

Introduction

The main purpose of this book is to bring to the attention of the general public an important, though little-known, cluster of societies of Asia. Lowland majorities that occupy fertile plains and coastal areas of the southeast section of the Asian landmass are well known in the West; namely the Han Chinese, the Viet, the Thai, the Burmans, the Khmer, the Lao. But how many, in the broader international community, have heard of the Yi or the Tujia, with a population of 8 million each? Or the Dong, the Buyi, and the Yao, each weighing 3 million on the demographic scale? In fact, even the massive Zhuang, with 16 million, have constantly failed to make the news outside China.

Like the Kurds, who were addressed in the first volume published in the Historical Dictionaries of Peoples and Cultures series of Scarecrow Press, the Asian societies dealt with here spread over several countries. Like the Kurds, each of these constitutes a minority. However, their total number is about three times that of the Kurds. Moreover, they show drastic linguistic and cultural differences among themselves. These groups, living in the highlands at a distance from the densely populated deltas, are in fact geographically dispersed and politically fragmented. Among them, they speak hundreds of languages from five language families. Their economic systems range from hunting and gathering, to forest horticulture, rice growing agriculture—for the majority—and, for a growing proportion, to wage work in the most modern and technologically advanced urban areas of East and Southeast Asia.

Indeed, the highland societies of the mainland Southeast Asian massif offer so much cultural originality that they have become prized targets for the international industry of ethnic tourism, a new economic lifeline that may—but perhaps only may—prove crucial to the preservation of their distinct identities in the face of persistent pressures toward national cultural integration, and the imperatives of the market economy threatening to turn them into little more than commodities.

THE HIGHLAND PEOPLES

Attempting to summarize competently the staggering cultural diversity found in the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia is a daunting task. The latest census data on Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China, the six countries under consideration here, yield the figure of approximately 130 million individuals belonging to one or another of what each of these countries calls, in its own way, its “ethnic minorities.” Of particular interest to this dictionary, 80 million of these people live in the Asian highlands extending east from the Himalayas. This is, in demographic terms, equal to the population of Vietnam, the most populous country in mainland Southeast Asia. Or one can also calculate that it is 15 million more than the population of Thailand, nearly twice the population of Burma, and five times the combined population of Laos and Cambodia.

Across these six countries, the official numbers of different highland ethnic minority groups accounting for the 80 millions are 49 in Vietnam, 46 in Laos, 29 in China, 11 in Thailand, and an estimated 21 in Burma and 14 in Cambodia. However, given the overlap between these national lists, linked to the fact that several ethnic denominations straddle borders, merely adding up these numbers cannot get to the essence of the matter. In reality, the possible number of distinct ethnic identities in the highlands can be over a thousand when taking into account the array of local names and language variations within each group. Such is the linguistic and cultural variety in these mountains that, combined with the incomplete state of scientific knowledge about these peoples, no authoritative figures can be obtained about how many groups there are.

Generically, the mainland Southeast Asian massif’s peoples are variously called, when official vernacular terms are translated into English, mountain people, highlanders, hill tribes, Nations, Nationalities, minorities, Minority Nationalities, or National Minorities. Across time, countries, and political regimes, agreement has never been reached about which ethnonyms (ethnic names) should be assigned to most highland groups, in particular those found in more than one country. The truth of the matter is that most names used officially are exonyms, names groups are given by their neighbors regardless of what they themselves might prefer to be called. The problem with exonyms is that

they are often misleading. If a certain proportion can be considered appropriate, some are outright derogatory or offensive. For instance, highlanders in the southern Annam Range were for a long time generically called *Moi*, “savages,” encapsulating their cultural subordination. The generic terms *Kha* in Laos, and *Man*, *Miao*, and *Lolo* in China were used for a long time with similar negative connotations. Other exonyms are simply faulty, too broad, or applied to the wrong people. In China, the Miao, Tujia, and Zhuang all number 8 million or more. Surely subgroups could be meaningfully acknowledged and labeled with different, more suitable names. Another very common and rather rudimentary practice in assigning exonyms consists of using colors of the attire to differentiate subgroups, such as Red, White, and Striped Miao; White, Black, and Red Thai; and many more. Overall, studies have shown that exonyms are often terms of marginalization, and as such, they tell us more about the preconceptions of the naming groups than anything useful about the peoples being named.

In search of a solution to the naming dilemma, one could also take into account autonyms, or names members of a society assign to themselves regardless of what their neighbors might call them. Taking popular examples in the West, the Sioux prefer to call themselves Lakota, the Eskimos are in reality Inuit, the Laps are Saami, etc. As a rule, it is widely accepted that autonyms are more suitable and more respectful than exonyms. Unfortunately, on the ground autonyms show such a degree of diversity and inconsistency, often with no rational justification, that a logical mind might find it impossible to manage at the macrolevel. Regionalisms prevail even from one watershed to the next, clan names are sometimes swapped with group names, local topographical features become part of names, and variations show up even within the smallest groups, all such discrepancies being most often due to an all-too-human desire to distinguish oneself—often in spite of logic. And even when a name is shared by a significant number of persons, local pronunciation often drifts in ways that can sometimes prove perplexing to the outside observer. The utmost care is thus required when assigning and using ethnonyms in the high region, disparity being far more prevalent than regularity. Popular, supposedly definitive terminology, such as that printed in coffee table books and tourist guidebooks, or indeed in the official discourse of several countries in the Peninsula, should be kept in check.

For this dictionary, a compromise solution has been adopted, which was to accept official national ethnonyms but correct mistakes whenever possible and cross-reference to alternative names. Close to 200 ethnonyms thus have their own entries, which is the largest number the relatively humble format of this series allows.

