

Borders of rubber

Over the last three years, northern Laos has been seized by a rubber fever unknown in the agricultural history of the country. Rubber, initially introduced by Lao farmers from China through a well-knit trans-border network of kin and friends, has been promoted by the Lao government as a miraculous antidote that will rescue thousand of farmers from poverty. The introduction of rubber is seen as meeting two long-standing items on the government's agenda: replacement of opium cultivation and reduction in unregulated swidden agriculture among upland farmers. Until 2002, rubber plantations on the Chinese side demarcated the border between "wild" Laos and "civilized" China, seemingly signalling a clear-cut separation between the two nation-states' distinct political agendas.



Today, rubber trees have mushroomed along the border on the Lao side as well. Rubber, with its high economic potential, is expected to bridge the gap between "modernizing" China and "underdeveloped" Laos. Yet, it is still too early to celebrate such optimistic predictions.

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