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Conclusion: Lesson for the Future

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Many lessons can be learned from studies such as the ones in this volume about how, in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif, local populations interpret globalizing shifts in their livelihood choices and practices and how, in Sally Engle Merry's words (2006), they vernacularize modernity. The themes explored in this book are many, from migration, cross-border trade, relocation, and economic mobility to the importance of local history, identity maintenance, avoidance, and subordination. Attempting to summarize such findings would inevitably lessen the unique and rich contributions made by each of the case studies. It is precisely this uniqueness that matters because it has too often been downplayed within this region.

Nevertheless, all of the local groups about which we read in this volume are living within politically centralized, one-party socialist states that have recently opened up to liberal market economies. This constitutes a unique political combination in history and one that commands attention. I would like to illustrate this by briefly considering two dimensions that cut across all the case studies in this book, though not necessarily addressed directly by all the authors here; namely the legacy of the implementation of modern state borders, and the politics of environmental issues in this highland space. Borders matter because their establishment has caused nation-states to deal with peoples on the frontiers in an entirely new way; the politics of environment are of consequence because highland livelihoods are intrinsically linked with nature, and the manner by which the state regulates nature (through environmental policies) has weighty consequences on highland peasants and their livelihoods.

First, the border question. The casting of modern and permanent borders has been a key factor in fragmenting and segregating highland societies between China, Vietnam, and Laos and turning these into national minorities (Michaud 2009). In the process, groups such as the Zhuang, the Dong, the Naxi, the Bai, and the Drung (Gros' chapter) have been nearly totally enclosed

within one country, China, and have had to cope with the Han majority's definition of what national identity should look like. Other highland societies have instead been split between adjacent countries. This is the case for the Hmong (chapter by Tugault-Lafleur and Turner), the Yi (Swain), the Hani (Sturgeon, McKinnon), the Khmu (Évrard), the Tarieng (Daviau), and many more. As exposed in this volume, the long-term adaptation of these societies to their new political reality has varied from one group to the next not only because of diverse and often conflicting national agendas but also because of an array of factors such as cultural resilience, economic practices, and political organization, in addition to location, demographics, languages, religion, history, and cultural proximity to lowland majorities (McKinnon 1987; Schoenberger and Turner 2008). Factors of change that reflect new national decrees, laws, development programs, and so on, thus met local specifics.

In the domain of history, one element in particular has been of great significance. As explained in Chapter 1, a key distinction among the highland groups in the Massif can be made between two distinct categories. On the one hand, we have groups with a flexible social structure based primarily on kinship ties (lineage-based groups) and non-territorial social organization. Such groups, for whom primordial links with a given territory play a less fundamental role, include some groups from the Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic language families (Hani and Lolo outside China, as well as Khmu, Lisu, and Jingpo, for instance) and all of the Miao-Yao. These groups have been able to cope relatively well with political separation, in particular through cross-border mobility and migration. On the other hand, there are some profoundly territorial groups, including many Tibeto-Burmans (for instance, the Naxi, Yi, and Bai), and virtually all Austronesian (Rhadé, Raglai, Jarai, and Churu) and Tai speakers (Dong, Dai, Buyi, Zhuang, Nùng, Thái, and Tày, to name a few), for whom the land they inhabit is intrinsically part of their core identity. For many among these latter groups, a territorial fragmentation or the plain political disappearance of their customary domain has been, and for many still is, traumatic.

With the establishment of European colonial powers in Vietnam and Laos and the advent of Republican China, long-established feudal privileges were formally abolished. Private ownership of the land along capitalist lines was promoted until it reached even the highlands, albeit often with appreciable difficulty, but yet it altered customary land tenure systems there. This triggered a syncretic reaction. Local communities, when operating among themselves, would often continue to abide by the old rules (communal or feudal or a blend of both) privately, while publicly, in front of agents of the colonial/republican state, they would follow the newly introduced ones (Mellac 2000, Sikor 2002). When socialism and the subsequent collectivization took place in the second half of the twentieth century, most landowners

were dispossessed and land was appropriated by the state (Brandt et al. 2002). Today in these three countries, land is still nominally owned by the socialist state, but over the last twenty-five years or so, liberalization and decollectivization have allowed for local communities to take back local responsibility for the management of communal land and forests (Sikor 2001; Sturgeon 2005; McKinnon this volume).