Other dilemmas remain. The deceptively simple notion of “national minority group” itself masks potential pitfalls. First, the bulk of the groups in the mainland Southeast Asian massif are not national. They are in fact transnational, meaning that they are found on both sides of many of the massif’s borders. The Karen, Hani, Lolo, Yao, Kachin, Khmu, Tay, Katu, and Lamet, to name a few, all spread over the massif in two countries or more. Representatives of the Tai linguistic family, the most widespread highland language group, with 33 million speakers, are established in considerable numbers in all six countries.

Second, the term “minority” is only conceptually valid when looking at the situation from within the borders of a single state. With around 5 million Hmong in Asia, equal to the population of Laos, a legitimate and internationally acknowledged sovereign nation, the notion of “minority” is intellectually less than satisfactory when labeling such a numerous group.

Finally, even the word “group” is contentious, as it suggests a sense of community and social cohesion that groups in the region do not all feel or share.

There is another problem: Since they in fact present more differences among themselves than similarities, do the highland societies dwelling in the mainland Southeast Asian massif form a “people”—the explicit object of this series? Is their apparent social and cultural resemblance merely an illusion, because all that they really share, beyond the use of a common ecosystem, is to *not be* one of the dominant lowland majorities that have ruled the region for centuries? The position in this dictionary is that, clearly, no, these dozens of diverse groups do not form a “people.” They constitute instead many “peoples,” a notion that, in this case, must not be defined strictly as a homogeneous, essential entity. What these peoples actually share is a sense of being different from the majorities, a sense of geographical remoteness, and a state of marginality connected to a degree of political and economic distance from the seats of regional power. Geographical remoteness becomes a metaphor for political isolation, and for the subordination of those who are most

likely to have been classified by the powers-that-be, through history, as “savages.” In cultural terms, “peoples,” here, is truly plural and multiple, producing a cultural mosaic with contrasting colors rather than an integrated picture in harmonized shades. Yet when observing from the necessary distance, that mosaic becomes a distinctive and relatable picture, a legitimate subject for a “Dictionary of People,” though clearly an unusual one.

GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

At their maximum extension, the highland groups considered here are scattered over a transnational domain most of the time situated above an elevation of 500 meters (see map 1), an area of approximately 2.5 million square kilometers, approximately the size of Western Europe. From north to south, it includes southern and western Sichuan, all of Guizhou and Yunnan, western and northern Guangxi, western Guangdong, most of northern Burma with an adjacent segment of extreme eastern India, the north and west of Thailand, practically all of Laos above the Mekong Valley, northern and central Vietnam along the Annam Cordillera, and the north and east fringes of Cambodia. It constitutes one immense massif; it is also a terrain of remarkable physical and climatic diversity. Stretching from the temperate Yangtze River system, which roughly demarcates its northern boundary, it moves south to encompass the high ranges extending southeast from the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau, and all the monsoon high country drained by the Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Mekong, and Red Rivers.

In more ways than one, China’s southwest uplands form a world of their own, with a specific logic and an extremely complex, little-known history. The region has political, linguistic, and biophysical particularities, and to address all of these in one book, one has to remain humble and accept that ultimately it may be necessary to devote an individual dictionary only to these peoples. However, it is plainly impossible to address the Peninsula’s highland societies in a satisfactory manner without tapping the source of Chinese history, where the ancestry of so many among them is deeply rooted. The chief drawback of this unavoidable choice is that the large highland population in southwest China is inversely proportional to the ethnological detail available to

distinguish peoples there from one another. Politics in China have dictated the agenda on minorities, and as a consequence, cultural definition is left wanting.

Malaya, beyond the extreme south of the massif, falls outside our scope, as does the Tibetan plateau on the massif's northwestern periphery. In the first case, academics agree that physically and culturally, Malaya, which is disconnected from the massif by the Isthmus of Kra, is also better associated in cultural, linguistic, and historical terms with the Malay world that forms the bulk of the peoples of Maritime Southeast Asia. As for Tibet and its cultural periphery, despite its irrefutable minority status within China, it is more appropriately conceived of as a distinct cultural entity, a centralized and religiously harmonized historical kingdom with a long political existence. Likewise, it would be tempting to try to include in this survey the "Scheduled Tribes" located in the far-eastern portion of northern India, such as those found in the states of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. These groups are indeed marginal and subsidiary in their country and share many similarities with a number of groups in the Peninsula, particularly regarding social organization, cosmology, and agricultural practices. However, their historical and political center of gravity leans more toward the sub-continent than the Peninsula, and consequently, our study area has been limited to the western Burma border.

LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS

Linguistic classification in the massif, which one would assume could offer an appropriate apparatus to discriminate ethnic entities into logical categories, is still unsure and tentative. The mixture of languages spoken in those highlands—dozens of them, though again, no exact figure can be ascertained—cover five major language families: Austronesian, Austro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and Miao-Yao. The first family includes, for instance, Malay as spoken in Maritime Southeast Asia and by a handful of groups dwelling in the southern Annam Cordillera. The second comprises Vietnamese as well as the major Mon-Khmer cluster. The third includes, in addition to the huge branch constituted by Chinese languages, the Tibeto-Burman galaxy. Tai-Kadai, although not the largest, is the most widespread family, with native speakers all over the

massif. Finally, there is Miao-Yao, which is rather specific, yet geographically very dispersed.

This fivefold classification is still debated among linguists. Proto-languages, the common stems of languages, which are today sometimes drastically distinct from one another, are being explored as we speak and as a consequence, particular languages are still being shifted from one family to the other, becoming new subfamilies, or being merged with another related language. Yet with all its flaws language remains one of the safest structural elements for clustering ethnic identities. It constitutes the backbone of the ethnic division used in this dictionary.

The six countries covered here each have a different national language. More problematic is the fact that they also have six different and mutually unintelligible scripts—with the arguable exception of the Thai and Lao scripts, which are related. This lack of homogeneity precludes, in this modest publication, doing justice to the suitable national scripts in entries that would ideally require their use.

