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# Land Control, Land Grabs, and Southeast Asian Crop Booms

By Derek Hall

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Abstract

This paper argues that research into dynamics of land control in the contemporary 'land grab' can benefit from engagement with the literature on booms in the production of crops like cocoa, coffee, fast-growing trees, oil palm, and shrimp in Southeast Asia. This literature can help us to answer three key questions: for whom land becomes more valuable when world market prices for a crop rise; how would-be producers bring to bear regulatory power, market power, force, and legitimation to gain control over land; and how rapid increases in export-oriented crop production differentially affect areas with secure and insecure land control relations.

## Land Control, Land Grabs, and Southeast Asian Crop Booms<sup>1</sup>

A large literature is emerging on what is variously called 'large-scale land acquisition' or the 'land grab' in the global South.<sup>2</sup> The main focus of this literature is on the post-2007 purchase or lease by transnational corporations (often in association with domestic capital in the country where the investment is taking place) of large parcels of land for the purposes of growing food, fuel, or fiber crops for export. While estimates of the scope of this phenomenon suggest that it is happening on a very large scale (The World Bank 2010: 35; Grain 2008), such estimates must be treated with caution. It is widely recognized that studying the land grab is complicated by the sparseness and unreliability of data. Even at the most aggregate level - that of the total area 'acquired' worldwide - things are unclear, and a recent World Bank Report noted with some frustration the 'astonishing lack of awareness of what is happening on the ground' (The World Bank 2010: 2; see also Borras and Franco 2011: 14). If this is true for the aggregate statistics, it is even more so with respect to several equally important, but more qualitative and context-specific, questions. How do would-be 'land grabbers' actually gain control over land? What happens when state and/or corporate officials attempt to make use of land that may be classified as "idle" or "uninhabited" on state maps but that in fact has people living on it, making use of it, and claiming it (see for instance Borras and Franco 2011: 10-11) ? What, concretely, are their strategies for exercising land control - both in the sense of gaining access to the land themselves, and of keeping others off it? These questions can only be answered by detailed local research, and while such research is underway (see Vermeulen and Cotula 2010, and many of the papers to be presented at this conference), we do not yet have the body of empirical work required to study this question comparatively. This situation contributes to the top-down nature of much of the literature, which has been more able to analyze questions of policy and large-scale causes (Zoomers 2010; Borras and Franco 2010) than the actual trajectories of land grab projects.

In this paper, I argue that insight into some of the land control dynamics likely to characterize the land grab may be gained through a study of the literature on 'crop booms' in Southeast Asia. While such booms have been a feature of agrarian Southeast Asia for centuries, key recent booms have included cocoa, coffee, fast-growing trees (such as acacia and eucalyptus), oil palm, and farmed shrimp. These booms bear some resemblance to the drive for large-scale land acquisitions. Most importantly, both have been triggered in part by rapid rises in the value of land (in the sense of the incentives that exist for different actors to make claims to it) for the purposes of export-oriented crop production. Domestic states and transnational capital have been involved in both, though in varying ways and to differing extents. And in some cases (notably oil palm), the actual crops in question overlap. These similarities are promising because a large literature on

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<sup>1</sup> The analytical framework proposed and material covered in this paper derive in part from work done jointly with Philip Hirsch and Tania Murray Li in (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). An earlier and substantially different version of this paper was presented to a workshop on "Rural Property and Inequality" at the University of East Anglia and to York University's Department of Geography. I am grateful to the participants at those events and to Henry Bernstein, Tania Murray Li, Christian Lund, and Nancy Peluso for their comments. All errors are my own.

<sup>2</sup> These are contested terms, and with good reason, but I will mostly avoid the use of scare quotes in this paper.

these booms already exists, and forms the basis for a comparative investigation that can suggest approaches to studying land control under the land grab.

This paper argues that this is so in at least three ways. First, comparative study of Southeast Asian crop booms provides insight into the question of *who* the land becomes more valuable for. While the land grab literature focuses largely on foreign companies and foreign and domestic states, work on crop booms goes further by showing how not just domestic capital but also smallholders have tried to take or keep control over land on which to grow boom crops. While the available space does not permit a detailed investigation of the conditions (across and within crops and countries) that encourage them to do so, the simple fact of widespread smallholder participation suggests two overarching points. First, energetic smallholder engagement suggests that arguments that take large-scale investments as necessary for the stimulation of agricultural development in the South need to be rethought. The literature highlights the fact that support for land grabs is a political choice that pre-empts alternative organizational frameworks. Second, however, the 'frontier'-like conditions of many Southeast Asian booms also suggest that we need to pay attention to smallholders as potential agents of land grabbing. Smallholder-driven crop booms often involve, at the micro-level, processes that are surprisingly similar to those that characterize the land grab at the level of tens or hundreds of thousands of hectares.

Second, the crop booms literature provides detailed studies of *how* control over land is actually exercised. The diverse land control strategies of four key sets of actors – foreign and domestic corporations, domestic states (which provide land for foreign and domestic companies through concessions and leases, and may organize various kinds of integrated smallholder schemes), migrant would-be smallholders, and smallholders who were *in situ* before the boom began – have all received substantial attention. To organize and analyze this diversity, I draw on of the analytical framework developed in the book *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia* (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011: Chapter 1). The book makes the case that the four powers of *regulation*, *the market*, *force*, and *legitimation* are central to the way in which people, corporations, and state actors exclude one another from land, and this argument also applies to the way they gain control over it. *Regulation* involves the ways states and other groups set the rules regarding who gets what land and how that land may be used. *Market* power works primarily through the price of land and the inputs required to work it; actors may gain access to land by buying or leasing it, or be excluded from access to it because of how much it costs. *Force* sees violence or its threat used to exercise control by, among others, producers, would-be producers, and state actors. *Legitimation*, finally, involves principled arguments about the ways in which land may, may not, and must be governed, allocated and used. While these powers are not, obviously, entirely distinct in practice, separating them for analytical and heuristic purposes permits a highly productive analysis of the dynamics of land access, exclusion, and control.