For the ancient feudal groups in the Massif, territoriality has resulted in certain links to modernization. It appears that the more geographically rooted a group was, the more swiftly and efficiently it could adapt its land use practices and livelihoods to fit the market economy when modernity reached – be it through colonialism or socialism (or more recent liberalization practices). This, in all likelihood, can be explained by the fact that sedentarity and primordial links to the soil were key factors behind the integration of these groups into centrally controlled feudal systems. This in turn facilitated the move later on into the modern nation-state and in turn, the liberal economy. As a result, such groups undertake a greater diversity of livelihood options today and are often far more integrated into the market economy than those less territorially rooted.

Now to the second point, the environment. As several authors in this book have emphasized, over the past twenty years, despite their numbers being extremely small compared with the national majorities – with the exception of Laos where minorities account for roughly half the population – highlanders in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif have been persistently blamed by their respective governments for deforestation, land erosion, and chemical poisoning of land and waterways that affect virtually every watershed. Highlanders' agricultural behaviour, especially swiddening, is publicly decried by state officials and many experts alike as highly detrimental to the environment (reviewed in Forsyth and Walker 2008). To discourage swiddening, isolated populations are relocated along national road networks and sedentarized, and crop substitution programs are implemented to enforce commercial agriculture and integration to the market (Colchester and Erni 1999). In several areas in the Massif nowadays, increased demography, decreased availability of forested land, and the spreading of cash cropping all contribute to reduce the duration of fallows beneath a threshold where natural regeneration becomes severely impaired. This is forcing the adoption of chemical additives and modified seeds that are often distributed and handled in ineffective or inappropriate ways. All these factors are in turn used in official rhetoric to blame environmental degradation on highland farmers, adding new challenges to an already fragile balance between people, their livelihoods, and the local environment.

In China, because of the country's sheer scale of nationwide industrial development (notoriously entailing significant pollution) and large-scale population movements, highland minorities are less directly accused by the

state of having a harmful impact on the environment (Xu Yuan 2004). To be frank, the Chinese state does not really perceive ethnic minorities in southwestern China as actors of any significance on the national scene (MacKerras 1994, 2003). Yet, the provincial states in Yunnan or Guizhou, for instance, have to constantly remember that 15 and 13 million of their constituents respectively, are from non-Han extraction. Thus, prudently, in such provinces the official blame is not directly placed on “minority nationalities” but on “bad habits” or “backward” practices – which, indirectly and conveniently, are often linked to the highland “little brothers” in day-to-day dealings anyway.

In Vietnam, by contrast, for a number of years the most hotly debated issues regarding the highlands have been linked to environmental degradation (Rambo et al. 1995). In the north, highlanders form a sizable portion of the population and, ironically in comparison to China, are systematically held responsible by the state for deforestation and its adverse consequences for the lowlands and the coastal plains. In the south, tensions over the environment are reaching dangerous levels. The massive migration to the Central Highlands of Kinh from the plains, officially launched in the late 1970s under the New Economic Zone scheme, spearheaded the penetration of the market and put immense additional pressure on highland natural resources and ecosystems there (De Koninck 1996, 1999). In addition, spontaneous economic migration from lowlands to these same highlands started to unfold at the end of the 1980s, thanks to Economic Renovation (Đổi Mới). This was encouraged by crop substitution schemes and extensive plantations such as coffee, tea, and rubber (Tan 2000, Hardy 2002). This policy persists today (and is gaining momentum in the northern highlands too). The pressure thus exerted on resources has generated social tensions, triggering in turn severe social unrest (Tran Thi Thu Trang 2009).