HISTORY AND SOURCES

Except for relatively recent Han (Chinese) migrants, most of today's inhabitants of China's southwest highlands are believed to be aboriginal to that region; that is, they were the first human settlers there. Whether they initially settled there of their own will, in response to demographic pressure or political adversity in the lowlands, and whether they were indigenous to another area in the massif than the one they currently occupy, has not been ascertained, and perhaps never will be due to the lack of evidence. In the continuation of the massif into the Peninsula, it is believed that most of the current inhabitants, whatever their ethnicity and nationality today, are migrants from elsewhere on the Asian continent. The most ancient migrations, generally called Proto- and Deutero-Malay, predate the Christian era. A variety of Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic clusters still visible today were part of that ancient movement, as well as some lowland groups still present, such as the Cham, the Khmer, and the Mon. Roughly during the last millennium B.C. and the first millennium A.D., later migration flows, following land routes, brought new groups from the north, who went on to establish their own kingdoms in the fertile and hospitable lowlands. These include the Viet,

the Thai, and the Burman, who either eliminated, assimilated, or pushed farther away or higher up a number of their predecessors. Scholars think that this process is the most likely reason why numerous earlier groups—those Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic speakers—found themselves moving up into the hills and highlands of the massif, such as the Annam Cordillera.

Thus, over time, various kingdoms and empires—Chinese dynasties, Tibetans, the kingdoms of Funan, Chenla, Champa, Angkor, Dai Viet, and Dvaravati, to name a few—claimed sections of the fertile lowland deltas and floodplains surrounding the massif, stamping a definitive political supremacy on specific territories still prevailing to this day: the Han in southern China, the Tibetans on the Tibet plateau, the Viet (Kinh) in northern Vietnam, who went on to snatch south Vietnam from the Cham and the Khmer; the Khmer in Cambodia; the Thai in Siam; and the Burman in Burma (Myanmar). In the process, remnants of an array of earlier groups were displaced to the highlands, where they did their best to survive the new lowland masters, sometimes standing their ground successfully, as did the Tai, Bai, Naxi, and Yi kingdoms in the central massif, but more often merging, acculturating, sometimes plainly assimilating to these predatory lowland neighbors.

Starting in the sixteenth century A.D., within Southwest China and between China and the Peninsula were set in motion a series of smaller, more discrete migration waves. The Han's continuous progress into the southwest highlands of the Middle Empire, accelerated by the import from the Americas of maize suitable for the highland climate, motivated some of the groups that had long lived or found refuge there to get moving again to escape subordination, assimilation, or annihilation. This time, Han occupation of virtually all of the surrounding fertile valleys meant that the only remaining uninhabited zones open to migration were situated farther south and west in the massif's uplands. Starting roughly 500 years ago and peaking at times of major political turmoil in southwest China in the nineteenth century, a more or less constant flow of mountain dwellers left their homes in southern China—and perhaps also far-eastern India—to push south into the nearly vacant high grounds in the south of Yunnan and the northern parts of Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam (they did not reach Cambodia), where they now form a significant portion of the total national highland population. While all the states in the Peninsula have now passed regulations to

curb such unwarranted flow of migrants, it is likely that a fair number of illegal migrants still pour out of China, following family connections and trade networks. The era of massive migration into the Peninsula's highlands, however, is definitely over.

A review of the highland minorities' migrations in the region would not be complete without mention of the most recent migratory wave that took highlanders outside Asia, when the First and Second Indochina Wars in the second half of the 20th century drove several hundred thousand of them onto the road to such faraway destinations as the United States, France, Australia, and Canada. These migrations outside Asia, however, are not covered in any detail by this dictionary.

In terms of archaeological heritage, the longer human groups dwell in one location, the more material evidence they are likely to have left behind. Southwest China, the source of most highland groups in the massif, and northern Burma seem to be the zones where such evidence is the most likely to be unearthed, thanks to the earlier sedimentation of human groups in these highlands. For instance, the Naxi in the Lijiang region, the Dai around the Erh Hai Lake, the Yi in central Yunnan, the Lue of the Sip Song Phan Na, the Zhuang, Kam, and Tujia of Guangxi and Guizhou, and the Shan in eastern Burma have long built their dwellings with lasting material, carved sizeable water works, and erected temples and pagodas. But elsewhere, the picture is less promising. Of the peoples under scrutiny here, particularly in the Peninsula, where many arrived as nomadic or seminomadic migrants, a large number only produced temporary shelters made of biological materials, clothes processed from hemp, and shallow graves that have quickly disappeared. Animism, their chief religious system, did not necessitate the building of lasting worship buildings. The occasional grinding stone and, later, metal tools are for many all they left behind. Even their signature on the landscape—swiddens, foot and horse paths, graveyards, village sites—has been largely reclaimed by the forest or erased by later occupants. In brief, archaeology is of limited assistance in the highlands of the Peninsula compared to the wealth of baked brick and stone buildings, deep foundations, temples, cities and citadels, carved steles, clay or metal artifacts, jewelry, impressive graves, and even libraries left by the surrounding civilizations.

When lacking solid material evidence, historians can opt for working from text. Here again, the harvest for the massif is relatively sparse.

Only a small number of highland groups have fashioned lasting indigenous scripts. The pictographic script of the Naxi in western Yunnan, for example, is an entirely indigenous invention. As a handy substitute, Chinese ideograms were adopted by the Yao, who could thus register their genealogies in colorful codexes. The Tai groups in the Sip Song Chau Tai used variations of the Pali-based Siamese script to write the occasional annals, as did some of their Tai-speaking neighbors in upland Laos. These particular cases aside, it is predominantly when Western Christian missionaries came in contact with local groups in the 19th and early 20th centuries, bringing with them Romanized and syllabic alphabets to translate the Bible into the vernaculars, that most of the massif's languages were for the first time put on paper. The Pollard script, a syllabic assemblage, thus became popular among certain Miao groups in China, while Barney and Smalley's Romanized Popular Alphabet for Hmong is now widely used by the Hmong refugees from Laos living in the West. In the second half of the 20th century, the process of alphabetization of minority languages was pursued and completed by the local governments.

