



City profile

Re-territorializing Mengla: From “backwater” to “bridgehead” of China’s socio-economic development

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ABSTRACT

This profile of Mengla contributes to our understanding of the city itself and the drastic transformations underway in China’s vast inner Asian borderlands. Applying the conceptual lens of territorialization, it offers a critical review of the physical and discursive transition of Mengla from “backwater” to “bridgehead” within the specific context of China’s anti-poverty campaign. It first contextualizes the city’s recent transformation within three waves of socialist modernity imposed on Xishuangbanna since 1949. Second, it outlines the evolution of poverty reduction in China, focusing particularly on how the Development-oriented Poverty Reduction program has transformed Mengla and the broader Dianxi Area. Third, the development of the Mengla Experimental Zone illustrates how a hybridized BRI-poverty reduction program has further accelerated Mengla’s urbanization. Fourth, a detailed case study of Nanla New District reveals a novel form of frontier urbanism characterized by a tourism-related real estate development model. This profile concludes with three lessons, namely the importance of integrating environmental and social histories into urban history studies, interpreting the impacts and effects of the BRI in relation to other development initiatives, and investigating the discursive spaces of development projects to reveal the socio-ecological values that undergird the physical transformations observed on the ground.

1. Introduction

Mengla is a county-level city located in the extreme south of Yunnan Province under the jurisdiction of the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. It has the longest national borderline (740.8 km) of any county in Yunnan Province, sharing a 63-km border with Myanmar in the west and a 677.8-km border with Laos in the south (Lin, 2016, 12). On July 16, 2015, Mengla and five other cities along China’s national borders were approved by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as Key Development and Opening Up Experimental Zones, a new genre of special zones established along major economic corridors under China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The recent appraisal of Mengla as a BRI bridgehead is in sharp contrast to a long-established narrative of Mengla as primitive, remote and mountainous. Likewise, the exceedingly long national border of Mengla, formerly seen as a contributor to the county’s “poverty” and “backwardness,” has metamorphosed into a critical asset endowing the county with unprecedented development opportunities. This drastic change of Mengla’s image from “backwater” to “bridgehead” in term of socio-economic development, undergirded a grandiose exhibition held

in Mengla in 2019, which was organized by the Mengla County Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Mengla County People’s Government. Its title “No One Must be Left Behind: Witnessing the Battle Against Poverty in Mengla” draws on a quote from the speech delivered by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the launch of the Battle against Poverty in 2015, which set 2020 as the target year the country should wipe out poverty and become a moderately prosperous society. President Xi declared “we will establish a moderately prosperous society to be enjoyed by each and every one of us; on the march towards common prosperity, no one must be left behind.” A year after Mengla announced the county-level success of anti-poverty battle, President Xi declared the nationwide victory on poverty alleviation in December 2020 and framed it as a birthday gift for the 100th anniversary of the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

This city profile, based on the review of key government policies and planning documents and field surveys carried out between 2017 and 2019, offers a critical review of the physical and discursive transition of Mengla from “backwater” to “bridgehead” within the specific context of China’s anti-poverty campaign. Applying the conceptual lens of territorialization, this paper draws insights from, and seeks to contribute to

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the existing literature that examine the territory as a key practical aspect of state control. Departing from the definition of territories as fixed spatial entities, increasing literatures identify territories as socially constructed spaces, which is inseparable from the on-going processes of territorialization and affiliated de-territorialization/re-territorialization (Brenner & Elden, 2009; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995; Wainwright & Robertson, 2003; Woods, 2019; Yeh, 2013). As a deliberate strategy to transform both the subjectivity and the landscape, state territorialization is usually instigated with a view to governing people and controlling resources located within and around the territory in question (Yeh, 2013). Drawing on Robert Sack's "ten tendencies of territoriality" (1986, 58–60), Vandergeest and Peluso highlight the dual processes of classification and communication in their examination of territorialization projects in Thailand, wherein classification refers to eliminating or altering the notional compulsion to regulate specific resources or individuals within a territorial zone, and communication refers to delineating territorial boundaries and restrictions on activities within a given territory in verbal and visual terms (1995, 388). In the same vein, this city profile foregrounds how the land and people of China's southwestern borderlands have been classified by the changing socio-political ideologies and how the planning practices play an important role in communicating territorial orders that assign people and human activities to their "right places."

The city profile is uniquely different from others by focusing on how a hybridized BRI–Poverty Reduction policy drives the territorialization of a Chinese border city. The importance of offering a timely examination of Mengla is based on the following three premises viewed at distinct scales. First, China's borderlands are among the most important frontiers of urbanization in the world today. Characterized by extreme socio-ecological diversity and an often-perplexing history of state-driven modernization since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, China's borderlands are fascinating case studies for examining new modes of statecraft and extra-statecraft in an era of neoliberal globalization (Woodworth & Joniak-Lüthi, 2020). Second, the Western Yunnan Mountainous Border Area in the country's southwest frontier (hereinafter referred to as the Dianxi Area), characterized by "adverse natural conditions, underdeveloped infrastructure and impoverishment of much of the population" (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2011), is one of the 14 "main battlefields" in the 2011–2020 Poverty Reduction and Development Plan. Here China's anti-poverty campaign has driven urbanization at an unprecedented speed and scale. Third, Mengla city in the Dianxi Area, now finds itself at the forefront of overlapping initiatives and policies, notably a Development-oriented Poverty Reduction program launched in 1994, and the Belt and Road Initiative officially inaugurated in 2013. The Mengla case illustrates a novel form of urbanization driven by frontier capitalism (Barney, 2009; Laungaramsri, 2012; Woodworth, 2017), where natural and cultural landscapes are being rapidly commodified due to their frontier locations and BRI affiliation.

The following sections of this city profile are organized accordingly. Section 2 contextualizes the recent transformation of Mengla within three waves of socialist modernity imposed on the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Essentially territorialization projects, three waves of socialist modernity contribute to the making of an impoverished region and its population, and consequently call for additional measures to solve the problem of poverty. Section 3 examines the evolution of China's poverty reduction efforts initiated in the late 1970s, with a particular focus on China's Development-oriented Poverty Reduction program that emphasizes the importance of development projects in this context. This section recounts how China's poverty reduction programs were co-opted by other overlapping national initiatives and policies, leading to a refocus towards the country's western regions including the Dianxi Area. Section 4 analyzes the ongoing re-territorialization of Mengla by focusing specifically on the formation of the Mengla Experimental Zone and how Mengla's position at the periphery of China was redefined as being at the

center of a vast South and Southeast Asian territory. This section highlights the unprecedented significance given to Mengla when the BRI was praised for elevating Development-oriented Poverty Reduction to a higher level. To better articulate the socio-spatial implications of a hybridized BRI–Poverty Reduction policy, Section 5 provides a detailed examination of Mengla's Nanla New District, which embodies a tourism-related real estate development model. This section illustrates how frontier capitalism is rapidly commodifying the natural assets and indigenous cultures of a border region undergoing transformation from "backwater" to "bridgehead" of China's socio-economic development.

