

CHASING TRACES

History and Ethnography in
the Uplands of Socialist Asia

EDITED BY

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AND

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Cover photograph: A research assistant interviewing a centenarian Hmong woman with the help of the latter's daughter (left), about the story of the prophet Pa Chay Vue. © Sarah Turner

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INTRODUCTION

Pierre Petit and Jean Michaud

A COMPULSION TO PRESERVE and pass on the memory of the past has gripped Western European societies since at least the Industrial Revolution (Nora 1997). By contrast, among the upland societies living in the area covered by this book—that is, the connected highlands of China, Vietnam, and Laos—the urge to investigate and own the past is not even remotely as pressing. These three countries of the communist “red brotherhood” (Evans and Rowley 1984) have gone through economic openings that have increasingly connected them with global flows and the market economy, tourism, heritage industry, and digital technologies. But recalling the past in this region remains highly sensitive. Among the local societies of the uplands, many may actively avoid recalling the past for fear of endangering themselves and others. Such contrast begs for careful investigation.

A similar level of complication arises regarding the material traces of the past.¹ After the communist revolutions, artifacts and monuments associated with the so-called feudal period had to be destroyed for the sake of building the modern socialist society. Years later, the language of “heritagization” of upland “cultures” has saturated the national discourse in China, Vietnam, and Laos. This discourse has crystallized in a selective way requiring total compliance with the national historical narrative: some institutions formerly banned have now resurfaced, but mainly under the benign guise of “living fossils of the nation,” to use the expression popularized by Chinese bureaucrats in relation to the “ethnic minority cultures” (*shaoshu minzu*).

James C. Scott’s (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* fostered, more strongly than any prior publication, an interest in the so far neglected history of this highland region (which he calls Zomia), and especially in the relations between

the lowland centers of power and their mountainous peripheries. Scott's daring thesis triggered vigorous debates, as in the special issues of the *Journal of Global History* (Michaud 2010b) and the *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* (Tappe 2015), and inspired more indirectly a recent special issue of *Social Anthropology* (Stolz and Tappe 2021).² Now, fifteen years after the release of his book, it is time to uncouple the debate from Scott's germane hypotheses and consider the making of history itself as a central challenge.

Working from disciplinary margins raises epistemic awareness, and the very project of historical anthropology is by nature a perpetual inducement to "rethink our practices of knowledge production" (Axel 2002, 33). Producing history, ethnohistory, historical anthropology, and historical geography in the Southeast Asian highlands raises significant questions relating to methodology, epistemology, and ethics, for which most researchers in the fields of social sciences and the humanities are often ill prepared. There is still no single reference book on how to navigate the margins between the fields of history and social anthropology, where oral traditions and rare archives remain the main avenues to visit the past.

Our initial questions were manifold. How can scholars manage to competently access information about the past? How do local societies produce and store their stories in their own terms, terms that are often ill at ease with national and Western categories? How is the memory of the past transmitted—or not—and with what logic? Regarding oral testimony, who exactly are the "wise ones" researchers are routinely directed to for their interviews? How can one handle the oft-reported male authority on historical information, and how can historical narratives better reflect the different voices behind the authoritative versions of those in charge? How should one cope with key informants but also with gatekeepers when working with minorities under authoritarian regimes? How can historical statements be addressed as situated speech acts and not mere "data"? And how is one to capture history-in-the-making through events, rituals, and performances rather than interviews and surveys, including the telling of life stories and micro-stories?

Similar questions arise when perusing archives. If written archives are the staple of historians, how should social scientists use them? Should they proceed in the same way as historians, or should they develop a specific method and agenda? How does archival research intersect with fieldwork, and what kind of added value might it bring to it? Is access to

national or regional archives restricted for political motives? If so, what are the costs and possible compromises needed to access them?

And in terms of positionality, by what right can Western and/or “white” scholars dig into the past of societies other than their own? This is an unsettling question that came to the fore amid debates on reflexivity and decoloniality, one that has become unavoidable and for which there is no simple answer.

The necessity of working with a variety of dissenting sources across disciplinary boundaries represents a common experience for those working on history in the highland regions of Asia. One must then find out how to use oral and textual information together—or, rather, the conditions for their synergy. The same question can arise about archives from different holding funds, from different epochs, written in different languages, for different readerships, or managed and ordained by different political regimes with intentions often outside scholarly consideration. Historical criticism, reflexivity, and methodological triangulation are simply essential in this context. And once all has been gathered and put together in a meaningful way, the final production of history as texts, films, or exhibitions creates, in turn, a new flow of historical information that will one way or another feed back into the local scenes. Are those retroactions common or exceptional? In them, who speaks for whom and in what languages and scripts? How does the work of scholars—national or international—when fed back to their original owners, impact the local sense of history and self? What can be said on the ethics of anonymity, authorship, censorship, and self-censorship? Historical analysis in the shape of a scientific discourse that refracts ideological injunctions can easily annoy the powers that be, gatekeepers, and pundits, who develop and support canonical narratives about the past they claim to be common (and beneficial) to the whole nation. When producing knowledge that challenges such orthodoxies, scholars are not the only ones who could find themselves in the line of fire, even if unwittingly or by unfamiliarity with national canons—their informants and collaborators could be too.

Facing such complications, this volume is intended as a guiding companion for those confronted with such multifarious and at times daunting challenges. It is based on experiences and reflections rooted in decades of work in the three Marxist-Leninist states who share portions of the Southeast Asian Massif: China, Vietnam, and Laos (see map 1). We are convinced of the relevance of reaching out beyond



Map 1. Location of authors' fieldwork in upland socialist Asia, with respective chapter number. © P. Petit and I. Renneson.

national borders not only because populations and fluxes straddle these porous boundaries, but also because heuristic exogamy is the best way to refresh perspectives on research. Seventy-five percent of the indigenous highland populations of the Massif are concentrated in these three countries (Michaud 2016, 3). The challenges of social science fieldwork in that area have been addressed in a volume edited by Sarah Turner (2013a). With the present volume, we want to focus particularly on history and the social sciences as fields of inquiry shared by a dozen researchers with different backgrounds, mindsets, and perspectives, with the aim of launching a constructive discussion about common stakes—and mistakes.