Still, if most highlanders in the Peninsula have not written about themselves before the immediate past, their literate neighbors have been more prolific. Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, and Burmese official annals yield some information on the identity, cultures, and whereabouts of numerous highland groups on the periphery of their domains. Most of the time, this information takes the form of administrative reports filed by passing officials and traders, or by military officers leading parties sent to pacify the uplands. These reports routinely contained a few lines, most often derogatory, about "barbarians" met on those journeys and expeditions. Rampant bigotry, a forceful discourse of exclusion of the "savage" unfavorably compared to the civilized self, lowers the value of these texts for learning about the mountain dwellers in the more distant past. Nevertheless, though modest, imprecise, and distorted, the harvest they yield is priceless.

It was with the arrival of European observers in the massif, toward the middle of the 19th century, that text of a more solid ethnographic nature increased. Up until the end of European colonial rule in the region, Western missionaries and explorers in Southwest China and Thailand, British officials in Burma, and French representatives in French Indochina collected crucial elements of oral history, completed

with their own observations. Hundreds of such reports can be consulted in archives and in old colonial journal issues, which also include photographs, drawings, hand-made and ordinance maps, artifacts, etc. Except in wartime, ethnological, linguistic, and historical research has been growing since then. Today, an army of international scholars issues new publications on one or another of the highland groups every day. These three types of sources—Asian annals, colonial archives, and modern scientific works—are used by academics around the world in combination with field investigations to support the works they produce.

It is also worthwhile to bear in mind that the notion of text can embrace oral text. Oral tradition in the highlands is rich and lively. It can be mined for historical evidence, though great care must be exercised when interpreting such material. One classical form of oral tradition, the myth, embeds information on the creation of the world, the appearance of humans, and the distinctions between male and female seen from within a given tradition. However, poetic license is granted to the storytellers, and myths cannot be assimilated with historical facts. But oral history, unlike mythology, is more reliable. It is composed of events set in the memory of living elders who can testify to their veracity—or lie about them. When collected with care and cross-checked for error or distortion, oral history yields valuable pictures painted with what the subjects have themselves experienced firsthand. On a longer time scale, oral history can include information passed across a few generations, though in such cases additional confirmation is needed from other sources. Thus, when no archaeological evidence can be found or used to confirm, for example, the moment a given group actually entered a region for the first time, and the written records are mute or nonexistent, oral history can generally give a relatively dependable account.

RELIGION AND RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

The variety of religious beliefs and practices in the highlands ranges from early forms of animism to shamanism, ancestor worship, geomancy, and ultimately local syncretism, feeding on constituted world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and philosophies like Confucianism and Taoism. Such diversity cannot be

addressed here. Instead, a broad picture of how religious combinations materialized among the highland groups is drawn.

Perhaps half of the highland minorities in the mainland Southeast Asian massif do not follow, at least not in full, one of the dominant world religions mentioned above. Among a significant proportion of the ones who do, it is actually a syncretic version that they practice. At any rate, many of the highland societies still are, or were until recently, what anthropologists call generically “animists.” The notion of animism is a broad and convenient umbrella created to cover the variety of original religious systems of all human societies, based on the veneration of various elements of nature, hence the term “animism,” that is, the practice of assigning a “soul” (*anima*) to objects or natural phenomena. It refers to a world of benevolent and malevolent spirits, ghosts of deceased ancestors, a universe that constantly needs to be actively dealt with as its influence reaches everything from the newborn’s health to house location and shape, agricultural practices, food restrictions, migration patterns, or the final resting place of the dead. To propitiate these otherworldly spirits, to cure illnesses, defeat bad luck, or simply negotiate for a better living, a range of intercessors are needed, both men and women, who are generally called in the vernaculars “spirit doctors” or, more commonly in the West, priests and shamans.

No so-called pure forms of animism exist today in these highlands, as total isolation is a thing of the past—if indeed it ever existed. Over time, intergroup contacts and human movement caused original forms of religious beliefs and accompanying rituals to be altered by neighboring or competing belief systems and practices. Before European involvement, diverse types of syncretism gradually occurred among varieties of animistic beliefs and practices inside the region, which were further blended later when Confucianism and Taoism spread in China; Hinduism in western Burma and around the ancient Khmer and Cham kingdoms in the lower Mekong basin; Buddhism expanded virtually all over the Peninsula, taking over Hinduism; and when Muslim merchants and craftspeople migrated from northern to Southwest China and eventually into the extreme north and south of the Peninsula. Then with European colonists came forms of Christianity, which were proposed to lowlanders and highlanders alike, often playing into a political strategy of divide-and-rule that still sets apart today’s Christianized highland groups in Burma and Vietnam from the overwhelmingly Buddhist lowland majorities.

This religious distinction between highlanders and national majorities is one of the most serious sources of ill-feeling in the Peninsula at the moment. A case in point is provided by those inhabitants of the Central Highlands in southern Vietnam. A colonial religious conversion to Catholicism of many groups there played a central role in ensuring that they would support the anticommunist forces during the Indochina Wars. Defeated in 1975, these groups are now being monitored closely by a Vietnamese state that distrusts them. Not helping their cause is the fact that these Christianized groups keep in touch with some of their fighting representatives who took refuge in the United States and elsewhere at the end of the war. Some among these refugees have obtained the support of fundamentalist Christian groups and use this alliance to vigorously lobby the United States government to maintain a hard line on socialist Vietnam regarding what they allege to be religious repression of highland Christians. For the Vietnamese security services, a strong and unfortunate connection is thus made between the cultural distinction of the Central Highlanders, the Christian faith, and their resistance to socialism.