2. Mengla and three waves of socialist modernity in Xishuangbanna

Mengla means "Place of Tea" in the Dai language ("Meng" meaning "place" and "la" meaning "tea"). Traditionally acclaimed for its celebrated Pu-er tea, the city had long been recognized as the northern gateway to the old Southern Silk Road, also known as the "Ancient Tea Horse Road" (Lin, 2016, 3). In addition to its Silk Road affiliation, Mengla is famous for its natural and cultural diversity thanks to its humid subtropical climate and mountainous terrain. The current narrative of how Mengla's historic significance along the Southern Silk Road holds promise for its future development, with its romantic descriptions of Mengla as a Spring City (*chuncheng*), Green City (*lücheng*), and Ecotourism City (*shengtailiyou chengshi*), is in fact a relatively new construct (People's Government of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, 2018, 34; People's Government of Mengla County, 2019a; Banna Daily, 2020). This new image stands in sharp contrast to the more dominant image of Mengla as primitive (*yuanshi*), remote (*pianyuan*) and mountainous (*qiqi*) that has characterized most government reports over the past three decades (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1992, IX-5; People's Government of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, 2002, 144; Lin, 2016, 7). This section helps us better understand the changing image of Mengla by examining how the city, part of the broader Xishuangbanna area of Yunnan, has been subject to processes of territorialization through three waves of socialist modernity since the establishment of the PRC in 1949.

In the early 1950s, China's newly established regime launched the first wave of socialist modernity based on a political ideology that prioritized military security and national unification. The "Place of Tea" witnessed a boom in rubber production in the 1950s when the central government designated natural rubber as a strategic industrial product during the Korean War (1950–1953) in response to a US trade embargo (Xu, 2006). Rubber plantations were rapidly established in China's tropical areas of Hainan Island and Xishuangbanna. In Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, tropical rainforest across the lowlands of Jinghong and Mengla formerly used by Dai farmers was cleared to make way for eight state farm rubber plantations in the 1950s (Chen et al., 2016). At the same time, dramatic changes were imposed on the cultural and physical landscape; the new regime sent teams of scholars to carry out ethnic identification in Xishuangbanna to "scientifically" classify peoples into "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*). Just as in other regions of China populated by ethnic minorities, people in Xishuangbanna were classified and ranked according to a Stalinist model of social development based on modes of production along a continuum from primitive production through slavery, feudalism, to early capitalism (Sturgeon, 2012). State research teams identified 13 minority nationalities in Xishuangbanna, the largest indigenous group comprising one-third of the total population being the Dai, ranked as feudal (wet rice farmers)¹ (Sturgeon, 2012).

A second wave of socialist modernity was inaugurated in the late

¹ These 13 minority nationalities in Xishuangbanna identified by state research teams in the 1950s include Dai, Hani, Yi, Yao, Zhuang, Miao, Hui, Lahu, Wa, Blang, Jino.

1990s based on an environmental ideology formed after the catastrophic floods of 1998, the worst China had suffered since the 1954 Yangtze floods. In 1998, devastating flooding affected the Yangtze, Nen, Songhua, and Pearl River basins, killing more than 3600 people, displacing 240 million people, flooding 25 million hectares of farmland, and causing damage estimated at over USD 20 billion (Lott et al., 2008). The central government deemed the flooding a national environmental catastrophe partly natural and partly human-made, and initiated programs to tackle local land degradation and negative off-site environmental impacts through water and soil conservation measures including afforestation in upstream areas. Policy changes were implemented to recentralize state control over natural forests, including those in Xishuangbanna. The Natural Forest Protection Plan (NFPP) made illegal the cultivation of any land steeper than 25 degrees gradient and obliged farmers to plant trees or allow natural forest regeneration to rehabilitate any such sloping land lacking existing forest cover (Lang, 2002). In addition, the “Grain for Green” or Returning Farmland to Forest Program (RFFP) granted farmers tree seedlings and eight years of grain and cash subsidies if they agreed to undertake reforestation of their sloping lands (Ye et al., 2003). These policies and regulations were imposed on shifting cultivation and village and household forests, thereby resulting in huge losses of agricultural land for upland farmers. The Akha, an indigenous group rated as primitive (shifting cultivators) by the ethnic identification program of the 1950s, now found themselves defined as environmentally destructive as well due to their traditional farming practices (Sturgeon, 2012).

After the adoption of the Decision on Deepening Reform by the CPC Central Committee in late 2013, a third wave of socialist modernity primarily based on an economic ideology has been promulgated, incorporating the environmental ideology dominant since the late 1990s. The latest rationale behind the governance of nature and culture emphasizes their economic value to attract investment capital. The wet tropical climate and rainforest that enabled the establishment of rubber plantations in the mid-20th century has now become the ideal stage set for a 21st-century urbanism that advocates “human–nature harmony.” Over the past decade, Mengla has been increasingly referred to as the southernmost “Spring City” in China thanks to its monthly average temperature of 22 °C and year-round beauty. It has an average annual precipitation of 1941.8 mm and average annual relative humidity of 86%, one of the three most humid counties in Yunnan Province (Lin, 2016, 24). Mengla has also been branded as the southernmost “Green City” in China, thanks to its rich rainforest resources. Praised as the “Kingdom of Plants and Animals,” Mengla is situated within the national key ecological function zone and the national ecological demonstration zone and is a provincial level ecotourism county and a national level eco-county. The mountainous terrain and extensive rainforests account for the county’s exceptional diversity of flora and fauna, and its ethnic and cultural diversity, a key component of the flourishing ecotourism industry. Mengla Urban and Rural Master Plan (2016–2030) identifies Mengla as an “Ecotourism City” characterized by diverse ethnic customs as well as a provincial-level model county for ethnic unity and progress. Accounting for 74.1% of Mengla’s total population of 297,900 people, the minority population comprises 26 ethnic minorities (People’s Government of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, 2021).²

The first, second, and third waves of socialist modernity are essentially territorialization projects driven by distinct ideologies. Similar to the territorialization projects in Thailand described by Vandergeest and Peluso, by means of planning practices, national, provincial, and local authorities “divide their territories into complex and overlapping political and economic zones, rearrange people and resources within these units, and create regulations delineating how and by whom these areas

can be used” (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995, 387). These territorialization projects produce and reproduce social power relationships, creating plans that serve the dominant political economy as much as they challenge existing social configurations. During the first wave of “socialist modernity” started in the early 1950s, zoning was carried out based on the suitability of land for rubber plantations. As the traditional “low-efficiency” modes of agricultural production were replaced by the modern industrial mode of production in the valley floors, the patchwork of small paddy fields was swept away to be replaced by large state-run rubber plantations. Lowland farmers (predominantly Dai people) were cast out of their land in favor of “efficient” state farm workers (almost exclusively Han people). During the second wave of “socialist modernity” that started in the late 1990s, zoning was carried out based on the suitability of land for forest protection and reestablishment. Environmentalists and authorities considered the uplands a “poverty-environment nexus” where poverty and environmental damage were locked in a mutually degrading vicious circle. Traditional “environmentally-destructive” modes of subsistence agriculture were replaced by forest conservation and afforestation initiatives. Upland farmers (predominantly Akha people) along with their traditional shifting agriculture and forest management practices were evicted from the newly designated forest protection and conservation zones.