Laos is a country of mountains. Thanks inadvertently to the growing impact of an international agenda of environmental protection channelled through large institutions such as the World Bank (Goudineau 1997), moving highlanders around can be officially legitimized by arguing that forest and watershed protection must be ensured. The widespread and allegedly unsustainable practices of both pioneering and rotational swiddening must therefore be put to an end (Ireson and Ireson 1991; Ovesen 2004; Rigg 2005). As both Daviau and Évrard (this volume) explain, scores of highland populations in upland Laos have thus been subject to authoritarian measures and moved out of the forested hills. They are brought down to new resettlement zones established as modern centres where new livelihoods can be developed. By the same token, this policy emphasizes the two themes that dominate the state’s strategy toward ethnic minorities in Laos since 1975: economic modernization and inclusion within a Lao nation-state (Daviau, Cottavoz, and Gonzales-Foester 2005). It has been estimated that by the year 2000, as

many as one million peasants in Laos had been relocated, about one-fifth of the total population (Évrard and Goudineau 2004). Much as in Vietnam and China, local protests against this type of policy are swiftly gagged, and news of them still rarely reaches the outside world.

Lesson for the Future

With this picture in mind, and at the closing stages of this particular journey, what lesson can be learned from the socialist parts of the Southeast Asian Massif on how ethnicity and livelihoods correlate?

As a starting point, I would like to recall briefly a key argument made in Chapter 1. There we suggested that the ways local populations on the margins of centralized states make a living while preserving and re-working their identities are shaped not only by external forces (an underlying assumption often made by outside agents) but also by their own culturally embedded agency. The focus of this book was to examine the creative ways by which people on the margins use this agency to keep control over their lives when faced with powerful external normalizing factors. The eight case studies, each in their own way, have shown this assertion to be demonstrable on the ground. Time and again through highly varied circumstances, ethnically rooted agency appears as a key factor in the local interpretations and translations of global commands and engagements. This is a key factor that has seldom been given adequate space in livelihood studies to date.

Moreover, as discussed above, nation-state building and environmental disputes play directly into local livelihood decision-making processes. It is therefore of interest to note that if we go back to the definitions of sustainable livelihoods in Chapter 1, such specific elements are often ignored from development practitioners' approaches to livelihood studies (Scoones 2009). Livelihood studies are frequently situated within the physical and political limits of the nation-state, and the environment is merely (albeit not always) reduced to "natural capital" within the livelihood asset pentagon (see Conway et al. 2002 and Toner 2003, for critiques of the "asset pentagon").

So, how could livelihood and development research and policy making factor in these key dimensions more constructively? Toward the end of Chapter 1, three suggestions were made: (1) to study and understand ethnicity and culture in order to assist in helping highland peoples achieve effective livelihood strategies; (2) to realize how ethnicity influences livelihood strategies and vice versa; and (3) to operationalize these lessons for livelihood practices, especially through understanding the role of local agency.

This collection of case studies in (post-)socialist contexts are culturally distant from each other, yet they highlight the need to be creative in learning about the place ethnicity could be given in livelihood studies. In a nutshell, the message is: local actors have their own ways of doing things attuned to their particular cultures; as a consequence, this implies necessarily

that livelihoods are embedded in local identity and ethnicity. Therefore, livelihoods can only be understood, and eventually changed successfully, when studied comprehensively within discrete cultural contexts that are acknowledged to be fluid and open to change. Beyond paraphrasing Karl Polanyi's assertion (1957) that the economy is always embedded in culture, this statement has far-reaching implications that have been richly illustrated in each of the situations we have just seen. These implications have often been ignored, passively or energetically, by outside agents whose gazes are narrowly focused on swiftly elevating the level of economic performance among "poor" peasants in a given country. This lack of awareness is visible more than ever in socialist Asia, where the enduring Marxist dogma of social evolutionism still thrives, hardened over the last two decades by the equally evolutionist take on economic progress typical of the neo-liberal agendas (Escobar 1995, Michaud 2009).

