

Rural Life in Late Socialism

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Rural Life in Late Socialism

Politics of Development and Imaginaries of the Future

Edited by

Phill Wilcox, Jonathan Rigg, and Minh T.N. Nguyen



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Rural Life in Late Socialism: Politics of Development and Imaginaries of the Future

Phill Wilcox, Jonathan Rigg and Minh T.N. Nguyen

Abstract

Late socialist countries are transforming faster than ever. Across China, Laos and Vietnam, where market economies coexist with socialist political rhetoric and the Communist party state's rule, sweeping processes of change open up new vistas of imaginaries of the future alongside uncertainty and anxiety. These countries are three of very few living examples that combine capitalist economics with party state politics. Consequently, societal transformations in these contexts are subject to pressures and agendas not found elsewhere, and yet they are no less subject to global forces. As all three countries maintain substantial rural populations, and because those rural areas are themselves places of change, how rural people across these changing contexts undertake future making is a timely and significant question. The contributions in the volume address this question by engaging with lived experiences and government agendas across Laos, China and Vietnam, showing a politics of development in which desire and hope are entangled with the contradictions and struggles of late socialism.

Keywords

rural – late socialism – Asia – development – aspirations

I know that I will have a different life from my parents. I came from our village in the [Lao] countryside to the city to study and now I have a good job. At university [in China] the teachers tell us that in the future we can be rich. I want to have my own business one day and make enough money to support my parents.

These are the words of a student from a rural area of northern Laos, studying at a Chinese university, to one of the authors in 2019. Aged 23, this young

person is entering adult life at a time of unprecedented change. The socialist rhetoric that marked the generation above him remains, but the economic policies of socialism, along with its vision of the future, are receding fast, to become a memory.

These words are echoed in social transformations throughout late socialist Asia.¹ Across China, Laos and Vietnam, where market economies coexist with socialist rhetoric and the Communist party state's rule, sweeping processes of change open up new vistas of opportunity and imaginaries of the future alongside uncertainty and anxiety. These countries are three of the few living examples that combine capitalist economics with party state politics and attempt to manage both simultaneously. Consequently, societal transformations in these contexts are subject to pressures and agendas not found elsewhere, and yet they are no less in the thrall of global forces than other parts of the world.

The speed of change across these late socialist countries is unprecedented. Within a few decades, centralised planning has given way to market economic policies. But, at the same time, this loosening of the economic climate has not gone hand in hand with significant liberalisation of the political landscape, as the Communist party retains its singular leadership. How this political economic trajectory shapes ideas of the good life and imaginaries of the future in these countries is the primary theme of the chapters in this volume. Late socialist countries are not immune to the pressures of globalisation, neoliberalism and restructuring found elsewhere, but these dynamics intersect with socialist rhetoric and institutions, and manifest in people's lived experiences in unique and often contradictory ways. The seemingly contradictory union of socialist ideology with market-based economics provides a unique place for future aspirations to take root and unfold, while also engendering a distinct politics of development.

Jackson notes that 'it is one thing to *be* alive; it is quite another thing to *feel* alive and to *think* that life is worth living' (2017: ix). Yet what constitutes a life worth living is an open question, and one that can take a very specific form depending on context while being driven by a general expectation of rising living standards. Electricity and Wifi are now regarded as life's essentials for many

¹ We utilise the term 'late socialist' to distinguish between countries that retain a nominal commitment to socialism and those that have formally abandoned any connection with the term and its ideology. We acknowledge the cogent recent work by High (2021) who argues that Laos should be viewed as socialist on its own terms, but maintain the use of the term late socialism, particularly as we talk here of three different national contexts. Moreover, debates about the usefulness of the term late socialism aside, we suggest that considering future making across these three countries is illuminating precisely for the heady mix of socialist politics and capitalist economic systems.

rather than a luxury only accessible to the elite. Focusing on transforming rural areas, we demonstrate in this introduction to the volume how the question of what constitutes a good life in contemporary Laos, China and Vietnam is by no means straightforward. What appears to mark a good life, for example the desire for a higher standard of living, may be common across contexts, but routes to achieving it vary enormously, as does the politics of achievement. In some cases, achieving a good life may simultaneously take the form of an outright rejection of traditional customs and beliefs and embracing change. In other cases, it can encompass the reinvention, rethinking and appropriation of traditions as the means for future building and achieving life goals.

Following Jackson, our point of departure is that the quest for wellbeing or a good life is always a field of struggle in which people hold varying expectations and hopes for the future, depending on their social and economic positions. The achievement of a good life may be calibrated and measured individually ('what is your level of education?'), but it is not achieved individually. It is relational. People are socially situated, and this enables and can impede personal achievement. Importantly, achievement is validated and non-achievement justified through such societal values and acts. This struggle is also defined by what Jackson terms 'existential dissatisfaction' (2011: ix). In other words, the pursuit of a good life is an open-ended struggle that might remain perpetually unfulfilled. It is, however, in this very pursuit that people, communities and nations justify their actions and politics.

People may equate a good life with a happy one (Carson 1978), but as we shall see, the ongoing presence of hope for something more has no clear end-point at which the goal of happiness has been achieved (Berlant 2011). The question of whose project a successful and meaningful life is, and whether that is an individual or collective one, and the role of the state in shaping those aspirations is a recurrent issue. So too are questions of how future building has transformed from being the remit of the elite to being open to a broad spectrum of people across society. What is clear is that future building is not exclusively a state project, and people consistently stake their claims and participation in its direction. Scholarship on future making, and especially future making as part of rural lives in late socialist Asia, is receiving increasing attention (see, for example, Stolz and Tappe 2021), but this is generally limited to a single case study context. We address this gap in the contributions that follow. As all three countries maintain substantial rural populations, taking changing rural life as a primary focus is an obvious place to start. All too often, it is assumed that urban spaces represent the heartlands of change, but rural areas are also transforming rapidly. As Rigg (2014) argues, it no longer makes sense to view the countryside as something inherently fixed and bounded, separate

from urban spaces. Nor does it make sense to view the countryside as a static and unchanging entity, a relict space. In rejecting these assumptions, we recognise that much as hopes for the future are changing, the very landscapes in which those changes are grounded are also changing. How rural lives are transforming across these countries inevitably underscores a series of contradictions and tensions between global and local forces. They implicate on the questions of individual and collective agency in negotiating change and how people shape and are shaped by transformations around them.

This volume's ten contributions from across Laos, Vietnam and China demonstrate how these tensions are lived out in the everyday lives of people and government policies. Following this introduction, Ian Baird describes the nature of changing agricultural practices in southern Laos as farmers seek to achieve higher crop yields for less work. Seb Rumsby argues for the prevalence of Christian conversion among the Hmong of northern Vietnam as an alternative strategy for development in the face of perceived failure by the state. These chapters demonstrate the ambivalent relationship between desire and modernity and the tensions that stalk these dreams. For Baird, it was the private concerns of people over the use of increased fertilisers and the long-term consequences of so doing. Quick returns is one thing, but at risk of the land providing for the next generation. This demonstrates the precarity of livelihood making in the face of sometimes increasingly difficult living conditions. The alternative to this is migration, something that is a choice, sometimes a constrained choice, or not a choice at all, as Guido Sprenger outlines in his chapter about relocated villages and the illusive power of the state. These chapters demonstrate the future-oriented visions of the good life, and the worries regarding its achievement.

The importance of having a choice in what one desires, or at least appearing to, is a recurrent theme in all the chapters. For Ruijing Wang, there is a choice to be made for those who wish to do away with their customs against their elders' wisdom and authority, and make the case that, in the contemporary world, it is possible for a baby born with a birth defect to be an accepted member of Akha society. For Tuan Anh Nguyen and his co-authors, being a single mother should be possible without being reprehensible, even where patriarchal structures continue to predominate. Acceptable life choices are a theme also picked up by Roy Huijsmans and Mr Piti, in their demonstration that the Lao school system may instil possible career choices in rural Lao schoolchildren yet give them no way to achieve them. In growing economies that demand a vast supply of low-cost labour, it is therefore unsurprising that labour migration is a common strategy for rural households in late socialism, as outlined by Hy Van Luong. As rural people migrate to the cities, urban lifestyles in turn

become a model for the countryside to emulate, as Lan Wei outlines in her account of the changing architecture of the house in a model village in southern China. What a good life looks like at different life stages is also a theme picked up by Catrina Schwendener, in her account of how workers plan and execute their plans for retirement in the economic landscape of China, which has changed immensely during their lives. For Zhi-Nong Li and Shu-qing He's Tibetan informants, what choices people have are between polygamous, particularly polyandrous, marital unions, which suit their particular ideas and practices of care but are incompatible with being a modern member of society and state-approved forms of marriage. As such, desire in material and spiritual terms, for belonging and autonomy, for tradition and modernity, at the same time, is part of the struggles for a good life at work, at home and in private. Moreover, members of the same society will aspire in different ways because desire is itself dependent on one's life situation (Appadurai, 2004). Their desires do not map neatly on to what is possible: such possibilities are sometimes uncomfortably linked to what is acceptable, and what is acceptable can be contested by local people and the state. How these matters manifest themselves in the unique context of rural late socialism is the focus of this volume.

