Law and Development Minus Legal Transplants: The Example of China in Vietnam

I. Introduction

The concept of "legal transplant," understood, at its most basic, as the movement of law from one jurisdiction to another, has become deeply wedded to the study of law and development, that is, how donor states influence the economic development of recipient states through legal institutions and practices. Law and development is most commonly associated with the ascendance of the United States in the post-World War II international economy, a period during which the US exported legal rules, statutes, doctrines, and pedagogies to developing countries in Latin America and later, in Southeast and East Asia. Although widely perceived to be a failure, law and development has been rebooted in various guises, including the "rule of law" revival in the 1990s, an effort that was primarily American-led. US legal transplants gained currency particularly in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and Eastern Europe, as well as, to some extent, the People's Republic of China (PRC). At the same time that the US was transplanting law bilaterally to recipient states, it has also been structuring the major international organizations, including the World Bank, IMF, and WTO. Doing so has allowed the US to be a norm-shaper of both international economic law and domestic or municipal law in developing states.

Fast-forwarding to the present, the US is retreating from its commitments under international economic law and China is seeking to supplant the US's position as norm-shaper. Since the late 1990s, China has been exporting ever-higher volumes of capital, including investments, loans, and aid to recipient states in Africa and Southeast Asia. The "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) has seen further injections of capital into mainly Central Asia and South Asia, but also into Africa, Pacific island states, Latin America, the Caribbean, and

Eastern Europe. In such recipient states, Chinese enterprises and policy banks are providing the financing, expertise, and labour for mega-regional infrastructure and energy projects that are stimulating economies throughout these regions. The PRC has a strong incentive to protect its investments in high-risk states, and law plays a part in such risk mitigation, suggesting a Chinese approach to law and development. Whereas not only the US, but also the British and French too, have each relied on legal transplants for various types of law and development projects,[1] what is remarkable about the Chinese approach is that, to date, the Chinese have largely avoided legal transplants. This difference is important as it suggests a novel way for an economic hegemon to promote and protect its interests through law.[2]

This article examines the role of legal transplants in Chinese law and development (CLD), that is, China's approach to cross-border ordering that includes but is not limited to law, a question of broad relevance to some two-thirds of the world's population.[3] It argues that whereas, thus far, Chinese law has not gained traction as a source of legal transplant in recipient states, it may do so in the future, to the extent that recipient states perceive Chinese law as instrumental to the success of China's industrial policy, a policy from which many developing states are eager to learn. CLD thus highlights the "pull" by would-be recipient states as much as the "push" by China, as donor. The element of the attractiveness of Chinese law as legal transplant by recipient states may, in fact, be more relevant in CLD than in the law and development experiences of past donors.

To make this argument, we first review the history of legal transplant as an idea, briefly examine its relevance in the law and development field, and

[1] Cohn (2010); Deschamps (2012); Chen-Wishart (2013).

[2] There is a growing literature on China's engagement with international economic law and legal development abroad. See e.g. Chen (2017); Seppänen (2018); Shaffer & Gao (forthcoming).

[3] For a fuller treatment of CLD as an analytical theory, see Erie (forthcoming).

then focus on CLD primarily through the example of Chinese involvement in legal development in Vietnam. Methodologically, we combine our observations of law in China and Vietnam based on our respective practice of law in these countries, as well as drawing on relevant official documents, media reports, social media, and interviews with people involved in the decision-making process. We believe this collaborative approach suggests a new field of inquiry into "inter-Asian" legalities, the interaction of law between and among Asian jurisdictions.[4] Our paper concludes that the relative minor role of legal transplants in CLD requires new thinking about transnational ordering.

II. Legal Transplants as Law and Development

A. Legal Transplant Revisited

The concept of legal transplant has become integral to the study of law and development. Moreover, legal transplant has become a leitmotif of not only law and development, but also the disciplines of comparative law and law and society. For law and development, legal transplant has become routinized into the scholarly vocabulary as one of the main vectors of how a donor state moves into legal system or rules to a recipient state, such that it is difficult to conceptualize law and development without legal transplant. How did we get here?

Alan Watson's 1971 *Legal Transplants: An Approach to Comparative Law* is commonly seen as the origin of the theory; however, legal transplant has much deeper roots in Anglo-American legal comparativism and can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham's 1802 *Of the Influence of Time and Place in Matters*

[4] Ho (2017), p. 907, (describing "Inter-Asia" as an "old world crisscrossed by interactions between parts that have known and recognized one another for centuries"); Erie (2020), (providing a study of emergent legal hubs across Eurasia).

of Legislation.[5] Bentham's use of legal transplant combined his commitment to utilitarianism and imperialism (he provided advice to the East India Company in transplanting English laws to Bengal via "Anglo-Bengali law").[6] While Bentham's work would have a lasting influence in legal philosophy, most notably in the thinking of HLA Hart,[7] it was Watson's contribution that popularized the idea.[8]

Watson wrote *Legal Transplants* as a programmatic text for comparative law. For Watson, legal transplant, as "the moving of a rule or a system of law from one country to another, or from one people to another," was indispensable to understanding the relationship between legal systems.[9] The legal transplant, then, was part methodology and part theory. As to the former (method), Watson theorised a plurality of forms of transplantation: "imposed reception, solicited imposition, penetration, infiltration, crypto-reception, inoculation…"[10] Yet, more controversially, as for the latter (theory), for Watson, legal transplants were a kind of universal technology that occurred independent of social context.[11] He wrote: "usually, legal rules are not peculiarly devised for the particular society in which they now operate."[12] The implication – perhaps in its hard form – is that culture and politics (and to some extent, history) are irrelevant. This perspective on legal change flies in the face of much of the canon of socio-legal theory, beginning with Montesquieu and, later, Marx and Weber.

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[5] Huxley (2007), p. 177.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Hart (1970), xxxii-xxxiii.

[8] Cairns (2012), p. 638.

[9] Watson (1993a), p. 21.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[11] In taking such a stance, Watson demonstrated some of the utilitarianism of Bentham. Although Watson had read Bentham, it is believed he tried to ensure his thinking on legal transplants was divorced from that of Bentham. See Huxley, *supra* note 5, p. 177.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Given its radical nature, the idea of legal transplant has incited a lively debate particularly centred on the issue as to whether the legal transplant is agnostic to context. On the one hand, some comparativists have found Watson's legal transplant to be "good to think with."[13] On the other hand, socio-legal scholars have challenged Watson's views, particularly on this point.[14] Despite the contested nature of legal transplant, it continues to inspire comparative law research, some of which has revised Watson's original idea (which he himself subsequently modified)[15] by incorporating greater socio-cultural awareness into the analysis.[16]

B. Development by Transplant

One of the fields in which legal transplant has gained most traction is law and development. Law and development, in the American guise during the Cold War and after, largely assumed the form of transplanting US laws and institutions first to developing economies in Latin America and Southeast Asia (some of them, client states), and later to African and East Asian countries. During this "first moment" of law and development, the common legal transplants were law schools based on the Socratic pedagogy and case study approach, familiar to US law students.[17] The goal of such reforms, championed by the US government (i.e. USAID, Justice Department, Commerce

[13] See e.g. Ewald (1995), p. 489; Mattei (1994), pp. 2, 5.

[14] See e.g. Cotterrell (2001), p. 70; Kahn-Freund (1974), p. 5, contesting "mechanical" notions of transplantation; Kingsley (2004), pp. 510-519, building a theory of legal transplantation that is sensitive to culture; Legrand (1997), p. 111; Teubner (1998), p. 12, suggesting "legal irritant" over "legal transplant."

[15] In the 1993 edition, Watson added a discussion on the relationship between law and society. Watson (1993b), p. 107-18.

[16] Ajani (1995); Chen (2013); Choudhry (2006); Crouch (2018); Feldman (1994); Langer (2004); Nichols (1997); Sannerholm (2009).