Culture as Agency

In China, Vietnam, and Laos, locally embedded traditions distinct from those of the dominant majorities have been labelled "backward" by national majority actors, actors who are often not entirely aware of their own ethnic footprint. This unawareness of their hegemonic character has rendered these actors prone to ethnocentrism and a normalizing polity (MacKerras 1994; van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; McElwee 2004; Ovesen 2004; Sowerwine 2004; more broadly, see also Scott 1998, Acheson 2006). What the case studies in this volume have demonstrated is that we – and more importantly the subjects of our development schemes – would benefit greatly from a rethinking of these normalizing processes and the prescriptive approaches to livelihood studies they entail. We need a shift from the theoretical and institutional designs of livelihoods based on mechanistic models (Forsyth 2003) to recognizing ethnic networks and culture as core, vital elements.

For modernist thinkers still highly influential within many mainstream approaches to the international development agenda (Leys 2005), ethnic particularity among national minorities is a remnant from an obsolete past, a pre-modern feature in need of "straightening up" – of *redressement*, in Michel Foucault's language. For these thinkers, the ethnic factor is not an asset but an obstacle to the effective implementation of modern (that is, rational and effective) development programs (Ferguson 1997). Ethnic distinction has been reduced to a superfluous artefact that has to be downplayed to allow the efficient implementation of dependable and economically sound solutions (Nederveen Pieterse 2001). In this way, elements of local cultures have been derided by state and development actors alike as superstitious, counter-productive, atavistic, based on ignorance, or just plain stupid. Examples include ritual expenditures, animal sacrifice, the symbolic value attached to certain entities and places, refusal to perform certain "logical"

actions, time “wasted” propitiating the spirits, a lack of interest for accumulation, and so on (for instance, see Viet Chung 1968).

This derogatory interpretation on the part of many outside actors in the Massif (not all of them, of course, but still an unfortunately high number) is further compounded by a rampant will to ignore local and regional history and culture along with their implications for today’s economics and politics. This will is often rationalized with arguments such as a lack of time, means, or easily accessible information. We also hear of the political and historical unimportance, in the broader scheme of things, of these marginal groups and their deficiency in written archives that could help attest to who they claim they are. As for their oral history, this is frequently brushed aside as unreliable. These “people without history” (Wolf 1982) – peasants around the world as much as in the Massif – have as such been craftily turned into “people without culture” (Scott 2009).

In all the case studies in this volume, it becomes clear to the watchful eye that the type of deep-seated analysis and multi-faceted conclusions reached by each author could be shaped only after a significant amount of time and energy working to understand the subjects’ take on their own lives and their material and spiritual worlds. As a consequence of this challenging methodology and in place of pinpointing what should be changed among these societies to make them more socially “fit” and economically “competitive,” each writer has instead opted for presenting the current reality in an historical perspective, factoring in how the subjects see themselves and how they grasp their current challenges. Proposed solutions, if any, are cautiously worded and come as a result of considering the situation from within and at length. By contrast, outside agents with the predefined aim to “develop the underprivileged” and “alleviate poverty” – an archetypal position within large development institutions and regional states alike – tend first to rely on macro-level measurements, such as national income per capita or flow of goods and capital, to make a general assessment. Then, on the ground, they contain their analyses to objective, rational, and quantifiable factors to underpin their actions: demographics, statistical pictures, agricultural yields, cattle heads, land surface, formal education levels, the state of biodiversity, slope gradients, erosion rates, chemical inputs, transport costs, soil and forest regeneration cycles, and so on. Undoubtedly, taking such quantitative data into account to analyze a local situation can be useful and is not to blame in any way per se, it often highlights crucial patterns of economic or health demise. It is drawing definitive conclusions and planning action from this type of quantitative analysis *alone* that constitutes the real liability.