Religion and Ecology

The tenacity of ancient animistic practices even when syncretism has occurred is, however, cause for some recurrent behavior throughout highland groups, notably in their relationship to nature. Generally speaking, highland groups in the Peninsula still perceive themselves as being *part of* nature, as embedded in it, as opposed to being “enviored” by it, as in the modern notion of “environment.” The evolution of the space they live in is an inseparable element of their individual and collective well-being. Countless forms of rituals underscore this refusal to conceive of humans as set apart from nature: rites to select a village site that intend to reassure and compensate the local spirit of the soil; prohibition against cutting down forests along watercourses because these are inhabited by friendly ghosts; assigning a soul to certain species of trees, which means that no one should cut them down; prayers and offerings before and after an animal has been killed to ensure its freed spirit will be at peace; complex shamanistic symbolic cavalcades in the outer-world to visit the Gods in their homeland and convince them to put an end to a streak of bad harvests or soil depletion.

It has been observed that such apparently solely religious beliefs and practices often carry very practical wisdom, such as enforcing a certain minimum length of time for fields to be left fallow or forbidding tree felling at certain times of year. As opposed to modern agronomy and forestry science, these practices represent the sediments of hundreds of years of intimate and, more often than not, balanced interaction with nature. It has been demonstrated that before cash cropping became the norm in the Peninsula's highlands, as elsewhere, the ancient and common practice of swiddening (slash-and-burn) in small settlements had proved to be highly sustainable in the long term. It is only with the intensification of agriculture and the imposition of monocultures and plantations that forest started to shrink severely and the demographic increase went beyond sustainable thresholds, breaking the previous ecological balance. A recent trend in highland development is thus to actively reassess the value of this ancient indigenous knowledge in an effort to reconnect nature and human societies, and again make the highlanders the competent custodians of the highland forests and ecosystems they have inhabited for centuries, even millennia.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOWLANDS

Historically, the political relationship between highland and lowland societies has been a complex and often strained one, clearly more for the former than for the latter. Before European colonization and the resulting adoption of the principle of national territories bounded by definitive and secured borders, peoples on the Peninsula's highland fringes were generally of limited interest to the lowland rulers. Politically as much as economically, these fringes acted in the vast majority of cases as mere buffer zones. Keeping the inhabitants of these buffer zones in an obedient position through feudal tributary relationships was, most of the time, considered a good enough strategy, better than to conquer, populate, and police these marches at high cost. Such was the situation in, for instance, the buffer zones between China and Tibet (the Naxi domain); China, Laos, and Burma (the Sip Song Phan Na, the Kachin, and the Shan states); northern Vietnam and Laos (the Sip Song Chau Tai); and Vietnam and Cambodia (the Montagnard kingdoms). Only occasionally would a lowland power actually invade and permanently oc-

copy such highland fringes, usually when land was badly needed to support an excess population of farmers, or in times of local uprisings such as the numerous rebellions in Southwest China in the 18th and 19th centuries, triggered at least in part by the foray of Han settlers from the plains taking over fertile high valleys in the southwest.

On the economic front, exchanges were, if not intense, regular and complementary. Highlanders have long been providers of forest produce to the lowlands through a complex and hierarchical system of matching demand and supply. On the highest grounds, semimobile groups such as the Chin, Yao, Hmong, or Khmu collected rare timber—in particular coffin wood—medicinal plants, game, and various parts of animals considered essential in the Chinese, Siamese, or Vietnamese pharmacopeias. Mid-elevation groups such as the Yi, the Bai, and the many Tai-speaking groups, all long sedentarized wet-rice cultivators settled in valleys and in control of the road and river systems, then controlled the circulation of these goods toward the lowland markets. In the opposite direction, they channeled other merchandise necessary to themselves such as cloth, precious metals, and tools, and to the highlanders, in particular, salt, metals, arms, and gunpowder, which they traded for a robust fee. Another product that was channeled from the highlands to the lowlands was the highly profitable raw opium. Limestone-based soils, common in the massif, combined with cooler temperatures, were perfect for opium poppy cultivation, which thus became the monarch of highland cash crops from the mid-19th century until roughly the 1980s, when most countries in the massif gave in to international pressure to ban the henceforth unwanted narcotic.

Relationship to the State: Then and Now

Official positions toward mid- and highlanders vary across countries in the massif. It can generally be asserted that two main trends exist: a paternalistic one in socialist states—China, Vietnam, and Laos—and a pragmatic one under capitalist governments—Thailand, Cambodia, and, to a degree, Burma.

During times of war, communist ideology in the massif was strongly influenced by the Soviet Union (USSR). Communism posited as a basic principle that everyone was equal within the socialist republic. At the source of this apparently egalitarian rhetoric was the need, during

independence/revolutionary struggles in Vietnam, Laos, and China, for nationalist/socialist forces to win the allegiance of the largest possible numbers in the local peasantry and workforce. This political strategy was largely responsible for the initial leniency and wide-open promises made during the early years of the struggle, which routinely included cultural and political independence once victory was achieved. The wars once over and socialist rule in place, virtually all promises for minority self-rule were forgotten or replaced with watered-down substitutes guaranteeing that priority was given to the one and indivisible socialist nation and national territory. Next, the new socialist states set out to “help” the highland comrades long kept in a state of cultural and economic subordination by the “feudal” agents of the past. They were thus “supported” to catch up with the enlightened industrial socialist masses by joining the proletariat working in mines, dams, or factories, while benefiting from increased educational and health services. All national minorities were granted full-fledged national citizenship, but this apparently favorable status also required that in return for this recognition and for help modernizing from their “big brothers,” the “little brothers” were to “progress,” that is, to leave behind their “backward” ways and think and behave like socialist nationals. Cultural, religious, economic, and especially political distinctions in the highlands were only to be tolerated if they did not stand in the way of integration into the socialist nation. In practice, this policy boiled down to cultural, economic, and political absorption into the majority, with only the most benign expressions of material culture being allowed to persist in set formats (in particular, house architecture and clothing, dance, and music expressed during annual “minority culture days”), keeping only the picturesque and inoffensive as a token contribution to national ethnic variety. This policy has been euphemistically called “selective cultural preservation.”

