

## **The Discourse on Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II and Discursive Practices on Savannakhet area\***

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this article is to study the falls under the discourse on Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II resulted from power, determination, disciplinary, dominance, constitute and establishment. Meanwhile, this process presses and subjugates things that differ from the mainstream and turns them into something else for the public apocalypse. Thus, this article's objective is to analyze the discourse on the establishment of the Friendship Bridge II to be knowledge and truth. That is, to analyze the method, process, chronology in building identity and defining meaning for everything in the form of discourse and its practices. This is so as to deconstruct in order to show the power and the reality behind the discourse on the Friendship Bridge II at Savannakhet area.

**Keyword:** Discourse, Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II, Discursive Practice, Savannakhet area

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## 1. Introduction

Since 1990, Asian Development Bank has funded the initiation of the economic cooperation among the six Greater Mekong countries, including Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, under the policy of The Greater Mekong Sub-regional (GMS). This policy has resulted in various forms of cooperation in the region. Under all 11 GMS Flagship Programs, the East West Economic Corridor (EWEC) is the program with concrete development. One of significant of this development project is the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II (Mukdahan-Savannakhet) project. There will be rapid economic expansion all along the route of the East West Economic Corridor. In particular, Lao PDR will be transformed from a landlocked country to a land-linked country.

However, the discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II that constitute as a mainstream, as an object, as a knowledge, as a truth representing a state of development that they must have and would have. Moreover, discursive practices reduce and hide the observation that the bridge would not only bring about benefits but it would also destroy the ecological system, natural resources as well as the peaceful life style.

This research was conducted through using the concept of discourse analysis as a guideline. Though it was discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II. This study will expose rules and process behind creating identity and meaningful of Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II project to be the discourse. Further-

more, this study will show how the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II discourse organized and it Interacted with anything? How to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II discourse constituted? How to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II discourse subjugated?

This research article contains seven sections. The next section relate with research methodology. Section 3 is a research framework. Section 4 is genesis of discourse on Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II. Section 5 is the second bridge over Mekong River and discursive practices on Savannakhet area. Section 6 is the aftermath of the Friendship Bridge II's establishment and the revealing of undesired state. The last section is conclusion.

## 2. Research methodology

The research employs four methods of study to collect primary data and secondary data which are documentary research, field work, focus group and in-depth interview. As for documentary research, data were collected from various documents, textbooks, relevant research, websites of relating agencies and institutions, both from private and government sectors.

As for the field work<sup>1</sup>, the research was conducted by observing the environment and people's way of life as well as interviewing and inquiring people about the characteristics of economy and cultural society in the area. In addition, there were in-depth interviews of key informants who were involved or were stakeholders. Data has been analyzed by the discourse analysis and is presented by the descriptive analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> The researchers visited in Savannakhet during 28 and 31 August 2012

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### 3. Framework of the discourse analysis

Michael Foucault views discourse not as the medium of language per se. The language conceals power, determination, disciplinary, dominance constitute and establishment. Meanwhile, this process presses and subjugates things that differ from the mainstream and turns them into something else for the public apocalypse. Just as a discovery tool in archaeology, Foucault creates discourse analysis to show the establishment and doctrine of various discourses under the system of power in the form of institution, academic, knowledge etc. through discursive practices which builds and establishes power and those who have power which in turn define things through discourse and prevent unwanted things from being revealed or faded away. In the other words, discourse analysis is to deconstruct in order to illustrate the power and reality behind various discourses. Moreover, under this study it will expose rules and process behind creating identity and meaningful to be the discourse. Discursive practices, it struggles to be the dominant discourse by defining and rules. How to the discourse organized and it Interacted with anything? How to the discourse constituted? How to the discourse subjugated? Therefore, discourse analysis is the study of the processes which have the power to constitute a society and object became the subject, knowledge and truth under the power of discourse. By determination, discourse will mention anything, the content anyone or any institution would have the authority to mention

about it. It has power to be accepted in society, as a historian has authority to mention about the historical event. However, individual is only a tool to enact the rules of discourse. The discourse has the power to determine who will say, therefore, the discourse analysis is the main focus of the study which is to set the rules and governing that discourse (Chairat Charoensin-o-larn, 2006; Kanjana Kaewthep, 2010).