Standing at the opposite end of the spectrum, authors in this book have relied predominantly on qualitative factors: beliefs and spirituality, customary wisdom (or indigenous knowledge), social organization, fears, desires, and more. Across the board, their studies have benefited from long and

recurring fieldwork periods, intense participant observation, life stories, oral histories, loosely structured and repeated interviews, and, perhaps most importantly, a marked empathy for their subjects, for their fate, and for their right to participate fully in deciding about their own future. But equally clear is that qualitative research alone is not going to help highland peasants to determine which variety of crop to adopt to enhance yields, how best they can stop soil erosion, or what the cure is for that malign disease afflicting their livestock.

It was not the point of the authors here to make such assessments; but it rests on the shoulders of development practitioners and policy writers to be able to bring together these two approaches. Qualitative research alone, like quantitative research alone, is not sufficient to ensure long-term solutions and contentment. Both are needed. To achieve this, development practitioners and state officials have to accept that letting the subjects genuinely participate in their own development may require additional flexibility and time. But time is in short supply in most development schemes. Yet, is time the problem, or is it the schemes themselves? Rather than discarding the “take more time” option as impractical and idealistic (that is, more costly), the initiators of those schemes must come to terms with the implications of the simple fact that quick fixes for complex societies do not carry lasting results. And as the case studies in this volume have made patently clear, highland societies in the Southeast Asian Massif are truly complex.

Results-oriented development thinkers, state officials and development practitioners also have to accept that inviting subjects to participate in their own progress carries the risk of a community not making the “optimal choice” because of a lack of understanding of global forces, a restricted vision linked to a lack of information or formal education, or simply a rejection of the scheme (see McKinnon, this volume). However, we must ask: How total is a failure when it stems from a choice that is coherent with the cultural fabric and the endogenous decision-making processes of a given community? Is such an outcome any less acceptable than failure following the implementation of ill-conceived and ill-applied solutions after a too-short investigation in a poorly understood cultural and historical context? And, one might also ask, why is this latter type of failure so often spun into “a good solution” that was “not properly understood and implemented” by the local subjects “lacking in will and awareness”?

Ethnicity and Resistance

What is it, then, that is not understood well enough about the recipients of development in this case – minority ethnic groups in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif?

Local groups translate outside demands into locally intelligible arrangements due to the distinctive impetus of their own vision of the world – their

culture – and the resulting interpretations may differ significantly from the original meaning embedded in the message sent by outside actors, such as state development programs and development practitioners. Putting to use the case studies in this collection, we can see, for instance, that the state's encouragement to increase trade may be objectively sensible for diversifying the livelihoods of the Hmong of Lào Cai province in Vietnam; however, these Hmong do not seem to want to fall in line entirely with the plan that promoters have designed for them and so come up with unexpected actions (see Tugault-Lafleur and Turner's chapter). In Yunnan, Dai, Hani, and Yi peasants, rubber planters, and entrepreneurs are turning their new economic activities into success stories that appear consistent with the principles of the government's Go West scheme; on the ground, however, customary principles are inserted in the equation, and the result sometimes bears only passing resemblance to the model of liberal rural entrepreneurship promoted by Beijing (see chapters by McKinnon, Sturgeon, and Swain). Tarieng and Khmu peasants in Laos may accept to relocate their hamlets as demanded by the Lao state and adjust their livelihoods accordingly, but when examined at closer range, the precise mechanisms of their movements show signs of a project that largely escapes the state's gaze (see chapters by Daviau and Évrard). And while Thái and Tây peasants in northern Vietnam do agree to play by the national rules of land tenure, ancient kinship networks and customary rights are nonetheless essential ingredients in their livelihood strategies (see Mellac's chapter). In all these situations, a degree of overt conformity meets a degree of covert defiance that remains under the radar – James C. Scott's very notion (1990) of *infrapolitics* – and it is the particular contours of customary social relations, local culture, and agency that decide the balance between the two.

