

Eventuality and Rhythms of Life in a City Yet-to-Come

Text by Jessica DICARLO

Photos by Nicholas BOSONI

Between 6 am and 7 am every weekday, Boten's few short streets come to life. People navigate the four-block area in which they live and work; the three main streets are lined with shops, restaurants, bars, massage parlours, and lodgings. The remainder of the soon-to-be-city is under construction. To one side of the main highway that runs from the Chinese border and across northern Laos is the 'old' Boten, which took shape during the casino boom of the late 2000s. Its windowless structures are made of corrugated metal. Garage-like doors seal these small boxes each night. To the west of the highway lies 'new' Boten. Here, the streets are lined with tall concrete buildings, most of which are either vacant and under construction or serve as worker housing. The first floors of these buildings are shops of various sorts where many people in Boten work. Throughout the course of a day, these few streets are where lives weave between work and personal time, intersecting in some instances and separating in others. Tourists on tour buses or road trips, typically from China, stop for, at most, a night.

One morning in 2019, I situated myself at a small restaurant in the new area, slowly sipping my tea and nodding to the increasingly familiar faces who passed on their way to work. The parade of people began early, with construction workers and day labourers. They were up with the sun, which pierced through the already dusty air as the hum of trucks resumed. Their pants were thick, baggy, and covered in red earth. The smell of *baozi* rose in the air and people stopped by the steaming pot of *cha jidan* or tea eggs by my side, sharing brief exchanges with the shop owner before walking to their respective worksites with tiny plastic-bagged breakfasts. Diagonally opposite my seat, a group of workers stood idly, waiting to see whether their labour would be called on that day. It was common knowledge that this corner was where informal labour arrangements could be made on a day-to-day basis. Often it was young Lao men, primarily from Luang Namtha Province, who waited each day. The young men had already eaten *khao piak* (a local rice-noodle soup) that morning in their often-shared dorm rooms, and now waited on this corner. The security detail was also out walking the streets. Their gaze was not unlike mine that morning, and we noted the various passers-by and their movements, while also keeping a watchful eye on one another despite our many previous exchanges of hellos and informal conversations.



By about 8.30 am, the appearance of the people walking to work began to change. Those on the street were now smartly dressed in suit jackets and blouses; some women wore low heels and skirts. They were the young, twenty-something Chinese employees of Haicheng, the Yunnan-based developer, who had to be at the office by 9 am. Traces of dirt covered their office attire despite attempts to dust it off at the end of each day—a reminder of the construction site in which they lived and worked. After the younger employees had disappeared into their offices, bosses meandered out for a late breakfast. They often appeared to be in meetings at the streetside restaurants, busily chatting. Indeed, all my meetings with officials and leaders in the zone took place not in an office, but either at the company's 'luxury' hotel or at large round tables with lazy susans covered in food.

Throughout the day, I walked the city-in-the-making—at times an observer and at others with the many workers who moved there from China. Everyone living in the SEZ was involved in its construction and development: Haicheng employees, casual labourers, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, hoteliers, and the staff

Clear and Develop

(Previous page, top) Land has been cleared and water wells are drilled in a new area soon to be developed in Boten. (Bottom) A view of the Chinese developments in Boten. (Below) A street in the Lao quarter of Boten that will soon be torn down to make space for new hotels and residential buildings. All photos were taken in November 2020.



of karaoke bars and massage parlours. Many of the Chinese workers employed by Haicheng came to Laos with a vision of what their life and work would be here. Their views were rooted in the spectacular and grandiose images of Boten presented to them in job advertisements and marketing materials.

Haicheng's advertisements crafted a spectacle for investors and tourists alike. In contrast to the mundane reality of workers preparing for each day, billboards advertising the emergence of a global city—the likes of Shenzhen—lined the main highway from the Chinese border. Haicheng's design team visited Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Chiang Mai, and Luang Prabang for design inspiration to craft Boten as a modern megacity offering an idyllic Southeast Asian culture (DiCarlo 2020). This vision manifested in miniature models and marketing materials across Boten. For example, a 7.6-square-metre model of Boten SEZ sprawled across Haicheng's main sales hall. In the background, a video boomed on an enormous screen, showing animations of wide, clean streets with children walking to school and people arriving to work at high-rise office buildings.

