

Agrarian livelihood change in Chinese border areas of northern Laos

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Background

Laos, a small landlocked country in Southeast Asia, has restored relations with China after the 1990s, and then Lao-China borders were opened by both nations. After that, a lot of Chinese from Yunnan province in the southern part of China have come over to Laos.

Chinese firms have expanded into new agribusinesses such as para-rubber plantation and contract farming of vegetables in rural northern Laos, especially Chinese border areas from the late 1990s.

Purpose of Study

In this study, we would like to elucidate vegetable farming for Chinese market and agrarian livelihood change from the viewpoint of cultural and political ecology.

Boun Neua district of Phongsaly province, which has one of major border checkpoints between Lao and China, is selected for the study area (Fig. 1).

New Agriculture

Introduction of sugarcane into former swidden field from the late 1990s (Photo 1), various vegetables into paddy fields during the dry season from the 2000s (Photo 2) and some new cash crops (Photo 3) are widely observed as a form of contract farming with agribusiness firms mainly by Chinese capital, and are drastically caused land use changes (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). In particular, since rice could not be cultivated in dry season owing to cold climate, dry season crops in paddy field with new agricultural techniques are well accepted by agrarian living near the Chinese border area.

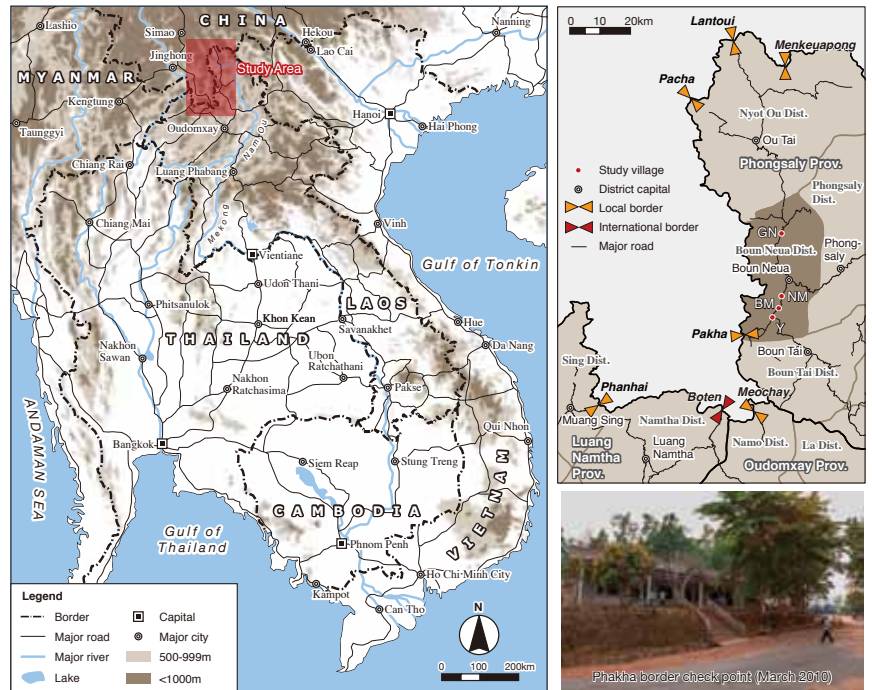


Fig. 1 Study Area

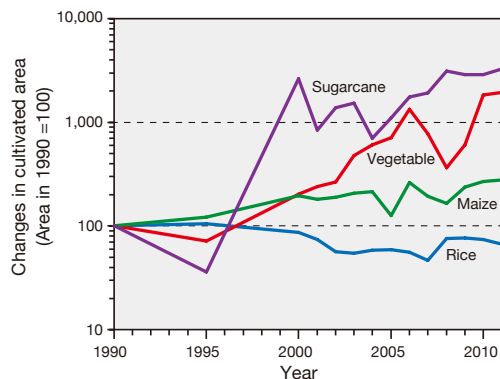


Fig. 2 Changes in Cultivated Area in Phongsaly Province, 1990-2011

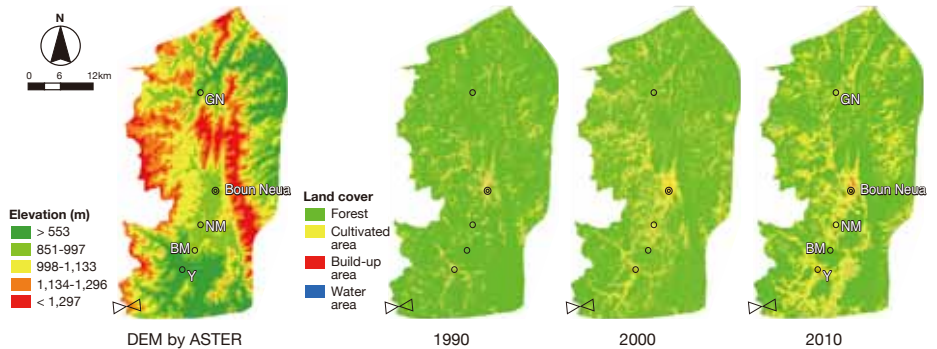


Fig. 3 Land cover changes in Boun Neua district of Phongsaly province, 1990-2010 (Landsat images, 30m resolution, from NASA)



Photo 1 Contract farming of sugarcane cultivation in former swidden field of NM village (March 2012)



Photo 2 Contract farming of various vegetables in paddy fields during the dry season (March 2012)



Photo 3 New contract farming of banana cultivation using tissue culture technique in former swidden field of GN village (March 2012)

Conclusion

This study clarified that there are three main factors to develop a contract farming with Chinese firms in northern Laos.

1. Agrarian must depend on the Chinese agricultural products market because domestic market is undeveloped.
2. People living near Lao-China borders have a common language because of the same ethnic group, Tai Lue.
3. Since Laotian government leaves management of local borders to local governments, the provincial government can respond quickly to measures for imports and exports of agricultural products without waiting for the decision-making of central government.

From a variety of factors, the study area had laid the groundwork for accepting the cultivation of crops for Chinese market since the 1990s.