[17] Trubek & Santos (2006), pp. 1-4; Krishnan (2004), p. 448; Kroncke (2016), pp. 102-3.

Department, Securities and Exchange Commission), civil society (e.g. Ford Foundation), and educators (i.e. law schools), was to create a cohort of commercial lawyers that could facilitate cross-border transactions, and potentially, catalyse institutional change.[18] This first moment gave rise to criticism, however,[19] and henceforth law and development underwent reform without necessarily minimizing the role of legal transplants.

During the "second moment" of law and development, in the form of the "rule of law" revival directed at post-socialist states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, legal transplants, many inspired by US law, were again deployed, with some measure of success.[20] Specifically, an increasingly diversified array of actors, including not only US governmental agencies and civil society but also multilateral organizations such as development banks, proposed "structural adjustment," which included political conditionalities to recipient states, as informed by primarily neoliberal prescriptions. Development assistance thus required deeper reform, including multi-party elections, independent bar and bench, and an outward-looking legal framework that was market-oriented and investor-friendly.[21] During this period, the US and the UK exported their commercial law to post-Soviet republics.[22] At the same time, the US has also used, to varying degrees, US-inspired standards to inform the "international" standards of multilateral organizations, whether in the field of securities or of human rights.[23] The US has mobilized both these types of transplants, the first

[18] Trubek (2006), p. 75; Trubek (2016), p. 304.

[19] Trubek & Galanter (1974).

[20] Carothers (1998); Trubek & Santos, *supra* note 17, pp. 3, 5, 6; Berkowitz et al. (2003); Lindsey (2007).

[21] deLisle (1999), p. 181.

[22] Ajani, *supra* note 16; Nichols, *supra* note 16.

[23] deLisle, *supra* note 21, pp. 201-3.

horizontal and bilateral and the second vertical and multilateral, to promote its interests via law and development abroad.[24]

C. East Asian Patterns of Law and Development

Much of the theorisation of legal transplants derives from the Anglo-American or European civil law experience, but legal transplants are not solely the legacies of these powers. East Asian states have also exported their laws to recipient states. Often, East Asian states were themselves the recipients of earlier ("first-order") waves of legal transplants from Anglo-European precedents, and subsequently adapted and transformed those transplants, including statutes, constitutions, and doctrines as well as legal pedagogies, legal practices, and legal institutions. These "second-order" legal transplants have gained greater currency in the post-World War II period following Japan's growth and the rise of the Asian "tigers," including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea. The Asian tigers have left a legacy of the so-called East Asian development model, characterised by the strong role of the government in promoting industrial growth. This model has garnered the attention of emerging economies throughout Southeast Asia, Oceania, Central Asia, and Africa. Law is seen as part of the success of these states' industrial policies.

While not categorised as representing the East Asian development model, among East Asian states, Japan has been the most successful in presenting its law as a model for emerging economies in Asia.[25] It is perhaps not surprising that Japan has emerged as the first Asian power to engage in law and development through transplants given Japan's history of learning colonial

[24] Miller (2003), pp. 840-1.

[25] See Matsuura (2005). See also the example of Singapore that has translated its version of "rule of law" into governance training for a number of low-income states in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. See Harding (2018), p. 257.

techniques from Germany and the US, among other Western imperial states. Along with trajectories exhibited elsewhere, the Japanese have also become donors to territories it previously occupied, in this case, Southeast Asian states, such as the former French Indochina.[26] Consequently, beginning in the 1990s, Japan has done so through its official development assistance programs, in such countries as Vietnam and Cambodia.[27]

What is noteworthy, however, is that the Japanese appear to have modified some of the methods of legal transplantation. Although generalisations can be problematic, the Japanese approach appears to be "light touch" compared to that of some of the US donors. For instance, through the Japan International Cooperation Agency, Japanese legal experts worked as consultants to Vietnam as it rewrote its Civil Code in the early 2000s, but they "were not directly involved in the actual drafting of the Code."[28] Similarly, Japanese experts have provided technical training to Vietnamese judges in fact-finding, application of law, and reference to judicial precedents."[29] Japanese legal scholars have characterised this approach to law and development as "incremental"[30] and "pragmatic."[31] Such an approach, which eschews some of the cultural hubris of past American efforts, seems to have been generally well received, and thus created more demand.

III. China and International Economic Law

[26] Japan has, however, also been active in providing legal assistance to Central Asia where it did not have a colonial presence.

[27] Kaneko (2010), p. 313; Kaneko (2019), pp. xii, xvii; Kuong (2018), p. 271; Nicholson & Kuong (2014), pp. 156-61; Taylor (2005), p. 251.

[28] Kuong, *supra* note 27, p. 282; Nicholson & Kuong, *supra* note 27, 161-2.

[29] Kaneko, (2010) *supra* note 27, p. 327.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 353.

[31] Kuong, *supra* note 27, p. 271. See also Nicholson & Kuong, *supra* note 27, p. 167 indicating that incrementalism reflects a "practical strategy."

CLD shows a higher propensity to seek to shape international economic law rather than intervening directly in the legal systems of recipient states through, for example, legal transplants. In recent years, China has emerged as a potential donor in the increasingly competitive law and development field yet CLD demonstrates even more reluctance to transplant than some of China's East Asian neighbours. There are a number of factors that may, in the near term, militate against the extensive use of legal transplants in CLD.

China's economic modernisation over the past forty years has attracted the interest of low-income and developing states around the world, from Southeast Asia to Africa to Latin America. There is, as a result, significant demand from such states to learn from China, particularly during a time when American-style democracy and liberal rule of law appear tarnished. China has self-consciously presented itself as a model for developing economies,[32] most noticeably in the period following the 2008 world financial crisis and after 2013 when Xi Jinping announced the BRI. Likewise, following the BRI, China is exporting higher volumes of capital to recipient states in the form of loans and investment. For instance, the Export-Import Bank of China, one of the PRC's two main policy banks, has financed over 1,800 construction projects in so-called BRI states for a total of nearly $145 billion,[33] and according to the PRC Ministry of Commerce, Chinese enterprises have invested over $100 billion in BRI states.[34] Chinese enterprises and lenders require security to protect their investments abroad. Such measures include robust courts and other dispute resolution institutions such as international arbitration (both commercial and state-investor) whereby Chinese contracts are enforced and judgments or awards are

[32] Peerenboom (2007).

[33] Wang (2019).

[34] Xinlang Caijing (2019).

rendered. As a result, there is demand on the Chinese side, too, to mobilize legal measures to protect Chinese financial and strategic interests.

Scholars have observed China's broad engagement with international economic law (i.e. trade and investment law), in recent years, interpreting such engagement as efforts to introduce Chinese norms into existing regimes.[35] On the trade side, for example, China has consciously studied the WTO rules, and in so doing, created whole knowledge industries in the PRC for improving China's status in the WTO, particularly vis-à-vis the US and other trade partners.[36] As many of the BRI states are WTO members, the groundwork China has laid since its accession to the WTO in 2001 will provide a normative framework for its trade relations with those states.[37]

At the same time, the BRI has been regarded as a "radically new approach to international trade and investment,"[38] as, while it may build on WTO rules, it also overlays them with what are essentially bilateral projects that involve combinations of investment and concessional and market-rate loans which are themselves tied to trade relationships. Likewise, on the side of investment law, the PRC has almost more than any other country except Germany, championed bilateral investment treaties (BITs), signing some 129 BITs, as well as 20 free-trade agreements (FTAs) with investment chapters to facilitate its investments, both bi- and multi-laterally.[39] China has been particularly active in using existing international forums such as the G20 to promote its investment concerns.[40] Furthermore, China has actively participated in emerging

[35] Burnay (2018); Du (2014); Toohey et al. (2015); Kong (2017).