Moreover, and most unexpectedly, our collection has recently acquired a timely quality. A few months after we launched this editorial project, the COVID pandemic took off, changing everything. Traveling for research became severely restricted, to the point that fieldwork and ethnography became inaccessible to most researchers. Then, the war in Ukraine and its unpredictable side effects and long-term ripples further increased the threat to international mobility. Last but not least, scholars working in China, be they nationals or outsiders, currently face increasing research and access limitations imposed ever more strictly by the present regime. Over what could turn into a lengthy period, many among our colleagues have no idea about when they may be allowed to resume their fieldwork, and they feel confused. Facing these major obstacles, many researchers practicing ethnographic fieldwork had to change their methods and turn to alternative sources of information. This has become a time for many to delve into online ethnography and archival work. In this context of multifaceted change, researchers have need of guidelines for alternative ways to document and reflect upon Asian highland societies when access has become, at best, limited. Our book can help to cope with this challenging situation.

Ten Issues Addressed in This Book

To bring order to these liminal remarks, we propose a list of ten key issues recurring throughout this book. Before enumerating this list, however, it is necessary to clarify how the term “history”—beyond its practical use referring to the past by contrast to the present—has been used throughout the volume. “History” can refer to a very specific way to record and analyze the past, with a focus on chronology;

history would thus be the specific domain of chroniclers, specialists, and trained historians. Alternatively, it refers to any narrative about the past: a song, a ritual, an oral tale about origins, a story prompted by a mnemonic device, chronicles written in archives, a book by a local or professional historian, a personal memory of a past event. It can narrate the past using not only chronological but also mythical and genealogical means (Daniel 1996; Harrell 2001). This empirical, extensive meaning from the ground up is the one that has been favored by all our contributors, and it acts as a methodological foundation for this book.

This distinction recalls the one drawn by Maurice Halbwachs between memory and history ([1950] 1997, 130–142). In Halbwachs's view, memory is more popular, multiple, tied to emotions, embodied, and collective, and only concerned by elements of the past that are relevant for the present. History is by contrast more constructed, erudite, objective, conceptual, and all-embracing, and hovers above human groups. In this sense, our book would be, for the most part, a contribution to the study of the former: collective memory in the highlands.

But this still leaves another important dimension unaddressed: the engagement people have with knowledge about the past. Rian Thum (2014, 1–2) insightfully remarked that memory denotes a passive, “mostly involuntary participation” in the recollection of the past. By contrast, the Uyghurs, who were at the center of Thum's research, were driven by curiosity, intentionality, effort, and active engagement in their relationship to the past. Thum argues that this active attitude is a defining feature of the practice of history and hence considers that the relation of Uyghurs with their past has more to do with history than with memory. We endorse this view, as it certainly applies to many situations described in the next chapters. Defining history by engagement rather than by methods is a creative way to address the conceptual issue we now discuss in this first point.

1. A “Duty of Remembrance”

We begin with a critical reflection on the way scholars themselves relate to this past, with a reference to what is widely called in French *devoir de mémoire*. This reflexive stance sees social scientists as constituents of the research process, which helps avoid the trappings of “othering” the host societies through their projection into a time of their own, different from the present of the researcher (Fabian 2014).

Pierre Nora's (1997) *Realms of Memory* captures the "duty of remembrance" that pervades late industrial societies in Europe and most Western countries. This fascination with the past goes well beyond the sphere of scholars; it is noticeable in everyday practices, including the way Western tourists plan to visit a city by delving into historical tourist literature without which their experience would be deemed incomplete.

The contributors to this volume share elements of this implicit concern and see the task of empowering highland communities with their own history as a laudable endeavor. However, the intrinsic value of the past, of historical evidence, and of witnesses' testimonies is not to be assumed. If modern Western scholars take for granted that historical knowledge is to be shared and the "truth" to be unveiled, this commitment is not shared by all societies, and even less by all their members. It may come as a surprise to many, but some highland groups have little interest (not to be confused with capability) in preserving and transmitting their history. And far from being an exception, this might even be the norm for some of them. According to James Scott (2009, chap. 6½; Michaud 2020a), this oblivion could be a defining trait of Zomian societies. Neglecting the production of a history of self protects one from the burden of carrying the past on one's back, from self-proclaimed legitimacies, and, ultimately, from the grip of the state, from whom crucial information is withheld. The Bru of the Central Highlands in Vietnam discussed by Gábor Vargyas are an excellent example of this notion, as we will see in issue 4 below. For some, the past is only cautiously evoked, as in the chapter by Vanina Bouté, where the old institutions of the Phunoy are explicitly stigmatized by the subjects themselves as archaic, counterrevolutionary, and superstitious. Such stigmatization even made it difficult for her to elicit comments on that period beyond prudent lip service conforming to the official state version.

But who are we to demand "the truth"? Do Western and/or white scholars have the moral right to explore the depth of history among Asian societies who have not conducted (or have not been seen to conduct, or have refused to conduct) this search by themselves? We strongly adhere to the view that local history should be explored primarily by, or at least jointly with, the holders of memory and not merely rely on extracting data (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). But with different cultures having drastically different visions of what history means and what purpose it serves, many of which are unrelated to the principles of the European Enlightenment, collaboration raises real challenges. As argued above,

revealing the past publicly and precisely is not as widespread an objective as one might think, and local upland groups under authoritarian regimes are definitely not to be held solely to the standards of scientific positivism. That said, such an argument does not suffice to stop any scientific consideration of the history of the Other in its tracks, especially when that Other's history is being seized and edited by an internal elite to perpetuate forms of social inequality, or when it is enmeshed with that of dominant societies that enforce contradictory and sometimes conflictual narratives about a so-called common past onto local groups.