### 4. Genesis of discourse on Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II

The present era<sup>2</sup> of Mekong region is under the shadow of globalization where it is heading to the full development and modernization after the end of the cold war era. Political ideology of democratic liberalism and that of socialism are no longer obstacles for cooperation. Mekong region enters into the borderless era of globalization, which comes after the cold war, where people, goods and other things are more connected, more freely to move around and boundaries between countries are no longer obstacles. Cooperation under the framework of Greater Mekong Sub-region supported by the Asian Development Bank is also a part of globalization. In the late 20s century, the world experienced the new phenomenon, the geography aggregation which has built international institutional cooperation at a regional level. This leads to higher economic dependence on each other (Surasom Kritsanajuta, 2009 ).

Tracking back to the background of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II, one would

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<sup>2</sup> Mekong is divided into 3 eras which are; the first era under the shadow of colonialism, the second era under the shadow of the cold war after countries became independent and, the third era under the shadow of globalization.

find that it initiated from the road no. 9 which was a part of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) framework supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It can be said that both ADB and GMS are the outcomes of development process by the first-world countries after the end of the World War II under the discursive practices through institutions, organizations and agencies that are authorized to support development as the world's mainstream. These are; for example, the World Bank, other international development organizations including ADB itself, and other national agencies which have been reduced by discursive practices and have become the others which are called as underdeveloped countries. Underdeveloped countries readily act as agents responding to the discourse on development which has a characteristic of globalizers. Moreover, the development generates knowledge on development such as development economics and textbooks on development from which all scholars in underdeveloped countries study, hoping to impel their countries away from the so-called underdeveloped state to that of Fielder happy (under discourse) which is branded as development. However, prior to 1955, there was no record of the study on subject regarding development economics in the world (Chairat Charoensin-o-larn, 2006).

It can be said that the state which is called development is a discourse comprised of power, determination, disciplinary, dominance, constitute and establishment for development. Without power in various forms as aforementioned, the development would on, be signifier

which is weightless and powerless to become the mainstream desired internationally. It would be powerless to press and limit things that differ from the mainstream. For example, the development under GMS project which was the outcome of ADB, a financial institution for multilateral development similar to the World Bank. ADB is found by member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Asia Pacific (ESCAP) whose objective is to provide economic and social assistance to member countries and alleviate poverty. ADB's assistance is in forms of loan, loan guarantee and technical assistance. In 2013, ADB has a reserve of 21.53 billion dollars (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

In the other words, ADB is an institution which acts as a globalizer whose responsibility is to pass through, build creditability and maintain development ideology. Providing loan makes development a state which must be exchanged at a price and value. Technical assistance emphasizes that development is knowledge that has to be obtained in order to be beyond the condition of underdevelopment. ADB creates GMS with its power of development which crams and diminishes the value of all GMS area and regards it as another that is in an underdeveloped state. This is because of the influence and power of discourse created by ADB. There is a conference called GMS summit where all members<sup>3</sup> must collectively participate and observe that development is the state to which GMS region has to reach. Under all 11 GMS Flagship Programs, the East West Economic Corridor (EWEC) is the program

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<sup>3</sup> GMS members are Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and China

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with concrete development. There are 3 objectives of EWEC area development which are:

1) Increase economic cooperation between all 4 member countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region program.

2) Reduce the cost of transportation in the East West Economic Corridor and improve transportation for goods and commuters.