[36] Shaffer & Gao (2017).

[37] Shaffer & Gao (forthcoming).

[38] Chaisse & Matsushita (2018), p. 167.

[39] UNCTAD Investment Policy Hub (2020); Chaisse (2018), p. 2.

[40] Bath (2018); Sauvant (2019).

international commercial dispute resolution mechanisms such as the Singapore Convention on Mediation.[41]

One question, then, is whether China's involvement in building such legal infrastructures constitutes vertical transplantation. A closer examination of China's activities in these international legal forums suggests that Chinese are not yet as assertive in their purposes as the Americans or others have been, even if the Americans too have demonstrated variance in their strategies for integrating US norms into international law.[42] For example, while Chinese spearheaded the non-binding "Guiding Principles for Global Investment Policymaking" (hereinafter, "Principles") during the 2016 meeting of the G20 Trade Ministers in Shanghai, the Principles do not necessarily veer from established practice. Rather, the Principles continue with the tradition of imposing obligations on host states (e.g., non-discrimination, investment protection, etc.) and do not mention host state obligations.[43] The fact that the Principles demonstrate continuity with past practice does not in any way negate or disprove the active participation of the Chinese delegation in their formulation, but transplants, for the most part, function to introduce change.[44] Hence, the PRC's involvement in extant international law regimes may be one more of "nudging"[45] than "transplanting," the difference being that the former is an incremental push, often in a multilateral arrangement and the latter is the wholesale borrowing, importation, or replication of a set legal rule or norm

[41] UN Convention on International Settlement Agreements Resulting from Mediation (2018). Corne and Erie (2019).

[42] See deLisle, *supra* note 21, p. 201.

[43] Sauvant, *supra* note 40 , p. 319.

[44] Miller, *supra* note 24, pp. 867-73, demonstrating how different types of transplants introduce change based on economic efficiency or legitimacy.

[45] Nudging is a concept developed most extensively in the behavioural economics literature but which has migrated into law and economics. See e.g., Sunstein and Thaler (2008); Mathias and Tor (2016); Alemanno and Sibony (2016).

from one jurisdiction into another, even if the recipient is an international legal institution.[46]

While CLD may show greater aptitude for transplant-like behaviour in regards to international legal forums, the PRC's general but not, by any measure, absolute reluctance to engage in bilateral or horizontal legal transplants is much more apparent. We hypothesize a number of reasons to explain China's hesitance:

1. Regulatory capacity;
2. Relative nascence of the PRC legal system;
3. The prestige deficit of PRC law;
4. Linguistic hurdles;
5. Valorisation of sovereignty;
6. The nature of PRC law as an agglomeration of different legal systems and the problem of the "second-order transplant."

Taking these reasons in turn, starting with, one, *regulatory capacity*, the common criticism of Chinese law is not about the quality of the legislation but rather that it suffers from poor implementation and enforcement.[47] There are a number of reasons for this state of affairs - institutional, cultural, and political - which stem from the current stage in the PRC's legal development. Perhaps most critically in the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still trumps the law.[48] As a result, whether in the fields of environmental law or administrative litigation, Chinese litigants encounter roadblocks to mobilising PRC law when doing so challenges state interests, understood usually as the local government and its internal CCP apparatus, as well as affiliated business interests.[49] In

[46] Cf. Wang (2018), pp. 8-10 (calling China's approach one of "uploading" BRI-related principles into international law via such bodies as the United Nations).

[47] Clarke (2003), pp. 91-3; Peerenboom (2002), p. 323.

[48] Zhonggong zhongyang (2014); Sapio (2010).

[49] van Rooij (2006); He (2014).

summary, in terms of ensuring justice, PRC legislation may not be law of the highest grade.

Looking at law for its transplantable potential not from the perspective of a citizen or user but rather from the vantage of an authoritarian (i.e. law-as-order), one could argue that PRC law has helped support the rule of the party-state,[50] and, by extension, other authoritarians could borrow from this law. However, the argument for the authoritarian-friendly transplant encounters difficulties when considering the complex intermingling of party-state power and formal law, a relationship that is difficult to replicate *sui generis* although for states where there is a pre-existing Marxist-Leninist ideology, there may be more portability, as we show in the example of Vietnam below.

A contributing factor to the enforcement incapacity of PRC law is the second reason, the *relative nascence of the PRC legal system*. The modern PRC legal system was established only in the early 1980s. While China has achieved remarkable progress in that short time in most areas of law, this progress has been uneven. While what is taught as "economic law" in PRC law schools, including, such areas of civil and commercial law as contracts, banking, investment, company law, and dispute resolution, has received particular emphasis for modernisation, progress has been stunted in the areas of public law, including constitutional law, criminal law, and administrative law for political reasons.[51] Even in frequently used areas of economic law, such as arbitration, there are still significant gaps (e.g. the 1994 Arbitration does not follow the 1985 UNICTRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration, which has become standardized in the domestic legislation of most East Asian states).

[50] Biddulph (2015).

[51] Hurst (2018), arguing that China demonstrates one type of legal regime in one domain of law, something like "rule of law" for civil and commercial law and another type of regime in other domains of law, e.g., "neotraditionalism" in criminal law.

The third reason, what could be called the *prestige deficit of PRC law* follows from the foregoing concerns, among others. When a non-Chinese corporate lawyer advises a client on the governing law in their contract and weighs as options, for example, UK common law versus PRC law, the choice is clear. UK common law has become the preferred law for cross-border transactions due to its long history, predictability, and pro-business substantive rules (e.g. freedom of contract).[52] All of these are effects of the British Empire, which, at its height, covered approximately a quarter of the world, an empire which ruled not only by the law (and, also, its navy, joint stock companies, industrial revolution, and slavery) but also the prestige it generated around its law.[53] Vehicles and signs of prestige include the Royal Court of Arms, court oaths, Magic Circle firms, Inns of Court, "silks," Ox-Bridge law faculties, full-bottomed wigs, and so on. As any English law student knows, the UK common law is riddled with hierarchies and saturated with prestige.[54] As a generalisation, PRC law has very little prestige within China (if one considers preferences for majors among university students) and even less outside of China. The perception of Chinese law, however, may be changing, particularly among developing countries, and globalising PRC law firms are increasingly pushing for PRC law to be the governing law of BRI contracts.

The fourth reason and another obstacle for the transplantation of PRC law are *linguistic hurdles*. Mandarin is considered one of the most difficult languages in the world. English is also difficult but, again, has benefitted from the four-hundred-year-old legacy of the British Empire. Legal transplants require translation, which takes a number of forms (technical, doctrinal,

[52] Groffman (2018), arguing for the use of English law in BRI contracts.

[53] Ajani, *supra* note 16, noting that the prestige of common law models has varied over time in post-Soviet states.

[54] Bourdieu (1987), p. 812, observing that the juridical field is one profession particularly susceptible to symbolic capital, including authority, knowledge, prestige, reputation, academic degrees, and so on.

institutional) but is, at its root, linguistic. Hence, transplanting PRC law requires familiarity with, if not mastery of, Mandarin. The difficulty of Mandarin aside, others have noted that the language may enable vagueness or imprecision in law-making.[55] Still others have argued that the arbitrariness of Chinese characters enables arbitrary discretion of Chinese leaders.[56] While the growth of Mandarin as a second language worldwide may belie some of these claims and China may eventually follow some of the path dependency of English as the lingua franca for international transactions, nonetheless, Mandarin faces obstacles in gaining traction as a legal language abroad.