A substantial proportion of the “impoverished population” in the region were people evicted from their lands, which had been reappropriated as rubber plantations and protected forests. Yet, their impoverished status is itself appropriated by the third wave of “socialist modernity” driven by Development-oriented Poverty Reduction, with land being zoned according to its suitability for natural and cultural resource commodification. Thus, the Mengla Urban and Rural Master Plan (2016–2030) states, “Of Mengla’s 6860.84 km² land area, the mountainous areas make up 96.1 percent of the total while the ‘bazi’ (valley floors) constitute only 3.9% of the total. The geographical configuration and topography of a given area determine its socio-economic development pattern. The mountainous areas characterized by ecological and cultural wealth, bequeath Mengla with tourism resources yet to be exploited. Meanwhile, the bazi areas provide Mengla with precious land suitable for urban development. Urbanization must shift from an extensive to an intensive growth model to use limited land resources with maximum efficiency and optimize service provision” (People’s Government of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, 2017). The county- and town-level master plans support the efforts of governments and development agencies to facilitate the implementation of preferred socio-environmental development patterns and projects, assigning people and human activities to their “right places.” Towns in the bazi areas are expected to take on a contemporary urban outlook with multi-lane roads and high-rise condominiums. By contrast, towns and villages inhabited by ethnic minorities, which in many cases had been forced to relocate during the first and second waves of “socialist modernity” are now expected to actively engage in the tourism industry, turning their traditions and customs into touristic commodities to graduate from their impoverished status.

3. Dianxi Area and the evolution of China’s poverty reduction program

The 2019 “Battle Against Poverty in Mengla” exhibition celebrates the transformation of Mengla from a lowly county struggling with “adverse natural conditions, underdeveloped infrastructure and a large impoverished population” in the words of the 2011–2020 national poverty reduction and development plan, into a bridgehead of China’s embrace of South and Southeast Asia. This exhibition reveals how Mengla has recently been reinvented as a forward-looking city “endowed with rich natural and cultural resources ripe for improved management, regulation and development” (People’s Government of Mengla County, 2019a). Mengla is described in the exhibition preface as being at the vanguard of various national policies, “a strategic location

² Among the total population of 297,900 in Mengla, Dai people made up 28.5%, Hani People 23.38%, Yao People 7.52%, Yi People 7.08%, and other minorities made up 4.4%.

where the Battle Against Poverty, the Development and Opening Up in Border Areas, the Western Development Strategy, and the Belt and Road Initiative overlap” with “poverty reduction being the overarching structure that guides the socio-economic development of Mengla” (People’s Government of Mengla County, 2019a). To better understand how the on-going re-territorialization of Mengla is driven by a hybridized BRI–Poverty Reduction policy, Sections 3 and 4 of this city profile offer a critical overview of the evolution of China’s poverty reduction program and how it has been co-opted by other aforementioned national initiatives and policies since the beginning of the new millennium.

Although China’s help-the-poor program was initiated following the inauguration of the Reform and Opening Up policies of the late 1970s, it was not until the mid-1980s that a Development-oriented Poverty Reduction program was implemented which then truly gathered steam after the launch of the Seven-year Priority Poverty Reduction Program (1994–2000) (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2001a). Poverty alleviation with a particular focus on the western half of China entered a new stage at the beginning of the millennium as part of a broader change in China’s regional development strategy, specifically the launch of the Western Development Strategy (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2001b). The concept of a Moderately Prosperous Society (*xiaokang shehui*) originating in the Confucian classics, describing a society where poverty is eliminated and inequality is reduced, started to be emphasized in new iterations of the poverty alleviation campaign, partly in response to the increasing inequality between inland and coastal regions in the 1990s (Solé-Farràs, 2008). Two ten-year plans have been

implemented since 2001, guided by the Outline for Poverty Reduction and Development of China’s Rural Areas (2001–2010) and the Outline for Development-oriented Poverty Reduction for China’s Rural Areas (2011–2020) (hereinafter referred to as the 2011–2020 Poverty Reduction and Development Plan). In 2015, the central government issued the “Decision of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Winning the Battle against Poverty,” setting 2020 as the year the country should have wiped out poverty and become a moderately prosperous society (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015).

The Western Yunnan Mountainous Border Area (hereinafter referred to as the Dianxi Area) was selected as one of the 14 “main battlefields” in the 2011–2020 Poverty Reduction and Development Plan (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2011) (Fig. 1). According to the plan, the social and geographical conditions of this frontier area are characterized by poverty and ethnic diversity amid inaccessible and mountainous terrain. The Dianxi Area covers approximately 209,000 km², 53% of the total area of Yunnan Province (Lin, 2016, 4). It comprises 61 districts classified as “extremely poor” in 10 contiguous cities and autonomous prefectures, namely Baoshan City, Lijiang City, Pu’er City, Lincang City, Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture and Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture (Lin, 2016, 4). Abutting Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, the Dianxi Area comprises 22 border counties and 48 ethnic regional autonomous counties. The Dianxi Area is a hotbed of ethnic cultural diversity, home to an extraordinary