And here the question of resistance arises. How far is resistance a form of livelihood strategy in the Massif, and what does this tell us about the politics of identity maintenance there? Does the notion of resistance allow us to adopt a more dynamic and relevant approach to understanding livelihood strategies locally? First, we have to realize that forms of resistance available to most minority groups in the highlands of China, Vietnam, and Laos, three politically rigid states with potent police forces and matching legal systems, are of the quiet type. Open defiance has long proved to be hazardous, sometimes plainly suicidal. This risk is not to be solely associated with socialist regimes; much the same applied to earlier colonial and imperial times, as the millions of victims from countless rebellions that beset southwest China and northern Indochina in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have demonstrated (Lombard-Salmon 1972; Jenks 1994; Culas and Michaud 2004). The lesson has been learned the hard way: a peasant without historical memory can promptly become a dead peasant. Civil society is the necessary condition for social movements to emerge, and in its absence, or

in the absence of its most fundamental elements, no such movements can be successfully set in motion without running the high risk of the repressive arm of the state setting out to crush it mercilessly (Pickett 1996; Mittelman and Chin 2000). This is true of mainstream society in heavily populated lowlands, in industrialized settings, and in urban centres, as was manifest in the Tiananmen Square events of 1989. Extreme domination is even more potent on the rural and cultural margins of the state, where open defiance can carry a high price, as recent examples in Tibet, Xinjiang, Vietnam's Central Highlands, and the Xaysomboun Special Region of Laos reconfirm like clockwork.

Yet, I contend that resistance is at play in the ways that new livelihoods are adopted among minorities in the socialist Massif. Resistance, rooted in Scottian infrapolitics, especially its covert form – hidden transcripts – is activated as a custom-made response to disproportionate power exercised in conditions of intense domination. Scott's "everyday forms of peasant resistance" (1985, 2005), also convincingly developed within "everyday politics" by Benedict Tria Kerkvliet (2005, 2009), provide a simple yet powerful explanatory apparatus to decipher the invisible forces of disobedience and refusal at play behind the facade of compliance. The implications of this type of explanation for understanding the strategies of the "weak" in the Massif are palpable (Turner and Michaud 2009). Scott himself (2009) explores them at length in his latest book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* and makes a powerful case for re-appraising the upland situation in this new light.

In the field of livelihoods, which sits at the core of this book, local peasants are not resisting modernization simply for the sake of refusing change – that would be the outdated homogenous model (Cancian 1989). All peasant societies are interested in change that can ease hardships and bring about a better life. But they also clearly see that new livelihood propositions that arrive from the outside carry cultural and political implications that will impact on their social life and identity, in spite of these being "proven" and "objectively excellent" development schemes. Such implications, in themselves, can be enough to trigger resistance. Change, yes, but not at all cost, as this book documents powerfully.

Concluding Thoughts

Mechanistic models applied to livelihood strategies neglect the local role of culturally embedded forms of agency play. Consequently, these models also overlook the role of locally rooted and structured micro-politics. The conceptual and methodological solutions proposed here require paying more and deeper attention to the subjects' ways of indigenizing modernity and fashioning infrapolitics, as well as to public and hidden transcripts. Ethnic minority peasants in the socialist part of the Southeast Asian Massif

understand the difference between what can be expressed openly and what would better remain concealed. This is not necessarily a case of careful political strategizing but, instead, is played very pragmatically in terms of what represents a risk so big – be it economically, politically, or culturally – that it would be wiser not to run it.

This book aims at making a compelling statement that new livelihood strategies are, for the ethnic minority subjects in the Southeast Asian Massif but also elsewhere, not mere ways out of objective difficulties but also experiments in activating culturally rooted approaches, geared toward finding solutions to, among other factors, the unyielding imperatives of physiological, social, and spiritual reproduction. In this regard, local communities are not just reactive; they constantly innovate.

In short, here, as in any other situation around the world involving ethnic minorities in modernizing states, the lesson is that culture, ethnicity, and agency play core roles in livelihood decision making, alongside local politics and history. Yet these features are frequently ignored in livelihood approaches, especially those taken onboard by development practitioners. Bringing together approaches that can build on such locally rooted understandings of livelihoods, while being acceptable to the state, should be the aim. It is where the challenge lies for creating and supporting truly sustainable livelihoods and development and rewarding life strategies.

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