The fifth reason is China's deep-seated *valorisation of sovereignty* and concomitant reluctance to engage in the domestic affairs of foreign states. Since the "reform and opening," the recognition of state sovereignty has served as the cornerstone of China's foreign policy,[57] with the apparent logic that such a position would be reciprocated by other states that would not interfere in the affairs of the contested regions in and around the PRC: Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and the South China Seas.[58] This rationale was encapsulated in former leader Deng Xiaoping's epigram, "hide our capacities and bide our time" (*tao guang yang hui*). Popular commentary on the BRI has firmly closed the chapter on this foreign policy approach.[59] While there is no question that China is increasingly embroiled in domestic politics in countries in Central Asia and Southeast Asia,[60] the Chinese presence pales in comparison to evangelical American interventionism (through military campaigns, regime change, and corporate penetration of local markets) in fragile states such as in Afghanistan and Iraq.

[55] Cao (2018), chapter 7.

[56] Lubman (1999), p. 149.

[57] Guangming ribao pinglunyuan (2019).

[58] Garver (2016), p. 553; Christensen (2015), pp. 18, 19, 21, 22.

[59] See e.g. Clover (2017).

[60] Karrar (2009); Thul (2016); Pheap (2019).

The sixth reason why PRC law has not yet gained currency as legal transplant may be the *nature of PRC law as an agglomeration of different legal systems*. Closely related to reason two above, as a result of the particularities of Chinese legal history and the fast-paced legal reform over the past forty years, PRC law is a palimpsest of different legal orders, including some remnants of traditional Chinese law, Soviet law, European civil law (mainly German and Swiss), and Anglo-American common law.[61] These different legal orders apply to different areas of PRC law, for example, Soviet law inheritance is more prominent in PRC criminal law and the law that applies to questions of ethnic minorities (i.e., "regional ethnic autonomy"), whereas German law has had some influence in PRC property law and PRC company law shows traces of US law.

It is not accurate to describe all of these influences as "legal transplants," as legal transplant denotes some intention, on the side of the donor, to replicate the donor's law in the recipient legal system. While there are notable exceptions,[62] often, Chinese law reform has proceeded through Chinese reformers' assessments of the merits of settled law in more developed jurisdictions and borrowed from these sources of law for the purposes of China's modernization.[63] The end result is a fairly idiosyncratic legal system that endeavours to balance market liberalisation with strong state control over key sectors of the economy, a goal it may not always fulfil in practice. In sum, the PRC legal system may not be one for emergent states to emulate.

The counter-argument is the "second-order transplant" effect: countries that have undergone economic modernisation (e.g. "upper middle income" states, by World Bank standards) have experience of legal reform, including legal

[61] Keller (1994), p. 711, noting the "normative richness" of PRC law and calling it "not a coherent body of law."

[62] See Erie (2019), footnote 89, explaining the origin of article 164 of the PRC Criminal Law in the 2011 amendments to that law as a result of US influence.

[63] Potter (2004), p. 478, observing the selective adaptation of PRC legal reforms.

transplants and that emerging states (e.g. "lower middle income" or "low income" states, by World Bank standards) may learn more from the example of such states than from the donor states that originally sourced transplants (e.g. "high income" states, by World Bank standards). To give an example, Tajikistan may have more to learn from the United Arab Emirates than it does from the UK. While we do not contest the plausibility of the "second-order transplant" argument and derivative transplants may in fact offer a new area for academic research, as with any transplant ("first" or "second" order), the viability of the transplant depends foremost on the quality of the transplant (and, additionally, the process of transplantation and a number of contextual factors in the recipient state). A threshold question, then, for would-be recipients of PRC law, for instance, along the BRI, is whether PRC law provides quality transplants.

The foregoing hypothesis of interrelated causes for the lack of evidence for PRC legal transplants, to date, is primarily but not exclusively an analysis from the donor or supply side of the equation. For example, the prestige factor of a legal system has as much to say about the perception of a would-be recipient of a transplant as it does the inherent quality of the donor state law. Nonetheless, the "push" of a donor state is only one side of the equation. We argue that the recipient state "pull" is just as important, if not more so, in the viability of second-order transplants. Moreover, some of the challenges identified above may be manageable in those circumstances where China has long-standing cultural, political, and ideological ties with neighbouring states. In the following section, we illustrate this argument through the example of China and Vietnam, and a rare case of a Chinese legal transplant in CLD.[64]

IV. Chinese Legal Transplants in Vietnam

[64] Gillespie & Chen (2010), demonstrating the influence of China's legal developmental model on Vietnam.

A. Some Historical Background

CLD has traction for the Sino-Vietnamese relationship for a number of reasons, both from the vantage of China as a potential donor and Vietnam as a host state. Vietnam has a long history of borrowing from Chinese legal ideas and attitudes. Neo-Confucian political-legal beliefs were introduced into pre-modern Vietnam and, after centuries, began to dominate Vietnamese legality from the fifteenth century.[65] As in China, Vietnamese Confucianists advocated combination between rule by virtue (*đức trị*) and rule by law (*pháp trị*).[66] Legal rules were not seen as independent from moral standards, but as an instrument to maintain social morality.[67]

The PRC was not the main developmental model for socialist Vietnam during the planned economy era; rather, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was the preferred template.[68] From the 1950s to the late 1980s, Soviet borrowing dominated the legal order of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and, subsequently, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.[69] Still, the PRC had considerable influence on Vietnamese socialist law. A case in point is the DRV's 1953 Law on Land Reforms, which was drafted and implemented with instruction from Chinese advisors, showing that transplantation was achievable quite early in the history of PRC-DRV relations.[70]

Furthermore, Chinese political ideology left an important imprint on DRV legal thinking and practice. As with its Chinese counterpart, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) endorsed the doctrine of "revolutionary morality" (*đạo*

65 Nguyễn & Tạ (1987), p. 18.

66 Gillespie (2007), p. 140; Nguyễn (1974), p. 50.

67 Gillespie, *supra* note 65, p. 140; Nicholson (2007), p. 207.

68 Pham & Do (2018), pp. 98–106.

69 Nicholson, *supra* note 66; Pham & Do, *supra* note 67, pp. 103–106.

70 Duiker (2000), p. 437; Võ (1995), p. 412.

đức cách mạng), which promoted CPV rule through moral edict and example.[71] Vietnamese communists also imported the Maoist theory of the "mass line," which emphasises the importance of popular participation and support and, therefore, the adoption of flexible and outcome-oriented approaches to legal problems over principle-based ones.[72] Put differently, law was subordinated to and suffused with moral concepts and political expediency.[73] Despite bold legal reforms from the late 1980s, the Chinese-inspired emphasis on virtue-rule and mass mobilisation continues to have considerable impact on Vietnamese regulatory thinking and practice to this day.[74]

B. Chinese Legal Transplants in Contemporary Vietnam

The USSR has ceased to be the main model and donor for development in Vietnam since the 1990s (though its legacy has persisted and remains significant until today).[75] As a corollary, China has become the sole major socialist state that the CPV can model. Chinese influence has been felt, to a greater or lesser degree, particularly in the area of commercial law. Beginning in the late 1980s, Chinese legal templates had considerable effects on Vietnam's first wave of commercial law reforms, including the enactment of the 1987 Foreign Investment Law and the 1989 Ordinance on Economic Contracts, among others.[76] However, Vietnamese lawmakers soon turned to capitalist states and international organisations as the main source for commercial law reforms in the 1990s.[77] Still, Vietnamese lawmakers remain

71 Gillespie, *supra* note 65, pp. 142-143.

72 Do & Nicholson (2020 forthcoming); Gillespie (2005), p. 49.

73 Do & Nicholson, *supra* note 71.

74 Pham & Do, *supra* note 67, pp. 127-128.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-131.

76 Gillespie (2006), pp. 65-66.

77 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

attuned to legal developments in the PRC, even if Chinese influence on commercial law reforms in contemporary Vietnam is moderate.[78]

Take Vietnamese labour law for an example. The 1994 Labour Code - the first major labour law after the transition towards a more market-oriented and open economy from the late 1980s (known as *Đổi mới* reforms) - reflected mixed influences of capitalist, international and socialist labour law.[79] Additionally, it was not the PRC but non-Chinese East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Western industrialised market economies that received the greatest attention from legal drafters.[80] The most visible borrowing from China in this Code was the three-tier system for labour dispute resolution (i.e., conciliation-arbitration-litigation).[81]

Even so, this system was not based solely on the Chinese model. It was also proposed in light of the law and practice of various other jurisdictions, including the Republic of Vietnam - the capitalist state that existed in southern Vietnam before 1975.[82] In this connection, Vietnamese law diverges from its Chinese counterpart in that it allows more union autonomy, divides labour disputes into individual and collective, and rights- and interest-based disputes, and recognises workers' right to strike.[83] Other examples of existent but modest Chinese borrowing include corporate law,[84] competition law[85] and consumer protection.[86]

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78 Interviews with A (Hanoi, 8 January 2020) and B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020). A and B are staff of the National Assembly.