Finally, we argue for the logical grouping of late socialist Asian countries. Much as we began with the story of the young migrant from the Lao countryside who went to a city, then to China and aimed to establish his own business in Laos, this transcends the conventional groupings of (North)east Asian vs Southeast Asian studies and provides valuable insights across the conventional boundaries of area studies. The contributions that follow draw from a wide range of disciplines and provide richer data as a result, although most of them take ethnography as a central if not the sole research method. This approach allows for detailed consideration of the how, why and directions of rural transformations as the economy transforms rapidly. Changing rural areas are a crucial place to think with and through in this discussion.

1 Places of Change and Changing Places

1.1 *Rural Transformations*

In an increasingly interconnected world, the days of a neat division between the rural and the urban are, for the most part, gone. For many, so too are the days where everyone in a rural settlement expected to become a farmer and that cycle of life to continue indefinitely through generations. By contrast, many people who would once have been considered farmers may not own land themselves and/or may labour for other people. In traditional rice-growing

areas, rice may also have given way to other industries or crops, including cash crops for short-term gain (Hsing 2010; Lyttleton and Li 2017; Nguyen, Gillen and Rigg 2020). Agricultural workers no longer merely exist to provide long-term staple foodstuffs for the population. As much as urban people, those living in rural areas aspire to what they see as an ideal life trajectory and actively craft their own future-making projects. For many, this means a different trajectory of expectations and actions from those undertaken by their parents, as we saw in the opening of this introduction.

The very role of agriculture within the countryside and societies more generally is changing with greater market expansion and technological intervention. This brings farmers into encounters with different actors with agendas of their own, including urban people, entrepreneurs and even those involved in business activities across borders (McAlister 2015; Grillot and Zhang 2017). Urban dwellers' and entrepreneurs' goals often intersect uncannily with state programmes for development. Since 2007, the Greater Mekong Subregion has pursued a campaign of 'community, competition and connectedness' (Lyttleton 2017: 216) and in its vision for how the region should develop and grow in economic terms even if, as Lyttleton observes, what it means for a large number of the poor remains to be seen. Under such ambitious programmes, the countryside would be hard pressed not to demonstrate sweeping and far-reaching changes. Among others, the growth of rural industries is testament to changing uses of the countryside and also how the countryside is understood and perceived across the region (Long, Ye and Wang 2010; Rigg 2014; Sakata 2013). Consider, for example, the Lao government policy of Turning Land into Capital (Dwyer 2017), which has encouraged mass development of rural areas, sometimes with mass infrastructure projects. In the Lao case, this drive for development via infrastructure was apparent in the collapse of the Xi Pian–Xe Namoy Hydropower Dam in a remote area of southern Laos in 2018, with disastrous consequences for local residents (Shoemaker 2018). But even without this catastrophe, the countryside being utilised to fulfil state and individual ambitions for future prosperity represents how rural areas have transformed and been perceived differently over time, as shown by Sprenger's analysis of resettlement in Laos (see also Evrard and Baird 2017). These changes are often carved literally into the landscape, not least in the imposition of urban planning on rural landscape as part of the new socialist countryside programme in China that Wei explores in this volume.

1.2 *Places of Movement*

Rural areas are also places from which people migrate, to which they return and where they stay. Like development of infrastructure, the movement and non-movement of people has profound effects. Even the relocation from one

rural area to another is a form of movement that changes the countryside in different ways. The circumstances under which this happens have profound implications for how the countryside is understood and imagined. The questions of who is moving and who is not, to where and for what reasons, are worth asking outside a linear paradigm of rural to urban movement.

Rural inhabitants may maintain a view of the cities as places of opportunity and somewhere to better their life chances through education or employment and earn the necessary remittances that improve their family's prospects. Yet they usually maintain networks with people of similar rural origins and dynamic emotional and economic relationships with their rural households as strategies for dealing with the precarious nature and emotional stresses of migration, as Luong shows in his analysis of translocal households in Vietnam (see also Nguyen 2014; Nguyen and Locke 2014; Tappe and Nguyen 2019; Rigg and Salamanca 2011). Rural households are actively involved in the process of migration by their members, for instance, through the provision and conveyance of supplies to relatives working outside agriculture in urban areas. These linkages fuel not only practical needs but also ambitions and aspirations. Relatives in villages may then follow existing networks to work in cities, pursuing lives different from those of previous generations. Yet while rural inhabitants are no different from anyone else in harbouring dreams for their future, they are subject to limits on the fulfilment of those dreams. These limits might be simple bad luck or individual life situation, but often they can be traced to rural migrants' structural disadvantage that leads to a lack of money, low education and poor health, because of their exclusion from urban services and the biased structures of opportunities in the labour market (Nguyen and Locke 2014). These mean that they are disproportionately affected in case of economic slowdown or environmental crisis. Such limits have not hampered the significance of mobility for rural imagining of the future. Meanwhile, not all migration is voluntary and the rejection of mobility at times plays an equally important role in people's sense of agency and self-determination regarding their future, as Sprenger suggests. Nor, as Schwendener notes, is this an action executed only by young people as ideas of what constitutes a good life, and where, change over time and throughout the life course. Clearly, migration and non-migration – coerced, voluntary or a movement that has elements of both – are both constituting rural change, raising questions about the future of agriculture and rural livelihoods, particularly small-scale agriculture (Fox et al. 2018; Rousseau and Sturgeon 2019; Thieme 2008; Wilson, Hu and Rahman 2018). Talk of migration thus must also deal with the trauma of forced movement and its ramifications across communities and beyond (Dao 2016; Habich 2016; High 2013).

2 Desires and Actions

Humans desire. This might be an immediate desire for the material and to participate in consumption (Miller 1987) or for the more abstract: wellbeing, prestige, reputation and respectability (Berlant 2011). As Jackson (2011) notes, it is unusual to find people without desires for anything whatsoever. Hope, the desire to have or to become something more, is an arguably universal state. The chapters in this volume demonstrate the connection between the immediate and the intangible, between desires and actions. We highlight the importance of thinking through future aspirations as something one has (a capability) as well as does. This is what Appadurai (2004) calls for in his insistence that aspirations do not exist in a vacuum; they are often highly situational and contextual. What looks attractive in one context will not always do so in another. It may also vary with time. This is why High urges us to think of desire as 'a locally charged concept and as a way of thinking about the cosmological and symbolic commitments behind particular arrangements of economics and politics' (2014: 14). Desire impacts people in different ways, while reproducing existing social inequality, as demonstrated by several contributions in this volume which address ethnic (Rumsby, Wang) or societal minorities (Nguyen et al.) and their attempts to realise the good life amid a social order hegemonic landscape that seeks either to maintain or to ignore their marginalisation.

Desire is related to how modernity is understood, and what it means to be a modern citizen, of a country and of the world at large (Salemink 2015). There is a growing literature on social aspiration and desire in late socialist contexts (High 2014; Hoang 2015; Nguyen et al forthcoming; Rofel 2007; Salemink 2015; Zhang 2010). Noted as emerging across these countries is what Rofel terms a 'desiring subject' (2007), a form of moral personhood that vies for belonging in a cosmopolitan world of development and modernity and yet remains immersed in nationalist sentiments. In his account of how development is understood by the Hmong of rural northern Vietnam, Rumsby demonstrates how this desiring subject arises from the margin. As the Hmong rely on the economic moral guidance of Pentecostalism for their 'development' effort, they are subscribing to the modernising claims of both the church and the state, at the same time as they critique the state's lack of involvement in improving their lives. Similarly, the Chinese villages ready to incur significant debt to rebuild their houses following the blueprint of the government for a New Socialist Countryside (Wei) might grudgingly do so, but many would find in such state programmes a space for realising their aspirations to be modern and exemplar citizens (see also High 2014; Nguyen 2018b). What being modern actually means is an open question

while people seem happy to forego some aspects of culture if these are no longer regarded as 'useful'; individuals, groups and cultural norms are not fixed or immutable. The challenge is that it is hard to second guess what these aspects might be. For instance: does land hold symbolic and cultural value beyond its productive role in rural livelihoods? And: to what degree does the power of the 'homeland' keep rural migrants connected to their villages of origin even as economic forces would seem to drive them away?