This essay focuses on global city-making as experienced in the everyday lives and embodied experiences of Chinese company workers. It is primarily based on conversations, interviews, and participant observation with young Chinese professionals who came to Boten for work, as well as interviews with Lao officials, labourers, hotel and shop owners, potential investors, and tourists between 2017 and 2020. Through ethnographic accounts centred on the main streets of Boten, this essay attends to the ways people make sense of, experience, and produce the zone. Throughout this essay, I detail some of the lives entangled with Boten's construction and how people navigate the space as, simultaneously, a future global city and a material project that structures their expectations and everyday life.

Expectations and Experiences of Urban Becoming

I returned to the 1 square kilometre (if not less) of Boten over multiple visits between 2017 and 2020 and walked with the people who inhabited its few blocks. With each visit, the streets took on new life and momentum. My first trip was not unlike anthropologist Alessandro Rippa's (2021) description of Boten in 2016 as being in a state of ruin and suspension for those working in the zone as they waited for development. However, with subsequent visits, the construction site morphed into a small city and lived-in space. The evenings were increasingly lively and late, as I spent time circulating between the 'old' and 'new' Botens for dinner, drinks, games, or karaoke with various company employees. These workers are the current faces of Boten, as significant capital and state support are redefining the border space as a global city (for more details, see DiCarlo 2022). Many of these workers came to Laos with a vision of what their life and work would look like. In one sense, their views were rooted in the bird's-eye view of what Boten



could be—notions of the ideal city defined by the developer. However, the ways they experienced and, in turn, created Boten often looked quite different to what the company advertised.

Chen arrived in Boten with high hopes, never having been to Laos (or out of China for that matter). In contrast to other workers' sense that Boten was too urban and lacked any sign of Lao culture, she moved here precisely because it *will* be a global city. Her trendy shoes, clothes, and jewellery pointed to her desired cosmopolitan life, yet stood in contrast to the dusty construction-site street on which she lived. And yet, she hoped to be a part of making urban Boten a reality. Before coming to the SEZ, Chen worked in cosmetics and fashion sales in Kunming. When I met her, she was in her mid-thirties—a bit older than the usual twenty-something Haicheng employees—and had been hired to lead an import/export team for the zone's duty-free shop (in a building that was a nightclub in the days of Boten Golden City). 'My favourite part of my job is shopping for all the beauty products from Australia and Thailand,' Chen told me. 'Most of my orders come from Thailand.' She hesitated, with a look of disappointment, 'Right now we do not get many customers, but I still have to sell everything and that is very difficult.' During

The Butcher

A butcher shop in
Boten, February
2021



my time in Boten, Chen showed me the tedious process she undertook with junior members of her sales team; to meet sales quotas, she used online platforms in China. She and her team would then carry the products across the border in backpacks to ship to individual buyers. Because Boten was not yet the bustling city she envisioned, Chen was trying to work part-time from her home in Kunming and part-time in the SEZ while she held out hope for the place.

Unlike Chen, Yongwen more openly ‘hate[d] working in Boten’ and reminded me of it each time we were together. When we first met in 2018, he had worked in the SEZ for only three months, having moved there for the money (US\$750 per month). In his mid-twenties, he wore thick, round glasses and had a lanky, tall frame that led him to hunch when he talked with people. He often complained that the stiff shirts he had to wear each day were uncomfortable and that it was impossible to keep them clean in his small, dingy room and on a construction site. One afternoon we went to the old hotel, a decrepit building with mould-covered walls, broken furniture, and remnants of past zone lives. Yongwen seemed to use the hotel and the fact that some employees lived in the old rooms to demonstrate his disdain for his work. And yet, he said, he planned to stay for at least one year.