79 Do (2016), pp. 106-127.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

81 *Ibid*., p. 119.

82 *Ibid*., pp. 118-121.

83 Do, *supra* note 78, pp. 340-341.

84 Gillespie, *supra* note 75.

85 Le (2012).

86 Nguyen (2011).

The modest borrowing from Chinese commercial law is understandable. Like Vietnam, China has had little experience in regulating a market economy. Attempts to attract investment from capitalist states and integrate one's domestic market into the global economy has also pushed Vietnam towards non-Chinese economic law models.[87] Further, China has been much less active than international, Japanese, and Western donors in legal reforms in Vietnam.[88] The importation of legal innovations from China was normally due to Vietnamese lawmakers' own initiative.[89] Further, Vietnamese lawmakers have usually borrowed from multiple sources rather than rely on a single model.[90] Thus, Chinese influence - if existent - has often been diluted and become less visible.

Notwithstanding this, there are remarkable examples of legal imports from China. An illustration of this is the introduction of the concept of "land use rights" (*quyền sử dụng đất*) in the 1993 Land Law, which retained state ownership of land while simultaneously enabling the emergence of real estate markets.[91] Another example is Vietnam's adoption of a case law system for the first time in 2015. This system largely resembles the unique case law system of China in that it exists in the form of guiding cases selected and interpreted by the People's Supreme Court.[92] More recently, the Vietnamese Cybersecurity

[87] Gillespie, *supra* note 75, p. 66.

[88] Interviews with A (Hanoi, 8 January 2020) and B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020). See also Gillespie, *supra* note 75, pp. 66-67.

[89] Interviews with A (Hanoi, 8 January 2020) and B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020).

[90] Gillespie, *supra* note 75, pp. 66-67. See also Do, *supra* note 78; Le, *supra* note 84; Nguyen, *supra* note 85 for illustrations.

[91] See Kaneko [(this symposium issue)].

[92] See Resolution No. 03/2015/NQ-HDTP of the Judges' Council of the Supreme People's Court dated 28 October 2015; Resolution No. 04/2019/NQ-HDTP of the Judges' Council of the Supreme People's Court dated 18 June 2019. See Jia (2016) for Chinese case law.

Law promulgated in 2018 also replicates Chinese law in some important ways.[93]

More evidence is needed to conclude that Vietnam has increased Chinese legal borrowing recently. Yet, it is arguable that such borrowing is likely to be greater when the CPV needs to address new phenomena, like real estate markets, case law or the Internet, without sacrificing core socialist and Marxist-Leninist institutions and principles, such as the socialist ownership of means of production, Soviet-style CPV-led courts and CPV control over the society.

In short, Chinese legal borrowing has existed and, on occasions, has had significant impact on legal reforms in transitional Vietnam. The Bill on Special Administrative-Economic Units (often known as the Bill on Special Economic Zones, "SEZs Bill" or "the Bill") examined below is one such example. However, as we show, the legal transplant was ultimately unsuccessful despite Chinese actors' active participation in the exportations of their legal model to Vietnam.

C. The SEZs Bill and Chinese Transplanting Attempts

Special economic zones (SEZs) are not an entirely new concept in Vietnam. A few SEZs existed during the planned economy era (1976-1986), but were terminated due to their "failure to produce significant impact."[94] Nonetheless, the idea of SEZs revived soon after the commencement of *Đổi mới*. A resolution of the CPV adopted in 1997 called to "study [and] pilot some SEZs … in coastal regions."[95] This idea has, however, never been fully realised - although 328 industrial parks and 46 economic zones of different kinds have

[93] Sherman (2019).

94 Anh (2012).

95 CPV (1997), Part Two I.3.

been established to promote foreign investment and cross-border trade since the early 1990s.[96]

Facing the pressure of economic slowdown and international competition,[97] the CPV became more determined to realise the SEZ initiative in the 2010s. The CPV's 2011-2020 Socio-Economic Development Strategy suggests, "some - especially coastal - regions with outstanding advantages be … developed into economic zones that spearhead the development."[98] On this basis, Quảng Ninh, Khánh Hoà and Kiên Giang Provinces respectively submitted their proposals to develop Vân Đồn, Bắc Vân Phong and Phú Quốc into "special administrative-economic units," that is, SEZs. These proposals were approved by the Politburo, the most powerful organ of the CPV, in 2012/13.[99] This prompted the Government to begin the drafting of the SEZs Bill in 2014.[100] The Bill was forwarded to the National Assembly (NA) in August 2017 for deliberation and passage,[101] but has been postponed indefinitely.

The SEZs Bill aimed to establish a unique legal framework for the three proposed SEZs by granting them with "superior institutions and policies."[102] The underpinning objectives were to promote fast-paced economic growth at local, regional and national levels and experiment with new institutions, policies and regulatory models.[103] There was also an emphasis on fostering green, hi-tech, and knowledge-based businesses and industries.[104]

96 Drafting Committee (2017c).

97 Government (2017), pp. 1_2.

98 CPV (2011), Part IV.6. See also CPV (2016); CPV (2017).

99 Government, *supra* note 96, p. 6.

100 *Ibid.*

101 *Ibid.*

102 CPV, *supra* note 97, Part III(4); Government, *supra* note 96, pp. 4_5.

103 *Ibid.*

104 Government, *supra* note 96, pp. 4_5.

To realise the above-stated goals, the SEZs Bill offered a series of unique regulations and favourable incentives to promote investment. These regulations and incentives included *inter alia*: relaxation of licensing conditions and procedures, expansion of land rights for investors, particularly foreign investors, including land leases up to 99 years, tax and other financial incentives, special financial mechanisms for infrastructure development, and easy rules for immigration and expatriates.[105] The Bill also proposed new models for a smaller but more effective government in SEZs.[106]

As explained in a government paper, the SEZs Bill was constructed in light of the experience of SEZs from thirteen jurisdictions.[107] These SEZs include: (i) successful SEZs, (ii) SEZs in neighbouring countries, and (iii) new-style SEZs aiming at Industrial Revolution 4.0 in developed states.[108] Put differently, the Bill reflected eclectic foreign influences rather than a single foreign model. Apart from that, the drafters also attempted to adapt foreign experience, particularly in designing governmental structures for Vietnamese SEZs, and provide incentives more favourable to foreign investors than SEZs in other countries.[109]

A close reading of the *Report on the Review of the International Experience in Constructing, Developing and Managing SEZs and Similar Models* (hereinafter, *Report*) prepared by the Drafting Committee of the SEZs Bill reveals that the greatest attention was given to SEZs in China, Korea, Singapore and the UAE, the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands.[110] The *Report* not only highlighted SEZs from these countries as successful models,[111] but it

105 See generally SEZs Bill. See also Drafting Committee (2017a) for elaboration of major features of the SEZs Bill.

106 Drafting Committee, *supra* note 104, pp. 25-32.

107 Government, *supra* note 96, p. 6.

108 *Ibid.*

109 *Ibid.*, especially pp. 6, 13-21.

