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## <Book Review>

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### ***Turning Land into Capital: Development and Dispossession in the Mekong Region***

PHILIP HIRSCH, KEVIN WOODS, NATALIA SCURRAH, and MICHAEL B. DWYER, eds.  
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022.

What is land? The anthropologist Tania Li (2014, 589) observed that “Land is a strange object” and can be considered “an assemblage of materialities, relations, technologies and discourses that have to be pulled together and made to align.” These multiple facets of land make discussions about land relations and land politics increasingly complex. This complexity is reflected in the interdisciplinary discussions over the past decade about global land grabbing, with the Mekong region emerging as a key area for exploring this topic. Under the influence of globalization and the market economy, land in this region has transformed from a traditional production factor into a mobile and appreciating asset. This process, known as land capitalization, has triggered various socio-economic and political concerns. The edited volume *Turning Land into Capital: Development and Dispossession in the Mekong Region* thoroughly explains these issues.

The introduction of the book discusses the complexity of land capitalization, with its social, economic, and political factors and resulting struggles, resistance, accumulation, and exploitation issues.

This chapter identifies three main forms of land capitalization: improvement, commodification, and financialization. “Improvement” is a social process of investing “labor and materials to make land more productive” (p. 174) in the context of modernity and development. “Commodification” is the process of gaining land control through transforming social-property relations in favor of monetary investment. “Financialization” encompasses the multiple financial actors as well as state-owned enterprises controlling land in its various forms with various outcomes.

Using as an example the Mekong region—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Southwest China—the volume examines the practices and profound impacts of the above three processes at different national and local levels.

The book is divided into two main parts: (1) a broad overview of the Mekong region and a comparison of land governance between countries within this region (Chapters 1 to 4), and (2) case studies of five countries (Chapters 5 to 9). Chapter 1 examines cross-border land deals in the Mekong region, specifically the complex motivations behind them, their heterogeneity, the intricate interactions among multiple actors, and how these transactions shape the regional geopolitical landscape. It also highlights how cross-border land investments intertwine with the region’s turbulent history. Chapter 2 discusses changes in land governance in Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from colonialism to socialism during the Cold War, exploring historical legacies of land governance in the Mekong region and their impact on contemporary land policies and practices. It also addresses long-standing indigenous discontent. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth analysis of the history of agrarian modernization in the Mekong region, examining both past developments and current market-oriented trends. It critiques the current agricultural policies dominated by large-scale farming, especially neoliberal agrarian modernization, expressing concerns about drastic changes in agricultural structures and uneven development. The chapter emphasizes the importance of smallholder agriculture and its contribution to social justice and economic development. Chapter 4 illustrates how the three main forms of land capitalization shape land ownership and governance, leading to unequal land access and exclusion, which reveals the complexity of land justice struggles. Notably, the justice issues have received growing attention from land science researchers (Meyfroidt *et al.* 2022), as reflected in the Global Land Programme Science Plan and Implementation Strategy 2024–2028.

The second part of the book (Chapters 5 to 9) offers a detailed examination of the history and current state of land governance in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Case studies are presented to reveal the main strategies and characteristics of land capitalization processes in each country. Land tenure insecurity and the resistance behaviors of smallholders in unstable conditions are also addressed in these chapters. Specifically, Chapter 5 delves into the history and current state of land governance in Cambodia and the interplay of land commodification, state formation, and agrarian capitalism. It highlights three crucial processes: land titling and the creation of credit markets, integration into regional agricultural trade, and large-scale economic

land concessions (ELCs). Chapter 6 discusses the political dynamics of land development in Laos. It emphasizes that land policies and practices there have been shaped against the backdrop of the country's history and its geopolitical and economic imperatives, with two distinct modes of land capitalization: concessions based on state land, and smallholder development based on private land. Chapter 7 explores how race, ethnicity, and war have influenced land policies and practices in Myanmar. Specifically, it addresses the long-standing contestation of racial, ethnic, and national identities and unequal power relations, represented by "Burman-led crony capitalism and non-Burman strongmen economies" (p. 130) in land commodification. Chapter 8 explores the evolution of land relations and how land has been improved, commodified, and financialized in Thailand's "highly unequal rural society" (p. 136). In addition, it highlights the countermovement limiting accumulation and dispossession by engaging with the Polanyian notions of fictitious commodity and double movement, as well as cross-border investment through contract farming and long-term land rental in neighboring countries. Chapter 9 examines the historical evolution of land policy and property relations, with a focus on the current "land recovery" policies as reverse land reform seeking domestic and foreign investments in the name of national development in Vietnam. It extends the discussion to the balance between protecting smallholders and promoting economic development.

The following points are worth noting. First, the book reveals the diversity and complexity of land capitalization in the Mekong region along various dimensions, exploring how land is capitalized through different processes and how these are influenced by geopolitics, historical legacies, and ideologies. It highlights internal differentiation in the processes of land capitalization within each country as well as interactions within the Mekong region, noting similarities in agrarian modernization and transborder investment in agriculture between Vietnam, Thailand, and China. However, the differentiation of processes within countries could have done with a more in-depth examination. Also, the book does not contain a separate chapter on China despite the speed and scale of Chinese capital entering the Mekong region and the impacts of China's Going Out policy and Belt and Road Initiative. As S. M. Borras *et al.* (2018) pointed out, it is crucial to consider not only investment flows from China but also those within and into China.

Second, the book effectively highlights the persistence of land capitalization issues over time, described as casting "a long shadow" (p. 30). As mentioned in Chapter 2, colonialism, war, and socialism have profoundly impacted current land governance. In other words, the production, shaping, and reshaping of land relations unfold through ongoing social processes (for instance, the ELCs in Cambodia and the ethnic and racial dynamics as well as unequal power relations in Myanmar).

Third, the book elaborately describes the upland-lowland differences and the linkages between certain Mekong countries in terms of ethnicities, agro-ecological practices, migrations, and tenure systems. For instance, it addresses differentiation in land access in Cambodia, different modes of land capitalization in Laos and Myanmar, and land reform for differently allocating individual land

use rights in Vietnam. However, these dynamic processes in land capitalization deserve to be explored further.

Fourth, although this is not extensively covered, the book sheds light on the plight of marginalized groups in the land capitalization process, such as smallholders and migrant laborers. As a Cambodian farmer notes, “I do not like the situation now. I wish I could have the livelihood like before” (p. 76), reflecting the uncertain future of inhabitants of the Mekong region. This echoes M. Vatikiotis’s (2017, 304) description of Southeast Asia as being caught “in a cycle of relentless tragedy.”

The volume is rich in content. Its contributors, who have long been engaged in research on land politics and land relations, have based their work on an abundance of research results. Undoubtedly, the book makes a significant contribution to understanding the ongoing issues of land grabbing, crop booms, agricultural transformation, and rural-urban interactions in the Mekong region and other developing countries. For a better understanding of land politics and land system changes in the Mekong region and situating these topics in broader academic contexts as well as disciplinary fields (such as environmental outcomes), this book can serve as an important reference along with two other open access resources: the report titled “State of Land in the Mekong Region” (2019) and the collection titled “The Agrarian Transition in the Mekong Region: Pathways Towards Sustainable Land Systems” in the *Journal of Land Use Science* (2024). This book also offers a valuable foundation for further discussions on smallholder agriculture, rural development, nation building, and regional sustainable development. It is likely to be of great interest to researchers in the fields of Southeast Asian studies, agrarian studies, and land system science.

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