The paper's third main point is that the crop booms literature can illuminate a policy debate around large-scale land acquisition. The World Bank and other international institutions argue that tenure security and respect for local land rights are key pre-conditions that will permit locals to share in the benefits of such acquisitions (The World Bank 2010: x). While the difference between security and insecurity is more a continuum than a dichotomy, the Southeast Asian literature, I argue, permits us to distinguish in a broad sense between booms that have taken place under 'secure' conditions and those that have not. In 'secure' booms, the basic relations of land control that existed before the

boom are respected by participants in the boom, often (but not always) because they are supported formally by the state.<sup>3</sup> In such cases, the most obvious power shaping land control during the boom is market power, as land changes hands through mutually-agreed sales and leases (sometimes to outsiders) of newly-valuable land - as the World Bank would prefer. There is, however, more to the story than this. The cases of shrimp and eucalyptus in Thailand show that such booms can see intense struggles over regulation (and its legitimation), and that the occurrence of booms often makes it more difficult for both participants and non-participants in the area to stay on their land. 'Insecure' booms, on the other hand, take place in areas where the basic nature of pre-boom land relations is challenged as various actors use regulatory, market, forceful, and legitimating powers to make a play for control over newly valuable land. Such areas are often conceptualized in the boom literature as 'frontiers'.

This paper thus responds to Annelies Zoomers' effort 'to stimulate more rigorous and critical discussions on how to carry out systematic research inquiries into the phenomenon of the global land grab' (Zoomers 2010: 430). The remainder of the paper is organized into three main sections. I first briefly introduce the dynamics of Southeast Asian crop booms, compare them to the standard understanding of large-scale land acquisitions, and provide potted histories of the booms under discussion. I then analyze secure and insecure booms in two sections, with a focus on the concrete ways in which protagonists seek to gain or keep control over land. The conclusion returns to potential lessons for research on the land grab.

### **Southeast Asian crop booms: comparative dynamics and potted histories**

Crop booms may be defined as taking place when there is a rapid increase in a given area in the amount of land devoted to a given crop as a monocrop or near-monocrop, and when that crop involves investment decisions that span multiple growing seasons (usually because it is a tree crop that takes some years to grow to maturity and begin producing) (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011: Chapter 4). I focus here on the development since the mid-1980s of five key crops (cocoa, coffee, fast-growing trees, oil palm, and shrimp) in order to ask what factors unite these booms, what differentiates them, and how their dynamics compare to those of the land grab. One key unifying factor is that Southeast Asian booms have been driven primarily by export rather than domestic market demand. Second, these booms have all been caused by some combination of a rapid rise in the commodity's price, the spread of knowledge about growing techniques, and various kinds of direct and indirect government support. Third, booms have been highly lucrative for many, but by no means all, participants. Much of the money, of course, is made by non-agrarian actors in boom crop commodity chains, but enough has been made by farmers that get-rich-quick stories can seem compelling. State actors, too, have been excited by the promise booms hold of contributing to foreign exchange earnings and rural development - and to the wealth of the state actors themselves. Fourth, and relatedly, booms make the land on which the crop can be grown more valuable,<sup>4</sup> making various actors more inclined to try to control the land. A fifth point runs against all this enthusiasm: booms frequently go bust, as production value and/or volume drops in

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<sup>3</sup> I do not seek in this paper to explain why property relations do or do not turn out to be robust, but treat this as exogenous.

<sup>4</sup> Lesley Potter reports that when oil palm arrived in one district of Jambi, Sumatra, land prices rose by a factor of 300 (Potter 2001: 313).

response to diseases, pests, or falling prices. Committing to monocropped production of these crops is risky.

A sixth common feature of crop booms is their association with the notion of the frontier. One element of this is agricultural expansion, as the boom raises the total amount of farmed land (Hall 2009; De Koninck 2006). A second is intensification, as land previously under swidden or agroforests is converted to boom crops.<sup>5</sup> Expansion and intensification are both associated with deforestation, a third characteristic of the frontier. Fourth, while much boom crop production at the frontier is carried out by people who were already present before the boom began, booms have also been associated with migration. Even in an era of deagrarianization in Southeast Asia (Rigg 2006), very large numbers of people continue to undertake risky and expensive migrations (domestically and internationally, temporarily and permanently) to take part in booms (De Koninck 2003; Hall Forthcoming). While this association between crop booms and frontiers has multiple causes, as we will see below, an important factor is the built-in drive for relocation that characterizes some of these crops. It is widely argued that the dependence of crops like coffee and cocoa on a 'forest rent' in the form of soil fertility that is rapidly drawn down when production becomes permanent (Neilson 2007: 227; Li 2002: 418-19; Potter 2008: 176), and the susceptibility of some of crops like cocoa and farmed shrimp to disease, undermines existing production and encourages the opening up of new areas (Hall 2004).