110 Drafting Committee (2017b).

111 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

also examined them carefully with a view to drawing lessons for Vietnamese SEZs.[112] Of these jurisdictions, the Drafting Committee was particularly focussed on China and Korea, dedicating the largest part of their *Report* to analysing these two jurisdictions.[113] They specifically noted, "The special administrative-economic units to be developed [under the Bill] are a combination of Chinese SEZs and special administrative and economic zones in Korea."[114]

1. Chinese Participation and Influence

While eclectically borrowing from various jurisdictions, the drafters of the SEZs Bill had a strong interest in the Chinese experience. China was ranked first and occupied the longest part in the summary of foreign experience of the *Report*.[115] Demonstrating obvious admiration for the Chinese experience, the Drafting Committee stressed, "China is the birthplace of SEZs and is one of the most successful countries in developing SEZs."[116] Further, Chinese SEZs "set examples for [economic] development in the world; therefore enhancing the position of [China] in the international arena."[117]

More importantly, the drafters widely applied Chinese lessons in formulating the SEZs Bill. Arguably, the most remarkable aspect of Chinese borrowing was the emphasis on proactive involvement of the state - rather than a *laissez faire* approach - in developing SEZs.[118] Modelling the Chinese SEZ, the Bill endorsed an extensive role of the government in SEZs development, for

112 See *ibid.*, pp. 2_9. While the Report dedicated more than six pages to summarise the experience from these SEZs, other SEZs in ASEAN and developed states were mentioned within less than a page.

113 *Ibid.*, pp. 2_6, 19_29.

114 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

115 *Ibid.*

116 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

118 *Ibid.*, pp. 19_22. See also CCSEZR (2019) for such an advice from Chinese experts to a Vietnamese delegation.

instance, through determining market entrance requirements, coordinating, financing and facilitating infrastructure development, reducing taxes and levies, and providing subsidy and other support to investors, such as in relation to research and development, vocational training and labour recruitment.[119]

Moreover, the Drafting Committee tried to define the organisation of SEZs authorities in China by proposing new government structures, which are smaller but enjoy greater autonomy, for Vietnamese SEZs.[120] In the same light, SEZ governments were encouraged to utilise technology and simplify administrative procedures.[121] Concurrently, also modelling Chinese SEZs, the Bill placed SEZ authorities under the control of provincial authorities so Vietnamese SEZ authorities have less autonomy than those in many other jurisdictions, such as Korea and Hong Kong.[122]

Another striking example of Chinese influence is the adoption of a gradual approach. Pointing to the experience of the first SEZs in China, Vietnamese law drafters suggested that the Bill permit various industries instead of immediately focusing on selected core industries in the early stage of SEZ development.[123] In defending the Bill, Minister of Planning and Investment, Nguyễn Chí Dũng, a key drafter of the Bill, emphasized: "[We] should not be too cautious in making the SEZ Law … If necessary, we can amend it later, during the implementation."[124] This statement closely replicated Chinese thinking on economic development in general and on SEZ construction in particular.[125]

There are other examples of borrowing from the Chinese in the process of setting up SEZs in Vietnam. The above-mentioned examples are remarkable as

119 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–22. See also generally SEZs Bill; Drafting Committee, *supra* note 104.

120 Drafting Committee, *supra* note 110, pp. 20–22; Government, *supra* note 96, pp. 13–21.

121 *Ibid.*

122 Drafting Committee, *supra* note 110, pp. 3, 13–14, 20.

123 *Ibid.* p. 20.

124 Huyền (2018b).

125 See Drafting Committee, *supra* note 110, p. 21; CCSEZR, *supra* note 118.

they illustrate that Vietnamese legal drafters did not only import single legal concepts or principles from China, but that they were also driven by the ideas underlying the Chinese SEZ model. It suffices to say that, of all the alternatives, Chinese SEZs have left the greatest imprint on Vietnam's SEZs Bill.

It is difficult to trace the exact involvement of Chinese actors in the drafting of the SEZs Bill due to the political sensitivity of this Bill in Vietnam. Despite this fact, accessible data reveal that the Vietnamese government received extensive technical support from Chinese experts, particularly the China Centre for Special Economic Zones Research (CCSEZR) at Shenzhen University.

Considerable evidence indicates that the Quảng Ninh government sought technical advice from the CCSEZR to prepare its proposal for the Vân Đồn SEZ. The websites of these institutions list at least eight important events between the two parties including one- to multiple-day visits, fieldwork activities, a two-week training program, many meetings and workshops, and one international conference with more than 200 participants.[126] The conference was co-organised by Quảng Ninh and the CCSEZR in early 2014, and was a major event.[127] It attracted numerous Vietnamese CPV-state leaders and officials from the national level and provinces with interest in SEZ development, including Khánh Hoà and Kiên Giang.[128] While including experts from other jurisdictions and international organisations, the main objective of the conference - as described in the CCSEZR website - was to introduce Chinese experience and consider its applicability to Vietnam and other emergent economies.[129]

CCSEZR experts were said to provide Quảng Ninh with "opinions on the theoretical foundation, strategic development paths, and legal framework

126 See e.g. CCSEZR (2018); QNP (2013a); QNP (2013b).

127 CCSEZR (2014).

128 CCSEZR, *supra* note 127; Tuấn (2014).

129 CCSEZR, *supra* note 127.

planning of Vietnamese SEZ construction."[130] Chinese technical assistance occurred not only during these early stages and with representatives from the CCSEZR, but also involved additional Chinese experts and continued well into the later stages of setting up the SEZs.[131] At the same time, it is apparent that the cooperation between Quảng Ninh and the CCSEZR had particularly noticeable effects on the SEZs Bill. Quảng Ninh was the first province that submitted an SEZ proposal to the Politburo. This proposal became a template for subsequent proposals prepared by Khánh Hoà and Kiên Giang and exerted significant influence on the SEZs Bill and related governmental documents.[132] Further to this, Phạm Minh Chính - Quảng Ninh's CPV Secretary in 2011-2015 - was later promoted as a Politburo member and became a key leader of the Steering Committee of SEZ Construction of the central Government. In these new roles, Chính headed a delegation to the CCSEZR and sought advice on many issues regarding the SEZs Bill.[133]

As such, the SEZs Bill is a rare case in which China energetically introduced its legal model to another state. This can be explained by the confidence of Chinese experts in their SEZ model and its usefulness for Vietnam. It was stated on the CCSEZR's website:

> Prof. Tao Yitao … Director of the CCSEZR … point[ed] out [that] the successful experience of China has important reference value to Vietnam[.] Shenzhen is a typical representative of the founder as a success of China's special economic zones, which is [a] product of the China's modernization process[.] [F]urthermore, Shenzhen is an example for the socialist countries to achieve transformation… Their successful

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[130] *Ibid*.

131 Interviews with A (Hanoi, 8 January 2020) and B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020). See also e.g., CCSEZR, *supra* note 118; CCSEZR, *supra* note 126; CCSEZR, *supra* note 126.

132 Interview with A (Hanoi, 8 January 2020). See also Quảng Ninh Province (2017) in comparison with Khánh Hoà People's Committee (2017); Kiên Giang Province (2017); Government, *supra* note 96; Drafting Committee, *supra* note 104; Drafting Committee, *supra* note 110. The latter essentially replicate the structure and contents of the former.