3) Reduce poverty in the East West Economic Corridor by supporting development projects in rural areas and along the border, increase income of low-income people, create jobs and promote tourism. (Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, 2004)

The power of discourse on development whose objective is to develop the area along the East West Economic Corridor turns governments and governmental agencies in the East West Economic Corridor into development agents. They have responsibility to pass through and make development as a mainstream and become the desirable state for the people in Greater Mekong Sub-region. This results in various projects in the area, especially the route no.9 which is the road connecting Thailand's Mukdahan and Vietnam's Lao-Bao via Kwangtri city along the route no.1 to Vay, Danang and Kwang-ngai which are in middle Vietnam. The route no.9 is very popular because it is the 245 km. road that directly connects Lao PDR to Vietnam. The important effect of this development is the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II (Mukdahan-Savannakhet). There will be rapid economic expansion all along the route of the East West Economic Corridor. In particular, Lao PDR will be transformed from a landlocked country to a land-linked country. It will also reach other objectives of the East West

Economic Corridor. In the other words, the government of the Lao PDR has been continually responsive to the development. This can be seen from Lao's past economic development plans which were consistent with capital system and capital flows, whether it was to be battery of Asia, trade center, maintenance of economic growth or investment promotion.

## **5. The second bridge over Mekong River and discursive practices on Savannakhet area**

Savannakhet is Lao's largest province in terms of area and number of population. Savannakhet is comprised of 2,177,400 hector or 13,608,750 rai which is accounted for 9.2% of the country, of which 58.5% is lowland and 41.5% are hills and mountains (Royal Thai Consulate-general at Savannakhet, 2012).

Savannakhet has 890,582 inhabitants, which is the highest number of population in the country. It has diverse biology. Its important resource is woodland of 1.1 million hector or 52% of the country. As for minerals, Savannakhet has both gold and copper. The gold mines in Sepon, which is a commercial mine in Lao PDR and largest in Savannakhet (Royal Thai Consulate-general at Savannakhet, 2012). It is Lao's first mine that produced and exported copper in March 2005 and brought the country a lot of income. In 2009, the Minerals and Metal Group (MMG) from China, a concessionaire of gold and copper mining, paid 80.5 million dollars in taxes and dividends to the government (International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Lao PDR and The National Economic Research Institute (NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR, 2011).

Throughout the past development, the government sector of Savannakhet has been an agent well responsive to the development, especially in observing and approving for discourse on development passed through by a globalizer like ADB to GMS and EWEK. If looking at the geography, Lao's important problem of being a landlocked country could be observed. This is a crucial drive which transforms Lao from a landlocked country to that of a land-linked one. On this ground, it is in line with various projects for the road development like the route no.9 which goes through Savannakhet. Between 20 and 22 November 2007, Thailand hosted a ministerial meeting for 4 foreign affairs ministers (Thailand – Lao – Vietnam – Japan) in Mukdahan. Representatives from relating countries joined the meeting to discuss about the beneficial use of the bridge and the development of the East West Economic Corridor. The meeting came up with the conclusions as follows:

1) Approve the joint feasibility study to promote trade and investment by establishing a special economic zone in Mukdahan and Savannakhet which to be used as a joint production base. Also, there is a probability of establishing special economic zone in other areas along the route no.9.

2) Insist on the intention to jointly provide expediency in trade, investment, tourism, transportation or goods and commuters across borders by escalating an establishment of one-stop service custom.

3) Promote inland tourism which focuses on cultural and ecological tourism. Marketing plan for promoting tourism shall be conducted jointly as “three countries, one

destination”. There shall be development of infrastructure to support tourism.

4) Promote capability building in 8 sectors which are transportation, communication, tourism, trade, investment, human development, energy and tourism.

5) Promote and stimulate international organization, financial institution and other countries to take part in the development of the East West Economic Corridor.

6) Promote the governmental sector and the private sector both domestic and international to take part in the development of the East West Economic Corridor.

7) Promote and push for implementation of projects that have been prioritized in a study before making an investment (Soparat Jarusombat, 2007).