While the six points above highlight similarities, Southeast Asian crop booms also exhibit great diversity. One source of this diversity is the different characteristics of the crops under discussion. They differ in biological and ecological terms with respect to the altitudes, soil types, and climate to which they are best suited, to the time they take to begin producing, to how quickly they need to be processed after harvest, and to their susceptibility to diseases and pests. They have different requirements for up-front inputs like capital, technology, seed stock, agricultural chemicals, and knowledge of growing techniques. They also have different levels and seasonalities of labour demand (including labour for land clearance and preparation), and different potentials for intercropping (most importantly during the period before they mature and begin to produce). Another aspect of boom diversity involves the four main types of actors who take part. These are *state actors*, the government ministries, agencies, and individuals who structure policy, and at times directly organize production; *private companies*, which are most important for their role in creating plantations, but which have also (especially in Indonesia and Malaysia) engaged in various forms of contract-growing arrangements with smallholders; *in situ smallholders*, or smallholders who held land in the boom area before the boom; and *migrant would-be smallholders*, people without land in the boom area who hope to set themselves up with land and begin production. A critical factor differentiating Southeast Asian booms is the relative weight of participation by these four types of actors, and especially the extent to which production is carried out by relatively independent smallholders or by larger plantation- or contract-style schemes. While all of these crops have been grown under many organizational frameworks, there is a fairly clear distinction between those dominated by smallholders (cocoa and coffee) and those where larger-scale production has been dominant (fast-growing trees and oil palm), with shrimp an intermediate case. While the crop characteristics described above do not determine this breakdown, they help to shape it.

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<sup>5</sup> On conversion of agroforests, see (Feintrenie, Schwarze, and Levang 2010); on the relationship between intensification and expansion, see (Cramb 2011).

How can this discussion help to inform research on land control in the land grab? Oil palm and fast-growing trees provide very direct points of connection, as both crops feature in the land grab, and work has been done on large-scale foreign land acquisitions for the purposes of growing them in Southeast Asia (Barney 2008; Hall 2003). More broadly, crop booms and the land grab both involve rapid transformations in land control in response to export demand. From a more methodological point of view, too, comparative work on crop booms has developed a set of approaches to the analysis of common dynamics that are differentiated by crop, and to the examination of the same crop across different national and sub-national policy frameworks and agrarian structures (McCarthy 2010; Hall 2004, 2003). These approaches remind us of the dangers of approaching the contemporary “land grab” in an overaggregated way: land grab dynamics should be expected to vary between crops, and between locations. They also shed light on a central question addressed in this paper: for whom does land become more valuable (and thus more worthy of control) when booms take place? Profitably growing a boom crop requires more than control over land (Ribot and Peluso 2003). It requires knowledge of growing techniques, which may be acquired from corporations, state extension agents, neighbours, or trial and error. Capital, similarly, may be fronted by state schemes or corporate contract-growing projects, or through the networks that link migrants to each other and to kin back home. Different crops have different post-harvest requirements, and the absence of a nearby processor for oil palm or shrimp may constrain smallholder excitement. While there is not room in this paper to analyze the way these and other factors vary across and between crops and countries, they play a critical role in determining who will be interested in controlling land to grow boom crops. It is important to note, as well, that the role of state and corporate actors in establishing processing plants and providing inputs means that their entry in a given area may not be perceived entirely as a threat by locals, but also as to some degree an opportunity.

These more general points should be kept in mind as we move on to discuss land control. First, however, I would like to sketch the trajectories of the main booms. Recent Southeast Asian *cocoa* production boils down to Indonesian boom and Malaysian bust. In 1990, Malaysia was the bigger producer, with 298,000 hectares of cocoa land to Indonesia’s 159,000. By 2005, however, the area in Malaysia had fallen to 33,000 ha, while that in Indonesia had more than tripled to 490,000.<sup>6</sup> The Indonesian boom has been concentrated on Sulawesi, which in 2002 accounted for two-thirds of the country’s production, and has been based almost entirely on smallholder production (Neilson 2007: 228). The Sulawesi boom has taken place largely at the expense of swidden production of other crops and of forest reserve (Li 2002: 415). Malaysian production in fact only began to expand a few years before Indonesian, in the late 1970s, but peaked around 1990 before being laid low by the cocoa pod borer. There are signs that the Sulawesi boom, too, may have reached its limits (Neilson 2007: 230-1).

There have been two *coffee* booms in Southeast Asia since 1990, a substantial one in Indonesia after the financial crisis and the fall of Suharto (Sunderlin et al. 2001; Potter 2008: 183), and a spectacular one in Vietnam from the mid-1990s. While Indonesia had long been a major producer when its boom began, Vietnam went abruptly from being a negligible player in the global coffee trade to being the world’s second-largest producer after Brazil. Between 1993 and 2000, the area of harvested coffee land

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<sup>6</sup> FAOSTAT figures downloaded 24 July 2008.

in Vietnam went up more than 6.5 times, and production increased by nearly as much.<sup>7</sup> By the late 1990s, huge areas of garden, swidden, and forest land had been converted to coffee. This coffee was almost all for export, and the boom was driven almost exclusively by smallholders. Many of the early participants were recent migrants from the lowlands, and migration accelerated as coffee fever spread, but upland minority groups also threw themselves into coffee. The extent to which farmers had committed themselves to a single crop became painfully clear when the price of coffee suddenly plummeted in 1999.

Of the five crops discussed here, the production of *fast-growing trees* has been most dominated by plantations, which often measure in the tens of thousands of hectares (Hall 2003). Useable comparative statistics on the extent of these plantations are difficult to come by, a situation that derives in part from the incentives that drive interest in concessions. While there is strong demand for the wood chips, paper pulp, and paper that derives from plantations of acacia and eucalyptus, companies have often feigned interest in planting these trees in order to get access to the right to clear standing forest on concession land or to the financial subsidies sometimes provided by states to support plantation development. In such cases, plantations often fail to materialize. Extensive amounts of land have, however, been converted to fast-growing tree plantations in countries including Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos (Barney 2008) and Cambodia. Thailand provides an interesting counter-case: as will be noted below, popular resistance established limits to a state- and corporate-backed push to promote plantations, and in part as a result Thai smallholders in core agricultural areas moved into small-scale tree production in the 1990s (Barney 2004: 331; Hall 2002: 173-4).