The issue becomes further complicated when research is conducted among/about/with ethnic minorities in former colonies by scholars coming from former colonial powers and their associates. Recent examples include India with the subaltern studies debate (Chaturvedi 2012), and the Americas with the push for "decolonizing" research among indigenous subjects by agents seen as connected to the former oppressor (Quijano 2007). Without digging too deeply into a debate that exceeds the parameters of this book (see Axel 2002), we find that refraining from conducting social science research in authoritarian Asian countries purely on moral grounds (not being the right persons, from the right countries, collaborating with an "unjust" polity, and so on) and in the absence of indigenous voices who have the right to be heard, would only encourage guilty complicity. Such research may foster a tacit collaboration with the systematic operation of silencing "national minority" groups conducted by state agents, whose role is to produce a normative story coherent with the national political narrative (as will be unpacked in issue 7 below). Currently, scholars devoting their energy to the Uyghurs or the Tibetans will understand immediately what we mean here—"carrying a voice." As an adapted response to this moral dilemma, the strategy known as engaged or public anthropology (Low and Merry 2010; Besteman 2013) has been sympathetically viewed by various scholars working in the region, including several contributors to this book. Beside the production of science, further carrying the voice of minorities under duress becomes an aim and a powerful incentive to mindful researchers. Their work will not be perfect, but an imperfect history conducted prudently is better than a falsified one meant to suit ideological purposes.

Such moral commitment may even stimulate applied projects aiming to reactivate historical memory within specific groups, guided by the concern that writing and diffusing local history should reinforce the agency of subaltern groups and those who have routinely been

muted. This was the explicit objective of the project undertaken by Sarah Turner and Sarah Delisle; young Vietnamese Hmong were asked to collect life stories of elders from their group. The stories formed the basis of a website intended to transmit history in a context where inter-generational knowledge-sharing seemed at risk.

2. *“Incidental” Historians*

Compared to historians who are generally focused on the past, social scientists are primarily interested in the present. Their analyses substantially aim to understand social relations, institutions, material culture, and subjectivities in human societies based on ethnographic fieldwork—that is, on participant observation and various forms of interlocution. The chapters in this volume make it clear: social scientists, and in particular social and cultural anthropologists, do not investigate the past as an aim in itself; rather, they explore it as a way to better root their understanding of today’s society. In this sense, they become “incidental” historians, much in the same way Western missionaries became “incidental” ethnographers in this same region (Michaud 2007).

In this book, interest in the past mainly takes two forms. First, social scientists can simply not ignore the events that led to the current situation. The concept of “regressive history,” a term coined by historian Marc Bloch (1964), captures this movement: to make sense of the present, one needs to shed light on the previous state of things and see the continuities and ruptures. Understanding current kinship hierarchies, agricultural landscapes, or the morphology of highland villages is pointless without a sound historical background. To analyze a ritual performed today without considering the impacts of wars, communist revolutions, the ensuing state policies framing religious practices, and the recent call for tourist heritagization would be plainly misleading. This is the argument of Sylvie Beaud in this volume. Beaud’s anthropological research on the Guan Suo Opera, now performed in a village in Yunnan, supposes not only unpacking the troubled past that followed the Communist takeover of 1949, but also unearthing of deeper layers of history relating to the presence of imperial troops in the region during the nineteenth century. Neglecting such layers of history could produce only folkloristic vignettes resting on a fallacy of cultural simplicity and presumed continuities. Such is precisely the way state ethnography has proceeded in many instances in the three countries under investigation, with the view to dehistoricize and depoliticize upland cultures (McElwee 2004; Petit 2008; Michaud 2009, 2022; Mullaney 2011).

Besides the need to historicize today's societies, social scientists have found another interest in the past. This time, researchers focus on the memories people keep of the past and on the past's various uses as a resource. If the first, "regressive" movement aimed to understand the present by looking into the past (the past being embedded in the present), the second movement aims to decipher the intricacies of the present in the recounting of the past (the present being in the past-as-a-narrative). Indeed, history provides a frame to make sense of and justify present institutions. Any reference to tradition or culture supposes assertions on origins. This can lead to unabashed instrumentalization of the past, as when communist states reconstruct local history to have it toe the party line. But often, the process is not as blatant: the past is progressively, incrementally, subtly, and even partly unknowingly remodeled to fit with the current views of those in charge of narrating it. For instance, the oral traditions collected by Wang Ming-ke in the Aixigou Valley of Sichuan describe the migration of the Qiang using the trope of brothers founding different villages. It is doubtful that this is an actual fact; rather it is a way to shape the Qiangs' experience of the local world and to frame the relations of alliance, distinction, and confrontation between communities.

In sum, any discourse on the past is related to the current time, to the views and stakes of the society voicing it. This simple assertion explains in part why historical memory is selective in forgetting or obliterating elements; the past will be remembered only when it is deemed relevant to and consistent with the present. This selective memory further causes the discrepancy between the scientific work on history, which maximizes the critical recollection of historical sources to produce thick knowledge, and the vernacular memory of the past in highland Asia as elsewhere, which has adapted to meet the needs of intelligibility and legitimacy for the group today in an economical way. As argued by Pierre Petit in his chapter, the minimalist ways in which local societies record history presents a challenge for social researchers, creating "hollows" that are more extensive than positive information. This situation is very different from more usual forms of ethnography where information can be produced abundantly over time.

3. An Iterative Process Based on Multiple Sources

Whether their interest in the past stems from their wishes for a regressive history to contextualize the present or from a willingness to understand how current discourses instrumentalize the past as a resource,

social scientists have no choice but to come to terms with history. This is often unexpected, and scholars usually confess that they improvise with this requirement.

To answer the challenge, most contributors to this volume combine written and oral sources, and they praise the benefits gained from doing so. The benefits of this crossover are many. Combining sources can confirm information, add details, and pose questions. Disparities between written and oral sources often act as teasers for researchers, pointing to unexpected directions to investigate and new questions to address. In his chapter, Petit explains that the information he found in the French colonial archives of Aix-en-Provence were instrumental in designing new questions about colonial times to ask during fieldwork, notably regarding past economic activities and trade routes. These refined questions prompted significantly more comments from informants than his previous, less precise ones. Conversely, when Petit cross-checked the oral narratives he collected during fieldwork with data he gathered in the archives, further speculation ensued, moving back in time to events up to the early nineteenth century, which incidentally demonstrate the historical depth of oral traditions in the region.

