



Cashing In across the Golden Triangle: Thailand's Northern Border Trade with China, Laos, and Myanmar

Thein Swe and Paul Chambers

Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2011.

ISBN: 978-616-90053-4-6

192 + XX pages

Reviewed by: John Walsh, Editor, SIU Journal of Management, School of Management, Shinawatra University, Thailand.

Contact: jcwalsh@siu.ac.th

Borders continue to be important in the contemporary world: they represent the points at which differently configured geographic states meet each other and, where capitalism is given rein to do so, differences can be used to yield profit. Where multiple borders meet in a compressed area, the opportunities for profit necessarily multiply. Profits may be measured not just in an economic sense but also from political and social perspectives. The Golden Triangle is an obvious example of the various differences that can be seen within a comparatively narrow patch of ground. The place where China and Thailand meet Laos and Myanmar is one that has witnessed illegal drug smuggling, human trafficking, the to and fro of armed insurgents and the cautious movements of traders and their caravans that have, over the course of centuries, transported Burmese gems and trade, salt, manufactured goods and information. In the twenty-first century, the Golden Triangle Region has become a focal point for the Asian Development Bank's Asian Highway Network and the long-term attempt to turn the battlefield of mainland Southeast Asia into a marketplace.

Through a comparatively narrow strip of land bordering the River Mekong, therefore, the interstate R3A and R3B roads represent important means of moving goods and people across the borders and into new territories. Building infrastructure to link distant places has the effect of spreading capitalism. The roads bring the market to the peasants and the peasants to the market. In Schumpeterian fashion, the advance of capitalism is the advance of the processes of creative destruction that make for winners and losers and the reinvention of social relations as market or economic relations. People go to bed one night next to a forest which has for recorded history been a place of commonly held and used resources and wake up in a world in which the forest has an owner and a barrier and tollbooth prevent the previously customary free access to it. When this occurs in an area in which government agencies can properly monitor what is happening and enforce regulations to protect the vulnerable and rectify market failures, the spread of capitalism can be managed and taxed to pay for

its excesses. However, where the spread of capitalism takes place in a region such as the Golden Triangle, where government agencies are notable by their absence or lack of capacity and the rule of law is only occasionally available, cowboy capitalism takes over and it is a case of the devil taking the hindmost.

To rectify the problems of cowboy capitalism, one of the most important first steps to take will involve the gathering of proper information and, in this book, Swe and Chambers have added a great deal to the level of knowledge about the nature and extent of commercial operations taking place in the defined region. Drawing upon a programme of qualitative in-depth, personal interviews to supplement the personal observations and the secondary data, the authors provide baseline data on transportation costs on different roads, the problems of Chiang Saen shipping facilities, the types of goods transported across borders and the role of the Chinese in promoting casino-development. Most of the chapters of this short book (the text itself consumes just 140 pages with numerous charts and tables) are involved with the transmission of data and they do their job very well, if with the occasional stylistic lapse.

There is also an attempt to frame the text within the paradigm of postclassical realism, in an early chapter with peremptorily dismisses half a dozen other possible means of approaching the situation. This chapter is less satisfying in that at least some of the rejected approaches are dealt with in too dismissive a fashion. Further, the concept of postclassical realism rarely returns in the text subsequently. Instead, it becomes clear that it is corporations and individuals which are taking advantage of the freedom from governmental oversight to create their own little fiefdoms and palaces of excess. It is certainly true that the governments are present and do take some definite actions (e.g. the Chinese authorities only release water from dams when they want to assist their own ships on the way downstream and do not reveal to outsiders (including Thai captains trying to make the journey in the opposite direction) when the releases might be scheduled to occur). However, these kinds of actions might be

characterized – and often are in the case of Thailand – the result of private deals between office holders and private sector individuals or organizations. It might be argued that, to some extent, these corporations are enacting state-level developmental goals but, if they are doing so, then they are also displaying a great deal of autonomy in their decision-making.

Overall, this is a fascinating account of an area and a subject that is of considerable interest to the study of mainland Southeast Asia. It is, also, nicely produced by the Mekong Press, which is gaining a reputation for being a leader in the production of important knowledge about the eponymous region. The book is, therefore, highly recommended for those interested in the social and economic development of the region.

John Walsh, Shinawatra University.