In the opposite camp, in the capitalist sphere, the highlanders’ legal position appears markedly weaker, as many have not even been granted national citizenship. In Thailand, just about half of the “hill tribes” are currently full citizens despite most of them having lived for several generations on that soil. In Cambodia, a country still in a state of political and economic turmoil, leaders simply cannot at this stage afford to pay much attention to the highland groups’ rights. In Burma (Myanmar), armed confrontation and repression is the only policy of the Burman-centered junta. In practice, however, beyond the legal quandary or the

lack of means, capitalist countries sharing the massif have taken a very pragmatic approach to their national minorities. In a nutshell, if they can take care of themselves without being a burden on or a threat to the nation, and even contribute to increasing the national wealth, they are welcome to remain as different from “us” as they wish—or can. Advocates of this liberal position perceive lowland civilization as superior to highland “tribalism,” but no systematic action is taken to impose “cultural progress” on these lesser cultures if they do not so wish. The end result appears to be a fast cultural assimilation with the majority through market integration and national education.

Over the last 25 years, with the general introduction of the market economy in China, Vietnam, and Laos, the socialist position has become more and more indistinguishable from that of the capitalists. Pragmatism, the key stance in a free market economy, is gradually eroding security concerns, which, even in strongly centralized states, are slowly disappearing. Only Burma still constitutes a sad exception.

This general lack of cultural sensitivity to highland ethnic difference among lowland majorities surrounding the massif can be explained by the fact that the highland/lowland cultural dichotomy has long been fueled by an age-old and all too human discrimination by lowland farmers against heavily forested highlands, considered to be the domain of malevolent spirits and, perhaps more important, of little-known and poorly controlled nomads and sometimes rebels. For sedentary lowlanders, the highlands and the forests are allocated to the barbarians and the “raw” civilizations. All across the massif, groups dwelling higher up have been systematically associated with this derogatory categorization, while those living in regions of moderate altitude, with thinner forest cover and in closer proximity to the dominant lowland civilizations, are deemed more palatable, yet still to be treated with some caution.

Over the past 20 years, despite their ridiculously small numbers compared to the national majorities—with the notable exception of Laos—highlanders have been persistently blamed by their respective governments for most, if not all, of the deforestation, land erosion, and chemical poisoning of land and waterways that affect virtually every watershed. Highlanders’ agricultural behavior is publicly decried by state officials everywhere, especially swiddening, which is depicted as highly detrimental to the environment. To discourage its practice, isolated populations are brought into the open and relocated along national

road networks, and crop substitution programs are implemented to enforce sedentarization and commercial agriculture. But the real picture is not that black and white. Swiddening has been practiced all over the world for tens of thousands of years. It has proved to be highly sustainable provided that circumstances remain favorable. However, in several areas in the massif nowadays, increased demography, decreased availability of forested land, and the spreading of sedentarized cash cropping and the concomitant use of chemicals all contribute to reducing the duration of fallows to a level where natural regeneration is severely impaired. Such deterioration is a fact. But what officials fail to publicly acknowledge is that other factors have an even more definitive impact on highland forest and land erosion: massive illegal logging done right in front of lenient state agents, who turn a blind eye; the migration of millions of lowlanders to the uplands, sponsored by the national governments; and the ill-adapted agricultural practices of these migrants, who know little about farming the highlands.

Today, in the massif, highlanders are generally facing governments lacking reliable cultural information about them, lacking often even the interest to learn more about them. However, this does not stop these governments from vigorously implementing policies of cultural integration and economic standardization. Education, in principle a tool for emancipation, is geared toward Sinization, Thai-ization, Lao-ization, or Vietnamization of minorities. Only perhaps in southwestern China and northeastern Burma, where critical masses are reached by certain groups, can cultural resistance be successful—be it only thanks to their sheer demographic inertia. Tourism, the new gold rush in the massif, is a crucial factor in this equation, bringing to the world's attention these exotic minority cultures much sought after by cultural and adventure tourist wholesalers. There is hardly a travel agency in the West today that does not have on display one or several brochures advertising the smile of a colorful highland Southeast Asian minority man, woman, or child. Even national tourists increasingly crave the “little brothers,” often more in connection with the sexual fantasies nurtured by the dominant cultures than for what these hosts really are. Nevertheless, this increased visibility does contribute to curbing the states' enthusiasm for processing their minorities into the national mold, which they would do more ruthlessly if there were no witnesses to their project.

CUSTOMARY SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND THE ECONOMY

To better understand the social distinctiveness of highland societies as well as the influence this uniqueness has on their modes of adaptation today, it is useful to picture them as they appeared to the outside world at the time of European contact, roughly a century ago. That is, just before the rapid pace of modernization they have since been subjected to made many among them take drastically different routes than the ones they had followed previously.

Feudal Groups

In political terms, the highland societies that dwelled at medium altitudes in the mainland Southeast Asian massif were in regular contact with each other, and with the major lowland kingdoms and empires. Thus, a degree of diffusion among midland societies and from the cultural, political, and economic lowland cores toward the periphery occurred, causing, among other things, these groups to adopt a feudal social organization. A review of colonial writings in the late 19th century paints a portrait of such widespread feudalism among the peoples met in the midregion at that time. At the time of European contact, the Shan of northeastern Burma were highly differentiated between a dominant elite controlling the land and the means of production and a mass of peasants laboring for them and supporting the whole system. In Yunnan, the Naxi, the Bai, and the Yi operated on the same pattern, as did the Tujia in Guizhou. The Tai Lue had a feudal realm in the Sip Song Phan Na, the White Thai theirs in the Sip Song Chau Tai in northern Vietnam, the Zhuang in Guangxi, and the Dong in Guizhou.