In most instances covered in this book, the iterative process began with ethnographic field research, subsequently complemented and energized by an exploration of archives and written documents. For example, Vanina Bouté and Wang Ming-ke explain how merging oral and written sources was key to shedding new light on ethnogenesis among the Phunoy and the Qiang/Rma. Vatthana Pholsena proceeded similarly to analyze the rise in power of the Phu Tai in Central Laos from the seventeenth century onward. For Christian Lentz, on the other hand, while his work started in archives, he also underscores the benefits of his regular travels to the Điện Biên Phủ region, where he gained a sense of scale, agricultural cycles, evolving toponyms, interethnic backgrounds, and open-ended state interventions—in short, of the various “historical rhythms” of that area. In his view, these intimate field experiences enabled him to mentally reconstruct what happened in the 1940s and 1950s, when the region was progressively reframed as part of the nascent Vietnamese state.

Archives are unique windows into the past, but historical criticism is mandatory to contextualize the documents (Stocking 1991; Pels and Salemink 1999; Salemink 2003; Michaud 2007; Stoler 2009). Jean Michaud notes that the field reports he collected were authored by

French military officers and showed the predictable stereotypes typical of the French colonial project. That said, he also notes that the ethnographies were usually written with care and provide consistent descriptions of the highland societies at that time like no other contemporaneous source. In terms of methods, Michaud insists on patience and organization when conducting in-depth archival search, as collections can be scattered in diverse institutions governed by different bodies, each with their own sets of access and use rules. Both Michaud and Lentz point out that luck plays a significant role when dealing with archives, and they recommend that researchers keep snooping beyond and beside the intended targets.

Historical information can be drawn from a wide array of starting points. Magnus Fiskesjö demonstrates that anthropological history can benefit from an inspection of names and anthroponyms; Bouté and Wang do the same with ethnonyms, as do Lentz, Bouté, and Beaud with toponyms. These are all rich sources on the past, locales having often been (re)named through time following major as much as minor events. The landscape can also serve as a starting point for historical interpretation (Pholsena and Tappe 2013), and the technique of photo analysis can play a similar role, as exemplified by Michaud in weaving the story of a Hmong messiah from pictures (2020b). Ghost stories, legends, or “solidified” rumors linking historical events to hidden powers can also be used as starting points for grasping the local sense of history (Kwon 2008; High and Petit 2013).

Such diversity of sources and foci presents a real challenge for untrained researchers. Faced with this trial, contributors to this book seem to relish—and sometimes possibly indulge—in this largely unexpected change of registers, protocols, and disciplinary mind frames for their work. Eclecticism can become a treat to researchers, and their curiosity, rekindled by new and unexpected material, added to the body of their research and energizing it further. Enjoyment and pleasure are also needed for carrying out research in the long term. Curiously, social scientists are rather discreet, in their writings at least, about the pleasure they can derive from doing research, as if it were an improper or shameful topic.

4. History—or Lack of History—from Below

Fifty years ago, in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Robert M. Carmack took stock of the field of “ethnohistory,” aiming to capture the various

definitions, methods, and objectives allotted to this subdiscipline. The final set of definitions he discussed equated ethnohistory with “folk history”—that is, the way local populations conceive history in their own terms, in the same sense that ethnobotany is the endogenous botany developed by a specific society (Carmack 1972, 239–242). We propose that such considerations have not aged one bit and still usefully inform the way human groups construct their own history, and that they should be dealt with more attentively. For instance, E. Valentine Daniel (1996) talked about “historical” vs. “mythical” representations of the past, and Stevan Harrell (2001) contrasted a Chinese “historical” representation with a Nuosu “genealogical” one. What are the representational, lexical, and material frames people activate when addressing their past? What is an emic standpoint on history?

Several authors in this volume examine this issue, which is surprisingly not frequently addressed in reference works on historical anthropology (for instance, Axel 2002). In some societies, history does not seem to be a topic at all. Doing fieldwork in the 1980s among the Bru of Central Vietnam, Gábor Vargyas was utterly surprised by their lack of interest in things of the past. This Bru community had no local specialists of collective memory, no genealogies or yesteryears’ heroes, and no oral tradition or public storytelling related to the past. Besides casual comments addressed to the passing anthropologist, funerals seemed to be the only public circumstance when the past could be rekindled, though in a generic way: the ancestors had to be called to safely conduct the process of turning the “recent” dead into ancestors. Otherwise, all seemed to indicate that the Bru formed a history-repellent society, so to speak. Michaud (2020b) has also argued a very similar point about the Hmong, expressed through the potentially strategic absence of a common script into which their past could be recorded.

On the other hand, Pascale-Marie Milan shows that the Na of the Yunnan-Sichuan frontier favorably appraise the capacity to retell the past, which is evenly distributed across the population and straddles the borders of gender. “Telling stories about the past is useful today” was a saying often repeated to her. The Na use lexical categories in relation to this aptitude. And the Tai Vat discussed by Petit refer to the narratives of the main events of their past as *pavat*, a word they share with their Lao neighbors. *Pavat* has a meaning close to a chronicle in European historiography. For the male elites of the Tai Vat, being able to publicly tell stories about the past is a valued asset to gain respect.

Sometimes, when there is no specific term to refer to historical narratives, the latter may still appear as a practical category. According to Wang Ming-ke, among the Qiang/Rma of Yunnan, there is no specific word to convey the western meaning of history. Yet, people use the expression “long ago” (*zegvea*) when they engage in narrating the past, sometimes repeated twice to refer to the very distant past. Milan noticed expressions used by the Na in conversation to underline the historical character of what they were saying: “this is how we say” or “my mother (or grandmother) told me the story like that.” The role of such locutions when recalling the past emphasizes that discussions on history are always situated speech acts (Austin 1962). They rely on codes, are performative, and are determined by considerations well beyond the urge to pass on factual information about the past.

Back to our discussion on ethnohistory as folk history, favoring an emic perspective also creates a distance from logocentric approaches often favored in Western historical analysis. History from below and without written text can be conveyed by means other than language alone, like material supports and corporal performances. Beaud shows that the Guan Suo opera performances send viewers back to the imperial era in Yunnan. Fiskesjö recommends that physical supports of various kinds must also be considered when probing historical memory, as the skull alleys built by the Wa at the entrance of their villages, where the bones of vanquished enemies are set on display to remind everyone of the fighting deeds of the community—until the Chinese Communist regime put an end to them.