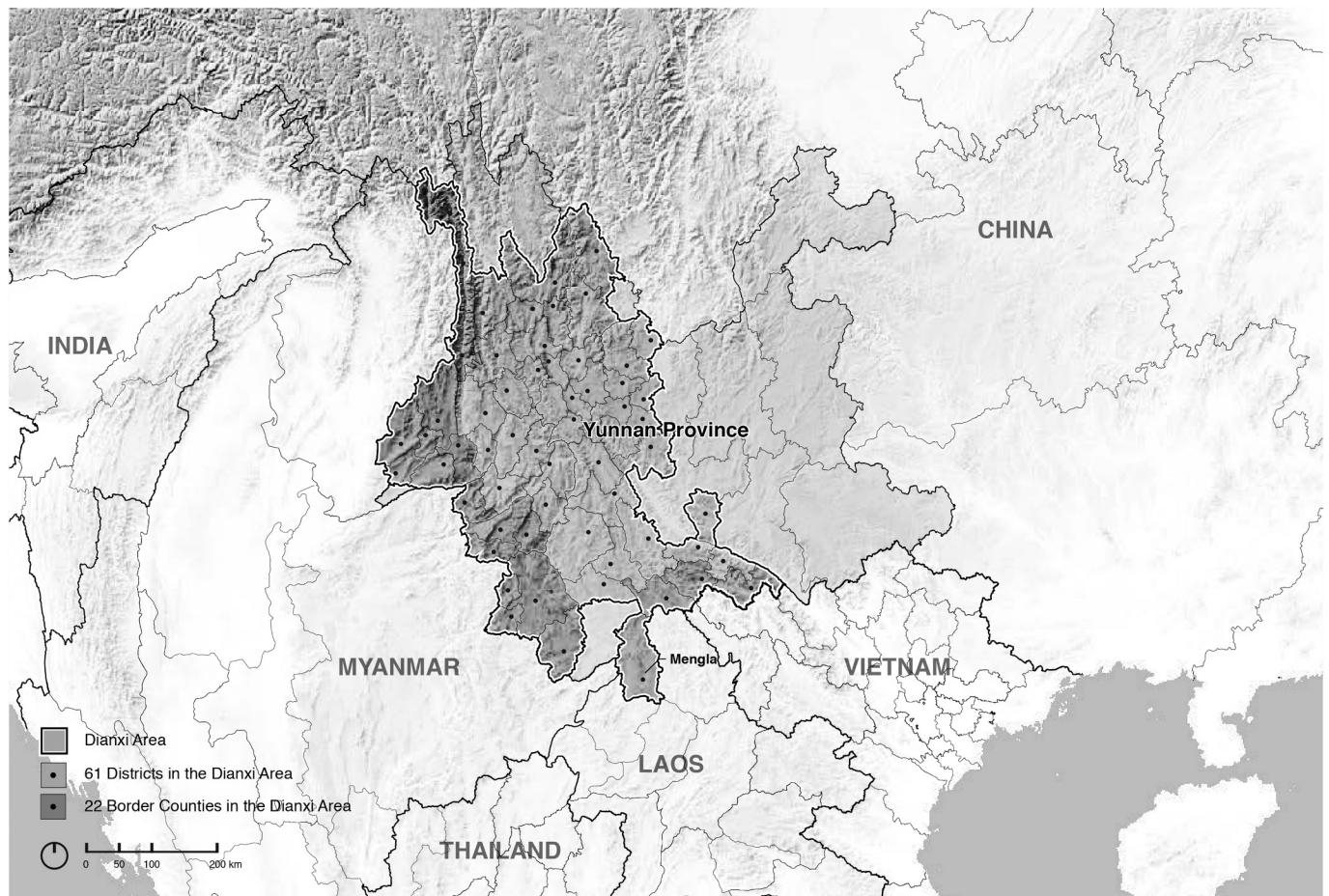


Fig. 1. Map of the Western Yunnan Mountainous Border Area (Dianxi Area), one of the 14 “main battlefields” identified in China’s 2011–2020 Poverty Reduction and Development Plan.

Map produced by the author.

number of ethnic minorities and cross-border ethnic groups. A mountainous area, it is celebrated for its biodiversity and ecological significance and includes the famous water source protection areas of the Yangtze, Lancang (Mekong), and Nu rivers (Lin, 2016, 1).

Like all the main battlefields of poverty reduction in Western China, the 2011–2020 Poverty Reduction and Development Plan describes Dianxi as having “adverse natural conditions, underdeveloped infrastructure and a largely impoverished population” (Lin, 2016, 8). Infrastructure construction and urbanization are critical tools deployed by the Development-oriented Poverty Reduction program in response to these natural and social challenges, in the belief that quality of life is dependent on how well the population is connected to markets. First, “inaccessibility” in terms of infrastructure is seen as an accurate proxy for poverty in rural developing economies. The argument is that poor infrastructure is a “problem” because it stymies trade for rural communities, raising the costs of inputs and lowering the value of outputs, thereby undermining livelihoods. According to this rationale, these areas require development intervention, and highways have been built as a matter of urgency to connect the poorest counties with national and provincial trunk roads. Second, urbanization is considered an engine of economic growth thereby reducing rural poverty, to be implemented by “the voluntary relocation of impoverished populations from areas with harsh living conditions to improve their living environment” and “the construction of county seats, central towns and industrial parks to improve public services for the people” (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2001b). The theory is that the combination of poverty-relief relocation and new town construction will provide employment for impoverished farmers in urban areas and sectors outside agriculture while simultaneously protecting the “endangered ecological environment” (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2011). Allowing former cultivated land to regenerate to forest and grassland is in line with the “Grain for Green” policy, a major part of the West China Development program that promotes turning low-yielding farmland back into forest and pasture (Lu & Neilson, 2004, 8).

Mengla took on unprecedented significance within the broader poverty reduction and development plan of the Dianxi Area after 2013. In anticipation of the 35th anniversary of the country’s Reform and Opening Up, the Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (hereinafter referred to as Decision on Deepening Reform) was issued at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in November 2013. The Decision included a special section on “Further Opening Up” advocating wider investment access (key point 24), the speeding up of construction of free-trade zones (key point 25), and further opening up of inland and border areas (key point 26) (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2013). Key point 26 declared the need to “quicken the pace of opening up in border areas, and allow key ports, border cities and economic cooperation zones in the border areas to have special methods and policies with regard to personnel exchange, processing and logistics, tourism and some other areas” and to “accelerate the construction of infrastructure connecting China with neighboring countries and regions, and work hard to build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a Maritime Silk Road, to form a new pattern of all-round opening” (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2013). Since then, a series of Key Development and Opening Up Experimental Zones (hereinafter referred to as experimental zones) have been established along major economic corridors under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In July 2015, the State Council approved the establishment of a new experimental zone in Mengla (People’s Government of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, 2015). Accordingly, the 740.8-km-long national border of Mengla has metamorphosed from a contributor to the city’s poverty into a critical asset promising the city with unprecedented development opportunities. “One Artery and Three Windows” is the description of the organizational structure of the Mengla Experimental Zone, which boasts of being China’s bridgehead along the revitalized Southern Silk Road (People’s Government of Yunnan Province,

2016). The “Three Windows” refer to the three border ports in Mengla, namely the provincial-level Guanlei Mekong River Port along the China–Myanmar border, the local-level Mengman–Pangthong Port, and the national-level Mohan–Boten Port along the China–Laos border. “One Artery” refers to the vision of a transportation corridor passing through Mohan–Boten Port comprising two major transportation infrastructures, namely the 1900 km Kunming–Bangkok Expressway (KBE), and the 3000 km Kunming–Singapore Railway now more often known as the Pan-Asia Railway (PAR) (Fig. 2).

4. Mengla Experimental Zone and a hybridized BRI-poverty reduction program

Mengla’s current status as “one of the poverty-stricken counties in the Dianxi Area” and its historical role as “an important caravan stop along the old Southern Silk Road” heralded the inspiring narrative of an impoverished county’s transformation to “the bridgehead of China’s opening up to South and Southeast Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative” (Lin, 2016, 14). Before European colonization, in particular of French Indochina east of the Mekong in the 19th century, various overland caravan routes and river-based routes in the upper Mekong together formed an important part of the Southern Silk Road between China and Southeast Asia. Sip Song Pan Na (modern Xishuangbanna) in southern Yunnan and Lan Na in northern Siam (modern Thailand) were key centers controlling the regulation and facilitation of trade in the upper-Mekong borderlands (Walker, 1999, 30). One of the main trade routes linked Mengla in Sip Song Pan Na, Luang Namtha, Viang Phoukha, and Houay Xay in Lan Na. From Houay Xay on the east bank of the Mekong, trading caravans could cross the river to Chiang Khong to trade with Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai in Greater Siam, or follow the river itself to Luang Prabang, the royal capital of the Lao Kingdom also known as “Mang Luang” meaning “the principal city” (Beyer, 1998, 75).