The most awe-inspiring boom under consideration here, *oil palm* is a tale of two countries. Malaysia and Indonesia produced 85% of the world's palm oil and 89% of world exports in 2004, and vast swaths of the two countries have already been converted - an astonishing eight million hectares between 1990 and 2007.<sup>8</sup> While Southeast Asian production was originally centred in peninsular Malaysia, since 1990 Malaysian expansion has taken place in Sabah and Sarawak (Bernard and Bissonnette 2011; Cramb 2011). The crop has spread even faster in Indonesia (particularly Sumatra, and more recently in Kalimantan), and oil palm hectareage in Indonesia is now well above that in Malaysia (De Koninck, Bernard, and Bissonnette 2011: Table 2.4). Production has gone on under various organizational structures, many of which involve either nucleus-type schemes or plantations rather than independent smallholders. This boom, like that in fast-growing trees, has thus been much more top-down than have those in cocoa, coffee, and shrimp. It has also seen very important intraregional flows of foreign direct investment, as Malaysian companies have poured capital into establishing plantations in Indonesia.

The regional *shrimp farming* boom began in the mid-1980s (Hall 2004: 317-322). Thailand has consistently been the top producer, but Indonesia is also a major player, and Vietnamese production has exploded since the late 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Much initial expansion came at the expense of mangrove forests, but a great deal of agricultural and other land near the coasts was converted as well. The boom engaged a wide range of actors, as smallholder farmers and fishers, large corporations, states, and even urban professionals

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<sup>7</sup> FAOSTAT figures downloaded 3 August 2010.

<sup>8</sup> (Buckland 2005); expansion figures calculated from (De Koninck, Bernard, and Bissonnette 2011: Table 2.4).

<sup>9</sup> FAO FIGIS figures downloaded 5 October 2007.

threw their hats into the ring. Shrimp farming has seen a wider range of levels of capital intensity and technological sophistication than have the other crops in this paper. Some shrimp farms are little more than lagoons with mud embankments built around them; others use concrete tanks connected to sophisticated water circulation and oxygenation systems, high-tech imported feed, and certified broodstock. Shrimp farming has also seen spectacular collapses at both the national and the subnational level as a result of falling prices, disease, and pollution.

### **Crop booms under secure land control**

I now turn to the ways in which regulatory, market, forceful, and legitimating powers are mobilized in booms. In this section, I discuss boom areas where land control remains secure even in the face of rapidly rising demand for land. I use 'secure' here to mean that the people or groups in question have a land claim that other potential claimants find they need to respect, and that they cannot trump by, for instance, seizing the land or having it allocated to them by the state. The most obvious example would be smallholders or plantation owners with state-backed, formalized property rights, rights which may fall short of full private property but which confer effective possession. As the next section shows, too, smallholder production of state-sanctioned crops can contribute to security of land control even in the absence of such formal rights. Less individualized forms of formal rights can also meet this definition of secure. In some areas of Southeast Asia where indigenous or native land rights are recognized by the state, native groups with secure title may decide to lease land to private boom crop producers; the *Konsep Baru* project in Sarawak was created to formalize and facilitate this process (Cramb 2007: Chapter 9; Ngidang 2002; Bissonnette 2011). And in cases where the state itself has firm de facto and de jure control over land, the relevant state agency may be able to allocate the land to boom crop production (through, for instance, leasing land to an oil palm company that was previously under a timber concession). In each of these cases, the people or organizations who held the land before the boom may decide to plant the boom crop themselves, sell or lease their land to a would-be producer, or keep doing what they had been doing with the land before the boom. In the powers framework, the key power at work in transforming land control in such situations (at least at first glance) is the market: the incentives created by rising prices, and the ways in which landholders who do not worry about having that land seized or reallocated respond to those incentives. As the types of rights in question (and the types of actors able to exercise them) vary across these scenarios, however, they require different types of analysis.

For reasons of space, I confine the discussion here to the first case (and the one that would presumably be most congenial to the World Bank), that of smallholders with secure rights. Given that crop booms are usually assumed to take place primarily in the more insecure, frontier-type areas discussed below, it may seem surprising to suggest that booms also occur in core agricultural areas with securely titled, individually-farmed land. Nevertheless, both shrimp farming and eucalyptus production in Thailand provide examples. With respect to shrimp, Stonich and Vandergeest report that the majority of Thai shrimp farms 'are located on titled land in agricultural areas, much of which was under wet rice prior to shrimp farming' (Stonich and Vandergeest 2001: 274). Both coastal and inland areas have seen both conversion of agricultural land to shrimp by owners and extensive land sales and rental to outsiders looking to cash in on the shrimp boom. Vandergeest and Flaherty, for instance, report that the rapid expansion of low salinity shrimp farming in core inland rice-growing areas of Thailand during the 1990s saw the establishment of a substantial presence of absentee owners (Flaherty and

Vandergeest 1998: 824-5; Vandergeest, Flaherty, and Miller 1999: 581-2). Keith Barney's work in a village in Chachoengsao province, meanwhile, provides a comparatively rare close-up look at the process whereby villagers with 'fairly secure' access to land that has 'traditionally been held in private tenure' have alienated their land to a company looking to plant eucalyptus. The combination of the substantial debts owed by many farming households with a very rapid increase in local land prices encouraged many villagers to sell their land to the company. Barney argues that while there was a coercive element to some of these sales (as the company's growing plantations cut off farms' access to water or roads), the main dynamic at work was 'persuasion through economic circumstances' (Barney 2004: 328-31).