Therefore, the construction of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II, which connects Mukdahan and Savannakhet, began in late 2002 and completed in 2006. It was bilaterally agreed with the Thai government that each country would borrow equally from JBIC. The budget was 2,550 million Baht. The project is comprised of the main bridge over Mekong River with the length of 1,600 meter. The bridge is reinforced concrete of 12 meter in width for one-lane traffic with a pavement of 1.50 meter on each side. The bridge ramp is 250 meter long in Thailand's side and 200 meter long. The bridge's total length is 2,050 meter (Rangsima Olarikbut, 2006).

According to the government's important objective which focuses on economic growth that could be measured by GDP, investment promotion is essential for increasing and the maintaining the level of development.



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Consequently, the government responses to the discourse on various forms of development. For example, an establishment of special economic zones which includes that in Savan-Seno area, tax privilege, tax exemption for gas importation during constructing period for developers of special economic zones and exclusive economic zones which locates in back country and are not in special economic zones and exclusive economic zones. Moreover, Savannakhet's natural resources are important incentives for foreign investors, especially in agricultural and mining sectors (International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Lao PDR and The National Economic Research Institute (NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR, 2011).

Thus, a guideline and policy for the construction of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II leads to a discursive practices on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II. Accredited Lao agencies which are the central government, the National Economic Research Institute (NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR, Savannakhet government and the department for Planning Investment of Savannakhet province as well as other agencies that are agents which react and welcome globalizers of development such as ADB, GMS and EWEC. These globalizers of development have a power to determine, discipline, dominate, constitute and establish developmental ideology and objects.

In case of Savannakhet government and the department for Planning Investment of Savannakhet province, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Lao PDR and The National Economic Research Institute

(NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR's (2011) study shown Savannakhet government and the department for Planning Investment of Savannakhet province its strongly support and enact development discourse to be knowledge and truth as follow:

*"...Investments are important generators of government revenue through concession fees, taxes, dividends and investment projects also directly contribute to infrastructure and community development in the areas in which they operate. Investments can also have indirect economic benefits, stimulating growth in local economies in investment areas and helping to attract even more investment..."*

Moreover, Academic sector (2012) also support and enact development discourse to be knowledge and truth as follows:

*"...Under the development stream, government began building infrastructure in Savan- Seno special economic zone for longtime. The companies occupying more than 150 companies, mostly from Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan....Therefore, our university must to meet the needs of the labor market. So, we'll support faculty of business administration...."*

Under the discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II whose supremacy objectives are to promote trade and investment, to facilitate trade, investment, tourism, transportation of goods and commuters across borders, to promote international organization, financial institution and other countries to take part in the development of the East West Economic Corridor etc. This is a consequence of a conference with a power implication. It is an opinion and agreement of many countries

whose representatives are foreign affairs ministers of Thailand, Lao, Vietnam and Japan. This reflects that the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II has an objective at an international level to dominate and pave a way for the state which is desired by the mainstream.

In addition, the Lao government's long-lasting characteristic as a giver and a leader of its people, as well as the publicizing, meeting, promulgating the benefits of the bridge have made the people observe the discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II as a mainstream, as a knowledge, as a truth, as an object representing a state of development that they must have and would have. Those who do not agree (minority) are of the view that the bridge would destroy the ecological system, natural resources and peaceful life style. These people will be degraded as representatives of the underdeveloped and blockers of advancement and development. This in turn obstructs and presses what the mainstream discourse do not wish to be revealed. Therefore, the public sector and the private sector mutually push for the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II. The data collected in the area shows that various parties were of the view that the bridge would bright about ultimate benefit, well-being, convenience, wealth and development for Savannakhet as follows:

#### ***The public sector***

The construction of the Friendship Bridge II makes it easier to travel, foster economic growth and attract more tourists to Savannakhet. More importantly, people can cross the border to Thailand for medical treatment and shopping. People with car use the bridge in order to come to Thailand as it is more convenient and they can go to places afterward.

