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Comrades of Minority Policy in
China, Vietnam, and Laos

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One could argue that the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic have little in common beyond physical proximity and a multi-ethnic blend of human populations, compounded by the worn-out veneer of socialist regimes. Over the past three decades, these socialist regimes have gradually departed from Marxist orthodoxy and opted to open up to the market economy instead: China in 1978, Vietnam and Laos in 1986. Indeed, to post-communism scholars working in the former Soviet bloc, what is happening now in socialist Asia has little to do with "true" socialism.

Also, a massive demographic imbalance appears to stand in the way of sensible comparisons. With 6.5 million inhabitants, Laos has only 7 percent of Vietnam's 90 million, which in turn is a mere 7 percent of China's 1.3 billion. Or, put differently, Vietnam would fit nicely as a Chinese province and Laos as a mere prefecture. What is more, while China and Vietnam share similar percentages of highland minority populations, nearly half of Laos's population is ethnically distinct from the ethnic Lao majority.

To make sense of such disparities, I turn in this chapter to the common historical complexity found in the relationships between national minorities and the state in these three socialist countries, which together constitute about 75 percent of the Southeast Asian Massif, or "Zomia" as Scott (2009) labelled it (Michaud 2010). The particular questions of interest to us here are: What is the source of the very similar state policies regarding national minorities in these three countries? And how have state policies addressing the minority question adapted to demographic distinctions and regime changes from imperial times to recent economic renovations?

A number of scholars have conducted country-based studies detailing the evolution of policies towards ethnic minorities within the national borders of China, Vietnam, and Laos. Some (Tapp 2001; MacKerras 2003; Yang 2009) have shown that in China, the Soviet model, based on Josef Stalin's

considerations (1913) of the "nation" and the USSR's ensuing policies, served as a template for the strategies of alliance during the 1930s between the Communist Party of China and minority groups whose support was essential to ensure victory over Nationalist forces (see also Diao 1967; Hsieh 1984; Heberer 1989; Wu 1990; Tapp 1995, 2002). Others (McAlister 1967; Michaud 2000; McElwee 2004) have shown that in Vietnam, the political strategy that linked the Viet Minh's revolutionary regime with highland minorities followed this Chinese model. In Laos, Osborn (1967), Evans (1999), Goudineau (2000), and Pholsena (2002) have exposed how the USSR-China-Vietnam chain of ideologies triggered standardized responses to the ethnic-minority question in Laos akin to those in China and Vietnam.

All these authors acknowledge that the various national communist revolutions in these locales could not have been successful without strategic wartime alliances with minority groups on the margins. To win over these upland partners to the cause, assurances of future political autonomy were included in early drafts of national constitutions. This way, minorities willing to accommodate the communist projects could hope for future political rewards (Connor 1984). Once communist victories were achieved, however, the new socialist states slammed on the brakes, as it was argued that wartime promises of autonomy for "minority nationalities" could not reasonably be carried out without endangering the socialist agenda and the very existence of the new socialist nations. Early commitments were thus toned down, diluted, or plainly forgotten. In clear contradiction of the promises previously made, the revolutionary states took the stance that highland margins and their populations could not be given more than token autonomy.

An important tool to achieve this forced marriage involved a decoy strategy – that is, the setting up of showcase autonomous territories where sizable numbers of minorities dwelt (one of Stalin's five original precepts). In China's southwestern upland borderlands, this practice became policy shortly after the communist victory of 1949. Not long after, in 1955, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) followed suit.

Although this chapter advocates the need to depart from a strictly country-based consideration of trans-border highland groups in the Southeast Asian Massif to understand these populations better, a country-based approach to state *policies* towards "minorities" through time is unavoidable and helps to set the scene for this book. Policies are country-specific, their development linked to the history of state development. Thus, I will give a brief overview of the evolution in China, Vietnam, and Laos of the state positions regarding minority issues, paying particular attention to the highlands. I first clarify what the situation was prior to the revolutions, and then examine the main course of events under communist rule. I complete the picture by focusing on the current, so-called post-socialist period.