Mengla’s historical significance along the Southern Silk Road holds promise for its development future as envisaged by the BRI. The traditional Southern Silk Road was never a single fixed route but rather a shifting network of routes used by caravans of heavily laden oxen and mules. Now reincarnated under the BRI as a “Modern Silk Road,” it comprises numerous planned tarmac roads and railways (Fig. 3). The renovation and upgrading of the 167 km Xiaomo Highway, the southernmost section of the 730 km China part of the KBE, was completed in September 2017 halving travel time (from 3 to 1.5 h) between Jinghong’s Xiaomengyang and Mengla’s Mohan Port (Department of Transport of Yunnan Province, 2017). Considered the most challenging section of the Chinese part of the KBE, the Xiaomo Highway passes through mountainous terrain clad in lush, tropical jungle. The China section of the 414-km China–Laos Railway is the northernmost part of the PAR linking Kunming and Mohan, mostly running immediately west of the Xiaomo Highway between Xiaomengyang and Mengla. On a recent visit, construction of the concrete railway viaduct columns was clearly visible from elevated sections of the Xiaomo Highway (Fig. 4). The terrain gradually becomes more accommodating as the Xiaomo Highway approaches Mengla Town in the Nanla River valley, and the railway finally bridges over the highway near Mansan Village in the south of Mengla Town just before entering Mengla Railway Station (Fig. 5).

According to the preface of the 2019 “Battle Against Poverty in Mengla” exhibition, the BRI elevates the Development-oriented Poverty Reduction to a higher level, and “One Artery and Three Windows,” the organizational structure of the Mengla Experimental Zone, will optimize Mengla’s logistical advantages. “Mengla,” the preface states “provides the most convenient land and river-based routes linking China to South and Southeast Asian Countries” (People’s Government of Mengla County, 2019a). Against the background of a potential trade war with the United States, strengthening China–ASEAN trade and connectivity is a higher priority than ever. Yunnan Province is at the forefront of regional integration plans, and Mengla is a critical bridgehead for



Fig. 2. Official map of the Mengla Key Development and Opening Up Experimental Zone.

Yunnan’s increasing engagement with regional Lancang–Mekong Cooperation and the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area. Locally, infrastructure construction and urbanization are finally opening the door to long-anticipated domestic and international capital investment in this remote border city, transforming Mengla’s unique geography, wealth of flora and fauna, and cultural and ethnic diversity into resources that can be exploited for profit to be “enjoyed by each and every one of us regardless of ethnicity” (People’s Government of Mengla County, 2019a).

Visual representations of Mengla’s strategic location under BRI could be seen at the Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center. The gallery closest to the building entrance is dedicated to “The Belt and Road,” featuring a simplified timeline of the vast trade network connecting Eurasia and North Africa *via* land and sea starting from the 2nd century BCE and continuing into the future (Fig. 6). This gallery also highlights Mengla’s strategic importance in Yunnan and globally, summarized in hyped-up titles such as “Opening up the Border Area to Build an Attractive Yunnan,” and “Reviving the Historic Silk Road to Build a Better-Connected World.” The cartographic representation of the imagined geography of a reincarnated Silk Road and regional

integration is installed on the wall right outside the “The Belt and Road” gallery. In the words of our guide, the backlit engraved steel map highlights Yunnan’s strategic location in an increasingly integrated Asia well placed to “embrace two oceans (Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean) and the neighboring three Asias (East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia),” with Mengla being the “golden crossroads of five-country collaboration” (Fig. 7). With its blue LED backlights twinkling, an octopus-like form centered on Mengla crisscrosses the landmass of South and Southeast Asia, sending four tentacles in different directions. One linking Mengla and Kunming is labeled as “heading northward through Central Yunnan to reach Chuanyu Region (Chongqing and Sichuan).” One linking Mengla and Bangkok is labeled as “heading southward through Mainland Southeast Asia to reach the Malay Peninsula.” One linking Mengla and Kyaukpadaung is labeled as “heading westward through Myanmar to reach the Indian Ocean.” Finally, one linking Mengla and Hai Phong is labeled as “heading eastward through Vietnam to reach the Pacific Ocean.”

The imagined geography of regional integration as represented in the 1:500,000-scale map with its diagrammatic blue octopus-like cross overlaid on a vast territory of over 3 million km² might take a long time

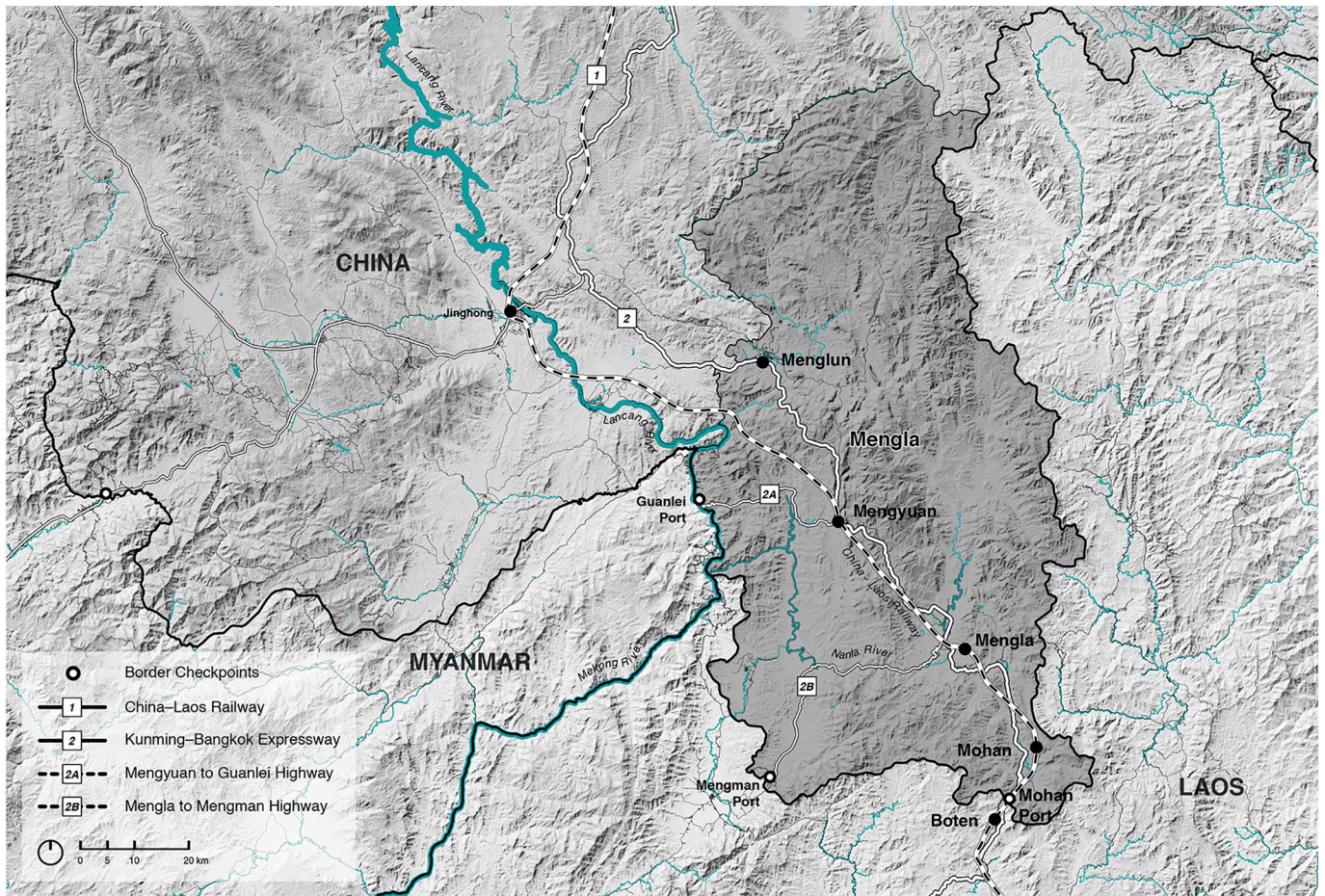


Fig. 3. Map of major transnational infrastructures passing through Mengla in far southern Yunnan Province. Map produced by the author.