Research in the field of folk history has also long underscored issues of a more encompassing nature, like the global perspectives on history developed by different groups. Or the “cultural attitude a people have with regard to the passage of time itself” (Carmack 1972, 239), a concern illustrated by Benjamin Whorf’s (1956) famous discussion on the conceptualization of time among the Hopi, and by Marshall Sahlins (1985) in *Islands of History*. Some contributors to this volume address related concerns. Beaud highlights the cyclical dimension of local history in the Yunnan villages where she worked, a feature she had to face to disentangle what seemed like inconsistencies from a chronological point of view. Fiskesjö points to the sense of decline pervading the Wa’s conception of their own history. The Wa see themselves as the original humans on Earth and believe that this makes them the keepers of ritual stability for all of humankind, a burden that they carry on despite the ungratefulness

of others. The loss of their former autonomy due to their forced inclusion into the Chinese nation has caused a deep feeling of alienation, triggering anxieties about the present and, by the same token, about what the future has in store for them.

5. A Gendered Access to the Past—and Writing about It

Pascale-Marie Milan, a single woman researching the matrilineal society of the Na in China, convincingly illustrates what many have demonstrated before and elsewhere—that is, how the gender of the researcher impacts access to channels of knowledge, which also entails different experiences and, ultimately, gendered outputs. It is no coincidence that in this book, women's voices have been collected and transmitted mostly by female researchers. While no chapter in this volume is specifically dedicated to the gendered dimension of memory, nearly all chapters show that authors as well as a number of informants, aware of their positionality, do factor in the implications of being (and being categorized as) gendered.

In Asian upland societies that view knowledge on the past as an asset, this domain can be the preserve of a few endogenous authorities, in particular male elders in power and/or ritual positions. Such experts can have no desire or pressing interest in sharing this privilege, as shown in chapters by Magnus Fiskesjö and Pierre Petit. Often, knowledge about times gone by is not treated as a common good in the highlands. The romantic representation of local societies as a milieu where the elders generously hand over traditions to the youth is generally mistaken. Typically, elders use this license sparingly and only amid their peers or to form the next generation of similar elites.

Gender asymmetries relate to access to knowledge in general, including things of the past. In Jean Michaud's study of French colonial archives, it became clear that not only were all the French ethnographers who were recording data at the turn of the twentieth century male officers, but all their informants were notables, meaning indigenous male leaders. And internally, among the Tai Vat, the spatial context where history is usually evoked favors transmission between elder men: younger men and women of all ages are not to be within hearing distance of these discussions. In Petit's chapter, as in Bouté's about the Phunoy of northern Laos, women interviewed on the past nearly always defer to men—except for some women married to local leaders, who partook in the daily practice of power through this relationship.

This obvious gender disparity regarding historical knowledge leads to a further question: what could a history of the highlands recorded and retold in a properly women-centered perspective be like? In all our chapters, there is little evidence of literary genres produced or retold by women, such as songs or oral traditions related to historical contents. However, Turner and Delisle report having had rich oral history conversations with elder Hmong women who could answer a broad range of questions with similar assurance as elder Hmong men. They also identified fields of knowledge through time that appear to be typically women-focused and on which men had little to say; this has more to do with cultural transmission than with historical memory, properly speaking, but the two processes are partly entwined. Another notable exception is life stories: Milan, Pholsena, and Turner and Delisle gathered women's biographies during their research, revealing a women-centered historical competency—see also Gail Hershatter (2011) on female historical memory among northern China rural peasants. We suggest that it is imperative to investigate this neglected field further.

Besides gender, other social divides, such as age, lineage, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic levels, may play a role in the unequal distribution of historical knowledge in highland societies. Moreover, these factors would all be promising entry points for new research. How do young highlanders appraise the local history of their group and their region? How do they make sense of the past, caught as they are between the national schoolbooks and the conversations they catch from elders, as noted by Delisle and Turner? This question consequently demands taking notice and addressing the coexistence of different narratives on the past that will be further unpacked in issue 7 below.

6. War and Violence

The legacies of warfare and violence are variables lurking behind this whole book. It is an uncommon situation that three countries with common borders could repeatedly share simultaneous occurrences of wars that were not fought primarily against each other. In China, Vietnam, and Laos, this refers to wars against imperial powers: in Vietnam and Laos, against France, and in China, against Japan and to a lesser degree several European powers entrenched on its coastline. These gradually morphed into civil wars fought internally between pro- and antirevolutionary factions. They devastated all three for decades, involving the

active participation of foreign powers of the first order—the United States and the USSR with their respective allies, of course, and China as one of the covert protagonists in the Indochina Wars. This situation was particularly tricky as many of the upland groups were fighting other nationals, not foreigners or even parts of their own groups, blurring the limits of trust for a long time.

Besides the wars, self-created internal violence based on ideological principles caused massive waves of diasporic flows combined with forced internment and communist reeducation of dissidents. In China, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution triggered the death of tens of millions. Concurrently, the American embargo promoted hunger and suppressed economic development in Vietnam for two more decades after 1975, with the implosion of the USSR starving that country as well as Laos for a decade. As if that was not enough, cross-border wars directly involved upland populations, such as the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of 1979 and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1979.

Thus, it is necessary to consider life anywhere in these countries as connected to warfare and violence: this has marked the landscape and socio-scape of the region, in all senses of the terms (Pholsena and Tappe 2013). Jean Michaud's chapter addresses this aspect the most directly by focusing on the intelligence the colonial military needed to gather about upland cultures and social organizations. War and ideological repression also appear prominently in the chapters by Vatthana Pholsena, directing the spotlight on war veterans; by Christian Lentz with the national and international fame of his subject, the Điện Biên Phủ battles and the discourse about it today; and by Gábor Vargyas with the war and postwar anxiety regarding recalling the past. In the other chapters, war and forced socialist normalization are always lingering in the background.

Tellingly, the China-based chapters less explicitly raise issues of violence, in part because a certain idea of "peace" has been imposed on the Chinese population after 1949 and has strongly impacted local discourses on the past. This absence might also, it could be argued, derive from the dominant state narrative in China that now deliberately discards the "diseases" of the past (chiefly feudalism) and promotes a unified "happy" image of its populations on the margins. It is then in subtle daily dealings, as shown in Magnus Fiskesjö's and Pascale-Marie Milan's chapters, that the issue of structural violence keeps arising, rarely obvious but always forcefully effective.