The Southeast Asian Massif

China, Vietnam, and Laos share the greatest portion of the Southeast Asian Massif, the highlands in the southeastern portion of the Asian landmass. This area encompasses the eastern portion of what van Schendel (2002) has named "Zomia," and equates roughly to what Scott (2009), following van Schendel's lead, has elected to label with the same name. As noted in Chapter 1 (see Figure 1.1), these highlands spread over a transnational domain, mainly situated above 300-500 metres in elevation, over a surface of approximately 2.5 million square kilometres. Stretching from the temperate Yangtze River system, which roughly demarcates its northern boundary, it encompasses the high ranges extending southeast from the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau as well as all the monsoon high country drained by the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Mekong, and Red Rivers and their tributaries (Michaud 2010).

The intellectual limitations embedded in an association of people and specific territories have long been noted by social scientists. My point here is not to be dogmatic about altitude defining social spaces. It is instead to highlight this as one among many factors of importance in Southeast Asia and southwest China, keeping in mind that scores of highland minority people now reside in lowlands and urban areas in and around the Massif. Concurrently, each of the countries sharing the Massif has promoted at one time or another – and many continue to do so – a relocation policy for lowland dwellers to move into the highlands, where demographic pressure on the land is below national averages. All around sprawling upland cities, however, the countryside is still where the majority of the upland population lives and works, an area much less frequently reached by lowland migration, whether of people, technologies, or ideas. As a consequence, in terms of human concentrations, highland zones remain largely ethnically distinct from lowlands, yielding a cultural mosaic rather than any sort of integrated picture. When observed from a distance, this mosaic becomes a distinctive picture – that is, a change in scale favours different intellectual considerations of the region and its inhabitants. In short, it is very likely that particular characteristics of the Massif help account for patterns of state making, state maintenance, and economic development, as well as social science methodological successes and failures, beyond the distinct political leanings of particular states.

The Highlands before Socialist Rule

Many non-Han minority groups of China are certainly as ancient as the Han majority (Wiens 1954; Lemoine 1978; Baranovitch 2001; Peters 2001). From the thirteenth century AD, the Chinese state penetrated the southwestern provinces and gradually put in place an administrative system based on the installation of local rulers, or *tu-si*, allied to their cause. Notwithstanding

this relatively early presence of the Han in the southwestern highlands, not a lot is known about the exact identities and demographic importance of many of the indigenous inhabitants before the twentieth century, when the first formal national censuses were conducted (Lombard-Salmon 1972; Olson 1998; Mullaney 2011).

Indeed, historians have shown that the main concerns of the rulers during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties were the gradual extension of military control over land and resources, the acquisition of land for migrants, and the prevention of peripheral groups from causing trouble for the core population and its economic performance. At the same time, rulers wanted to ensure that profitable trade could be conducted and military or tributary alliances made with the "barbarians" whenever necessary (Moseley 1973; von Glahn 1987; Bello 2005; Giersch 2006; Yang 2009a). In Herman's words (2007, 225), imperial China was not overly concerned with "a Confucian civilizing mission among the indigenous non-Han peoples."

In the first half of the twentieth century, with the toppling of the imperial regime and the emergence of the Republic in 1911, the Chinese state's interest in its minorities took a modern turn (Lary 2007). The number of resident as well as foreign observers interested in the ethnography of minorities soared (Mullaney 2011). By 1920, Republican China had become concerned with the formal integration of the nation's frontiers into the national body (Cheung 2003). While remaining politically uninterested in the inhabitants of the frontier themselves, it was thought to be strategically important to acknowledge the existence of four borderland, non-Han minorities in the Republic: the Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans, and Muslims, who together were believed to total 10 million, or 2.5 percent of the national population. Such ethnic and demographic inaccuracy (from what we know now) probably reflected a political will to ignore or downplay the importance of multi-ethnicity in early post-imperial China.