Smallholders in boom areas with relatively secure tenure have thus responded to the prospect of windfall profits by shifting to the new crop themselves, but have also, prompted by some combination of the positive incentive of rising land prices and the negative one of debt, rented or sold their land to people looking to get in on the boom. While this story of the ways in which people in these areas gain control over land for production fits well with the basic World Bank approach (including the idea that land should be transferred to the most efficient, i.e. profitable, users), it is not the whole story. Two other elements of crop booms have important implications for ongoing dynamics of land control once the boom has taken hold, and while they apply to booms that take place on secure and insecure land, they are best discussed here. First, as Barney's work cited in the previous paragraph suggests, the mass conversion of large amounts of the land in an area to a monocrop can make the production for the market of other crops more difficult. This difficulty increases as infrastructure (such as irrigation works) for other land uses is removed or destroyed and as sales networks for other crops disappear. Alternate land uses can also be affected by the environmental externalities of monocropped production, which can lead to conflicts over water resources (certainly problems with coffee, fast-growing trees, and shrimp), salinization and ground subsidence (shrimp), and erosion. Challenges to other land uses can thus be endogenous to booms and can often increase the pressure to sell. In some cases, the challenges to the legitimacy of crop booms that these problems raise have led states to respond through regulatory initiatives that seek to control where boom crops can and cannot be planted (see the case of inland shrimp farming discussed below).

The second implication of booms for land control derives from risk. As noted above, simple possession of land does not make production possible. The land needs to be cleared, seedlings or shrimp fry need to be acquired, inputs like fertilizers and pesticides may be necessary, and these investments are often required years before the crop begins to produce. While different crops vary in their 'smallholder-friendliness' along these lines, shouldering these burdens will often require that smallholders take on substantial debt.<sup>10</sup> The risks involved, substantial at the best of times, can become overwhelming when diseases, pest outbreaks, fires, or price collapses turn booms into busts. Tania Li's work in the Lauje hills provides a detailed and nuanced account of the processes under discussion here. Very soon after the people at her field site had converted their land to private property by planting it with cocoa trees (and had done so in a way that was accepted as basically legitimate by villagers), some began to sell land to others as they racked up debts related to production and gambling. Distress sales took place first within the village, but later expanded to incorporate coastal and city people buying up cocoa land which would then be worked by hired labour (Li 2002: 422-3).

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance (ADB and ActionAid Vietnam 2003: 50).

Cocoa, shrimp and coffee provide particularly spectacular examples of farmers being bankrupted, or at least immiserated, by collapses. In Vietnam, for instance, the large numbers of people who planted coffee trees around 1996 saw their trees begin to produce just as the price of coffee fell so far that they could not meet even their variable costs of production (Ha and Shively 2008: 314). The ironic consequence is that even in areas where people have taken part in booms from the seemingly positive position of secure control over their land, the risks of the boom can contribute to people losing that secure access.

### **Insecure booms**

'Insecure' booms, in which pre-existing relations of land control are not respected or accepted by at least some participants in the boom, are prominent in the literature. This use of insecurity does not necessarily imply that land relations were insecure before the boom; who controlled what may have been well understood. It does mean that once the boom begins and the value of land rises, these relations are thrown into question. Such situations frequently arise when booms take place inside the 'political forest', or the land areas that states deem to be forest (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001: 762). People often live on and use this state-claimed land, and land use in the political forest can range from well-established villages practicing intensive cultivation, to agroforests and swidden, to the use in common of land like forests and pastures. Even outside the political forest and in areas where people have some formal claim to their land, too, booms can be powerful enough that de jure land rights get overridden. The literature shows that all of the four types of actors discussed in this article – state actors, corporations, migrants, and smallholders in situ – have tried to establish new relations of land control in boom areas. In this section, I argue that there are five key processes through which different actors have sought to gain control over insecure land for the purposes of growing boom crops. Each of these processes involves a mix of some or all of the powers of regulation, the market, force, and legitimation. I discuss each here briefly, and introduce a number of sub-processes where necessary.

### ***Sales to migrants***

Many areas with insecure tenure relations have seen spectacular migrations of would-be smallholding boom crop growers. Although landholders in these areas have often not had formal title, land sales and (to a lesser extent) rental have still been central to the ways these migrants have gained control over land. Both the cocoa boom in Sulawesi and the coffee boom in Vietnam's Central Highlands saw very rapid alienation of swidden land to migrants, with extensive sales taking place before locals came to realise that land had increased in value (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011: 105-111; De Koninck 2006; Doutriaux, Geisler, and Shively 2008; Winkels 2008; Giang 2010; Li 2002). The fact that sale has been so important under these conditions suggests that farmers could often make a strong enough claim to their swidden land to convince newcomers that the land could not simply be seized and, further, that they were the appropriate recipient of cash paid for it. Research on both of these booms, however, highlights the ways that markets for land on the frontier can have quite different characteristics to those in areas where possession and title are more secure. A first issue in these areas is the extent to which village officials, who often have the ability to issue documents legitimizing possession by migrants, can claim that *they* are the ones who should receive the payment. Li shows for one of her field sites how local officials, as the 'official arbiters on land matters, interpreting the law according to their own interests and understandings', have 'provoked

and facilitated land transfers.’ Headmen ‘tell villagers that their customary rights lapse if the land has not been used for five years, or if the area exceeds 2 hectares, or if no tree-crops have been planted, or if the land has not been registered with the headman, or taxed, or issued with a certificate.’ The fear that headmen may take their land has also prompted villagers to sell to migrants while they still have some claim (Li 2002: 428) (see also Ruf and Yoddang 2001: 132). Another take on this issue can be found in Dorian Fougères’ *Aquarian Capitalism and Transition in Southeast Asia*, which gives a complex and fascinating account of the role of *lurah* officials in providing land for shrimp ponds in Ngapaaha Township in Southeast Sulawesi to Bugis migrants, and of the conflict that arose as Tolaki nobles protested these moves on the grounds that they had customary rights to the land in question (Fougères 2008: Chapter 6).