Acephalous Groups

At that time, either in the marginal uplands at the periphery of these feudal kingdoms, or more often at higher reaches within them, in a kind of archipelago of mountaintops where feudal monarchs had not installed their own peasants, was a mosaic of “tribes” that had in common the type of ecosystem they had colonized and their political subordination to the feudal lords. Among themselves, these “tribal” groups’ social organizations were all kinship-based, even household-based in some

cases; that is, their highest form of political formalization was determined by, and limited to, kinship ties. In short, they were without a centralized form of political authority, without a state. Wherever this form of simple political structure has been observed around the world, it has been known as stateless or acephalous.

In social terms, groups in this category showed an integrated organization, meaning that the political, the economic, and the religious constantly overlapped in all matters of daily life. Each of these dimensions could not be detached from the others; social ties were most commonly based on lineage (the known genealogy) or clan (the known and the assumed genealogy as expressed in a common surname).

In cultural terms, much as feudal societies were nearly all Tai and Tibeto-Burman and showed a degree of cultural connectivity, conversely, practically all the Austronesian, Mon-Khmer, Miao-Yao, and the remaining portion of the Tibeto-Burman groups belonged to the acephalous category. An exception was in the highlands at the south of the Annam Cordillera, where several groups had developed local chiefdoms of an intermediary type, more complex than the purely acephalous groups, yet falling somewhat short of developing fully fledged feudal kingdoms.

The Economy

At the time of European contact, the upland economy was structured in two ways: socially, along the lines of feudalism and acephality; and geographically, by inclusion in the three-tiered structure encompassing the lowlands, midregion, and highlands.

The economic rationale of feudalism is well known and need not be repeated here. The important fact is that an elite in control of the land and the agricultural surpluses used a variety of forms of coercion to extract wealth from the labor of its peasantry, for which in return they provided access to the land as tenants as well as varying degrees of economic and political stability. Outside the strict perimeter of the kingdom, trade relationships allowed the elites to use surpluses in elaborate exchange systems with the surrounding region, from which additional profits were derived. Tribute could also be extorted from weaker neighbors, whose local masters paid a price to safeguard their political liberty; tribute also had to be paid to more powerful monarchs.

In economic terms, acephalous societies were one of three possible economic systems: hunting-gathering, horticulture, or a simple form of peasantry, a “prefeudal” one. In all cases, the household (a group of individuals linked by blood or alliance and living under the same roof) was the fundamental building block; it also constituted the smallest economic and ritual unit. Subsistence agriculture was the norm, with various degrees of dependency on the market for the provision of indispensable commodities that could not be grown, gathered, or produced locally.

Hunters-gatherers, such as the Mlabri of Thailand and Laos, were in a state of continual nomadism and only took from nature what it provided naturally. They lived in small bands of no more than a few dozen individuals. Horticulturalists, on the other hand, constituted the bulk of the acephalous groups, with the ubiquitous practice of swiddening as the principal form of food production. Pioneering swiddening, with very short or no fallows at all, the most aggressive and damaging form of “slash-and-burn,” was limited to groups sticking to active nomadism or to those heavily involved in the land-exhausting culture of the opium poppy. Rotational swiddening, with long fallows, was a more finely balanced activity with little long-term impact on the environment, and was practiced by groups willing to stay in a given vicinity, such as the Karen on the Burma-Thailand border or most groups in the Central Highlands. Finally, early forms of peasantry chiefly involved the groups closer to the feudal clusters and denoted a gradual attraction toward these strong gravitational cores, falling just short of being a constitutive part of those systems. The Kachin of upper Burma, in the orbit of feudal Shan, were a good example of this.

It is through elaborate trade networks that a three-tiered geographical division—highlands, midregion, and lowlands—was tied together. Different ecological niches and variations in the degree of industrialization, diffused chiefly from the lowlands, ensured that inhabitants of each tier could provide the others with a number of exclusive produce, goods, and services. From the high and midregions came opium, maize alcohol, timber, medicinal and decorative plants, and rare animal parts, which were traded for indispensable processed goods common in the lowlands but often absent in the highlands, such as those listed earlier. Midregion groups could channel either way their specific production of rice and fruit, clothes, jewelry, or troops and labor, graciously made available to lowland powers

within the framework of tributary dependency. There are many known occurrences of the midregion groups extorting this same privilege from the less solidly organized highland groups dwelling in the upper reaches of their domains. While the populations at both ends of this trade system were the main producers/gatherers of the merchandise put into circulation, the midregion groups, in addition to providing additional merchandise, crucially acted as people cashing in on this two-way circulation.

THE HIGHLAND ECONOMY TODAY

In the second half of the 20th century, rapid and sometimes drastic changes affected the highlands. The end of European colonialism and the establishment of socialist regimes in China (1949), Vietnam (1954 in the north, 1975 in the south), Burma (the Ne Win regime from 1962 to 1989), Laos (1975), and Cambodia (under Khmer Rouge rule 1975–1979, then under Vietnamese occupation until 1989), followed by the political implosion of Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia and the opening up to the market economy virtually everywhere since the 1980s, all contributed to modifying the local economic equilibrium, not to mention U.S.-backed, capital-intensive Thailand, occupying *de facto* the coveted position of most economically developed country, sharing the massif. Opium production and trade were officially phased out after the end of the second Indochina War (1954–1975), and substitution crops were actively implemented. The groups in the midregion saw their strategic advantage as trade intermediaries vanish at the same rate that the road infrastructures extended into the highlands, while their feudal political organizations were deemed unsuitable to the modern world, socialist and capitalist alike, and had to be brought down, ending a centuries-old social and economic domination. As mentioned earlier, subsistence agriculture, adjusted to the household's needs and often based on swiddening, was branded economically unsound and environmentally unsuitable, and was replaced over the last decades of the century with cash cropping and plantations geared to market demand, thus exposing inadequately literate highlanders to the hazards of brutal market shifts most of them were not yet equipped to fully understand and swiftly adjust to.