The near-constant state of combat in China over the next twenty years did nothing to alleviate this label of inconsequence. During the civil war that pitted communists and Nationalists against each other, the tactic on both warring sides became geared towards securing political and military alliances with regional ethnic minorities in as many strategic areas as possible. Article 14 of the 1931 Jiangsi Soviet Constitution, drafted by the communists, gave minority areas the right of complete secession from China once the Revolution was over. On the Nationalist side, the right to self-determination was guaranteed by the Guomindang to Xinjiang, Tibet, and Mongolia, should the communists be defeated (MacKerras 2003).

South of the border, in Vietnam, until the French conquest began in the mid-nineteenth century, little was known about most highlanders on the periphery. Studies of imperial Vietnamese archives show few traces of these marginal people apart from relatively vague mentions in connection

with administrative or trade problems. With few indigenous written records, what is left of the early history of highlanders in Vietnam is scarce. For incoming French observers and scholars, it was chiefly through early European testimonies such as those completed by missionaries and military personnel that the existence of mountain populations in the Indochina portion of the Southeast Asian Massif began to be acknowledged (Michaud 2007). The process of securing the borders then brought French administrators and colonists face to face with these highlanders, which led to greater interest in learning more about these unfamiliar "sauvages."

Soon after, in the mountains of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, a colonial divide-and-rule policy was put in place. It aimed to protect metropolitan economic interests while keeping the highlands under somewhat loose but steady control. Of particular interest to the colonial administration was how to make circumstances favourable to the growing of poppies and opium production and trade (Le Failler 2001). In 1891, large portions of Vietnam's highlands were placed under military administration, separate from the civilian system in the rest of the country (Michaud 2000). A similar strategy was later implemented in the south when dealing with *montagnards* in the high plateaus, in large part guided by the fact that the nationalist and communist factions had begun to promote their own projects among these highland populations (Salemink 2003).

In Laos, prior to French colonization in the 1890s, local lowland monarchs paid little attention to highlanders at the peripheries of their kingdoms (Evans 2002). During French rule, a modern policy of strict control of national territory within secured borders was implemented. Minorities were accounted for and alliances made with a number of them. Civil disorder then raged for three decades following the Second World War. The political situation was first aggravated by France's determination to restore its grip over its Indochina domain after the war, until its military downfall at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Agreements of 1954. Civil unrest in Laos was then further compounded by the royalist struggle against the revolutionary surge of the Pathet Lao during the Second Indochina War (1954-75) and the active intervention of the United States. During this period, minority issues remained a matter of ad hoc military alliances following the fluctuations of the frontlines and military objectives. Both the Pathet Lao forces on one side and the Royal/Neutralist Lao Government forces on the other tried to draw local mountain peoples to their cause (Pholsena 2006). Such strategic alliances proved crucial for occupying the highland terrain that forms most of Lao territory. Thus, until the communist takeover of 1975, minorities in mid- and upland Laos were not subject to clear national policies, but instead faced more immediate pressures and dangers. They could not realistically "opt out" of the war effort, and taking sides was not so much a matter of choice as a vital necessity.

The Core Socialist Period

The birth of the communist notion of "nationality" and eventually of "minority nationality" took place in the USSR. Not quite as Josef Stalin had originally conceived them in the early days of the Russian Revolution, the two notions of nation (*natsiya*) and nationality (*narodnost*) were reinterpreted when passed on to friendly Asian regimes fighting colonial and/or reactionary powers. The Chinese term *minzu* therefore translated as "nationality," while *dân tộc* in Vietnamese and *sonsaat* in Lao both translated as "nation," thus blurring the initial distinction made by Soviet thinkers that nationalities were less advanced forms of nations.