133 CCSEZR, *supra* note 126.

> construction and development mode [have] attracted Vietnam attention and inspires other developing countries to establish and develop their own SEZs.[134]

In addition to the perceived efficacy of Chinese-style SEZs, another possible reason for the activism of Chinese actors in the making of the SEZs Bill is China's increasing investment in Vietnam. From 2011 to 2018, the annual registered Chinese capital in Vietnam rose from US$700 million to more than US$2.4 billion.[135] That said, the figures have excluded numerous cases in which Chinese investors used legal entities from a third jurisdiction, like Singapore, or local individuals and entities to hold their businesses.[136] Further, all of the proposed SEZs are in promising locations for Chinese businesses. Geographically abutting Guangxi, Quảng Ninh - one of the most industrialised and economically developed provinces in northern Vietnam - has maintained economic exchanges with China for decades.[137] Quảng Ninh, Khánh Hoà and Kiên Giang are also all favourite places for Chinese tourists and real estate investors.[138]

In addition to the foregoing reasons, the activism of Chinese actors can also be explained by the SEZs Bill's alignment with China's geo-economic and geopolitical initiatives. Quảng Ninh is an important point in the "Two Corridors, One Belt" initiative which connects major cities and ports in northern and central Vietnam with Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong and Hainan in China.[139] This initiative has recently been incorporated into the BRI.[140] Meanwhile, the latter is also one of the focuses of the CCSEZR and was

134 CCSEZR, *supra* note 127.

135 Lam (2019), p. 2.

136 Interviews with C, D, E (Hanoi, 7 January 2020) and F (Hanoi, 8 January 2020). C-F are lawyers with Chinese commercial clients.

137 Interview with B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020).

138 *Ibid.*

139 Le (2018), p. 3.

140 *Ibid.*

repeatedly mentioned in its meetings with Vietnamese delegates regarding SEZ development.[141] Hence, there are a number of reasons as to why CLD has currency in Vietnam, both from the Chinese perspective, to secure its interests in Vietnam, and from the Vietnamese vantage, to import a vital component of China's industrial policy.

2. Local Protests

The SEZs Bill triggered considerable criticism. Throughout the lawmaking process, the most vocal criticism normally came from economists, including domestic, diasporic and sometimes international experts (e.g. the World Bank) and - to a lesser degree, lawyers. Their opinions were communicated mainly through sanctioned channels, such as state media, legislative forums, or private communication with state officials.[142]

First of all, opponents challenged the SEZ model in general. They argued that SEZs were effective in attracting foreign capital only when several states maintained a closed economy.[143] They contended that as national economies, including Vietnam, have become considerably more open to global trade and capital, SEZs no longer enjoy outstanding economic advantages.[144]

They also criticised preferential policies offered by SEZs, especially tax and other financial incentives. Some believed that such incentives would encourage short-term investment and harmful tax practices, like transfer pricing and tax avoidance, and money laundering.[145] It was argued that the overemphasis on promotion of investment would lead to the disrespect of the interest of others

141 See CCSEZR, *supra* note 118; CCSEZR, *supra* note 126.

142 For illustration, see various newspaper articles cited in this section.

143 Kiều (2018); Nguyễn Tiến Lập (2018); Lê Ngọc Sơn (2018); Tô (2018); Trí (2018).

144 Kiều, *supra* note 143; Nguyễn Tiến Lập, *supra* note 143; Lê Ngọc Sơn, *supra* note 143; Trí, *supra* note 143.

145 Trí, *supra* note 143.

and of the society, at large.[146] According to critics, consequences of the preference for foreign investors included the growing gap between rich and poor, greater tolerance of breaches of environmental and labour law, increased social conflict (for example as a result of land, environmental or labour disputes), and the authorities' over-dependency on "strategic" investors.[147]

Moreover, economists were concerned about a fragmentary regulatory system that would intensify regional inequality, foster a race to the bottom between SEZs and other regions in attracting investment, weaken national industrial strategies, and separate SEZs from other parts of the country.[148] Some underlined that while the construction of an SEZ requires enormous investment, its outcome is uncertain.[149] They noted the failure of several SEZs in the world and stressed that even Chinese SEZs only succeeded in their early stages.[150]

Criticism was also aimed specifically at the SEZs Bill and the national situation of Vietnam. It was reasoned that as Vietnam had become a more open economy, it would be hard for the proposed SEZs to offer policy incentives significantly higher than other regions.[151] Similarly, as a result of economic globalisation, Vietnamese SEZs would not be able to maintain economic conditions more favourable to investors than other countries.[152] Additionally, the opponents argued that the SEZs Bill prioritised foreign investment while it should have fostered domestic enterprises.[153] Another robust criticism was that the incentives offered by Bill, such as those relative to taxes and levies, land

[146] Hồ (2018).

[147] Hồ, *supra* note 146; Trí, *supra* note 143.

[148] Hồ, supra note 146; Kiều, *supra* note 143.

[149] Hồ (2017); Hồ, *supra* note 146; Tô, *supra* note 143; Trí, *supra* note 143; Trương (2018); Tư (2014).

[150] Đinh (2018); Hồ, *supra* note 146.

[151] Tư, *supra* note 149.

[152] Hồ, *supra* note 149.

[153] Đinh, *supra* note 150; Trần (2018).

access and leases, immigration and gambling would encourage labour- and resource-intensive real estate, hospitality, and tourist businesses rather than green, hi-tech, and knowledge-based enterprises.[154]

The location of the proposed SEZs was challenged, as they are far from economic centres such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City.[155] Several experts highlighted the likelihood of corruption, as the Bill would set up special mechanisms for (state) funding for infrastructure projects, provide investors with generous incentives and grant SEZ authorities with considerable autonomy without effective supervisory tools.[156] The prevalence of land speculation and "fever" in the proposed SEZs was cited to illustrate the possibility of rent-seeking practices and the negative impact of SEZ construction.[157]

Lastly, economists consistently expressed concerns about national security and China.[158] They pointed to the geopolitical importance of all proposed SEZs, their significance to national defence and relevance to China's ambitious BRI strategy.[159] To support their argument, critics referred to Chinese factories with environmental and labour problems, many of which were strictly closed to outsiders and situated in crucial locations, and Chinese (illegal) purchases of property throughout Vietnam, especially in coastal provinces.[160] Economists also mentioned "negative lessons" from Chinese investment in other countries and their SEZs.[161] Economists worried that the enormous capital required for

[154] Đinh, *supra* note 150; Tô, *supra* note 143; Trí, *supra* note 143; Trần, *supra* note 153; Trương, *supra* note 149.

[155] Hồ, *supra* note 146; Trần, *supra* note 153; Tư, *supra* note 149.

[156] Luân (2017); Phương (2018); Tô, *supra* note 143.

[157] Huyền (2018a); Tô, *supra* note 143.

[158] Lê Quỳnh (2018); Tô, *supra* note 143; Trương, *supra* note 149.

[159] Lê Quỳnh, *supra* note 158; Tô, *supra* note 143; Trần, *supra* note 153; Trương, *supra* note 149.

[160] Lê Quỳnh, *supra* note 158; Trần, *supra* note 153.

[161] Kim (2018); Hoàng & Minh (2018).

SEZ infrastructure would create a debt trap that could be utilised by China.[162] There was also a belief that easy regulations on immigration (including permanent residency), expatriates, land lease and property ownership would pave the way for Chinese people to occupy crucial strategic regions in Vietnam, especially considering the permission of land leases of up to 99 years.[163]

In May 2018 - a month before the SEZs Bill was scheduled for passage, criticisms against the Bill exploded. High-profile intellectuals, retired CPV-state officials, and some legislators strongly criticised the Bill, particularly in relation to the Chinese threat and 99-year land leases.[164] Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc admitted, "[There is] an enormous wave relative to these issues[.] Intellectuals are very anxious. I have received numerous calls, messages and opinion letters."[165] The SEZs Bill became a lightning rod for criticism in the media.[166] Several authorities demanded more time for deliberation, while some, including a legislator, suggested a referendum.[167]

Responding to growing criticisms, the NA Chairwoman Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân emphasized, "The Politburo has made its conclusion [that] the Bill does not violate the Constitution[.] We discuss to enact the Law, not withdraw it."[168] The Minister of Planning and Investment added, "The Bill contains no reference to China[.] There are only peoples who think in that way and exaggerate the issue to divide the relationship with China."[169] A Deputy Head

[162] Trương, *supra* note 149.