A second important element of the way in which migrants gain control over land involves the people who set themselves up as land clearers and land brokers. In both the Sulawesi cocoa zone and the coffee areas of Vietnam, again, ethnic minority people who were *in situ* at the boom’s beginning have taken to clearing land, planting it to cocoa/coffee, and selling it on to migrants as a means of making money. Ruf and his coauthors have called attention to the emergence of this strategy in Sulawesi, which brings together migrants who are happy to buy ‘ready-to-harvest plantations’ and local people who find that selling such plantations is ‘an excellent way of turning labour into capital and then cash’ (Ruf, Yoddang, and Ardhy 2001: 183-4) - providing that there is still a frontier to move to and repeat the process. Areas like this, too, have seen the emergence of land brokers from migrant communities who take over the task of identifying, purchasing, and consolidating land for the next wave of migrants (Ruf and Yoddang 2001: 145-146; ADB and ActionAid Vietnam 2003: 50). We can also note that later migrants very often purchase land from earlier arrivals rather than from the people who were *in situ* when the boom began (Ruf, Yoddang, and Ardhy 2001: 182; Giang 2010), though by this point these earlier migrants may have secure enough claim to their land that these sales take on the characteristics of sales in the ‘secure’ booms described above.

### ***Seizure by migrants***

Land markets at the frontier also exist in the shadow of a second form of land control: seizure not just by officials but by migrants themselves. Much of the land converted to boom crop production is either fallow swidden land or forest, and migrants have often been able to take possession of this land in areas where local institutions are not strong or coherent enough to prevent this. While this effective seizure of the land need not be associated with any intent to use force (indeed, those taking possession of the land may be only dimly aware that someone else lays claim to it), the previous holders may feel unable to object. Examples of this dynamic can be found in work on the migration of would-be coffee growers to the Central Highlands of Vietnam in the mid-1990s, about which Dang Dinh Trung writes that some migrants ‘did not know or ignored the traditional land tenure system, so they occupied the fallow land that indigenous people used for their subsistence production’ (Trung 2003: 77). Ruf, Yoddang and Ardhy, similarly, write that in the cocoa-growing areas of Sulawesi they studied, locals often fear confiscation of their land by migrants, private companies, or government projects, and thus often move to sell on the principle that “‘If I don’t sell it, somebody else will”” (Ruf, Yoddang, and Ardhy 2001: 183).

### ***Receipt of land from the state***

Would-be participants in crop booms also receive land from state actors. The purchase of land from local state officials by relatively independent migrant smallholders has been discussed above. In Indonesia, too, some smallholder participants in booms received their land from the state as part of transmigration projects aimed different crops, and subsequently switched; I have discussed this dynamic (a version of which also applies to the coffee boom in Vietnam) elsewhere (Hall Forthcoming). Here, I take up the receipt of state land by richer individuals, corporations, and parastatal companies from higher-level (district, provincial, national) state actors. Smallholders are also involved, however, to the extent that they are seen as potential participants in production (under nucleus or contract-farming schemes) and/or as having some legitimate claim to the land that is to be allocated, and thus to be treated as stakeholders in the organization of the scheme even in the absence of clear, formal land rights. This focus on legitimacy and recognition, which implies that some form of agreement needs to be reached with the people currently occupying the land in question, distinguishes such projects from those where no such recognition is given; they are discussed below as examples of seizure.

The receipt by companies of state-claimed land has been particularly central to the expansion of oil palm and fast-growing trees, but has also been significant in shrimp farming. For the former two crops, large-scale schemes are required in part by the scale economies of processing plants or mills. In most of Southeast Asia, land parcels of sufficient size are almost all within the political forest, and will thus only be formally available from the state (see for instance Hansen 2005: 187). State officials often legitimate the planting of boom crops in these areas by arguing that the land in question is 'degraded' and not suitable for use as a reserve forest or protected area (see below for examples). In Thailand, mangroves, which had traditionally been seen by state actors as waste land, were being formally leased and sold by the state to shrimp farmers at below-market rates until at least 1987 (Huitric 1998: 20). While regulations were later tightened, and shrimp farming officially must take place on titled land, shrimp farmers have in practice often been able to receive land titles from local officials or at least to convince them to look the other way (Stonich and Vandergeest 2001: 283)

Many of these large-scale schemes engage formally with smallholders. In Indonesia and Malaysia in particular, state and private plantations and large-scale contract growing schemes have often asserted control over land by taking it from smallholders in exchange for various kinds of economic inducements. Such inducements may include direct compensation, a share in the profits of the scheme, and labour opportunities. Smallholders may gain access to inputs and a guaranteed (usually monopsonistic) market for the produce. Crucially for our purposes, too, they at times receive small amounts of cleared and planted land 'back' from the scheme, along with promises that they will be given formal title to it once they have repaid their loans. Participation in these schemes can thus appear to be a way of gaining state recognition of land rights. In some cases, the creation of smallholder schemes is a condition of state concessions and authorization for the project. Schemes of this sort have been particularly common in Indonesia (McCarthy 2010; Colchester et al. 2006; Levang and Sitorus 2006). The land acquisition method for a mid-1990s oil palm scheme in West Kalimantan discussed by Colchester et al. involved the common '7.5 model' under which participating farmers contributed 7.5 hectares of their land. 5.5 hectares would be allotted to the company for plantation area and infrastructure while the household would get 2 hectares for smallholder oil palm production. Farmers were to move from their scattered settlements to a centralized village, where the company would build housing and other

amenities, so that an uninterrupted plantation could be established (Colchester et al. 2006: 97).