China

Despite promises made before the 1949 Maoist victory, the Communist Party wanted to steer clear of the peril of multiple secessions. It immediately promulgated a new policy towards minorities, one based on the notion of China's being a multi-national (that is, multi-ethnic) unitary state, not a group of federated republics such as the model established in the USSR (Deal 1971). Yet, autonomous regions were set up throughout the 1950s, heralding minorities' token rights to self-rule. Five province-size entities were classified as Autonomous Regions (AR, *zizhiqu*), all located on the frontiers of China, with two in the southwestern mountainous area: the Guangxi Zhuang AR and the Xizang (Tibet) AR. Smaller Autonomous Prefectures (*zizhizhou*) and Autonomous Counties (*zizhixian*) further subdivided these ARs as well as parts of neighbouring provinces such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Hunan. On the ground, meanwhile, collectives were implemented from 1953 onward (Gjessing 1956).

In the early 1950s, to gain a better understanding of poorly known non-Han nationalities and to speed up their integration into the socialist nation, the People's Republic launched a massive ethnographic research program under the active guidance and supervision of state ethnologists from the USSR (Mullaney 2010). At the time, no one could agree on precisely how many minority groups there were, or what their exact identities were. The explicit objectives of the ethnographic project were thus to list and classify the various non-Han groups living within the national borders (Tapp 2002). The political intention, however, was clearly one of standardization and control. This classification project (*minzu shibie*) sponsored surveys that first focused on linguistics, with the explicit intention of developing an understanding of little-known languages, designing adapted writing systems (chiefly in Roman script), and ultimately training language cadres and installing them as mediators devoted to the Party.

In a Central Government Directive of 1951, terminology was "redressed" so that exonyms once considered derogatory, such as *Lolo*, *Man*, or *Yeren*, were replaced with more neutral ones, such as *Yi*, *Yao*, and *Jingpo*. Pejorative

ideograms using the dog, worm, or reptile radicals for names of minority peoples were purged from the Chinese writing system. In 1953, the first post-revolution national census then announced that 6 percent of the population, or over 35 million people, belonged to non-Han ethnicities. This constituted clear progress towards a more realistic picture than the 2.5 percent noted in the 1920 exercise had done. By 1959, the *shaoshu minzu* (minority nationalities) were officially classified into fifty-one groups occupying 64 percent of the national territory. This number of minority groups was pushed to fifty-three in 1963, before stabilizing at fifty-five in 1981. Since then, the authorized list of fifty-five *shaoshu minzu*, plus the Han *minzu*, has served as the basis for all official research and publications on nationalities in the PRC (Tapp 2002; Gladney 2004).

It was only in 1956 that research on the broader and more complex topic of the social history of minorities began, involving pioneer Chinese ethnologists such as Ruey Yih-fu and Fei Xiaotong. Only two years later, however, this nascent production of serious scholarship on minorities came to a standstill with the launch of the Great Leap Forward, a massive lull that was to stretch until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. These difficult times in recent Chinese history were less than tolerant towards cultural distinction. Uniformity became a top priority and official nationality policies from earlier years that insisted on special treatment for minorities on the basis of their distinctiveness were put on hold. Massive Han migrations from the overpopulated coastal regions and lowlands into the highlands were sped up by the national collectivization scheme. Radical changes to local economies were pushed, often with disastrous results (Swain 1990). The Cultural Revolution launched forceful attacks on religious expression in particular. The "Four Old Things" – old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits – were actively targeted for deletion and assimilation as a state policy. As long as Mao Zedong was at the helm, a different approach to minority questions was not yet possible (Chi 1956; Chiao and Tapp 1989; Howland 2011).

Vietnam

After its 1954 victory in the north, the socialist state in what was then the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam) maintained for a few more years the division between highlands and lowlands initiated by the French by setting up Chinese-style autonomous regions in the north, where colonial military administration had existed previously. The concept of politically sovereign autonomous regions had initially been promised as early as the 1930s by warring nationalist and communist forces alike, to entice non-Kinh (non-Viet) ethnic groups to join the struggle for independence. Here too, following victory, watered-down versions of these promises led to the creation in the north in 1955 of the Viet Bac Autonomous Region

and the Tay Bac Autonomous Region (De Hartingh 1996). As soon as the reunification war was won in 1975, however, the autonomous regions policy became obsolete.