2.1 *The Limits of Desire*

Even in the time where vistas of opportunity seem wider than ever, according to Jackson (2011), the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2006) has its limits. One's situation in society impacts how far one can develop their aspirations. Much as these countries have changed, people have also come to be confronted with new challenges in mastering their destiny, doing well for themselves and their family or at the very least appearing to do so. With the changing social contract in which responsibility for care and wellbeing now rests with the family, rural people, faced with higher living costs and rising expectations, have few other options than migrating to urban and industrial centres for wage work, often incurring high social costs for the rural family. Luong demonstrates this trajectory clearly in his discussion of migrant work and migrants' separation from their dependent family members. For Nguyen et al., the desire to build a family as a single mother is confronted with structures of opportunities and property regimes that privilege the married couple. This demonstrates how choice is often made within a limited range of options, even if these are far wider than those of previous generations. In Laos, children are allowed to make career choices that are considered acceptable aspirations (Huijsmans), while farmers have the option to use more advanced methods of agriculture and are encouraged to do so even as this endangers ideas of rice as a sacred part of Lao culture (Baird). Under the Chinese rural renewal programme, peasants are encouraged to build modern, urban-style houses (Wei), even as the project is stalked by debt and financial mismanagement. As certain groups insist on or adopt unconventional ways of family making, such as polyandrous marriage (Li), single motherhood (Nguyen et al.) or translocal family (Luong), the state-approved heterosexual and co-residing nuclear family remains the ideal, along with its norms and moral restrictions. Here we see one of the tensions outlined earlier, that of the individual versus the collective in negotiating processes of change. But given that all changes involve other people and wider society, future building always has an impact on other people and frequently demands their cooperation or acquiescence.

Although individual agency is ever present in how people imagine their future, some are in a far better position to exercise agency than others.

Everyone can desire but not all necessarily have their desires met. The presence of desire and the illusive struggle for success or respectability remains and extends beyond the individual and the local. This again speaks to a tension between local, national, global and international processes of change. What one wants may not be what the state wants as the latter balances competing interests of economic freedom with maintaining its ongoing need for legitimacy. Or what the state wants may contradict what is possible within the parameters of its own agency. In late socialism, one may have economic freedom but not the latitude to trespass on politics or ask too many direct questions about the ongoing relevance of socialist ideology. Such is how the cultural intimacy of late socialism operates (Herzfeld 2016). We also see the limits of the state in enforcing its rules (see Rumsby, Wang) or the inconsistency with which it does so. This makes thinking through agency and how people exercise agency a frustratingly difficult task. At the same time, the desire for a better life – to be ‘modern’ – seems to have almost universal traction, notwithstanding significant differences in the texture of what this means and how it is achieved (or not).

2.2 *Contradictory Desires*

Desire often manifests itself in contradictory ways. Even as they aspire for improvements, many people in the region express concerns about the pace of change. Desire thus is a negotiated and emergent process (High 2008, 2013; Rofel 2007) as well as one that is relational, often highly gendered and defined by generational difference (High 2014; Huijsmans 2019; Rofel 1999). A good life is as such not necessarily interchangeable with a happy one. As Baird shows, modern agricultural technologies might increase the rice yield and incomes of farmers and liberate them from the labour-intensive techniques of traditional farming, and yet the sticky rice no longer tastes as good while the quality of land declines over time. Yet a return to traditional farming is perhaps no longer possible, while the promotion of organic farming is often driven by the ethical consumption demands of better-off consumers rather than a real concern with restoring ecological balance for the sake of farming communities. Wei's thoughtful characterisation of the changing architecture of the rural house indicates the tension between the desire for privacy and consumption centred around the individual and the longing for a communal sense of family life that is distinctly gendered and shaped by power relations between the old and the young. Nguyen et al.'s account of single mothers in rural Vietnam shows that, while becoming a single mother allows a woman to fulfil her desire for family making as a form of self-determination, the mothers continue to refer to the hegemonic value of marriage in evaluating their lives.

People's articulation of their aspirations and desires is frequently connected to reflections about duties and sacrifices, missed opportunities and uncertainties, as the chapter on rural–urban migration in Vietnam by Luong suggests. Migrant workers talk of being materially better off through migration for both themselves and their families, but the question of for how long these trajectories of migration can be maintained is unanswered. The price of migration for work is living far removed from one's immediate family and entrusting care to someone else, or of struggling to keep a family together on a perilously small income. The desire to move and not move with the imagined consequences of both options is also articulated as a complex area of engagement by Sprenger in a chapter that reflects on the importance of maintaining autonomy, or at least being seen to do so, over one's life choices. In the same vein, Huijsmans and Piti's chapter on Lao schools demonstrates how the promise of education was held up as a means of social mobility for Lao schoolchildren, even if for the local authorities being able to show that all the children passed primary education was far more important than whether the children were actually academically capable. The state may foster children's dreams for the future but simultaneously denies them the means to achieve them. We return to this question of agency, assumed agency and the appearance of agency in the sections below.

Rather than individualised projects, desire is also political (High 2014; Nguyen 2018a; Rofel 2007). As the political economic landscape has changed, so too have the possibilities for desiring. As neoliberal restructuring shifts responsibility from the state to individuals, families and communities, migrating to a capitalist country or obtaining a top-spec mobile phone are now state-sanctioned dreams. It was not very long ago that the household registration systems in China and Vietnam kept people in place whatever their aspirations might have been – mobility was impossible for the large majority of the rural population. In Laos, limited infrastructure and poverty also effectively limited the scope for movement. Consumerist desires have also been democratised in the sense that they are open even to people living in poverty. In fact, consumption has implicitly turned into a citizen duty. Whether such levels of consumption are actually achievable for an individual subject is another question. Rural migrants to the cities encounter a wider cross-section of people than before, intersecting those with vastly different levels of financial, political and cultural capital. One may have images held up of what one could become, or how life could be if one worked sufficiently hard. These may be motivational but have also the potential for cruelty and negative consequences for the aspiration holders when and if they are not fulfilled. Such is the case for Schwendener's informants who plan for a good life in retirement but may die before realising these aspirations. As Berlant (2011) recognises, the end point

will be not the fulfilment of those dreams but failure to realise them. Desire is a startlingly potent force in prompting people to actions, which in turn shape the unfolding of rural changes, at times even the direction of the state development agenda. Moreover, while desire and aspiration can be empowering, it is worth keeping in mind that failure to achieve one's aspirations can be very disempowering, especially when the language of aspiration is appropriated by the state.

3 The Government of Desire

3.1 *Future Building and Its Parameters*

In *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) argues that freedom should be the goal of development, at both individual and collective levels. He outlines the importance of eliminating forces that restrict freedom(s), such as political systems of repression, and increasing access to economic opportunities and public services. This flies largely in the face of those cheering on neoliberal economics and arguing for growth at any cost while holding the state to account for the outcomes of development. The chapters in this volume underscore the prominent role for the state in late socialism, yet one that has been significantly reconfigured compared to the previous era.

At the heart of socialism is a future-making project premised on modernisation and the harmonisation of individual and collective desires. This project contrasts with the expectations of a continuing upward trajectory in individual accumulation of wealth and consumption possibilities under capitalism, what Beckert (2016: 61) terms 'fictional expectations'. As the states of late socialism carry out agendas that reference both the utopian dreams of socialism and the fictional expectations of capitalism, the parameters of future aspirations are a contested area. During the height of state socialism, future making was a straightforward matter, although symbolism from this period remains visible in how everyone has a role in progressing the cause of socialism within the nation (Creak and Barney 2018). With the opening up of all these countries and the gradual disassembly of economic systems such as collectives, possible career choices and life trajectories have widened. So too has the remit of the state. The state's role has morphed into a guiding force behind these multiple changes (High and Petit 2013) and, by so doing, avoided making itself redundant (Gainsborough 2010; Yamada 2018). With its contradictory goals, the state can be simultaneously a force that foment and encourages dreams for the future and sets limits on them. In contrast to the austere years of socialism, mass consumption is now what constitutes good citizenship (Huijsmans and Lan 2015)

This means that state power is not felt consistently or statically across any of our contexts (Rathie 2017; Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012; Zhang and Ong 2008). Several contributions to this volume demonstrate how the personal intersects with the political in respect of private life in ways that either contest or legitimise state power. Some of Wang's Akha villagers mobilise the state's power in a bid to create changes in local perceptions towards what the Akha deemed abnormal births, such as twins or webbed feet, which require killing the infants through purification rituals. Through appealing to state laws, which deemed their cosmological tradition around the practice backward and barbaric, change-makers prevented the death of babies that would have previously been deemed unnatural. But while some villagers wanted the state to play a more prominent role in this volume, others worried about cosmological imbalance resulting from the state intervention taking its toll on the community. Li Zhinong and He, in contrast, tell us of how people practising polygamy, particularly polyandry, in Tibet prefer to hide these alliances from the state, regarding their private lives as their own business in which the state's authority should not interfere. These two accounts suggest that people selectively turn to the state's modernising agendas for their own purposes while continuing to embrace enduring practices that do not fit in these agenda. In the same vein, Luong's chapter cautions against a straight contrast of care policies of state socialism versus the contemporary period, arguing that the dynamics of care have always been complicated and contested. It is worth keeping in mind, he points out, that even the universal promise of socialist care towards families did not always translate to very much in material terms. Finally, Nguyen and his co-authors suggest how the state approval of heterosexual marriage as the ideal basis of family shapes the very struggles for livelihoods and social recognition of single mothers in rural Vietnam, whom it however has to allow a space for family making on account of the women's specific moral claims.