Fig. 4. View along the elevated Xiaomo Highway heading south towards Mengla city center and passing across a slope covered by rubber trees. Photo by the author.



Fig. 5. Concrete viaduct columns under construction for the China–Laos Railway as seen from the Xiaomo Highway near Mansan Village in the Nanla River valley. Photo by the author.



Fig. 6. A small gallery dedicated to the “Belt and Road” from inside the Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center. Photo by the author.

to materialize in reality. However, the actual situation on the ground is being transformed in and around Mengla. In 2015, the 4500 km² Mengla Experimental Zone was established. More than 240 major construction projects representing an investment of 200 billion RMB are planned and many are currently under construction. Through a critical examination of the explosive development of Mengla’s Nanla New District, the following section offers a glimpse of the socio-spatial implications of a hybridized BRI–Poverty Reduction policy. Nanla New District exemplifies a new form of urbanization driven by frontier capitalism, transforming Mengla by literally capitalizing on its frontier position and BRI affiliation.

5. Nanla New District and tourism-related real estate development

The 2019 “Battle Against Poverty in Mengla” exhibition stresses the importance of urban and rural planning for Mengla’s development. In addition to the Mengla Urban and Rural Master Plan, which has undergone four revisions since its conception in 2009, more than ten town-level urban and rural master plans have been drawn up over the past decade (People’s Government of Mengla County, 2019b). Collectively, these master plans guide Mengla’s urbanization, which has increased from 36.0% of the total county area in 2010 to 43.6% in 2017, projected to reach 47.6% by 2021 (People’s Government of Mengla County, 2019c). In particular, the exhibition emphasizes how the real estate and tourism industries, guided by the master plans, attract ever-greater



Fig. 7. A guide at the Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center using a backlit map to introduce Mengla’s strategic location in an increasingly integrated Asia. Photo by the author.

capital inflows, visibly transforming the situation on the ground. “Since 2010,” the exhibition narrative declares, “with a favorable investment environment enabled by national macro-control policies, many well-known real estate development companies have shifted their attention from the first- and second-tier cities to Mengla” (People’s Government of Mengla County, 2019d). While real estate developments reinvent towns along national and provincial-level roads as “towns of modern development,” smaller towns and villages along county-level roads, particularly those inhabited by ethnic minorities, are envisaged to be revamped as “towns (villages) of tourism attraction.”

Situated on the east bank of the Nanla River opposite the old city center on the west bank, Nanla New District exemplifies how the real estate and tourism developments are rapidly commodifying the natural and cultural landscape of an “impoverished” borderland.

Advertisements for Nanla New District could be seen from the Xiaomo Highway particularly on the approaches to Mengla city center where newly cleared land and construction sites proliferated. After leaving the Xiaomo Highway and following Mengla Center Road south through Mengla city center, I came across a newly constructed six-lane road running eastward across the Nanla River. A gigantic “Water Splashing Square” designed to host 6000 people had recently been completed on the east bank of the Nanla River at the main entrance of the new district, together with a two-story Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center, which with its pitched roof, was a replica of the traditional Dai-style architecture, only ten times the scale (Fig. 8). Surrounded by a sea of building sites littered with cranes and other construction paraphernalia, the entrance square and exhibition center seemed to be almost the only features to have been completed within the 6 km² pilot zone of Nanla



Fig. 8. Recently completed “Water Splashing Square” and the two-story Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center located at the main entrance of Nanla New District. Photo by the author.

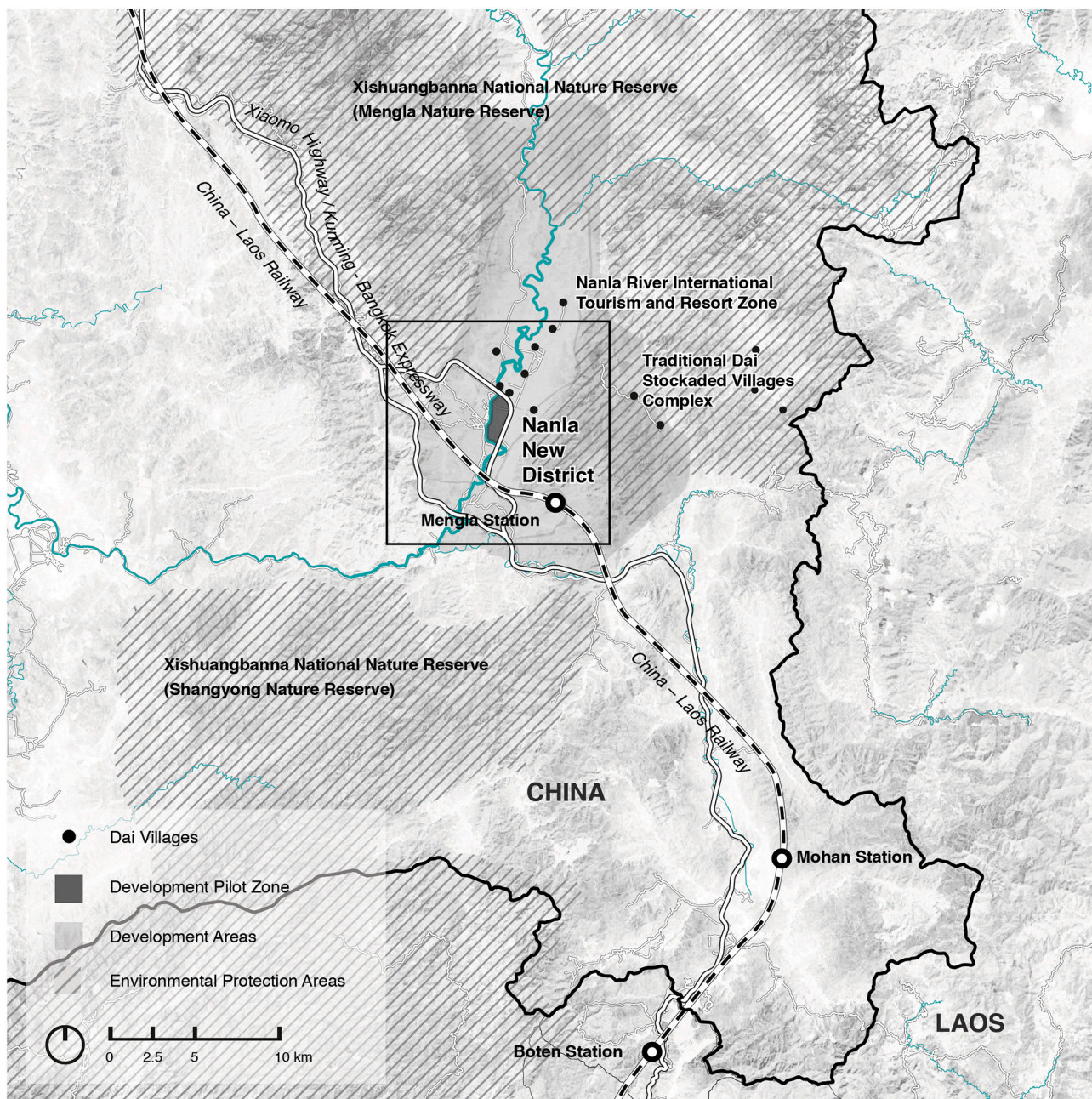


Fig. 9. Map showing the pilot zone and long-term control zone of Nanla New District. Map produced by the author.