As such transactions involve the exchange of an asset for benefits of various kinds, they are all shaped by the power of the market, and indeed such schemes are often justified in neoliberal terms. As in the case of sales to migrants, however, these transactions hardly take place under idealized conditions of voluntary consent; they are deeply structured by, especially, regulation and force. John McCarthy, for instance, has nicely summed up the way in which insecurity can influence these transactions, writing that in the oil palm schemes he studied, the 'lack of secure and enforceable rights over both private and village common land weakened the landowners' bargaining position and left them vulnerable to elite manipulation during the processes where 'informal' and 'fuzzy' rights were translated into formal legal entitlements' (McCarthy 2010: 838).

### ***Seizure by companies and/or state actors***

It is a grim irony of crop booms that while they make land more valuable - a development that seems like it should be beneficial for landholding smallholders - they also increase the incentives of others, both 'locals' and outsiders, to try to take control of their land through non-market means.<sup>11</sup> Attempts by state and corporate actors to seize control of large tracts of land while denying the claims of the people living on that land have led to highly contentious and highly visible struggles. Li, for instance, describes an oil palm scheme in Sulawesi for which villagers were forced to relinquish fertile agricultural land. They did this with the understanding that they would be given back 'plasma' land on which to grow oil palm for sale to the estate, but the land instead was given to transmigrants; they only received small amounts of poor quality plasma after a protracted struggle (Li, n.d. #6143). This scenario is far from uncommon.

State actors often argue either that the presence of people on political forest that has been allocated for boom crops is not legitimate - that they are 'squatters' or 'forest destroyers' illegally occupying state land - or, in some cases, simply do not acknowledge any inhabitation of land declared to be 'unused'. Under these conditions, state actors and firms tend to see intimidation and coercion as legitimate approaches to relocating these people, and there will likely be little involvement of local people as production gets underway. Heavy-handed state interventions on behalf of corporations wishing to plant oil palm or fast-growing trees were a hallmark of the Suharto era in Indonesia. One of the most notorious examples of these dynamics, however, was the Khor Jor Kor scheme in Thailand. During the 1980s the Thai government adopted a new approach to managing the country's reserve forests under which large areas of 'degraded' forest would be leased to the private sector for fast-growing tree plantations. However, the reserve forests, far from being empty, were home to as many as eight million people, many of whom lived in villages that were more than a century old. Efforts to develop tree plantations in these areas met with stiff resistance, and in early 1990 a moratorium was imposed on leasing degraded forest reserve to private companies. However, after the 1991 coup, the military government reversed course and embarked on the Khor Jor Kor program, which sought to evict five million people from the reserve 'forests' to open up 1.37 million hectares of land for private tree plantations (Carrere and Lohmann 1996:

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<sup>11</sup> On this dynamic in the context of the conversion of agricultural land in Southeast Asia to nonagricultural uses like urban development, tourism, and infrastructure, see (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011: Chapter 5).

237). While this scheme was quickly abandoned in the face of protests, as indeed was the effort to promote large-scale tree plantations in Thailand, it gives a sense of the scale to which land seizure for crop booms can aspire. In Sarawak, too, companies have received enormous amounts of land for oil palm plantations from the state, a process facilitated by amendments to the Land Code that made it easier to extinguish native customary rights to land (Cramb 2007: 11-12). Very often, the land in question - much of which is claimed by native groups even if they do not possess customary title to it - has been seized by the government without consultation. Cramb writes that protests over these seizures, which have included road blockades and interfering with bulldozers, have been met by threats and, in some cases, violence (Cramb 2007: 269; see also Bissonnette 2011).

### ***The use of booms to strengthen claims to land***

In analyzing the dynamics that lead to crop booms, it is natural to focus on the money that can be made from them as the primary motivation for producers. However, the priority and legitimacy state actors accord to boom crops have allowed smallholders to improve their control over their land by planting them, and allowed corporations to gain access to land by claiming they are going to plant them. How does this work? On the smallholder side, part of the answer has to do with the longstanding preference of Southeast Asian state actors for settled over swidden agriculture.<sup>12</sup> States, firms, and migrants generally treat permanent agriculture with a greater degree of respect than they do swidden, agroforest (Potter 2001: 316-7) or communal forest. Barney's work in the Lao village of Ban Sivilay (a pseudonym) provides an example. When 610 hectares of village land was zoned for allocation to a company looking to establish a eucalyptus plantation, 13 hectares of paddy land were carefully excluded from the allocation. Barney notes that a 'singular attention was paid to respecting paddy land,' which was mapped to the square meter with company-supplied GPS instruments, while no village claims to the 'degraded' forest were recognized (Barney 2008: 99).

If land planted to wet rice or fruit gardens gets more respect than do swidden rotations, then land planted to boom crops may be even more appealing to state actors, and even more difficult to seize. Production of these crops, after all, has often been explicitly prioritized and encouraged by state actors (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011: Chapter 4). Patrice Levang and Soadun Sitorus given an example that parallels Barney's study in Ban Sivilay: when an acacia plantation was being set up in the Rambang Dangku sub-district of Sumatra in the early 1990s, productive rubber land was excised from the concession (in spite of the generally heavy-handed approach taken to the overall project), while former swiddens were not recognized and were seized and converted to acacia (Levang and Sitorus 2006: 6). There are frequent references in the literature to the fact that smallholders understand these state visions and use them for their own purposes. This indicates that they see the benefits of planting boom crops as extending beyond the pecuniary to include increased respect from fellow citizens and state officials and to reduced concern over potential seizure of their land. Li reports from Sulawesi, for instance, that 'as long as hill farmers rotated their farms in a swidden system, the authorities viewed them as hopelessly backward. As soon as they planted cocoa, they began to be treated with more respect, as 'real farmers' building up a long term investment' (Li 2002: 421; see also Miyamoto 2006: 8; Cooke 2002: 203).

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<sup>12</sup> There is a large literature on this topic. For a recent statement, see (Cramb et al. 2009: 328).

