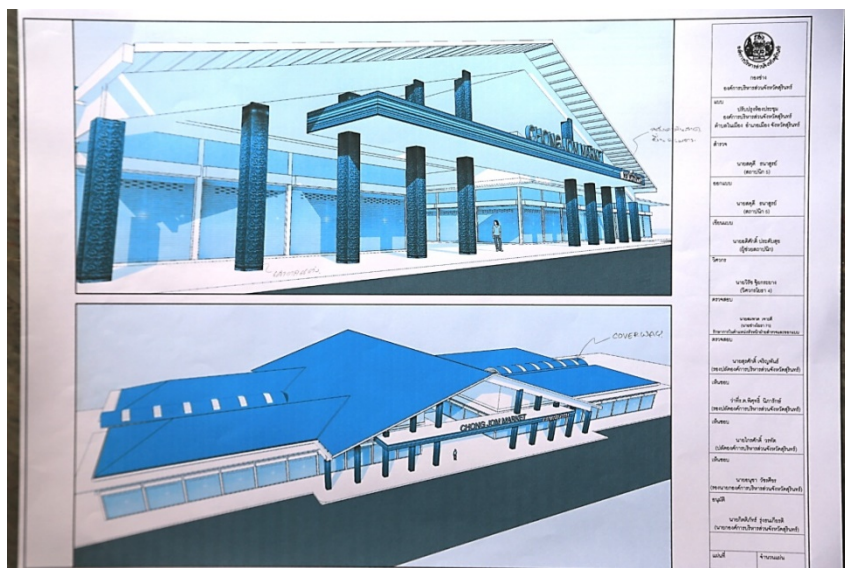


Figure 4: New Chongjom border market

Borderland development are in the process of putting forward a planning implementation in 2015 with no consideration towards the impact this will have on the community, the surrounding environment and locals in the neighbouring villages. Though, in this plan a 5 million Baht (1.7 Mil. USD) plant for burning waste is included, but there is no water pollution solving problem and other recycling plans for more shops and a large number of traders and tourists in the future.

Aside from the catastrophic effect this will have on the community, PAO are not paying more attention to the future impact will have on local residents. Major traffic issues might clog small village roads. The air quality will deteriorate where air pollution is already in excess of health limits.

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