Meanwhile, in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam), minorities in the Central Highlands, generically called "Montagnards" (from French for "mountain people") by American advisers and troops, were tragically entangled in the turmoil of the Second Indochina War (1954-75). These high plateaus, through which the network of the Ho Chi Minh trails reached the south, became the stage for fierce political and military confrontations. The RVN government tried to thwart communist insurgents by forcing large numbers of peasants to relocate to strategic hamlets (Hickey 1982). Then, in 1975, when the communist north prevailed, the nation became united under one socialist regime, and economic and political measures enforced in the north since the 1950s were exported to the south, including collectivization and migration of Kinh from the lowlands to the highlands, thanks to the New Economic Zones scheme (Hardy 2002).

In an emerging country in which the collective project had to be popular, national, and scientific, little room was left for the ways of the past (Nguyen 1968). In communist rhetoric, highlanders in Vietnam were considered to be at the lowest stage of economic development and in dire need of assistance, while the Kinh enlightened majority was entering the highest point, socialism. The least "socialist man" could do for "traditional man" – in the words of Vietnamese ethnologists – was to help him relinquish his simplicity and reach the superior levels of lowland civilization as quickly as possible (Chung 1968). Vigorous plans for sedentarization, collectivization, and industrialization were implemented against an ideological background that prioritized the indivisible unity of country and nation with the active promotion of Kinh culture (Kahin 1972). Concurrently, following the Chinese example, ethnological studies of national minorities gravitated almost obsessively to the issue of classification (Evans 1985; Koh 2002). The first exhaustive list of minorities in the DRVN was proposed in 1959 and included sixty-four ethnic groups. A second one followed in 1973, with fifty-nine. By 1979, under the leadership of ethnic *Tây* state ethnologist Be Viet Dang, the official total of fifty-four nationalities (*dân tộc*, including the Kinh nationality) was finally established. Much as is the case in China and for comparable reasons, this quasi-sacred figure has not changed since (Dien 2002).

Having made national unity a priority at the time of reunification, the post-1975 Socialist Republic of Vietnam needed a specific strategy to overcome the problem of integrating minorities into the Vietnamese nation. This came to be called "selective cultural preservation," as candidly explained by Vietnamese ethnologist Nong Quoc Chan in his article "Selective Preservation of Ethnic Minorities Cultural Tradition" (1978). As stated in the Constitution, minority nationalities (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) have a right to

maintain their traditions, but only as long as they do not pose a threat to the socialist progress of the country (Government of Vietnam 1995). As a consequence, "counter-productive" and "superstitious" practices such as shamanism, animal sacrifice, lavish funerals, bride-price, and swiddening were deemed "backwards" and earmarked for eradication. Other cultural activities, chiefly benign and aesthetic ones, were in turn encouraged, including the wearing of colourful attire, singing, dancing, and playing traditional music. The selective cultural preservation policy in Vietnam has never been revoked, and, quite conveniently today, it has enabled the survival of precisely what is needed to ensure that minorities will still be attractive to growing national and international tourist crowds.

Laos

With the war over in Laos in 1975 and the communists in power, promises of political autonomy that were made to certain minority allies in the heat of the action were drastically toned down (Pholsena 2006). The secretary general of the Communist Party of Laos, Kaysone Phomvihane, made it clear early in his exceptionally long tenure, from 1955 to his death in 1992, that the indissoluble unity of the Laotian people was the foremost national priority. The autonomous regions strategy followed by China and Vietnam could never take off in Laos due in large part to the more highly diversified ethnic fabric of the country. Local customs of ethnically distinct minorities could still be practised, but any thoughts of ethno-nationalism or regional autonomy were deemed undesirable. The Lao-Tai identity was actively promoted as the national cultural norm, and presented as the element that would cement together the multiple ethnicities in communist Laos. More strongly than in any of its brother socialist states, Laos enforced the use of a national language (Lao) and made next to no effort to devise scripts for its non-literate, non-Lao minorities (Batson 1991; Ovesen 2004).

