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A Study of Changing Views on Education in the Chinese Border Region of Northern Laos

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Laos is currently under the influence of China's "Belt and Road Initiative", which has led to the expansion of trade and investment and the construction of railroads, highways, dams, and other infrastructure. The purpose of this paper is to clarify how the educational views of local Laotians are changing in the wake of the Belt and Road Initiative, looking at residents of northern Laos near the Chinese border.

The method used in this study was to visit schools and conduct interviews in the central area of Luang Namtha Province, which is close to the border. The province has a large ethnic minority population and mountainous terrain, and the level of education is low. However, there is an economic zone in Boten, in the northern part of the province close to the border, where a variety of jobs are available, including trade, mining, and tourism.

Field surveys were conducted in March 2019 and January 2020. Thereafter, additional interviews were conducted through a local coordinator and when necessary online and via email.

Iwashita (2016) defines "border" as meaning of not only physical borders but also non-physical borders. Physical borders are drawn without regard to local conditions. In contrast, new borders created by people's perceptions are called representational borders based on human cognition. Based on these views, this paper focuses on changes in local people's views on education in order to clarify how representational borders are being formed in Luang Namtha Province.

The survey results showed that local people, concerned about the low quality of education in public schools, tended to send their children to Chinese schools, which have pre-school to first semester secondary education. Since the annual tuition is about JPY30,000, families with relatively stable incomes and a passion for education tended to make the choice.

Chinese schools have longer class hours than public schools, and these schools have become indispensable for the middle classes because of the care they provide for children, the Chinese language classes taught by native teachers, and classes where math is taught in Chinese. The schools are well equipped, the teachers are creative in their methods, and the children have a high rate of education and Chinese language proficiency.

Thus, it became clear that the local people, especially middle class families, are changing their

view of education in a way that is in line with the Belt and Road Initiative. In other words, rather than going to public schools where the quality of education is not expected to be high, they study Chinese, work in China or Boten, one step closer to the border, and aim for a higher income in the future.

In other words, Laotian people living in the area regard Boten, as a “representational border” rather than the real border area where the line is drawn. It can be assumed that they live there with a longing for it as a virtual border, and they are motivated to learn by the dream of working there.

While the Belt and Road Initiative continues to gain momentum, COVID-19 temporarily triggered an economic downturn, and it seemed that the Chinese boom had passed. However, now that the border is open, Laotian students who were previously unable to study abroad will begin to do so once more. Therefore, the need to learn Chinese is expected to further increase in the future. However, this trend will widen the gap with those who have no other choice but to receive public education locally, so measures to prevent further widening of the gap are also needed.