[163] Lê Quỳnh, *supra* note 158; Trần, *supra* note 153; Trương *supra* note 149.

[164] K (2018); Luân (2018); Nguyễn Đức (2018); Trương, *supra* note 149; Văn (2018).

[165] P (2018).

[166] From May to June 2018, the SEZs Bill was extensively covered by popular newspapers, including: Người Đô thị; Người Lao động; Tuổi trẻ; VnExpress; and VnEconomy; to name a few. Foreign Vietnamese-language media, such as BBC and VOA Vietnamese, were also active.

[167] BBC (2018b); Nguyễn Đức, *supra* note 164; Trương, *supra* note 149.

[168] Nguyễn Lê (2018).

[169] Bảo (2018).

of the NA's Economic Committee responded, "Why are we afraid of Chinese influence in SEZs? Why do Australia, France [and] the US all have a Chinatown?"[170]

These replies did not foster consensus within and beyond the CPV-state but fuelled opposition. Intellectuals and retired officials began to voice concerns in social media[171] and foreign media,[172] and initiated collective petitions online.[173] Independent bloggers and political dissidents quickly joined and then dominated the campaign. Their criticism of the SEZs Bill "went viral" on Facebook.[174] Unlike economists and lawyers, their messages were much simpler and concentrated on three points: first, 99-year land leases would render SEZs a Chinese "concession," second, lessons from other countries indicate that SEZs could be a Chinese "trap" for Vietnam, and third, unlike what was explained by the Government, the SEZs Bill did offer special treatment for Chinese citizens in immigration.[175] Calls for public demonstration quickly emerged.[176]

Facing escalating objection and possible demonstrations, the central authorities backed down. The Prime Minister promised to consider public opinions, including those relative to 99-year land leases.[177] On 9 June 2018, the

[170] Nghi (2018).

[171] See e.g. Tô, *supra* note 143; Vu (2018).

[172] See e.g. BBC (2018a); BBC, *supra* note 167.

[173] Kêu gọi phản đối dự thảo Luật đơn vị hành chính-kinh tế đặc biệt (Vân Đồn, Bắc Vân Phong, Phú Quốc) – Đợt 1-8 (2018). 2,536 people signed this petition within 15 days.

[174] See e.g. Nguyen Ngoc Chu (2018). His post had more than 16,000 reactions.

[175] Interview with B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020). See also e.g. Nguyen Ngoc Chu's Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/chu.nguyenngoc; Nhật ký yêu nước Facebook Page at https://www.facebook.com/nhatkyyeunuoc1/ for numerous posts regarding the SEZs Bill from late May to mid-June 2018. Each of these posts had thousands of reactions, comments and shares.

[176] Lời kêu gọi biểu tình ôn hoà phản đối thông qua Luật Đặc khu (2018).

[177] P, *supra* note 165.

NA announced that it would delay the Bill for further consideration.[178] Still, demonstrations involving from hundreds to thousands of people still took place in major cities and provinces across the country.[179] The "pull" from the Vietnamese side for the would-be legal transplant lost its momentum and, as a result, the SEZs Bill has been postponed indefinitely.

3. Why was the Exportation of Chinese SEZs Unsuccessful?

There are several possible explanations for the failure of the Chinese attempt to export their SEZ model to Vietnam. Arguably, the anti-China sentiment played an important part in the failure of the SEZs Bill. Nonetheless, it is hard to say that Vietnamese concerns about China were merely emotional. As an NA expert recognised, these concerns did have rational grounds, including several environmental, labour, and social problems caused by Chinese investment in Vietnam and other countries; the existence of illegal purchases of properties by Chinese people; China's geopolitical ambition and its increasingly aggressive approach in the South China Sea; and the crucial locations of the proposed SEZs.[180] Simply put, China failed to assuage such concerns, as held by local actors, and thus did not facilitate the exportation of its model.

Furthermore, the critique of the SEZs Bill did not focus only on the Chinese threat. First and foremost, it challenged the suitability of the SEZ model for Vietnam. In other words, China failed to offer a legal model sufficiently attractive to the recipient state. As the NA expert commented, "The failure of the SEZs Bill was not simply because of the anti-China sentiment or concerns about the Chinese threat. The SEZ model did not really serve socio-economic development in Vietnam. It was the root of the opposition."[181]

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[178] Lê Hiệp (2018).

[179] Tomiyama (2018).

[180] Interview with B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020).

[181] Interview with A (Hanoi, 8 January 2020).

A likely contributor to the failure of the SEZs Bill is the Chinese approach to technical aid. Conversations with two NA staff and a development expert involved in the law-making process suggest that Chinese experts did not widely interact with local actors, except for those working on draft SEZs proposals and bills.[182] Meanwhile, Western and international donors often interact extensively with actors within the CPV-state and beyond, and engage local technical experts in addition to international consultants.[183] They also regularly encourage and participate in consultation activities during the law-making process.[184] Suffice to say that Chinese technical assistance was less publicly accessible and gave little regard to the opinions of local stakeholders. This approach increased doubts and misunderstanding regarding the SEZs Bill and the Chinese involvement among the recipient population.

V. Conclusion

CLD suggests that whereas the PRC government and Chinese enterprises have strong incentives, including commercial and geopolitical issues, to secure their investment and assets overseas, in the near term horizontal legal transplants will likely not be a major part in this process. The 2018 Vietnamese SEZs Bill shows that even in a country with a close historical, cultural, and ideological nexus with the PRC, the would-be transplant, in this instance, the Chinese SEZ, encountered resistance both as a technical matter and on more pervasive societal grounds (i.e., sinophobia). The Chinese SEZ has gained popularity in

[182] Interviews with A (Hanoi, 8 January 2020), B (Hanoi, 9 January 2020) and C (Hanoi, 7 January 2020).

[183] Interview with C (Hanoi, 7 January 2020).

[184] *Ibid.*

many host states in Africa and South Asia,[185] suggesting novel interactions in wider Inter-Asia, yet the Vietnam case shows that writing the policy into local law - that is, transplanting it *legally* - was too much. There was not only insufficient demand in the recipient state, but outright antagonism toward a legal form of transplantation.

China may continue a below-the-radar approach to legal transplantation in nearby states or those that are economically dependent on the PRC. China may be incentivized to do so where it is confident of its legal model or where the legal transfer will substantially enhance its commercial and political interests. Nonetheless, Chinese capacity to export law is still limited not only by the innate features of PRC law (e.g., nascence, amalgamated nature, etc.) but also by local doubt of Chinese intention and Chinese lack of experience in providing technical assistance. Specifically, the Chinese approach to legal transplantation merits reconsideration. Whereas Beijing has taken a highly mediatized if not propagandistic approach to promoting the BRI as a "win-win," as the 2018 Vietnamese SEZs Bill shows, Chinese legal technical assistance is insular, if not secretive. In other words, such methodologies present public relations problems for CLD. Greater transparency and inclusiveness would potentially mitigate some of the suspicion toward Chinese legal transplants. In the mid- and long-term Chinese economic globalization will likely see greater fine-tuning in the party-state's approach to legal transplantation.

All of this suggest that if China is to emerge as a successful contender in the law and development market, it will likely resort to other means, in addition to legal transplants, to secure its investments abroad. This means greater vertical integration of Chinese norms into international economic law and the building

[185] Brautigam & Tang (2011); Brautigam & Tang (2014); UNDP International Poverty Reduction Center (2015); UN Office for South-South Cooperation and the UN Development Programme (2019).

of cross-border transnational law, mainly in the form of inter-corporate agreements, international arbitration, and onshoring commercial disputes - each of which is formative of CLD.

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