As we walked one afternoon, he narrated his arrival in Boten, reflecting on why and how he ended up there. After what he described as an idyllic childhood in the tourist area of Dali, Yunnan Province, he moved to Chengdu for university. As he studied (loosely in his description), he opened a bar and spent much of his time playing bass guitar in a band and arranging concerts. With hair hanging down his tattooed back, he saw himself as more rebellious and adventurous than most of his peers. His experience putting on shows and running the bar was how, he explained, he landed his job on Haicheng’s tourism team. He decided to come to Boten because he wanted to live abroad in an exotic location where he could continue to do the work he enjoyed. He also saw Boten as a chance to escape the big city of Chengdu and return to nature. He expected Laos to be rural and his job to offer him time to explore. He also hoped to experience Lao traditions and life in Southeast Asia. To Yongwen’s disappointment, ‘Boten is like any Chinese city ... There is only Chinese language, mostly Chinese food, and we stay with our work teams all day. I only know a few Lao people [and they] can

Construction Worker

(Previous page) A Lao construction worker in Boten, November 2020.



speak Chinese.’ He noted the irony of wanting to escape large Chinese cities only to move to Laos to build one. In his telling, rather than living more freely, he had become a disciplined subject, following dress codes, and cutting his hair. He was constantly on call and felt he was at the mercy of his work and bosses.

While many employees were young and had never spent time outside China, a handful had lived in Laos, often for school, and were hired as translators. Meilin, for example, worked as a translator and salesperson for Haicheng. She had envisioned her job in Laos as a way to gain a professional edge. In her words: ‘I think working overseas will get you a much better experience than in China because you meet more people and learn how to work and deal with things in ways that are different than in China.’ She viewed her time in Boten as a difficult but worthy investment in her future and career. When I first met her in 2019, she had worked in the zone for one year. Unlike many of her colleagues, she had lived in Laos two years previously, in the capital of Vientiane, to study Lao language. ‘I would have never known about Boten if I did not study here. Every time I travelled from China to Vientiane by road, I stayed in Luang Namtha Province and saw that the place was developing quickly.’ She was from Jinhong (about three hours north of Boten in China) and wanted to find a job in Laos that was closer to her home than Vientiane, so eventually she decided to apply for a job with Haicheng. Because she already held a bachelor’s degree and spoke Lao, it was not long before she landed the position in Boten. She insisted that ‘Boten will



help Laos develop’ and repeated what many of the employees and Chinese visitors I spoke with said: ‘This place [Boten] and the [Laos–China] railway will help Laos develop and grow like China did in the past.’

During working hours as I walked, ate lunch, or visited the office with Meilin, she focused on development—either for herself professionally or for Laos economically. However, in the evenings, I noticed a shift in our conversations. As the sun set and the din of construction faded into muffled KTV songs, her language moved away from the promise of development. Perhaps because the buzz of the day had subsided and she missed ‘Vientiane and home in China’, she instead conveyed a sense of precarity about her Boten life. She had no official work contract and thus was technically working in Laos illegally without a permit—as was the case with many lower-level employees who crossed the border as tourists. She also had no insurance because, as she told me, of the ‘in-between’ location of the project. Meilin said she felt ‘like a temporary worker’, even though, based on the job advertisement, she thought she would have a stable income and time to take a vacation to travel in Southeast Asia. However,

Workers

(Previous page) A Lao construction worker walking to a construction site in Boten. (Above) Lao construction workers walking to a construction site in Boten, with their Chinese supervisors, November 2020.



Across the Border

A border checkpoint between Laos and China in Boten, November 2020.

like other employees, she described her work schedule as erratic, leaving her feeling completely exhausted one week and utterly bored another. 'Today, I don't have anything to do, and this place is so boring. But tomorrow maybe we will work 12 or more hours in one day.' Yet this inconsistency, she complained, was not reflected in her salary. She continued: 'So I get paid by the day when I'm needed ... [I]f they don't need me, I don't get paid, and if they do [need me] then I get paid for a day, but the day can be as long as they decide.' Yongwen had similar complaints: he was hired as a full-time employee but was treated like a provisional worker.

Rhythms of Repetition and Eventuality

The experiences of Haicheng employees—what they thought they had come to do, how they experienced Boten, and what they ended up doing—illuminate a gap between the lofty visions of the city and the mundane grounded experience. Yet, labourers like Yongwen continued to create the mirage of Boten that was sold to them. As part of the tourism team, his work included assisting with marketing, physically building scenic areas, planning for

infrastructure needs, and arranging shows and dinners when the company hosted important guests or meetings. During one week-long meeting, the 2019 Laos–China Tourism Year Cross-Border Exchange Conference (2019老中旅游年一跨境交流推介大会), Yongwen worked 16 to 18 hours a day. He had dark circles under his eyes and smoked more cigarettes than usual. ‘It is nonstop when VIPs or important guests are here,’ he told me, exasperated. He had to be available all day and well into the night to ensure the guests were entertained—in his words, ‘babysitting’.