7. Local Stories versus National Metanarratives

“Distance-demolishing technologies” (Scott 2009, 11) have contributed to the integration, willingly or not, of highland communities into modern nation-states based on lowland cultural standards. Inclusion into the national network of physical and virtual communication has greatly facilitated the generalization of mandatory schooling for all children and, by the same token, the dissemination of an official vision of history throughout the highlands. Also contributing greatly to the spread of national narratives are television news and programs, advertisements, monuments, tourist infrastructure, and official speeches. The coexistence of a national narrative with local versions of history is explicitly addressed in over half the chapters.

The general script of official national history is largely shared by the three Marxist-Leninist states, in particular when it relates to dealing with upland minority groups, the “minority nationalities” (Michaud 2009). History is appraised through moral and evolutionary lenses, and the socialist revolution is presented as having rescued a powerless population from feudal domination, colonial indolence—and violence—and social backwardness. The “Liberation Wars” in China, Vietnam, and Laos have been made the central trope of this narrative, amounting to no less than the triumph of good over evil—“a tale of national salvation” (Tappe 2013, 437). Communist parties are now leading the three nations toward science, progress, prosperity, and the brightest possible future. As this official narrative hinges on the successful (re)unification of previously disunited countries, references to any rift along ethnic lines are strictly prohibited and, if need be, actively censored (Vargyas, this volume; Petit 2013; Michaud 2022). This (r)evolutionary metanarrative becomes the only possible version of history; it lays the foundations of the single-party state and legitimates the regime, which is the heir to the heroes of the liberation struggle. Therefore, anyone questioning this official history is liable to be deemed unpatriotic and a threat to the nation.

Local versions of history are impacted by the increasing pressure of the national narrative. Depending on context and power balance, these local versions coexist and often hybridize with the national one, or they are progressively demolished by the state’s informational steam roller. Pascale-Marie Milan describes the coexistence of two sets of historical narratives among the Na of China. These are depicted in the

official account of the Na as a surviving primitive matriarchal society, which is consistent with the evolutionist perspective of Marxist social history. Seeing an opportunity to partake in the tourist bonanza, the Na adapt to this situation by making onstage performances that fit the mainstream Chinese tourist expectations, notably that of going back to the latter's own ancient roots in a kind of internal orientalism (Schein 1997). But a backstage also exists for the insiders, as the Na are keenly aware of the fallacy of what they pretend to be for tourist consumption.

Local learned notables, with knowledge and/or texts about the past of their communities, play a pivotal role in articulating together the different historical narratives. Often doubling as local historians, these (mostly men) can promote a particular version of the local history and tune it more or less precisely to the national metanarrative. This is illustrated by Vatthana Pholsena, who details how a Bru officer of the Lao Front for National Construction interviewed his informants according to the script of the national historiography. Such figures fully participate in the ongoing local discussion about the past, influencing not only the vernacular traditions but also, to various degrees, the official story. Such elites become more and more common with the ongoing stratification of upland societies and increased access to (higher) education. Certainly, the category of "local historians" is an abstraction that covers a diversity of situations, ranging from the schoolmaster who jots down the genealogy of the village founding families as documented by Petit, to state officers who, following an administrative request or by their own volition, embark on writing the "true" history of the area where they work and sometimes originate from, as shown by Bouté and Pholsena. These histories often glorify the local heroes of the Liberation Wars, sometimes even faulting the "mainstream" histories for underestimating the role of their group in the national history (Harrell and Li 2004). The situation is different when such historians write from abroad, as discussed by Fiskesjö in this volume, or when war refugees of the diaspora feel free to express themselves unreservedly on behalf of their group, or when they entrust a Western scholar with these refugees' historical drama (Jonsson 2014).

8. From Revolutionary Destruction to the Glorification of National Heritage

Relating to the past in these uplands has never been a simple or stable affair. All three countries experienced a revolutionary watershed during

which everything connected with the “feudal” past was deemed undesirable and condemned as anachronisms founded on superstitions that could impede the harmonious development of the new socialist nation. In Vietnam, friends of ours who were children in the 1980s confess that when playing in local temples, they sometimes willingly broke artifacts; such iconoclasm was considered cute and revolutionary by many adults (see also Kwon 2006, 106–107).

But after this frenzy of obliteration of the visible signs of a shameful ancient regime, prerevolutionary monuments and symbols started being restored in what can be considered an ambiguous process, taking place in ways that shrewdly evade the full rehabilitation of their former status and symbolism. While this revisionism applies to the national level, it also pervades in the highland margins. In the latter, the restored cultural assets must obey a new, ascribed status of “heritage,” or of “living fossil” (*huo huashi* in China). Sylvie Beaud describes how the Guan Suo Opera was reshaped as valued local heritage after decades of proscription as an archaic superstition earmarked for eradication. On the Yunnan-Sichuan border, as explained by Milan, the Na also had to adapt elements of their culture to become acceptable to Han cultural canons, turning them into a pretty “living fossil” suitable for consumption by national tourists. Wang shows that the Qiang are undergoing a similar process in relation to ethnic tourism, which induces the branding of their aboriginality and magnifies their presumed backwardness, putting them “at the edge of history.”

Summoning or restoring prerevolutionary times is hence thinkable, but only along lines that make it harmless to the current regime. What is thus kept alive boils down to “lovely” customs, “ravishing” architecture, “colorful” dress, and “exotic” ritual survivals that honor the deep historical roots of the socialist nation, along entirely apolitical means (Nyiri 2006; Petit 2008; Michaud 2009). In the longer term, will such symbols of the past and the diversity of the nation, duly tuned to the glory of the harmonious multiethnic but single-minded socialist nation, remain forever under the control of the state? Could some upland groups divert and even subvert them to fit their own agenda, perhaps only surreptitiously? In any case, it is plausible that the emerging strategy of heritage-making can be increasingly harnessed by local groups to unexpected ends. This is also true for the inscription of local histories into national narratives by local historians, as we have mentioned in the last section.