While state agendas and individual desires are often mutually constituted, the state does not hold a monopoly over moral and political guidance. A good example is how the Hmong in northern Vietnam participated in alternative development programmes to those offered by the Vietnamese state through their conversion to Christianity (Rumsby). Through recognising their achievements as an exemplar of local development, however, the state is presenting itself as the patron of such development and thereby attempting to reassert its control over the ethnic minorities in the face of alternative powers such as Evangelical churches. This indeed plays into a more general policy orientation in which the state recasts its role as the supervisor and enabler of development, leaving the actual responsibilities to a broad range of social actors, including transnational actors (Derks and Nguyen 2020). In a related

discussion on communities that stay and move in the face of government resettlement programmes, Sprenger shows the elusive appearance of the state. Its power presents itself at times very explicitly, other times more tacitly, but is never entirely absent.

Thus, desire can be acted upon with tacit or explicit state support. For Nguyen and his co-authors' interlocutors, living alongside other single mothers appears to be a choice but in reality functions far more as a survival strategy as this is not a preferable life situation in the view of the state, albeit tolerable to certain extent. Here again, we see the state at work in arbitrating what is and is not possible, what can and cannot be the subject of aspiration. The question of who has the responsibility to care for whom is also a question that has never gone away, even as Laos, China and Vietnam enter a new era of possibility and aspiration. People continue to rely on their families and networks for survival and the tension of individual versus the community is felt acutely and lived out in everyday life. This is no less complicated in late socialist Asia than it is anywhere else and being an entirely free agent is perhaps the greatest risk of all. As Jackson (2011) suggests, happiness and satisfaction rest more on the awareness of one's possible limits and accepting what one has rather than accepting the risk of losing all in the hope of obtaining or becoming something more. Our interlocutors might not necessarily be happy at all times, but that does not deny their notion that a good life can be possible, sometimes precisely thanks to acceptance, resignation or compromise. As such, the struggle for wellbeing and the good life is closely intertwined with the recognition of having made the best of available options or acceptance, when very few were or are actually available.

What is clear is that desires, aspirations and future building across Laos, Vietnam and China continue to be shaped by the need to navigate state power. In Laos, the will for the country to develop and exit Least Developed Country status has been a cornerstone of Lao government policy for several decades (United Nations Economic Analysis and Policy Division 2018). But this does not mean that all forms of development are acceptable to the state, and those who 'do' development in these countries must balance a large number of competing interests (High 2014; Saleminck 2015). In their respective chapters, Sprenger and Rumsby demonstrate the multiple ways in which local people negotiate with considerably stronger interests at local, national and international levels. These negotiations lead to a complex relationship of parties showing limited tolerance for each other and skirting around issues of who has the right to do what, where and at what time. Here too, the role of the state is negotiated as part of the process of future building. Similarly, all the other chapters in this volume suggest the dynamic interaction between people's desires and aspirations and the state's agenda and the workings of its power.

4 Future Building in Transforming Places

Amid the growing uncertainty and precarity of late socialist Asia, the expectation of a future of wellbeing and fulfilment is pervasive, and rural people are no less driven by this expectation. In his work on the experiences of waiting by poor people, Auyero (2011) noted that the more powerful the entity or thing being waited for is understood to be, the more people are prepared to wait for it. The chapters that follow reveal people not only waiting, but taking active steps, sometimes over long periods of time, in the hope of getting what they want. For the rural subjects encountered in this volume, aspiration remains constant, and its force is potent. Desires for rising living standards, obtaining and achieving more in exchange for less hard work, greater material comfort, greater security and care for self and family, and simultaneously belonging to community, nation and global modernity are what drive people in the contexts we study. They point to a recognisable direction of change in respect of what constitutes a good life (Rigg 2014).

People in late socialist Asia are little different from those elsewhere in the world. What differs in this case is the way in which they navigate change amid the particular political context of late socialism. The backdrop of capitalist economics combined with socialist institutions and rhetoric results in multifaceted and at times contradictory desires for the future. While some of these changes signify an embrace of apparently modern values and a rejection of the anachronistic, for example in respect to traditional gender roles and marriage forms, there are exceptions, of which the ongoing prevalence of polyandrous marriage in Tibet highlighted by Li and He is the most obvious. Sometimes these changes are hidden behind the tension between the individual and the collective, the local and the global, or the old and the new. These intersections of power often demonstrate competing agendas that play out in the lives of our interlocutors.

We have demonstrated the diverse ways in which hope for the future is articulated as a project for *both* individual subjects and the state. They suggest how understandings of hope, development and the good life inform and are informed by imaginaries of the future that are particular to late socialism. They produce a politics of development that happens alongside, through and around the state as people navigate discourses of development in imagining their future at individual and collective levels. While late socialist Asia also shows signs of a recognisable direction of change, there are some unique features. In contrast to strict neoliberal economics and its *laissez-faire* approach to the market, the role of the state is not diminishing. If anything, it shows signs of increasing in its prominence as promoter and guardian of social

change. Nowadays, people are no longer asked to sacrifice for the nation, and it is possible for them to expect improvements for themselves and their family, but this expectation must continue to align with the interests of the nation and the state.

People in late socialist Asia now have, in many respects, more choices. However, these are not limitless and our subjects navigate their lives against a backdrop of opportunities and limits. While talk of individual dreams is abundant, these are subsumed into the logics of development and capital accumulation by greater forces. This is why migrant workers may move to cities to build lives for themselves, but face exploitation as low-paid workers for businesses interested in little more than exploiting their labour. Invariably, they encounter the explicit or implied force of the state, which acts as a patron of their desires and promoters of futures, as well as a limiter of their aspirations. What drives them is, according to Jackson (2011), the presence of hope, and a belief that one can, somehow, become something more than what one has been or is currently. Optimism itself is surprisingly durable in a world of uncertainty and precarity (Berlant 2011).

Yet, as Berlant points out, optimism can be cruel when the conditions for it, namely necessary social and political structures to ensure broad-based well-being, are vanishing or hardly existent. This is especially apparent in times of crisis. The last two years of the global COVID-19 pandemic have exposed the much greater vulnerabilities experienced by the very majority of people who provide the labour and care for sustaining the development model of late socialism. Workers are stranded, doctors and nurses over exhausted and underpaid, teachers lose their jobs, migrants are not able to come home - left alone with responsibilities for problems not of their own making. Meanwhile, corporations and powerful politicians have been gaining enormous profits from the anxieties and sufferings of ordinary people, and the states can use pandemic control as pretext for greater surveillance and population control, as they build a triumphant narrative around fighting the virus. Who can access what resources, and how these are used, has become more a more pressing question than ever. Indeed, the pandemic offers a moment of reckoning for the limits in the development logics that are central to late socialism.

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Risk Perception and Lowland Rice Farming Change in Savannakhet Province, Southern Laos

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Abstract

Lowland rice cultivation is changing in southern Laos. A formalised survey and informal interviews in the lowlands of Savannakhet Province indicate that while some farmers still raise water buffaloes, they now mainly use hand-held mechanised ploughs to till their fields. More chemical fertilisers are being used, and improved seed varieties have become dominant, with native varieties disappearing. Due to these changes, rice yields have increased substantially, with many more farmers selling surplus rice. The trade-offs are, however, not simple. Through applying the lens of risk perception, this chapter presents data about how lowland rice farming – the main occupation for rural people in Savannakhet Province – has changed over the last twenty years, critically assessing how farmers perceive and act upon risk during this time of rapid agrarian change. This approach can help us think about how farmers imagine the future and think about ‘good life’.