The switch to commercial agriculture in the mountains was made possible in large part thanks to the new hegemony of Western discourse on

environmental protection, conveyed to the local level via an array of development projects conceived and implemented by countless international agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) funded by the industrialized world. For highland agriculturalists, hand in hand with the environmental concerns and the spreading of cash cropping came the forced relocation of villages closer to the road grid—particularly in Laos—and the sedentarization of mobile or semimobile groups by clustering them in permanent village sites. Such drastic changes concluded the final monetarization of highland exchanges, relegating payment in nature and barter to the narrow circle of close kin. The increasing recourse to the market also entailed useful consequences, such as bringing to the mountains goods and commodities that were not available before and adding opportunities for the sale of local agricultural produce. In particular, it opened channels for the provision of the necessary implements of cash cropping, that is, seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and so on. However, with rampant illiteracy and without the necessary level of technical information, the use of these industrial inputs by highlanders caused many ecological problems downstream, where dangerously high amounts of chemicals are washed down by the monsoon rains that the ever-shrinking forest cover cannot hold back as effectively as before.

Current Issues

The region's state programs are attuned to economic "growth" and cultural "progress." The dominant rhetoric, after decades of applied social evolutionism inherited from Marxism and capitalism alike, has been superseded by the language of "development." With countless agencies from the affluent world knocking at the door to offer their services—and the loans in hard currency that will help pay for these—the techniques and technology of the international development industry are relentlessly applied to minority health, education, and customary agricultural practices that are labeled obsolete and harmful. Ensuring "better" gender balance is also on the agenda. All these initiatives play directly into the local governments' strategy of integrating minorities into the nation. In the process, cultural dimensions are paid only subsidiary attention, other issues being judged more urgent. One must recognize, however, that the general indicators of health and education do show a clear improvement in the highlands.

China clearly has a strong central policy of controlling and integrating its southwestern *shaoshu minzu*, or minority nationalities. The region is politically sensitive because it touches several international borders, is rich in natural resources important to the national development, provides a substantial portion of the country's diet through intensive agriculture, and is a land of migration for the surplus lowland population. Han immigration to the southwest, much as in Tibet, does not really mask a desire to eventually outnumber locals and take final political, economic, and cultural control of these margins. If organized resistance to this "invasion" is fomented locally at all, no news of it seems to filter out. Tourism, which could constitute a means to preserve local cultures by showing them to the outside world, as alluded to earlier, is controlled and formatted by the state so that only specific areas, nonthreatening groups, and selected cultural practices can be easily consumed by the tourists. Many nationally famous places fit this picture, such as Lijiang, Dali, and Lugu Lake in western Yunnan or clusters of Miao villages in southwest Guizhou. These destinations have been totally converted by the central government into mass-tourism resorts exhibiting the beauties of nature and the highly sanitized elements of minority cultures deemed suitable for public display by the authorities.

Burma (Myanmar), most prominently, has a history of using its military to crush internal opposition. The Karen, some of whom harbor a desire for political autonomy, have been fighting the central Burmese government for decades. The Shan and Wa control large sections of their semiautonomous state thanks to armed resistance financed by drug trafficking. There, resistance is waged not so much on grounds of a will for political autonomy as on a strong involvement in very profitable smuggling operations centered on the transformation of opium into morphine, heroin, and amphetamines. Elsewhere in Burma is a depressing story of forced displacement, exploitation, abuse, and seeking refuge over the borders, with no real solution in sight.

In Laos, a vigorous relocation program is gradually forcing scores of highland villagers into larger groupings within the Lao state's watch perimeter. Also, a deeply rooted mistrust between old royalist factions among certain highland groups (*sonphao*) and the socialist state has ensured that armed struggle has endured since the official revolutionary victory in 1975. The Xaysomboun Special Region has been established to isolate pockets of resistance, while other regions in which alleged

Hmong rebels are fighting the Laotian forces are sealed off from outside observers. Clearly, however, with nearly half its population belonging to one or another of many non-Lao ethnicities, Laos cannot afford to wage an all-out war on its minorities. A degree of negotiation must prevail.

In Thailand, communist “insurgency” brewing in the north and the northeast up to the late 1980s kept the state wary of certain groups connected to socialist Laos and Vietnam through ethnic networks. Resentment and defiance still creep into official rhetoric but have now been largely replaced by the environmental mantra of eliminating swiddening and erecting protected ecological zones from which long-resident minorities must relocate. With only 1 percent of its population belonging to the 11 *chao khao*, “hill tribes,” registered in the official statistics, Thailand has arguably all the leverage it needs to end the negotiations at will.

Vietnam has officially made its peace with its minority nationalities, the *cac dan toc thieu so*, through official recognition since the 1970s. But in fact, the Vietnamese government still considers that dangerously high levels of political resistance are simmering in the Central Highlands and elsewhere, supported mainly by U.S.-based “right wing” diasporas. Christian missionary activism is a bone of contention, chiefly in the southern but increasingly in the northern highlands. Tourism, as in China, is seen as a tool for the state to preserve selected benign features of local highland cultures and present them to mass-tourists, thus emphasizing the positive impact of the state’s minority culture preservation.

At present, perhaps only Cambodia does not have issues with its very small number of highland minorities, except when these are actually ethnic Vietnamese who settled in the eastern provinces during various waves of pioneering migration, the latest being during the decade-long occupation of the country by Vietnamese troops from 1979 to 1989. A mild concern is currently expressed about some other highland minorities presently filtering through from Vietnam’s Central Highlands, looking for economic opportunities or taking refuge from their government’s political exactions.

In all six countries there are serious problems and challenges; given the generally weaker position of the highland peoples and “minorities,” these are usually more serious for them than for the lowland majorities and, by extension, national governments. How these challenges are resolved will have a great impact on this population of 80 million and determine in large part how they can adapt to change.