Under the influence of Vietnamese ethnologists who were called in for scientific guidance, priority was again given to the establishment of a definitive classification of ethnic groups (Evans 1999). The first informal classification produced by the new regime adopted the figure of sixty-eight "ethnicities" (*sonphao*). The three-tiered division of the population according to the altitude of their usual dwellings – *Lao Loum*, *Lao Theung*, *Lao Soung* – also dates from this period.¹ A somewhat artificial consensus was eventually reached in 1992 on the figure of forty-seven official ethnicities in Laos, in time for the 1995 census in which these *sonphao* were explicitly used. Predictably, given the example set by its two neighbours, the state then formally associated architectural traditions, costumes, rituals, and beliefs with each minority group, so that it could publicly show the high regard in which the Lao authorities held its minority cultures (Goudineau 2000).

A dominant feature of the Lao government's policy towards highland minorities has been the focus on their resettlement through what has been called the relocation policy (Évrard and Goudineau 2004). In the 1960s, the royal and neutralist Lao governments initiated an early relocation policy in an official effort to enhance the living conditions of non-Lao groups. That decision could not hide a political strategy that aimed, in reality, to pull the rug from under the communist insurgents' feet by emptying rebel regions of their civilian populations. Meanwhile, the official communist revolutionary strategy during the decades of civil unrest was to bring economic development to the highlands. This was undertaken by providing uplanders receptive to the revolutionary project with goods essential for their survival in the highlands and for their active support of insurgent actions. In zones seized by communist forces prior to 1975, however, minorities who had supported the Pathet Lao were often rewarded with pieces of land located in the lowlands, thus initiating a de facto relocation movement (Pholsena 2006).

The victorious communists in Laos amplified this movement after 1975 by bringing many isolated populations closer to the country's road infrastructure (Baird and Shoemaker 2007), particularly in areas prone to persistent armed resistance to the regime (Lee 1982). Further complicating the picture, during the 1977-85 period, some Lao-Tai groups from the lower mountain slopes who had fled their homes during the war returned and demanded that their former land – allocated in the meantime to relocated highlanders – be given back to them. The state frequently answered their demands favourably, setting in motion further population movements (Mayoury 2000; Ovesen 2004).

Together, socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos have all implemented major land or agricultural reforms aimed at curtailing or terminating the privileges of the landlord class and at collectivizing agriculture and produce ownership. This process lasted from 1949 to 1978 in China, from 1954 in the north of Vietnam and 1975 in the south to 1986, and from 1975 to 1986 in Laos. In most cases, and prominently in China and Vietnam, land was appropriated by the state, landlords were dispossessed, and all former peasants were turned into rural workers in agricultural, labour, or industrial collectives. Such reforms were most effectively implemented in the populated lowlands; on the periphery, their intensity faltered.

In the Reform Era

Between 1978 and 1986, leaders in China, Vietnam, and Laos pursued a unique course of action that was hitherto unheard of in the evolution of communist countries or Marxist theory. In contrast to the Soviet bloc and its satellites, which completely departed from Marxism, these three Asian countries opened up to the market economy while keeping a socialist regime

firmly in place, as noted in Chapter 1. Does this novel course fit the generally accepted labels of “post-socialism” or “post-communism” as defined chiefly in relation to Russia and Eastern Europe? Should it instead be addressed as “late-socialism”? As the discussions during the Montréal workshop leading to this book made clear, debates are still raging, and I do not claim to have the answer (cf. Friederichsen and Neef 2010). But one thing is clear: this new and experimental combination has had a major impact on every facet of social life in China, Vietnam, and Laos, including the highlands.

With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the advent of Deng Xiaoping (1978-92), the Four Modernizations were immediately implemented in China, followed in 1979 by the Open Door policy. Once again, a relative liberalism towards cultural diversity could flourish, even if kept in close check by Beijing. The rights of minority nationalities to express and maintain their culture were restated in official texts such as the 1982 Constitution (articles 3, 36, 112-20). These included the right of self-government in Autonomous Regions and Prefectures, although all minority cadres would be vetted by the Party. In the 1980s, a revival of interest in minorities occurred through the activities of the Institute of Ethnology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, founded years earlier but silenced for two decades. Also, a Center for Nationalities Research was established in 1977 at the Academy of Social Sciences. Politically speaking, a number of privileges in the form of positive discrimination were granted to the *shaoshu minzu*, such as the exemption from laws prohibiting sumptuary expenditures at funerals, preferential treatment for admission to universities, and more tolerant population policies.