Keywords

rice – lowland wet-rice agriculture – agrarian change – organic – mechanization – Laos

1 Introduction

Wet-rice farming is the dominant smallholder family-level agricultural system in lowland parts of Savannakhet Province in southern Laos. Most rural farmers in Savannakhet have small landholdings – between two and three hectares of paddy land – and grow the main crop that their parents and grandparents grew: glutinous or sticky rice (*khao niao* in Lao). Indeed, the amount of rice consumed per capita in Laos, including Savannakhet, is among the highest in the world (Eliste and Santos 2012). Moreover, rural people in Savannakhet still identify their occupation as being ‘rice farmers’ (*xao na* in Lao) above and

beyond anything else, even if they are increasingly adopting multiple livelihood strategies, and more family members are leaving rural villages to work in other parts of Laos or in Thailand (Manivong and Cramb 2020; Rigg 2005). Still, rice holds a special place for rural Lao farmers, economically, culturally and socially (Manivong et al. 2014), and rice farming remains a crucially important part of the livelihood strategies of most families. According to farmers surveyed in Savannakhet (see below), rice is the main source of income for 91 per cent of rice farmers, whereas it was for 92 per cent of the farmers twenty years ago.

Lowland rice agricultural¹ practices in Savannakhet are far from static and have gone through considerable changes over the last twenty years, even though there have been fewer changes in Savannakhet as compared to neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam. Crucially, these changes have resulted in significantly higher yields and much improved levels of rice self-sufficiency and food security. Many households have gone from having to buy and even beg for rice near the end of each growing season to growing enough rice to eat – or, more commonly, to selling significant amounts of surplus rice. With some exceptions, farmers are doing economically better than ever before – at least for the time being – and it seems likely that these improvements in yield are an important part of the reason why the poverty rate in Laos has declined in recent years (Couloumbe et al. 2016). There has been a sort of revolution in rice farming quietly occurring in Laos. It is not exactly a full-scale green revolution, where all aspects of agricultural technologies and inputs have been dramatically changed (Clay 2018; Bezner Kerr 2012), since change in Savannakhet has individualised characteristics, but is rather what Manivong et al. (2014, 128) have referred to as ‘the partial adoption of green revolution technologies’. Crucially, these changes have largely been led by farmers themselves, but have also been influenced by government policy and market factors, as is elaborated on below. Some aspects have met with considerable success, but it is also true that these changes present some potentially serious risks, depending on the time-line one considers. The changes that are occurring indicate how farmers imagine the future and view the ‘good life’.

So, what changes have occurred regarding lowland rice cultivation in Savannakhet Province over the last twenty years, and how do farmers evaluate the risks associated with them? How do farmers’ perceptions of risks and short- versus long-term benefits affect their agricultural choices? What risks are Savannakhet lowland rice farmers willing to take and what do they avoid? Why do these farmers adopt some potentially harmful practices but refuse others

1 Lowland wet-rice is being considered here, not upland or swidden rice, which is grown in upland or hilly areas.

even if they could result in increased yields? Can the market for ‘clean’ food enable farmers to maintain higher incomes but avoid using the chemicals they feel are too risky for their health and the environment? These are the primary questions addressed in this chapter, which is based on research conducted in 2018 and 2019, focusing on four lowland rice-growing districts in Savannakhet Province: Xaybouly, Atsaphone, Outhoumphone and Song Khone.

We started, in May 2018, by conducting preliminary interviews with government officials and farmers in two–three villages per district. In June 2019, we continued by administering formalised questionnaires within three villages in each district, interviewing a total of 20 households in each of 12 villages, or 240 household representatives in total (see Figure 2.1). The districts were chosen somewhat arbitrarily, although with the goal of approximately sampling farmers in different lowland districts in the province, including those closer and farther from the Mekong River and Thailand. The villages within the districts chosen were selected to include communities located farther from and nearer to urban areas and the Mekong River, and we tried to include villages engaged in single and double cropping, when this was occurring. The households were chosen through simple random sampling. We did not try to stratify our sampling to differentiate farmers socially or economically. We believe that the quantitative data provided are likely to be broadly representative of small-scale rice farmers in the lowland plains of Savannakhet.

We do not want to give the impression that farmers all have the same strategies or the same access to various kinds of resources. However, in the study area the people’s livelihoods are generally similar enough that we did not stratify our sampling of households, but instead randomly selected households to survey, expecting that doing this would allow different types of household to be randomly captured. Our findings reveal the overall circumstances in the communities surveyed, but were never intended to focus on individual household differences, although we agree that these can be important.

The main reason we chose to consider changes over the last twenty years was because there is another component of our project related to remote sensing (not presented in this chapter), and good quality remote sensing data exist for the last twenty years, but are not as good for thirty years ago. We could not use locally significant years for interviewing, as for comparing with other sites in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand we needed to use the same time periods for all locations. In addition, we were concerned that farmer memory would be less reliable the farther we went back. The surveys asked questions about present-day circumstances and about twenty years earlier. Crucially, during the surveys respondents frequently provided qualitative answers that went beyond the limited scope of the survey questions. The first author also had a



FIGURE 2.1 Villages where rice cultivation surveys were conducted, as well as district and provincial capitals.

number of other informal conversations with farmers during fieldwork, both in 2018 and 2019. Thus, this chapter presents some of these survey data, but also more qualitative information collected by the first author, who is fluent in Lao and is able to converse easily in Lao about agriculture-related issues.

In particular, in this chapter we are interested in understanding the changes in lowland rice farming that have occurred. We provide an overview of the practices and views of farmers in the study area, reflecting on their ideas and considering some of the contradictions that exist, both in government agricultural policy and with regard to the ways that farmers understand and act in relation to the changes that have occurred and are still occurring. We argue that the emergence of ‘clean’ rice production is providing opportunities for farmers to improve their incomes while at the same time avoiding using the herbicides and pesticides that they perceive as risky.

In the next section, we consider the issue of risk perception. We then review agricultural policy in Laos, specifically as it relates to lowland rice cultivation. This is followed with a review of the main changes that have occurred in our study area over the last twenty years, and the results of these changes and how farmers assess them. We then reflect on a few of the key contradictions associated with changes in lowland rice farming, and government policy and market influences, before discussing rural farmer risk perceptions in relation to agrarian change in the conclusion.

2 Risk Perception

Scholars have long been interested in risk perception. Indeed, scholars of hazards have pointed out that risk perception and associated decisions are limited not only by objective uncertainty but also by various structural biases, such as the economic structure of trade or biophysical limitations, which limit how risk is perceived in relation to different options. Scholars of risk perceptions have studied people's behaviours, opinions and psychological orientations, demonstrating that sometimes people overestimate risks and sometimes they underestimate them. For example, even though the risk of flying is statistically lower per distance travelled than travelling by car, the fear of flying is much more prevalent than the fear of driving (Robbins et al. 2014: 86). Thus, scholars of risk perception have investigated the reasons for, and the biases associated with, differences between risk perception and actual risk, so that the factors that contribute to different perceptions, decisions and behaviour can be better understood (Slovic 2000). For example, Fischhoff et al. (1978) considered how the perception of risk is affected by the involuntary/voluntary nature of potential hazards, along with the chronic and catastrophic impacts of different kinds of hazards, showing that these differences are important for understanding why certain decisions are made. Douglas and Wildavsky (1983), through their cultural theory, have postulated that people perceive different types of risks based on their positionality in society. Some social or cultural groups, for example, encourage individual agency, while others are more fatalistic in their world-views. This results in some groups being more inclined towards being cautious and risk averse, while others tend to be more willing to take certain risks. In addition, there are also sometimes significant differences among individuals within social groups with regard to how they perceive and act on particular risks.

There has been much written about farmer perceptions of risk and risk management in agriculture, including in Southeast Asia. The vast literature on risk and agriculture indicates that there are a wide range of risks associated with agriculture, and that farmers in different circumstances adopt an array of risk mitigation strategies (Duong et al. 2019). In the 1970s James Scott, who wrote *Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), and Samuel Popkin, the author of *The Rational Peasant* (1979), debated about whether smallholder farmers in Southeast Asia tended to be adverse to risk or not. Peres et al. (2013) have emphasised that culture and societal factors are often important for determining how farmers understand pesticide risk, and that risk aversion affects pesticide use, sometimes resulting in farmers using more pesticides on crops that they sell compared to those that they consume (Gong et al. 2016).

Annie Shattuck (2021a), in writing about increased agrichemical use and risk perception in Xieng Khouang Province, northeastern Laos, has engaged with ideas about what knowledge matters when it comes to affecting farmers' perceptions of risk. Indeed, the values of farmers are critical, since it is often difficult – especially in places like Laos where there is limited testing and assessment capabilities – to determine the exact impacts of particular agrichemicals on human health. In addition, farmer knowledge related to pesticide risk is both contextual and partial, often constituted through embodied experiences (Shattuck 2021b). In Vietnam, it has been found that most farmers who cultivate crops requiring significant amounts of agrichemicals gain knowledge about these chemicals and their risks through their own experiences, rather than from consulting with experts (Houbraken et al. 2016). Shattuck (2021b) has also pointed out that rather than interrogating the types of socio-economic circumstances that require farmers to take certain risks, farmers are often accused of individual risky behaviour in relation to pesticide use.