9. Reflexivity and Positionality in Authoritarian Situations

In *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, Oscar Salemink (2003) vividly described the embeddedness of ethnography in the political, economic, and sometimes militaristic context of its time. On a more global scale, Andrew Willford and Eric Tagliacozzo (2009) explored the evolving relations between history and anthropology, and argue for the necessity of situating these relations in the broader political context of the colonial and postcolonial world. No one speaks from nowhere. A critically reflexive posture combined with transparent and explicit positionality consideration has been agreed upon by all authors in this book, stressing the practical, political, and cultural processes of their research and analyses. Gender, age, ethnicity and racial ascription, nationality, language(s), religion(s), and other assigned categories all impact interactions in the course of any research, and this book is no exception (Bamo, Harrell, and Lunzy 2011; Meadow 2013; Turner 2013a; Schnegg 2014). We consider it essential to make the readers aware of the conditions of our work, while carefully dodging the type of near narcissism that could sometimes surface during the heyday of postmodernist social science.

As we hope to have made abundantly clear above, handling history under socialist regimes requires great care. History is heavily politicized as a body of instrumental knowledge, and hence, it is a treacherous terrain to tread for individual social scientists. When addressing delicate topics regarding ethnic minorities in sensitive borderlands for whom top-down administration is the norm, potential pitfalls multiply. Scholars' frequent proclamations on the innocuous character of their research, buttressed by their individual good will, do not take reality fully into account and could even be called naïve. This then leads to the additional conundrum of deciding what to publish and in what shape, languages, scripts, and types of media.

The stakes in accessing the field are discussed by about half our contributors, their arguments connecting to issues raised in books on fieldwork in the region (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Turner 2013a). A wide range of postures have been taken by researchers in relation to state gatekeepers policing access to field sites and local populations. Choice can be very narrow at times, and many situations stand beyond researchers' grasps; at other times, these postures can be adjusted through changing circumstances. Among our authors, some prefer to keep a healthy distance from the representatives of state power. Vanina Bouté did her best

to escape the tutelage of the state officers who accompanied her in villages and hindered her research. Sarah Delisle and Sarah Turner, along with Jean Michaud, tried to associate with local state officials as little as feasible, knowing from experience that the former's presence would trigger reservations, self-censorship, and truncated information among their Hmong and Mien participants. Pascale-Marie Milan took great care not to become even narrowly connected with state representatives during her field research. Such prudence does not prohibit linkages with national scholars, but these are elected first for their higher degree of ideological as much as intellectual independence. Formal and routine associations with state-controlled organizations are treated with care.

Nonetheless, other researchers consider that it makes little sense to pretend not to be working "in the footsteps of the communist party," in countries where state control is ubiquitous and where official surveys are common (Hansen 2006). Vatthana Pholsena, Christian Lentz, Wang Ming-ke, Gábor Vargyas, and Pierre Petit have all worked in effective collaboration with state institutions—large organizations, national universities, national academies, and district officers—as it seemed to be the only way to access their field sites. The visibility of this tutelage becomes instrumental in preserving researchers from suspicions of espionage by the administration at all levels. This clearly does not mean these researchers endorse the standards and ideologies of the authoritarian state; it is a pragmatic strategy that can be tweaked daily at the level of personal rapport, which, with time and the gradual building of trust, can often develop into something less intimidating and restrictive than initially suggested. Here, Gábor Vargyas details the conditions he faced in the late 1980s as a researcher from an Eastern European socialist country (Hungary) conducting collaborative work in a "brother country" (Vietnam). His intimacy with the socialist state of mind allowed him and his local colleagues from the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, once trust had been established, to share common views on the bureaucracy and the police-like surveillance system they had to obey. In turn, this community of experience triggered a strong sense of solidarity at the personal level. Among this book's contributors, it is this unique experience that led us to position Vargyas's chapter as a sort of thought-provoking epilogue to this volume.

Inside this atmosphere of state control and permanent surveillance, all researchers experience various degrees of anxiety and fear. These emotions could relate to not being able to reach one's field site, being

expelled from the field, concern for collaborators' safety during fieldwork and after publication, and self-censorship (by local and foreign scholars alike) as a means to dull potential threats. One step further, chapters by Bouté and Fiskesjö also stress the disarray each experienced operating in societies victim to various forms of violence—physical, cultural, structural, and symbolic—worsened by the society's marginal status.

Consequently, it should not come as a surprise that a large majority of the scholars from the People's Republic of China or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam invited to join this book as authors, whom we cannot name for obvious reasons, did not feel comfortable enough to take up the opportunity. Since its authoritative turn, the government of Xi Jinping is highly suspicious of any critical take on the relation between the central state and the internal peripheries, and the prospect of bearing the brunt of the state's wrath have made many very cautious. This pressure is so strong that even some non-Chinese scholars working on China were also wary of joining a project requesting them to show critical reflexivity and making positionality explicit. And understandably so, in terms of safeguarding the right to return to their study sites in the socialist uplands.

All this said, this book proves that field research can still take place under restricted circumstances and, as Michaud (2010a) discussed in relation to Vietnam, that building relations of trust based on reciprocity is a key to success. In his chapter, Lentz vividly describes how he managed to break the ice with the employees of the archive center where he worked in Hanoi. Being an American working on the Indochina Wars is not a stress-free position in Vietnam. But after a rocky start, he managed to join everyday interactions and become involved in the staff's discussions about their professional concerns. This relationship required sharing breaks and snacks with the staff, joining in with a few dance steps, providing help to repair the air-conditioning system, and contributing to a trilingual edition of the user manual for the archive's holdings. Other related forms of everyday exchange and working cooperation are mentioned throughout the volume, notably in the contribution by Vargyas, who engaged in helping scholars of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences to access funding to travel abroad.

10. Ethics

It flows from the previous points that the elephant in the room here—ethics—matters greatly when conducting research with groups at risk

within ideologically rigid states. We are not merely talking about procedural ethics following the development of ethics boards across North America and beyond; we are above all concerned with the deeper matter of moral ethics, individual as much as collective (Harrell and Li 2003; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Dowling 2010).