This strategy, however, has been far from foolproof for smallholders. One of the main reasons it can fail is that different state actors are motivated by different legitimations (or, at times, the same actors are motivated by competing and contradictory motivations). The most important goal that can serve to delegitimize crop booms is conservation. State actors with responsibilities for conservation have worked both to reduce the environmental damage done by boom crops and to exclude them entirely from certain kinds of land. This regulatory push to zone land as off-limits leads both to efforts to prevent new production areas from being opened up and to the eviction of existing producers within conservation areas. In Thailand, regulations seek to keep shrimp farms away both from mangrove forests and from inland, freshwater areas (Flaherty, Vandergeest, and Miller 1999). Li has traced government efforts to exclude coffee growers from the Lore Lindu National Park, and the way those growers have sought to restate their claims (Li 2007). Indonesia provides a range of examples of a highly militarized approach to keeping boom crop producers out of protected areas. In the province of Lampung in South Sumatra, for instance, the Indonesian military undertook a series of campaigns during the 1980s and 1990s to remove coffee farmers from the newly-expanded territory of protected forests and national parks (Potter 2008: 183). At times, too, one boom crop can face off against another. In late 2010, over 9,000 farmers who had settled in an abandoned forest concession in Indonesia's Jambi province (Sumatra), and who had planted the land to coffee, were facing eviction by the government in favour of oil palm plantations. In a letter addressed to the President of Indonesia, activists opposing these evictions made a clear appeal to the legitimacy of coffee production as an important part of the local and national economies, and were careful to stress the economic and social benefits that came from highly lucrative coffee production (World Rainforest Movement 2010).

The ability of corporations to gain control over land by making use of the legitimacy accorded to boom crops and the regulations that govern their use, finally, is most evident in the regional oil palm and fast-growing tree sectors. A striking feature of both crops is that corporations have failed to plant them on land that they received as concessions for the purposes of doing so; the literature suggests that millions of hectares of land across the region falls into this category. In many of these cases, the companies that received the concessions in fact had no interest in the boom crop, but only in the rights to clear the land (and thus to cut and sell the standing timber on it) that came with the concessions. The appeal to state-valored boom crops, and the creative use of the regulatory frameworks around them, have allowed companies to gain access to highly valuable stands of timber.

## **Conclusions**

In arguing for the value of an engagement with the literature on crop booms in Southeast Asia for the analysis of the contemporary global trend towards 'large-scale land acquisitions' or 'land grabs', this paper has made three main points. The first of these relates to the question of for whom land becomes more valuable when there is a rapid increase in a crop's export price. Who, under such conditions, will actually wish to exercise control over land in order to grow the crop in question? The paper has suggested that the answer will depend on a range of factors: the crop's biological and ecological characteristics; its labour requirements; access to capital, inputs, knowledge, and downstream processing and networks; and the extent and nature of government support programs. While considerations of space prohibit a systematic analysis of these differences, two broad observations arise from the role smallholders have played in

Southeast Asian crop booms. The first is that policies promoting large-scale corporate land acquisitions on efficiency grounds are often political decisions that are not determined by 'technical' requirements of production and that may pre-empt smallholder production of export crops (on the comparative history of such preemption in Southeast Asia, see Hayami 2001). The second, however, is that smallholders themselves can be agents of land-grabbing. As the literature shows, both migrant would-be smallholders and smallholders in situ have gained access to land through purchases under the shadow of insecure tenure, land reallocation by the state, and seizure. In understanding responses to recent spikes in the prices of key export food commodities, the implications of what we might call 'small-scale land acquisitions' need to be brought into the debate. The material presented in this paper thus strongly supports the argument that the land grab needs to be analyzed within the framework of agrarian political economy broadly understood (Zoomers 2010).

Second, I have suggested that in the relative absence (so far) of detailed case studies of the post-2008 land grab, the crop boom literature can tell us a great deal about the concrete ways in which different actors actually control land. The paper has shown the variety of ways in which actors mobilize (and mix) regulatory, market, forceful, and legitimating powers in order to gain access to newly valuable land and to keep others off it. Purchase, lease, seizure, (re)allocation by government, participation in contract-type schemes, and the planting of boom crops themselves are all key strategies of land control, though here again these strategies very often bleed into one another. While the Southeast Asian context means that the frequency with which these approaches are used may differ in other regions (as indeed it does within Southeast Asia), the studies referred to in this paper and a wide range of others can suggest what is likely going on as companies and state actors try to bridge the gap between the hastily-sketched and overly-optimistic agreements they are prone to signing with each other, and actual situations on the ground.

Third, I have asked how the way land control is affected by booms 'makes a difference'. I have suggested that while these booms are enormously diverse, a basic distinction can be made between those that do not call the basic structure of property rights that existed before the boom into question, and those that do. In 'secure' booms, production is carried out for the most part by people who controlled land in the area before the boom, or by people who have bought or rented the land from those people. When the force of the boom does put pre-boom land relations up for grabs, however, the ensuing scramble for land control involves a much broader range of strategies, most of which involve some fusion of the powers of regulation, the market, force, and legitimation. While there is thus something to the common policy distinction between conditions in which 'local rights' to land are not respected and those in which they are, it would be a mistake to think that this means 'secure' booms inhabit a world of voluntary, mutually-beneficial transactions. Even putting aside the distress sales and lack of support for smallholders that can lead them to take part in 'normal' market transactions, this paper has shown that the consequences of booms for the ability of non-participants in the area to continue using their land, the environmental consequences of boom crop production (including for the crop itself) and the regulatory struggles they can stimulate, and the risks attendant upon monocropped production all greatly complicate this vision of win-win scenarios arising from increased demand for land. Tracing similar patterns as the land grab gains pace will be of the first order of importance.

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