In this chapter, based on survey and interview data collected in Savannakhet Province, we consider the types of risks and aversions that lowland rice farmers appear to be generally more and less willing to subject themselves to, and some of the structural issues that are influencing farmer behaviour.

Questions related to risk perception and decisions emerge from the present trend away from simple economic analysis of changes in rural livelihood. As Jonathan Rigg (2018, 1) puts it, although in relation to rural change in north-eastern Thailand, 'the development challenge is not being solved by economic growth, but reworked'. This suggests that we need to consider other ways of thinking about rural change (see, also, Nguyen et al. 2020), and emphasising risk perception moves us in that direction. Agrarian change is certainly occurring, but it should not be assumed that smallholder farming is about to end, or that the changes occurring are likely to mirror agrarian transition in the West or in neighbouring countries. Indeed, there are a wide range of social, cultural, economic, political and geographical factors at play, ones that are contextual and require an understanding of historical context (Nguyen et al. 2020).

3 Agricultural Policy in Laos

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a one-party state with a political system modelled on those of other communist countries, especially the Soviet Union and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Baird 2018). The Lao government and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party have a conventional view of agriculture development and agrarian change. They have long seen

small-scale villager farming practices as inherently backward and inefficient. Initially – after taking over the country in 1975 – the government hoped to modernise and transform Laos’ agricultural landscape through adopting socialist forms of collective agriculture and agricultural mechanisation. However, this sort of agricultural organisation was socially and economically problematic and, by the late 1970s, the government decided to abandon collectivisation, with agricultural land tenure reverting to small-scale family-based holdings (Manivong and Cramb 2020; Evans 1990). However, the government still hoped to modernise farmers and their agricultural practices, and continued to promote mechanised farming. Crucially, Lao PDR adopted *chinthanakan mai* (the New Economic Mechanism) reforms in the second half of the 1980s (Yamada 2018), resulting in major changes in how the government managed the economy, through opening up to much more private sector involvement. Although the political system in Laos remained largely unchanged, the government moved towards encouraging farmers to produce agricultural commodities for the market rather than for subsistence purposes. This is referred to as ‘producing for the market’ (*phalit pen sinkha* in Lao), a major policy initiative that remains at the core of present-day efforts to commodify and liberalise the agricultural sector in Laos (Baird 2011).

The Lao PDR government’s ideas about agricultural development are clearly visible on state-produced posters and billboards, which frequently glorify large-scale industrial agriculture, including the use of tractors to till large farms, irrigation projects and large-scale production for the market and particularly for export. This vision is even evident on Lao banknotes, which emphasise this sort of agricultural modernisation trajectory (see Figure 2.2). However, this vision stands in stark contrast to the realities of rural life in Laos, where farmers tend to have small plots of land, have only partially adopted mechanised and high input forms of agricultural production, and first cultivate rice for household consumption rather than for selling to the market or for export.

Small-scale lowland rice farming holds an important place when it comes to agricultural policy in lowland Laos. In contrast, in the uplands large-scale land concessions, granted to foreign and domestic companies, began being heavily promoted in the early 2000s, despite frequently meeting with farmer dissatisfaction and various forms of resistance (Baird 2017; McAllister 2015; Kenney-Lazar et al. 2018). This led the Lao government to question the value of large-scale plantation land concessions and critically re-evaluate the ‘turning land into capital’ policy that was the foundation of this concession strategy more generally (*Vientiane Times* 2014; KPL 2016).

In the rural lowlands, however, the emphasis on foreign investment and agricultural land consolidation was not promoted as in the uplands. The



FIGURE 2.2 Lao 100 kip bill (1986). The front of the bill shows lowland rice cultivation, visually emphasising the need to modernise and increase agricultural production.

government has not attempted to uproot rural farmers from their lowland rice paddy lands. According to the Lao government's Agricultural Development Strategy (2011–20), the objective has been, instead, to increase lowland irrigated agriculture and market-oriented agricultural production by small-scale farmers (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2010). Indicative of this, the government has generally excluded lowland rice farming land from large-scale land concessions, instead encouraging smallholder farmers to keep their farmland and increase rice production, either through moving from a single crop a year to double cropping, where possible, or through generally modernising rice cultivation practices, for subsistence and food security purposes. For example, the government has become heavily involved in developing improved lowland rice seed varieties, and producing those seeds for distribution to farmers. In

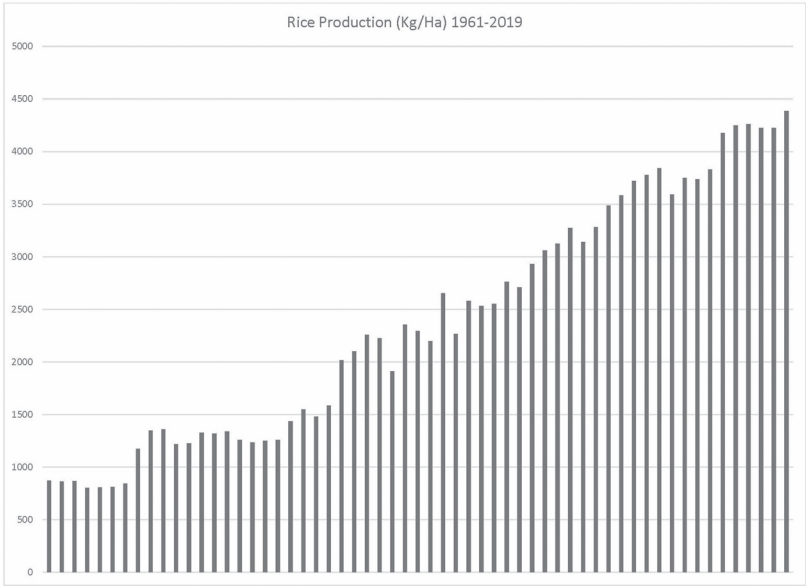


FIGURE 2.3 Changes in rice production in Laos (FAOSTAT).

addition, farmers have been encouraged to sell to the market, especially international markets. Rice production increases have been achieved nationally, from just 871 kg/ha in 1961 to 4,387 kg/ha in 2019 (see Figure 2.3), and the Lao government hopes to achieve even greater productivity in the future (Manivong et al. 2014), particularly for export purposes (*Vientiane Times* 2018b). However, agriculture’s contribution to the overall economy as a percentage of Gross Domestic Production (GDP) has declined in recent years, now contributing just 16 per cent of GDP (*Vientiane Times* 2018a). This is partially the result of the Lao government focusing more on other economic sectors, even though much of the population still relies heavily on small-scale farming for their livelihoods. These lowland farmers and their rice-growing practices are the focus of this chapter. How have farmers changed their farming practices, and how do they view these and other possible changes that are possible for them?

4 Changes in Wet-Rice Farming Practices in Lowland Savannakhet Province

As already mentioned, in the four districts of Xaybouly, Outhoumphone, Atsaphone and Song Khone Districts, in the lowlands of Savannakhet Province, there are extensive areas of lowland agricultural fields, where wet-rice is the primary crop cultivated, especially during the monsoon rainy season.

According to our survey of 240 households, 60 per district, 48 per cent of rice farmers live in multi-generational households and another 38 per cent live in typical two-generation nuclear family households with parents and children. Although lowland rice remains the primary crop, farming households follow holistic livelihood strategies that include raising domestic livestock, such as chickens, ducks, pigs, goats, cows and water buffaloes, catching fish and other aquatic animals to eat and sometimes sell, and cultivating small vegetable gardens and a few fruit trees on their house plots. The main changes that have occurred over the last twenty years in relation to wet-rice agriculture for the households selected have been (1) the adoption of hand-held tractors for tilling their fields, (2) the application of increased amounts of chemical or inorganic fertilisers when growing rice, and (3) the increased use of improved or enriched rice seed varieties. Other significant changes include the move to mechanised threshing, increased uptake of credit, and increased labour migration and access to remittances from household members working outside the villages. A summary of some of our survey results is found in Table 2.1.

TABLE 2.1 Survey Results from Rice Cultivation Interviews in four districts in Savannakhet Province.