Under regimes where the rule of law is not fully functioning, individual rights are always at risk, and protecting research assistants and research participants becomes a high priority. There is often a dilemma between the option—or sometimes the Western institutional requirement—to anonymize information, cover tracks, and protect people from retaliation, and the commitment to duly acknowledge all people involved in the research process. Answering these two imperatives is a balancing act: anonymity is imprecise, unfair, frustrating, and possibly unscientific, while nominal acknowledgment wields the potential to inflict grievous harm. In our view, interaction with trusted persons and research assistants in the field, discussion with colleagues facing similar issues, and finding inspiration in codes of ethics like the one popularized by the American Anthropological Association can all be of value in making informed decisions. We are concerned that the growing bureaucratic requirements in Europe, the Americas, and Australasia regarding the use of official procedures and forms (for instance, written informed consent) might induce a guilt-relieving treatment where boxes are ticked and official permissions granted, putting personal morals to rest. Our collective experience in China, Vietnam, and Laos rather pleads for a sensible, reflexive, context-driven, locally informed, peer-discussed, and iterative way of dealing with ethical issues, far from the mere rubber-stamping based on bureaucratic principles.

The pitfalls of field research for collaborators and researchers alike appears clearly in Gábor Vargyas's chapter. In 1989, he secretly interviewed a Bru man who ended up on the wrong (i.e., South Vietnam/American) side during the Second Indochina War. This interview happened only due to trust between the two men. The interviewee at first proclaimed that if his story was to be disclosed, "the Kinh (the Vietnamese ethnic majority) will slaughter me." The series of nightly discussions resulted in a lengthy recording whose transcription and translation, due to strategic and ethical considerations, was only completed in 2007 after the death of the interviewee. Due to a tense political situation in Vietnam's Central Highlands at the time, Vargyas always feared that local policemen might enquire more insistently and learn

of the content of the interview. This could have resulted in harmful consequences for Vargyas himself and for relatives and acquaintances of the late interviewee.

Vargyas also faced the dilemma of how to make this material reach the public eye. More than thirty years after its collection, he has decided to publish the life story in full. With the interviewee now gone, along with presumably the whole generation of those who have been involved in the events, the potential harmful consequences stand at a lower level. The process is still challenging for various reasons, and far from completion.

Finally, ethical concerns also have much to do with our institutional collaborators, especially with our local research assistants, whatever their ethnicity might be. How can we make sure no harm is done to them in the process? How can we help them in their career as they do for us (Turner 2013b)? How can we make sure that despite anonymity, reciprocity remains key in avoiding the stigma of extractive research? These questions remain open.

Concluding Thoughts

Considering the authors assembled in this book and the rich experiences they have shared with us, we believe it matters greatly to keep in mind that long-term, in some cases lifelong, research devoted to a society of limited demography and territory—one peripheral to the larger dominant cultures of a region—can be hard to sell to short-term and result-oriented funding bodies, universities, and sometimes even colleagues. We believe this book will provide arguments for a reasoned answer reaching beyond statistical weight, normativity, and supposedly immanent macroscopic truths. It is a plea for the individual, the hidden, and the infrequent, in other words for what life is really like on the ground, as opposed to imagined homogeneity, recurrence, legibility, and unambiguousness. It is a plea to embrace the challenge of complex thinking. Social scientists interested in micro-societies on the margins of strong centralized states can be derided by other, often state-focused scientists, as unpractical idealists and dreamers—“basket weavers.”⁸ Historians engaged in micro-history, in comparison with those involved in the more classical approaches of their discipline, can also be routinely reproved. Yet, the most central benefit of a historical reading in the social sciences applied to highland societies in Asia has been

most fittingly underscored by historian Victor Lieberman, in his comments on Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*: "Scott's central achievement, then, is to bring hill peoples into the mainstream of regional history by uncovering their relation to lowland states and societies. [. . .] Scott has rescued hill peoples from assumptions of stasis, primitivism, essentialism, and isolation" (Lieberman 2010, 36). In short, he has carried their voices and highlighted their agency.

Scott was not the first one to do that of course, but he is the most widely read scholar to have done so. Indeed, conducting historical anthropology is instrumental in multiplying standpoints on historical processes that have otherwise been approached solely from the perspective of the dominant polities controlling the fertile and heavily populated lowlands, thus depriving local upland subjects from their capacity for original agency. This is all the more visible in relation to matters like ethnogenesis or wars in the near as much as distant past. This also fosters substantial knowledge on the relationship between dominated societies and the nation-states with which they now find their destiny enmeshed. In this sense, the contributions to this volume substantiate what is arguably the central project of historical anthropology: "show(ing) up the ways that the supposed margins and metropolises, or peripheries and centers, fold into, constitute or disrupt one another" (Axel 2002, 2).

Beyond the reductionist binary of submission versus resistance, there is ample and inviting room for other relations made of vernacularization, hybridization, accommodation, tweaking, and coexistence on many different scales. To be bluntly realistic, in situations of political and demographic weakness and cultural vulnerability, forms of accommodation are mandatory for the smaller players. There is no possibility to escape the heavy presence of the state—strongly encouraged by international bodies and global strategies—as well as the symbolic and institutional straitjacket it imposes on subaltern societies dwelling in borderlands and internal peripheries. This is as true for upland Southeast Asia as it is for aboriginal Australia or indigenous Americas.

Biographies are highly relevant in producing a change in the scale of analysis (Waterson 2006). They help bring information to the fore that would remain totally invisible when adopting solely a macroscopic appraisal of history. Vathana Pholsena provides a fine example of that potential with her chapter based on life stories of Lao women engaged in the Revolutionary War. She argues that such an approach sheds light on local lives that would have otherwise remained below the radar if

examining history through an event-oriented bias or a focus on politics and institutions. With her view from below, we see in all clarity that oral history is a way to investigate the gray zone between the factuality of events and what lies inside the witnesses' minds. This approach promotes a rich way to explore the subjectivity of experience in history, its phenomenology, but also the agency of the various actors taking part in the events.

This, in truth, is what this whole book is about.

Notes

1. Including through archaeology. The field of archaeology is yet to expand into much of the highlands of Southeast Asia (Michaud 2016, 13–14) and it was therefore left out of this discussion.

2. Although, it would not be fair to ascribe the whole scholarly production on history in the highlands to the influence of Scott's book. For instance, monographs authored since the 2000s include Vargyas (2000), Michaud (2007), Bouté (2011, 2018), Le Failler (2014), Davis (2017), Lentz (2019), Nguyễn (2019), and Petit (2020), underscoring the vitality of historical anthropology in this highland region.

3. This was actually how some political scientists cheekily labeled social anthropologists in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies at the University of Hull, UK, when Jean Michaud worked there in the late 1990s.

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