Today, in this more tolerant political atmosphere, the state promotes a number of standardized minority cultural expressions, particularly for the fast-growing tourist trade. Members of the “minority nationalities” can often attend primary school in their home regions and listen to radio broadcasts in their own languages, albeit with strict surveillance and sometimes active intervention regarding the information circulating in these ways (Woodside 2007). Primary education may be available with local cultural flavours, but pan-China, Han-centred curricula are implemented. Anyone who wishes to pursue higher education in China today, as well as career success, is made well aware that these require mastering Mandarin and gaining an intimate understanding of Han Chinese society (Wang and Postiglione 2008; Mei 2009; Zhang and Verhoeven 2010). Such necessities act as powerful incentives for the cultural integration of the younger generations into mainstream Chinese society. Indeed, official recognition only partly masks a national policy of slow but steady cultural integration (Unger 1997; Henders 2004).

Unsurprisingly, much the same can be said about Vietnam (Ling and Walter 2010). The Economic Renovation (*Đổi Mới*) that took place following the decisions of the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party in 1986 has

contributed to somewhat reducing the intensity of state authoritarianism throughout the country, including the highlands. A generally more moderate attitude towards trade, religion, education, and cultural expression has, however, failed to completely dissolve the state’s worries regarding highland security issues such as Christian agitation in the Central Highlands, allegedly encouraged by outside agents. Preserving distinct cultural identities is still low on the national agenda (Salemink, Chapter 13; see also Stokhof and Salemink 2009). A policy of selective cultural preservation among national minorities is still implemented, in which the state decides unilaterally which aspects of a culture are sufficiently valuable – and politically palatable – to be retained, and which ones are to be actively discouraged. In Laos, in the meantime, after the launch of the New Economic Mechanisms liberalizing the economy in 1986, the relocation policy initiated earlier during the war gained momentum and, along with a general agenda of national progress and economic modernization, still forms the core of the state’s policy towards the highland non-Lao population (Kossikov 2000; Évrard and Goudineau 2004; Pholsena 2006, Formoso 2006).

Towards Modernization and Market Integration

Today, highlanders in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif are integrated into their respective nations at a variety of paces, but steadily in the same direction. They still face governments that could be more active in collecting and processing reliable information about their cultural distinctiveness, or, if they already do, could show greater empathy and respect (Blum 2000; Keyes 2002; Gladney 2004; Michaud 2011). To be fair, the ethnology of national minorities is an expanding field in local universities and institutes. What is being learned and studied there, however, is heavily influenced by a political agenda attuned to national priorities. The larger the country, obviously, the more remote these priorities can be from local realities. One factor in this disjointedness is historical: the vast majority of leading local scholars who occupy positions of power in institutional anthropological bodies are still from an era in which doctorates were obtained at the universities of “friendly” regimes – chiefly in the USSR and Eastern Europe – or in local colleges, universities, and academies under strict Marxist intellectual guidance. Now, a newer generation of ethnologists is allowed to be exposed to the outside world. The effects on the ground, however, are still only starting to be felt.

On the political front, China, Vietnam, and Laos share a policy of co-opting minority representatives to insert into all levels of state administration, from local communes all the way to national assemblies. The higher the appointment, however, the more this appears a political façade rather than a genuine interest in minority voices. It is also clear in this regard that some ethnic-minority groups are more integrated and influential than others, due

to cultural as much as geographical proximity, historical circumstances, or sheer demography (Keyes 2002; MacKerras 2003).