#### ***The business sector***

The business sector is of a view that the completion of the bridge will make it easier to move around. It will also foster trade and investment, create jobs and generate income from tourism. There will be development in various forms. The bridge will be an important attraction. For example, the industry will use the bridge to get to China or ports in Danang, Vietnam. Train from China will also make trading with China easier.

#### ***The academic sector***

The bridge will result in development, trade advancement. The bridge will bring about human development, especially in teaching and learning. There will be more research and academic services such as consultant for a group of companies investing in Savannakhet (Public Sector; Business Sector; Academic Sector, 2012).

It can be said that the discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II is a discourse established by international institutions and organizations which are ADB, GMS and EWEC which are essentially act as globalizers of developmental ideology. Meanwhile, the discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II has paid tribute to the Friendship Bridge II as a knowledge, truth and the state, the object for development which must be pursued by the central government, the National Economic Research Institute (NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR, Savannakhet government and the department for Planning Investment of Savannakhet province.

The Lao government as a giver and a leader of its people, Savannakhet people think that they desperately want the Lao Friendship Bridge II. They have a determination to be out



of poverty, to improve their well-being, to increase their value of trade, to attract more tourists and investment. These are grounds for the desired state called development. Only few people would mention the drawbacks or negative impacts for the bridge. Had the bridge, as an object, not locate in an meaningful area as important as this, not governed by institutions as powerful as this, not process the hidden developmental ideology, the bridge would only be a powerless object, powerless and there would be no yearning to have a bridge.

Thus, if such bridge were to build in the area that process no power established by international and national organizations with the objective of connecting together capital flows. Such bridge could have been asked to be built in areas within the country so as to connect agricultural network of farmers and villagers. The villagers' bridge would only be a weightless signifier because the project was not there to respond the benefits of international and national flows that were behind development ideology, development organizations as well as the people who were keen for development and modernization.

## **6. The aftermath of the Friendship Bridge II's establishment and the revealing of undesired state**

The establishment of the Friendship Bridge II from the discourse and discursive practices lead to efficiency. It is certain that when considering the desire that the discourse on the bridge creates, the desires that the discourse on the bridge is quite real. If we examine some numbers, which could be the average GDP growth of 10.8% while the country's average GDP growth is only 6.8%.

Apparently, prior to the construction of the Friendship Bridge II, Savannakhet's GDP per capita was USD 525 in 2005-2006. After the bridge's construction, its GDP per capita increased to USD 653 in 2007-2008 and to USD 897 in 2009-2010. Moreover, Savannakhet's poverty problem has continuously decreased from 19.1% in 2005 to 14.6% in 2007 and to only 10% in 2009 (International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Lao PDR and The National Economic Research Institute (NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR, 2011).

However, the desired state created by the discourse on the bridge as an object that supports the discourse on development in Savannakhet area. The development must be exchanged for allowing increasing investment and other developmental objects in the area after the completion of the bridge. These are contract farming, establishment of infrastructure, establishment of factories of all kinds, establishment of hotels and other serving enterprises including casinos named Savan Vegas. In the other words, while the bridge brings wealth to Savannakhet, it also brings some corrosion to the city.

A study conducted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Lao PDR and The National Economic Research Institute (NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR (2011) which studied benefits and costs increasing investment in Savannakhet, which are as follows:

### ***Positive impact of investment***

- An increase in the government's revenue
- job creation
- the existence contract farming

- stimulation of investment in the area
- development of infrastructure

***Negative impact of investment***

- an increase in households' expenses
- an increase in social problems
- a conflict on land
- problem of child labor which affects their education
- an increase in crimes
- a decrease in forestry
- Chemical contamination
- Impacts on water supplies
- Wastewater
- Noise pollution