New District. In addition, a 100 km² projected medium-term development zone and a 200 km² long-term control zone are projected for the future (Huanqiu, 2018) (Figs. 9, 10).

Nanla New District is developed by Yunnan Haicheng Industrial Group Holdings Company Limited (hereinafter referred to as the Haicheng Group), a Yunnan-based conglomerate that was founded in 2000 and is headquartered in the provincial capital Kunming (Haicheng, 2016a). Being one of the largest three real estate developers in Yunnan, the Haicheng Group mainly focused on land development and management during its first decade of operation. The company has a reputation particularly for tourism-related real estate development across

Yunnan, notably the 0.8 km² Gaozhuang Xishuangjing project situated along the Lancang/Mekong River in Jinghong city, the seat of the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (Haicheng, 2016b).³ Inaugurated in 2009, Gaozhuang Xishuangjing was carried out in three phases over the course of a decade. It is branded as “a new cultural city within Jinghong city” and has a gross floor area of 1.1 million m² (Haicheng, 2016b). Rated as a national AAAA (4A) level tourist attraction in 2018, the project has become one of the most sought-after residential properties in Jinghong city since phase 1 hit the market (IFENG, 2019).

Nanla New District represents a new genre of development for the

³ The project’s name “Gaozhuang Xishuangjing” means “nine towers and twelve stockaded villages” in the Dai language.



Fig. 10. Satellite image of Mengla Town and Nanla New District in the Nanla River valley, overlaid with the Nanla River, the planned urban grid of the Nanla New District pilot zone, and the major transportation infrastructures passing through the area. Map produced by the author.

Haicheng Group in the context of the BRI's social and economic geography. In 2013, the company launched a business diversification strategy within the context of a nationwide Further Opening Up policy pursued by the central government and the legitimization of BRI as a national development strategy. Since then, the company has rapidly expanded, establishing three sub-groups, namely, the Haicheng Real Estate Development Group, the Haicheng Jingland Cultural Tourism Group, and the Haicheng International Logistics Group (Haicheng, 2016a). The mission statement “forging the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor and increasing the regional industrial value of China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand-Vietnam economic circle” features prominently on the homepage of Haicheng Group's website. Nanla was

strategically acquired by the Haicheng Group to be exploited for economic interests including real estate, tourism, and logistics. Following the promulgation of the Mengla Experimental Zone in 2015 and the inauguration of the construction of the China-Laos Railway in 2016, planning and development of Nanla New District have proceeded apace.

The geographical vision of Mengla-Nanla urban cluster curated by Haicheng defines its booming future and promising investment opportunities at two distinct scales. At the regional scale, the urban cluster has shifted from the far periphery of China to the center of the whole of South and Southeast Asia, becoming the hub of a network of “Modern Silk Roads” comprising numerous highways and railways linking China with the four neighboring countries. At the local scale, the urban cluster

metamorphosed from sparsely populated villages to new towns that could accommodate millions of residents and attract large numbers of tourists to their well-forested tropical landscape by means of modern transport infrastructure. The promotional brochure of Nanla illustrates how these two distinct scales overlap. The brochure front cover is dedicated to the narratives of Mengla-Nanla's international status, sporting catchy taglines such as "Oriental Meeting Room," "Embracing Five Countries, Walking Up to the World," and "The Engine of the BRI China-Indochina Economic Corridor." The brochure back cover is adorned with floor plans of real estate projects, with jaunty taglines extolling the livability and ecological wealth of the new district, such as "Mysterious Tropical Rainforests," "Staying Green All Year Round, Warm and Humid All Four Seasons," and "Natural Gene Banks of Flora and Fauna Kingdoms."

Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center features central hall with a large LED facade display, a panorama model of the new district at 1:500 scale, and several architectural models of the real estate projects within the new district at 1:100 scale (Fig. 11). Facing the main entrance, a dynamic promotional video featuring the local natural and cultural riches and urban and infrastructure progress in the region loops on the LED display. The video portrays the new district simultaneously as a paradise of elephants strolling through rainforests and villagers in ethnic costume picking Pu-er tea leaves, and as a modern metropolis with glistening high-rise buildings under construction and containers being uploaded onto freight trains and trucks. The video narrations describe Nanla as "international modern new towns with outstanding natural and cultural landscapes," master-planned under the auspices of "Prioritizing Environmental Protection, Integrating Industries and City". The Nanla master plan comprises four zones corresponding to the four key industries of urban development, logistics, tourism, and ecological protection.

A large panoramic model takes pride of place in the central hall, featuring modern urban areas surrounded by lush tropical jungles connected to major transnational infrastructure, a 21st-century urban utopia celebrating ecology and modernity. While promotional video play in the background, guides at the exhibition center walk visitors through the interactive panorama model announcing key elements of the new district as they are illuminated at the touch of a button. The panoramic model represents an area of 10 km² including the 6 km² pilot zone of Nanla New District. Nanla River, Guangbayin Mountain, and Nanla Avenue that links the two make up the main structure of the pilot zone. While brand new high-rise buildings line up on both sides of Nanla Avenue in the urban zone, existing traditional settlements are incorporated into two major areas of tourist attractions. The Nanla River International Tourism and Resort Zone branded as "One River, Seven Villages, and Numerous Farms" incorporates seven villages clustered along the Nanla River.⁴ Five Dai villages located on the slopes of Guangbayin Mountain within the Tropical Rainforest and Ecological Protection Zone, are to be upgraded and collectively rebranded as the "Traditional Dai Stockaded Villages Complex." According to the guide at the Nanla exhibition center, Nanla New District will help make Xishuangbanna "one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, boosting the annual tourism carrying capacity of Mengla to 10 million people once the China-Laos Railway is completed."

Immediately next to the panoramic model of the new district, 1:100 scale models of real estate projects are displayed, showing off a variety of investment options (Fig. 12). Our guides, who seamlessly metamorphosed into salespersons, promoted these projects as "stable, high-quality assets" and "low-risk, high-yield investments" for three reasons. First, Mengla-Nanla is just as well-equipped with modern services and infrastructure as the older developed regions of Yunnan and other parts of China, but in addition, it is blessed with an incomparable

ecologically rich environment that is less disturbed and better-protected thanks to their frontier location. Situated amid a lush forested landscape, a rare asset in modern urban living, the property's high appreciation rate is guaranteed. Second, situated at the center of a region ever more integrated by the construction of the Modern Silk Roads and carefully planned to accommodate industrial and residential facilities, Mengla-Nanla is bound to become logistics and tourism hub able to handle heavy flows of freight and people. In anticipation of the opening of the China-Laos Railway in 2021, now is the best time to invest in these products that are in high demand and likely to be sold out soon. Third, situated within the national experimental zone and transnational collaboration zone under the BRI, real estate projects in Nanla are much less likely to be exposed to policy uncertainty and market volatility than other speculative real estate investments. Mengla-Nanla forms a strategic key node in a region that is guaranteed to have stable policies and politics, ensuring economic growth and a coherent and continuous path towards sustainable development.

