Chapter I
Introduction: Project Description and Implementation

CES & JODC Academic Research Project
1. Background

The 1.6 kilometre-long two-lane second Thai–Lao Bridge linking Mukdahan province to Sawannakhet in Laos was officially opened on December, 20, 2006. Vehicles and people were allowed to pass since January 10, 2007 and there has been daily bus transportation running. The Second Thai–Lao Bridge Project had a parallel historical background with the first Bridge. A feasibility study for the second bridge, with technical support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), began in 1990. During 1996–1998, Thailand and Laos reached an agreement on the bridge’s location. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) then spent a year, from 1999–2000, surveying and designing the bridge before Thailand and Laos agreed on the financial terms in 2001. This financial agreement committed them to an equal loan of 2.6 billion baht from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). This loan was also the first Overseas Development Assistance loan commissioned by the JBIC for cross-border infrastructure development. There was a committee composed of representatives from Thailand and the Lao PDR set up to supervise legal cooperation, as well as assess problems arising out of the use of the Bridge.

The Bridge construction was a part of the vision to make Mukdahan a “trade and tour town on the Mekong’s eastern Gateway to Indochina and beyond,” aiming to link countries together in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), such as Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Furthermore, the increased transportation and communications arising from this cross-border infrastructure building could serve as a starting point for further integration of ASEAN. The project was expected to be instrumental in boosting the cooperation in economic development—investments as well as tourism—in the GMS, which could then spill over to other countries in the region benefiting from the use of the bridge, including ASEAN trade partners such as China and Japan. Specifically, Thailand’s Ministry of Commerce has estimated that the Bridge will make Thai–Lao trade expand 40 percent annually, while tourism will double. The Lao PDR will also be freed from its land-locked trap and able to boost its
economic advantages greatly by accessing more rapidly the port in Vietnam.

2. Hypothesis and Research Question

The Centre for European Studies, Chulalongkorn University, in collaboration with the JODC, realized the significance of regional integration which could result from the cross-border infrastructure. It was expected that the Bridge would naturally bring ASEAN closer together or, at the very least, forge a closer tie among countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region. It is also possible to expect that countries in the region will eventually be “virtually borderless” if logistical integration is achieved. The Centre for European Studies, being the local institution that makes use of the knowledge of regional integration, took up this project to inspect if the region is also benefiting from the infrastructure to the same extent as what has been achieved in the European integration process. In short, the research team laid down the hypothesis that the bridge is the physical instrument for regional integration, but without necessary corollaries—such as legal, political and socio-economical infrastructure in place—the objectives will be slow to achieve.

Moreover, derived from European Regional Integration, which culminated in the form of the European Union, ASEAN could use some of the European experiences in integration, especially in the area of border controls, infrastructure maintenance regulations, and elimination of undesirable side effects of the opening of the boarders. This led to a central research question: to what extent do the changes in economic/social/cultural aspects occur within the locale after the use of the physical cross-border infrastructure, in this case, the Second Thai–Lao Bridge? Research was then conducted in order to provide background for improvements, as well as for the future preparation of trans-border activities in the region.

3. Methodology
The research was conducted by using fact-finding missions to the areas deemed to be affected by the bridge. The survey report was presented to a forum of experts who subsequently gave more academic and practical input to the project. At the last stage, the compilation of field research and seminar results were synthesized as a final chapter of the publication, where the process of this research and its outcome were systematically documented. In summary, the following steps were taken:

3.1 Physical Survey and On-site Interview: The Research team and a representative from JODC embarked on a field trip to Mukdahan and Sawannakhet province and collected physical information as well as conducted on-site interviews with relevant parties; for example, governors, Thai–Lao committee members, commuters, and residents. Research evidence such as photographs, videos and interview transcripts were summarized and incorporated into the background papers, which were then distributed to the experts and distinguished participants during the seminar.

3.2 Documentary Background Research: The background papers, composed of relevant literature, discussion papers, related treaties, and laws from ASEAN transportation and communications cooperation agencies and similar European Union projects, were produced. In order to reduce the bulk of the paper volume, other relevant information was compiled onto a CD and distributed together with the background papers to the participants during the seminar and thereafter.

3.3 Seminar: The element of participation and constructive criticism is instrumental in any research project; therefore, the CES in collaboration with the JODC arranged a seminar on this project entitled “Regional Integration in ASEAN: A Case Study of the Thai–Lao Bridges,” which provided a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences, both theoretical and practical. The seminar took place on March 9, 2007, at the Maha Chulalongkorn Building, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Panel discussions, experts’ observations, and experienced practitioners’ viewpoints were used to form the research findings.
4. Objectives Accomplished

1) Most recent empirical information on the new cross-border infrastructure is now available.

2) This research project has promoted an exchange of information, ideas, methods, and experience concerning the development of ASEAN and European Regional Integration among governments, private businesses, academic sectors, and the general public. This was not only to enrich the vision of this issue, but also to fortify the effort to make the best practice in the future.

3) This research has raised the awareness of this issue in order to understand the problems more in-depth.

4) It explores the potential of ASEAN Regional Integration from the case study of the second Thai–Lao Bridge.

5) The creation of networks among European, Japanese, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese experts in the area of regional integration from cross-border infrastructure building.

5. Research Chronology

The research planning began in January of 2007 by compiling the background papers of the second Thai–Lao Bridge. The proposal for funding was submitted to the JODC and a favorable reply was received. The Committee for the Research was formed and Associate Professor Dr. Apirat Petchsiri was designated Head of Project. During the month of February 2007, a field trip to Mukdahan and Sawannakhet was arranged in order to gather relevant primary sources to be presented before the experts at the seminar. The CES was responsible for the invitation of experts and organizing the seminar, where lectures and comments were documented. On 9th March 2007, the topical seminar took place at Chulalongkorn University. This one-day intensive seminar was comprised of keynote presenters, panel discussions, and commentaries from concerned experts. There were 80 participants attending the seminar. These distinguished participants were representatives of national governments directly involved with the subject and also those from non-governmental agencies, state enterprises, universities, the private
sector, and interested people. After the seminar, copies of the seminar proceedings were distributed for further comment and feedback.

6. Working Schedule

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<th>Month &amp; Project</th>
<th>January</th>
<th>February</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gather Information for background papers</td>
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<td>Invite experts</td>
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<td>Field trip</td>
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<td>Organize a seminar</td>
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<td>Proceedings published</td>
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7. Outcomes

The tangible outcomes were stated in the accomplished objectives above. Yet it is hoped that this work will produce more impact in the following areas:

1) Interested people will have better understanding of the potential of ASEAN integration in the context of the second Thai–Lao Bridge case study.

2) Interested people will have better awareness of the importance of the issue, in both the policy-making and practical stages.

3) A starting point for in-depth research of ASEAN potential in regional integration, benefiting from the European experience.
4) A network of information and experience sharing will be formed among concerned experts, which could encourage more interest in this research area.

8. Structure of this report

This report is divided into four chapters. This first chapter describes the formal research and acknowledges the benefactor’s generous support of this project. It lays down the framework of the research and identifies the core research personnel. Chapter Two deals with the field survey of the second Thai–Lao bridge as a physical instrument for ASEAN’s integration and explores the non-physical infrastructure which the EU has been implementing and is now under revision. Chapter Three consists of lessons of regional integration, using transport instruments as learned from the experts at the research seminar organized by the research team, as well as lessons derived from the EU’s experiences with its own transport policy. Chapter Four—as the last chapter—provides research synthesis and recommendations.