It can be said that although positive impacts of development are not negligible, negative impacts, resulted from direct impact on forestry, are just as much. In 2005, 60% of Savannakhet area was forestry but in 2009, the number decreased to 52%. There was a problem of chemical leftovers in Agricultural, industrial and service sectors. The quality of water supply in Savannakhet was also the problem. Moreover, people will have to cope with an increase in price of foods and water. Being an industrial area dramatically affects people's way of life. Previously, people relied on forestry and agriculture but now they are laborers for the industrial sector. They moved away from self-dependence to a life which must rely on the outside and capitals. This leads to various social problems; for example, child labor, human trafficking, prostitutes, health problem and crimes.

From the study and the data above, it can be observed that development does not only bring about benefits that the discourse promised. The study and the data above are in line with the researchers' findings collected in

the Savannakhet area. The findings show that the Friendship Bridge II has positive impacts which improve well-being, an increase of investment and better economy. Prior to the bridge's completion, there were no more than 200,000 tourists a year, comparing with approximately 1 million a year after the completion (Business Sector, 2012). Savan Vegas casino has spurred development to nearby restaurants and hotels. As for negative impacts, the cost of living has increased. The number of crimes and stealing has noticeably increased after the completion of the bridge and the Savan Vegas casino. Examples would be the following interviews:

*"...after the existence of the bridge, decreased a lot. Shop's sale volume decreases but they can still sell to country people who do not have. Like at our home, minimarts can still make it. Mom and pop stores do not make it. If they come to buy this and that, then they can survive.... As for casinos, there are more negative impacts. Most people come at night. That is, they will not let you in. But that is already known. Bribe them. Open a special room. Do not let you sit around like this. Just close a room and gamble inside. Many people go insolvent. No house...stealing has become a big problem. Previously there was none..."*

*"...things get better one there is a trade...but it becomes easier for bad people to come in. Bad people are not only from Thailand's side. They are also from Vietnam's side. With more exchange, there is killing of one another which did not exist in the past. There used to be no robbery, but now there is, although not a lot. Most are stealing of bags..."* (Business Sector; Public Sector, 2012)

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With the power of the discourse and discursive practices has suppress the undesired from being revealed. That is, the negative impact of development resulted from the bridge and the mainstream's discursive practices that reduce and hide the observation that the bridge would not only bring about benefits but it would also destroy the ecological system, natural resources as well as the peaceful life style. The study and empirical data in Savannakhet area show that the state of rapid development came at a cost. Alternatively, it can be said that every infinitesimal increase of GDP comes at environmental and social costs. However, the discourse on the bridge, which is the discourse that aims for the desired development, make us overlook and do not see negative impact and lost that would follow.

## 7. Conclusion

The friendship bridge II has become the mainstream and desired by Savannakhet people. This is the result of the discourse called the discourse on the friendship bridge II which has brought about by powerful institutions which are the ADB, GMS and EWEC which act as globalizers and by agents which are the central government of Lao, the National Economic Research Institute (NERI), Ministry of Planning and Investment of Lao PDR, Savannakhet government and the department for Planning Investment of Savannakhet province as well as other government agencies that has a power to determine, discipline, dominate, constitute and establish developmental ideology and objects. Under the discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II whose supremacy objectives are to promote trade and investment,

to facilitate trade, investment, tourism, transportation of goods etc.

Under the Lao government's long-lasting characteristic as a giver and a leader of its people, as well as the publicizing, meeting, promulgating the benefits of the bridge have made the people observe the discourse on the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II as a mainstream, as an object, as a knowledge, as a truth representing a state of development that they must have and would have. Those who do not agree are of the view that the bridge would not only be beneficial, but it will also destroy the ecological system, natural resources and peaceful life style. These people will be degraded as representatives of the underdeveloped and blockers of advancement and development. This in turn obstructs and presses what the mainstream discourse do not wish to be revealed. Thus, the government sector and the public sector cooperatively pushed for the construction of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge II.

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