At the macro level, the affiliation with the central government-led BRI affords security and order to the formerly "backward and lawless frontier," whereas at the micro level, special regulations that apply exclusively to the new district within a border experimental zone maximize the potential for profit. Since 2010, the Chinese government has imposed restrictions to curb the national housing market including home purchase restrictions (HPR) to reign in speculative buying.⁵ Despite this, Nanla New District has been able to devise its own ways to circumvent the restrictions and expand investment, promoting "No Property Purchase Restriction, No Mortgage Lending Restriction" as highlights of its real estate offerings. For example, the "stand-alone guesthouse" (SAG) property typology has been instigated at the Nanla Bay real estate project in Nanla New District. Essentially a hybrid of residential and commercial property similar to the shop house, the SAG is composed of retail space on the ground and two floors of residential units above. Branded as "a high-end commercial property" product, it is legally categorized as commercial property for which the policy of purchase restrictions does not apply, yet it has the practical advantage that property owners can rent out both the ground-floor shops and the upper-floor living units. "Designed in Dai-Thai architectural style," the salesperson explained, "the Nanla Bay project is in itself a mini tourist attraction with long-term potential to add value."

Promotional video, panoramic model and architectural models at the Nanla exhibition center tangibly illustrate the transformation of the region. A transformation from an impoverished past characterized by "adverse natural conditions, underdeveloped infrastructure and a large impoverished population," into a brand new "Spring City," "Green City," and "Ecotourism City." The forms and narratives applied to Nanla New District in Mengla city is clearly inspired by the preceding Gaozhuang Xishuangjing in Jinghong city. Yet, being a decade apart, Nanla New District is significantly different from Gaozhuang Xishuangjing as it is carried out under Haicheng's grandiose scheme of bringing to life a new form of frontier capitalism, which draws upon the synergy of the projects' frontier locations and close identification with the BRI. A socio-historical concept that refers to the process of incorporating areas previously external to the capitalist world economy, frontier capitalism is typically applied to examine dramatic changes in socio-natural landscapes caused by the extraction of natural resources in the forms of large-scale hydropower, mining, forestry and agri-business (Laungar-amsri, 2012). The Nanla New District, instead, exemplifies how a hybridized BRI-Poverty Reduction policy facilitates the commodification of the natural and cultural landscapes of borderlands through tourism-related real estate developments.

⁵ Home purchase restrictions was first started in Beijing in May 2010 and then progressively implemented in most major cities in China. It prohibits resident households from buying more than two homes and non-resident households from buying more than one home.

⁴ These seven villages are Manhe, Mangangna, Manlong, Mannuanjiao, Manlongdai, Manlongle, and Manyong.



Fig. 11. Inside the Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center with a panoramic model (1:500) of the Nanla New District in the foreground and a promotional video playing in the background.
Photo by the author.



Fig. 12. Scale model (1:100) of real estate projects displaying a variety of investment options, as found inside the Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center.
Photo by the author.

6. Conclusion

This profile examines the ongoing re-territorialization of Mengla by focusing on the physical and discursive transition of the city from “backwater” to “bridgehead” of China’s socio-economic development within the specific context of the country’s anti-poverty campaign. Mengla’s exceptionally long international border, the longest of any county in Yunnan Province, had long been considered as contributing to the county’s “poverty” and “backwardness” since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. This narrative has changed dramatically over the past decade, with Mengla’s 740.8-km international border with Myanmar

and Laos redefined by local, regional and national governments as a critical asset with unprecedented development opportunities.

This recent transformation of Mengla’s perceived status is contextualized within the history of China’s Development-Oriented Poverty Reduction program since 1994, including how the program has been deployed as an overarching structure guiding the socio-economic development of Yunnan’s Dianxi Area since the beginning of the millennium. Mengla took on an unprecedented significance within the broader poverty reduction and development plan of the Dianxi Area after 2013, when the CPC Central Committee issued the Decision on Deepening Reform and officially launched the BRI, both of which are

credited with elevating Development-oriented Poverty Reduction to a higher level. The Development-oriented Poverty Reduction program deploys infrastructure construction and urbanization as critical tools to introduce long-anticipated domestic and international capital investment in this remote border city. Mengla's unique geography, wealth of flora and fauna, and cultural and ethnic diversity are transmuted into commodifiable resources, and the logistics, real estate, and tourism industries are established as major pillars supporting Mengla's metamorphosis into a "moderately prosperous society."

Three lessons drawn from this profile might be applied to future scholarly research on the role that infrastructure development and urbanization play in China's vast inner Asian borderlands, which are characterized by extreme socio-ecological diversity and an often-perplexing history of state-driven modernization since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. China's inner Asian borderlands are now transforming from 20th-century economic backwaters into 21st-century hotbeds of resource exploitation and commodity production, and offer valuable case studies for examining new modes of statecraft and extra-statecraft in an era of neoliberal globalization.

First, this profile offers a critical examination of the dominant narrative about Mengla's "problem of poverty" by contextualizing the city's recent transformation within three waves of socialist modernity imposed on Xishuangbanna since 1949. This overlooked history of an impoverished region and its population provides a context for challenging the usual over-simplified narrative juxtaposing Mengla's impoverished past with its prosperous future in the making. The case of Mengla reveals the importance of integrating environmental and social histories into urban history studies, and understanding planning as a highly political process that facilitates various forms of territorialization projects "controlling what people do according to detailed land-classification criteria" (Vandergest & Peluso, 1995, 412).

Second, this profile provides an analysis of the formation of the Mengla Experimental Zone in 2015 and the conceptual re-positioning of Mengla from the remote periphery of China to the center of a vast South and Southeast Asian territory. Instead of interpreting the experimental zone and the new socio-economic imagination of Mengla simply as a product of the BRI, this profile emphasizes how Mengla stands at the forefront of many overlapping initiatives and policies, especially a hybridized BRI–Poverty Reduction policy. Mengla's case demonstrates that the BRI is more an effort to rally a variety of existing initiatives under a single grand narrative rather than being a brand-new plan *per se* (Dwyer, 2020).

Third, this profile reveals the socio-spatial implications of a hybridized BRI–Poverty Reduction policy in Mengla by scrutinizing visual and descriptive representations of Nanla New District, which embodies a tourism-related real estate development model. By strategically zeroing in on the Nanla New District Planning Exhibition Center as a subject of investigation, this profile highlights the ideologies embedded in the maps, panoramas, and architectural models displayed within the exhibition center, the effect of which is further reinforced by roadside advertisements, promotional brochures, and guides' narratives. Mengla's case illustrates how discursive spaces afford an additional dimension of investigation into urban study that helps reveal the ever-changing perceptions of nature and culture that undergird the physical transformations observed on the ground.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lu, Xiaoxuan: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing, Visualization.

Declaration of competing interest

All authors have participated in (a) conception and analysis and interpretation of the data; (b) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (c) approval of the final version.

This manuscript has not been submitted to, nor is under review at, another journal or other publishing venue.

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