VIP events were (and still are) centred on the JingLan Hotel (景兰大酒店, 磨丁) in the heart of Boten. According to Tsing (2005), investment depends on creating a performance of possibilities and prosperity, and labourers like Yongwen regularly perform when VIPs are in town. The zone roars to life with the flick of a switch. That week, I often saw him head down and cigarette in hand, briskly walking from one event to the next. Or, if he was with guests, he charmingly ushered them around. However, once the guests left town, the mirage of a lively city faded. The next day, the coffee stand in the hotel lobby was gone and when I asked employees about it, they looked at me as though it had never existed. Gone, too, was the open-air hotel restaurant preparing steak, imported seafood, and roasted vegetables. The large patio that had been filled with clinking glasses and raised voices was now cordoned off and dark. Haicheng employees returned to quietly eating cafeteria food at tables, often alone and exhausted. The feeling of a hangover (if not actual hangovers) blanketed the hotel after the event. Many workers live in this rhythm and repetition, snapping between hypercharged and monotonous. The hype, lulls, and hangovers reveal the iterative cycle of labour that goes into producing the zone.

Even as some find dissatisfaction, or exasperation, in the repetitive production of spectacle, the promise of Boten has captured their hopes and imaginations. The possible futures of this place continue to affect long-time zone-dwellers. A Chinese woman who had lived in Boten for 10 years running a small roadside shop told me stories of the casino boom and subsequent bust. In the post-bust period, Boten was practically vacant, and her store stayed open only because it was one of the few on the Lao side of the border. When I met her in 2019, her business had picked up substantially, yet she remained sceptical that the developer’s latest plans would come to fruition. Even with her doubts, however, she had no intention of leaving; the promise of Boten held her captive. Her resolution to stay highlighted the cycles of spectacle on which Boten is being built. Boten’s promises are layered: from material to imaginative, in the offices, streets, and shops, and even on the bodies and in the minds of the workers. At the same time, several interrelated themes emerge and illuminate the gap between visions of the city and practices on the ground: tensions between purpose and precarity, anticipation and disappointment, development and discipline, as well as cycles of boredom and exhaustion.



More than a rhythm of repetition, Boten is built on a notion of eventuality. The lives of Haicheng employees illuminate temporal experiences as people wait for what they believe will arrive. Workers and long-time residents repeat and stake their time on a mantra that ‘eventually Boten will work out’. Ellis (2021: 96) writes that ‘contemporary work on infrastructure trades on its analyses of enchanting hopes as well as of mundane technical operations’. It is precisely on the eventuality of infrastructure that some sense of viability—of the project and daily life—is built. The eventuality of Boten, then, makes repetition, monotony, and dashed hopes bearable. It also contrasts with promises of ‘China speed’ as days bleed into each other. This focus on workers opens analytical possibilities that are often overlooked when examining SEZs, as their experiences and perspectives elaborate what Boten is at certain moments. The zone is beholden not to one image of what it will become, but to an amalgamation of various visions that change throughout the rhythms of the day.

As I stepped out of my nondescript guesthouse on a winter evening in 2020, I was confronted with the same heterogeneous beats, and cadences of construction that I had chronicled

For Chinese Only

(Previous page, top) A Chinese hotel dating to the early 2000s in Boten, November 2020. (Bottom) A Chinese men having a break in Boten, February 2021. (Below) A gambling room inside a Chinese-owned hotel in Boten, November 2020.



years before. I watched familiar movements, if not the same people, concluding a long day with beers at sidewalk tables. My early unease in Boten had faded into the comfort that comes with familiarity and repetition. The sun set on another day and, at dinner that night, I again toasted and played dice with workers. The next day, they would wake to repeat the cycle, not knowing whether to expect the frenetic or the monotonous. Even as they wavered between feelings of anticipation and precarity, they persisted—mediating urban development—through a vision that is not quite their own and only possible through the eventuality of infrastructure. ●

Nightlife

(Below) A Vietnamese migrant worker employed at a karaoke bar in Boten. (Next page, top) The outside of a nightclub in Boten. (Bottom) The city of Boten lights up every evening from 7pm to 10pm.