Practice	2000	2019
% households using buffalo to plough fields	87%	3%
% households using chemical fertilizers	26%	94%
% households adding organic fertilizer	82%	77%
% households increased amount of organic fertilizer added	44%	56%
% households purchasing rice to consume due to shortages	27%	21%
% households selling surplus rice during most years	28%	60%
% households receiving credit received from shop	8%	22%
% households receiving credit from any source	9%	27%
% households using of improved rice seed varieties	25%	93%
% households using at least one native rice seed variety	72%	10%
% households using hand sickles to harvest rice	95%	85%
% households machine rice threshing	10%	93%
% households with access to irrigation	8%	17%
% households transplanting rice seedlings	95%	84%
% households receiving remittances from relatives	4%	42%
% households partially using remittances for rice cultivation	89%	86%
% households herbicide use	0%	5%
% households insecticide use	4%	6%

4.1 *From Water Buffaloes to Iron Buffaloes*

Twenty years ago, in 2000, 87 per cent of smallholder rice farmers in our study area used single water buffaloes to pull the ploughs that tilled their fields, with another 13 per cent using hand-held mechanised push tractors. Water buffaloes had some advantages. They not only allowed for the land to be tilled, but also produced offspring and manure, and did not consume gasoline or require oil changes and repairs. They also served as an important family asset that could be easily sold for cash in the cases of emergency need, such as to pay for medical expenses, funerals or weddings. However, our survey results indicate that at present 95 per cent of farmers use hand-held mechanised tractors to plough their fields, and another 2 per cent use large tractors. Only 3 per cent reported still using water buffaloes for tilling the soil. There are important reasons why such a significant shift has occurred. In particular, hand-held tractors save considerable labour. It used to take many days to plough a one-hectare piece of lowland rice paddy in preparation for farming. Now much shorter amounts of time are required, allowing farmers to get their crops into the ground quickly. This is important, especially during years when the annual monsoon comes late. Once the rains do arrive, quick field preparation and planting helps increase the likelihood of success. Thus, the introduction of hand-held tractors saves labour and decreases the chances of low yields due to lack of sufficient rain. Some farmers still raise water buffaloes, but very few use them to till their fields. One farmer commented, 'In the future buffaloes will become extinct since nobody uses them for farming any more.'² Tractors also have other purposes. In particular, they can easily be converted to transport people and goods on low-quality roads, which still exist in many rural areas.

4.2 *Changing Harvesting Methods*

There have been other notable labour-saving changes in rice farming in Savannakhet in recent years. For example, 85 per cent of farmers presently use hand sickles for harvesting rice, whereas 95 per cent of farmers used hand sickles twenty years ago. This is not a huge change, but the situation in Savannakhet differs considerably from neighbouring northeastern Thailand, where combines are now commonly used to harvest and destalk rice seeds, with hand harvesting declining from 97 per cent twenty years ago to 29 per cent at present. It appears that there has not been much investment in combines in Savannakhet to date. In addition, in Savannakhet machines are now usually used to thresh rice (93 per cent compared to 10 per cent twenty years ago), since it saves increasingly scarce and expensive labour. At least in theory,

² Farmer, Nong Boutha Village, Song Khone District, May 2018.

labour-saving innovations give farmers more time to pursue other income-generating activities.

4.3 *Changing Irrigation*

Irrigation is often a critically important factor when it comes to lowland rice cultivation, but in our study area only 17 per cent of the farmers reported having access to some form of irrigation, as compared to 8 per cent in 2000. Moreover, many of those who grow irrigated rice in the dry season still only cultivate a single crop, because their rice farmland is partially or very flooded in the rainy season. We also heard of cases when farmers grow two crops per year, but because of the risk of flooding they often do not use any chemical fertiliser or other inputs on their wet season crop, due to the high risk of crop losses. Therefore, irrigation is an important factor for some of the farmers we interviewed, since more fertilisers tend to be used for dry season rice, but the vast majority of farmers continue to cultivate a single crop.

4.4 *Changing Use of Organic and Chemical Fertilisers*

One of the most crucial changes regarding lowland rice cultivation has been the increased use of inorganic or chemical fertilisers. Only 26 per cent of the farmers surveyed in June 2019 claim that they used chemical fertilisers on their rice fields twenty years ago, including those who just use a small amount on rice seed beds cultivated for producing seedlings for transplanting. Now, however, 94 per cent report applying at least a small amount of chemical fertilisers on their fields, which compares to 85 per cent in Choumphone District – another lowland district in Savannakhet – in 2012 (Sacklokham et al. 2020). Chemical fertiliser use is still quite limited as compared to neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam, with just two or three 45 kg sacks of chemical fertiliser³ being typically applied to one-hectare plots. The results have been dramatic, with yields increasing significantly, turning rice-deficient farming families into farmers who sell surplus rice (see, also, Manivong et al. 2014).

Increased use of chemical fertilisers and improved seeds by small-scale farmers in Thailand have contributed to substantial increases in rice yields, especially over the last decade (Suwanmontri et al. 2021), and a similar result with rice appears to be occurring in Savannakhet Province. It is, however, unclear exactly what the long-term risks to soil quality may be. However, many farmers in Savannakhet and other parts of Laos associate chemical fertilisers with harder and less fertile soils. Still, so far the farmers in Savannakhet appear

3 With various distributions of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium.

to be happy with the higher yields, and are willing to accept the long-term risks for higher production now. According to our survey, 27 per cent of households reported buying rice to consume in the household twenty years ago, because they did not grow enough to feed themselves, compared to 21 per cent in 2019. Although this change may not seem substantial, the big difference is the number of households that sold surplus rice twenty years ago compared to now. Twenty years ago, only 28 per cent sold surplus rice, but now 60 per cent claim that in most years they sell surplus rice.⁴

Based on research done in northeastern Thailand, the amount of fertiliser that they now use may not pose a serious threat to soil fertility (Yanai et al. 2020). However, if farmers produce even more rice by increasing fertiliser use, and they have better access to credit and thus are able to access chemical fertiliser more easily, the result could be soil fertility and other agro-ecological problems, although these risks are less for lowland rice fields as compared to upland agricultural areas. Still, farmers might make the classical mistake of feeding the plants rather than the soil. Will farmers be able to resist making decisions that provide great short-term benefits but more potential long-term risk? Considering what has happened in other parts of Southeast Asia, it seems unlikely that long-term risk will be adequately considered. Short-term food security and economic concerns seem likely to outweigh longer-term risks. Our discussions with farmers indicate that while there are some concerns about the potential negative impact of using large amounts of chemical fertilisers, most are not particularly concerned about using smaller amounts of chemical fertilisers.

However, many farmers are using the vehicles that they now have to transport organic inputs – such as manure and rice husks – to their fields, thus resulting in increased amounts of organic inputs, to improve yields, reduce the costs of chemical fertilisers and maintain or improve the quality of soils over time. Not every farmer does this, but 56 per cent of the farmers surveyed in Savannakhet reported adding more organic fertiliser to their fields than twenty years earlier. Some claimed that it was previously labour intensive to push carts of organic inputs to their fields. Now that they have tractors, this work is much less labour intensive. The expenses associated with owning and maintaining a tractor seem not to deter farmers. The percentage of farmers who add some type of organic fertiliser to their rice fields has not changed much since 2000. At present, 77 per cent claim that they add something, whereas 82 per cent of farmers reported doing so twenty years earlier. Thus, somewhat

4 In Choumphone District, 62 per cent of rice farmers reported selling rice in 2012 (Sacklokham et al. 2020).

fewer farmers are adding organic fertiliser to their fields than twenty years earlier, but those who do so are adding more, often much more. This all suggests that many farmers are aware of the potential longer-term risks associated with using more chemical fertilisers and are trying to mitigate these risks by adding more organic fertiliser.

One factor that has reduced the amount of chemical fertiliser used is a lack of public funding that farmers can access to purchase it, and then repay at a low interest rate (*Vientiane Times* 2020). This is in contrast with Thailand, where most farmers borrow from the Agriculture and Cooperatives Bank, a state-owned bank designed to support farmers. Instead, 22 per cent of farmers in Savannakhet reported receiving credit from fertiliser sellers in the communities or others, while only 8 per cent received this sort of credit twenty years ago. Chemical fertiliser is the main input that farmers obtain credit to purchase. Moreover, whereas only 9 per cent reported obtaining any credit twenty years ago, that statistic has increased to 27 per cent, although this is only about half of the proportion of farmers who obtain credit in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. Nevertheless, some see increased debt in Laos as an increasing problem (Kemp 2012). We heard, in a number of communities, that standard chemical fertilisers cost 650 to 800 Thai baht⁵ per bag if paid for in cash (in Savannakhet, fertiliser prices are typically quoted in Thai baht). However, if fertiliser is taken on credit, the repayment cost amounts to between 900 and 1,200 baht per bag, often amounting to 30–40 per cent interest for just a four- or five-month period. This increases the cost of inputs and causes farmers to use less. Kousonsavath and Sacklokham (2020) also found that farmers in Savannakhet were paying high interest rates when they receive fertiliser on credit. Farmers often try to reduce risk by reducing fertiliser use in order to avoid becoming indebted, indicating that they want to avoid the risk of becoming overly indebted. No wonder the Lao Farmer Network (2019) has called for increasing farmer-access to credit at lower interest rates.