With fast-paced post-centralized economic agendas pressing ahead, vigorous policies of cultural integration and economic standardization are relentlessly decided centrally and implemented nationally, and there is not much that minority representatives can do about it. Coherent with this approach, education, in principle a tool for emancipation, is in fact geared towards the Sinization, Lao-ization, or Vietnamization of all within the national borders (Litzinger 2000; Kaup 2000; Schein 2000; Mueggler 2001; Harrell 2002; Pholsena 2006).

The region's state development programs are now founded on economic growth and cultural progress driven by market demand and national integration (Xu 2004; Sturgeon 2010). The dominant rhetoric, after the decades of applied social evolutionism inherited from strict Marxist ideology, has been nicely swapped for the language of growth and development. Both discourses share the common principle that highland "little brothers" are in need of modernization, and providing this is the privilege and obligation of "elder brothers." With countless agencies from the affluent world knocking on the door to offer their services – and loans in hard currency to help pay for these – the technology of the international development industry is being relentlessly applied to minority health, education, and agricultural practices (Baird and Shoemaker 2007; Bonnin and Turner 2012). While the general indicators of health and education do show clear improvements in most highlands, it should be remembered that all these initiatives play directly into the state's strategy of bringing marginal peoples into the mainstream. In the process, cultural dimensions are paid only subsidiary attention, an array of other issues being judged incomparably more urgent (Duncan 2004; Forsyth and Michaud 2011).

China clearly has a strong central policy of controlling and integrating its southwestern minority nationalities (Gustafsson and Sai 2009). As several contributors to this volume show, the region is politically sensitive because it touches international borders, is rich in natural resources important to 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 (Blum 2002; Wilkerson 2003). Han immigration to the southwest can be read as a symptom of a political desire to eventually outnumber locals and take final political, economic, and cultural control over these valuable margins (Harrell 2001; MacKerras 2001).

Thinking along the same lines, Vietnam has officially made peace with its minority nationalities, focusing on economic growth instead. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese state still fears that dangerously high levels of political opposition are simmering in the Central Highlands and elsewhere, supported

by foreign-based "reactionary" diasporas (Writenet 2002; Salemink 2003; Salemink, Chapter 13). Christian missionary activism is a bone of contention, chiefly in the south but increasingly in the northern highlands too. Education is accordingly seen as a tool to project the state's regime of truth, preserve selected benign features of local highland cultures, and emphasize the positive impacts of the state's actions on minority identity protection (McElwee 2004). In Laos, much the same is occurring. Yet, with nearly half its population belonging to one or another of many non-Lao ethnicities, the Laotian state cannot afford to wage an all-out cultural offensive on its minorities. A degree of negotiation has to prevail (Goudineau 2003).

What will be the mid- and long-term impact of market reforms, changes in customary land tenure and control of resources, flows of information, development, influxes of aid, global climate change, market liberalization, new opportunities for extraction and trade, and other concerns? No one knows for sure in this never-before-seen political and historical configuration. Thus, in all three countries, there remain both grave challenges for highland minority societies and, here and there, rays of hope. Health, education, employment opportunities, and economic wealth have all made impressive progress, but often at the cost of undermining identity, culture, and distinctiveness. Given the generally weaker economic and political position of highland non-majority populations, practical consequences of national policies are usually more tangible for them than for majority populations. How the current challenges are resolved will have a great impact on this population of 70-80 million spread among China, Vietnam, and Laos, and will determine in large part how successfully these distinct societies can continue to exist.

These challenges are among the questions that the contributors to this volume attempt to answer. In the following chapters, they expose and explain the intricacies of day-to-day dealings with minorities on the cultural, political, and economic fringes of these socialist nations. The contributors detail their interactions with intermediaries from numerous ethnic backgrounds, including representatives from the dominant majorities. For each such encounter, a unique, delicate balance has to be found.

Acknowledgment

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Note

- 1 Lao Loum, Lao Theung, and Lao Soung are French transcriptions from the Lao; while in English the first and last terms are written Lao Lum and Lao Sung. We have used the French transcription throughout for consistency with direct written quotes used in Chapter 8.

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