Another factor is contributing to low levels of chemical fertiliser use in some flood-prone lowland areas of Savannakhet Province, particularly in Xaybouly and Song Khone Districts. Many farmers in flood-prone areas told us that they did not apply any chemical fertiliser to their rainy season crops, for fear that the fields would be flooded and the majority of the expensive chemical fertiliser would be lost. This represents a strategy to avoid the risk of losing expensive fertiliser. Some of these same people do, however, use larger amounts of

5 The exchange rate is approximately 30 baht = US\$1.

chemical fertilisers for dry season irrigated rice cultivation, as there is no danger of flooding, and fertiliser being lost as a result, during that season.

One farmer who the first author met in another part of southern Laos in July 2019 warned that using tractors and chemical fertilisers would make the soil hard and cause fertility problems down the road. He challenged the first author to get someone to farm the soil with just a buffalo and no chemical fertiliser or other inputs and then compare it to farmland tilled by a tractor and the recipient of chemical fertilisers to increase yield. He said that the former would certainly have better soil. He did not use the word 'sustainability' (*yeun yong* in Lao), as villagers rarely articulate these sorts of understandings using newly adopted educated-Lao vocabulary, but it was clear to me that he was talking about sustainability and risk, warning about the potential for the farmland to be degraded if farming continues down the green revolution path. His comments are worth considering carefully, although it is true that the conditions for biological and structural fertility differ considerably between asphyxiated soils (water-saturated) and aerobic soils in the uplands. Still, there is no doubt that there is some risk involved.

4.5 *Changing Rice Seed Varieties*

A major change has been increased dependence on a few varieties of high-yielding improved or enriched varieties of rice (see Vanavichit et al. 2018 for information about how rice varieties are presently being enriched), something that has also been reported by others who conducted research about lowland rice cultivation in Savannakhet (Williams and Cramb 2020). The most important improved variety of rice is called Thadokkham 8 (TDK-8), a high-yielding strain developed by the National Agriculture and Forestry Development Institute (NAFRI) in Vientiane through conventional breeding of Lao glutinous varieties together with International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) Green revolution cultivars (Kousonsavath and Sacklokham 2020). Indeed, 93 per cent of farmers reported using at least one type of improved rice seed for part of their fields, as compared to only 25 per cent twenty years ago. This coincides with a 1990 report that 95 per cent of wet-season rice farmers were using native seed varieties, whereas in 2006 only 72 per cent of farmers were cultivating at least one variety of native seed (Inthapanya et al. 2006). However, our survey found that only 10 per cent of farmers are using native varieties now. Native varieties of rice are adapted to micro-niches and have long histories. There was a particular geography to them, which is not the case for improved varieties (Williams and Cramb 2020). For example, local varieties are likely to be better suited for local conditions, including localised drought and flooding conditions. Moreover, when diverse rice varieties are cultivated, crops tend to be less vulnerable

to diseases and insect damage. In addition, when local genetic material is lost, it is no longer available for future rice breeders. However, the use of native varieties has declined because the yields of improved varieties are higher, but also because some native varieties are considered to not be as good tasting as improved varieties.

Farmers also use improved glutinous rice seed varieties developed in the 1990s and early 2000s (Williams and Cramb 2020), such as RD 6 and 8, bred in Thailand through the irradiation of KDML 105 (*khao hom mali* in Thai) (Vanavichit et al. 2018). Farmers reported being able to collect the seed of these varieties of rice for planting year after year. They now largely identify these older improved varieties as 'native' (*pheun muang* in Lao), because like the truly native varieties, farmers could collect their own seeds for many years, without experiencing declines in quality. However, now that they have shifted from farm-bred cultivars to station-bred ones, they produce higher yields but report that the seeds they harvest are harder and are not as good to eat. To maintain quality, it is recommended that farmers obtain new seeds from government rice-development stations or other sources every year, but almost nobody does that. Instead, they typically trade 'hard seeds' with neighbours or relatives whose harvest includes softer seeds. Rice seed trading has a long history in Laos (Williams and Cramb 2020). As one farmer put it, 'When the rice seeds become hard, I either trade for softer seeds with relatives or neighbours, or I change the locations where I grow the seeds.'⁶ Even if farmer practices like these do not fit with government technical recommendations, most farmers remain convinced that these improved varieties of rice have contributed to higher yields. Farmers did not report eating different varieties of rice from those they were selling, although we have observed that this is regularly the case in central Thailand.

One important factor related to the disappearance of indigenous rice seeds has been the emergence of a large rice mill owned by the Indochinese Development Partnership (IDP), which now buys much of the surplus rice produced by farmers in the study area. Having a reliable buyer to sell their rice to is seen as advantageous to farmers. Moreover, the IDP rice mill in Savannakhet Province has been able to achieve the product quality necessary to export to Thailand (*Vientiane Times* 2016) and China (Manivong and Cramb 2020). However, to do this they have insisted on consistency, thus resulting in many farmers switching to TDK-8 rice seed in order to meet the quality standards of IDP. As one farmer put it, 'We can't grow indigenous varieties of rice any more,

6 Farmer, Dong Thada Village, Atsaphone District, June 2019.

as the seeds are big, and the mills don't want to buy them.⁷ Indeed, IDP produces some seed for farmers to cultivate. However, farmers have also received improved rice seeds from elsewhere, such as from Vietnam (*Hanoi 6*), Thailand (saphanthong daw) and from the provincial government.⁸ In addition, some farmers reported that they could not use native varieties of rice, as they tended to lodge⁹ (fall over) when chemical fertilisers are applied.¹⁰ This is one important reason why many farmers believe that chemical fertilisers do not go well with native rice varieties.

There is no doubt that the extensive use of TDK-8 rice seed has resulted in the vast majority of rice farmers totally abandoning native rice varieties, thus reducing agro-biodiversity significantly. Indeed, there was previously a great diversity of rice varieties in Laos (Williams and Cramb 2020). In fact, Laos has contributed over 15,000 varieties of rice to IRRI's International Rice Gene Bank, with only one other country in the world contributing more varieties of rice (IRRI 2020). In the past, farmers often used many types of rice each growing season, but now they rely on a much narrower range. This increases risk of diseases and pests, as using a single variety of rice that grows in the same way, and ripens and is harvested at the same time, may make it more efficient to cultivate and harvest but makes the crop more vulnerable to pests and diseases. Harvesting different varieties at various times can reduce efficiency for mechanised harvesting and milling, but if hand harvesting and other more labour-intensive practices are in use, this time range can actually work better if there is limited labour. Moreover, having more seeds produced by rice development centres is making farmers more dependent on improved rice seeds, an issue of importance to those working on food sovereignty. As Williams and Cramb (2020) have pointed out, it has also shifted the development of new seed varieties from farmers to scientists. Farmers are taking more risk by relying on centre seeds, since they no longer have any native seeds left in reserve, but few farmers seem concerned about this risk.

Academics and farmers from around the world have, however, become concerned about the loss of native seed varieties and the vulnerability new varieties potentially pose for the future (Borromeo 2000; Rerkasem and Rekasem 2006; PANAP 2010). The loss of native seeds threatens the food sovereignty of

7 Farmer, Dong Thada Village, Atsaphone District, June 2019.

8 Seng Maleng, Officer, Agriculture Office, Xayboully District, Savannakhet Province, personal communication, June 2019.

9 '*Lodging*' is the bending over of rice stems to near ground, which makes harvesting difficult and can significantly reduce yield.

10 Farmer, Sikhai Village, Song Khone District, May 2018.

small-scale farmers (Kerr 2013). Glover (2010) also reports that the positive implications of using genetically modified seeds are actually more variable and situation-dependent than has often been reported. Drawing on past local practice, when faced with this question one farmer in Savannakhet commented, 'If there were no more improved varieties of rice seed available, and we no longer had native varieties of rice to work with, we would have to move rice seed to other fields to prevent the rice from becoming hard.'¹¹ In other words, farmers often believe that rice seeds will become softer if hard seeds are cultivated on different fields. However, it is uncertain how effective this strategy would actually be. In any case, so far farmers seem largely unconcerned about the possibility of such a crisis emerging, albeit with some exceptions.

On the positive side, in 2019 some farmers in six village in Xayboully District began learning how to grow rice for the rice seed market, as IDP has experienced some problems with the rice seeds produced to supply farmers.¹² This new plan should help improve local control and the reliability of seed supply. Farmers are also interested in having new seed varieties that are better suited to local conditions (see Kousonsavath and Sacklokham 2020), but it is unclear if this will happen.

4.6 *Changing Labour Issues*

As with elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, there are fewer people available as agricultural labourers in particular households compared to a decade ago. Based on our rice farmer survey in Savannakhet in June 2019, an average of 5.39 people live in each household and, of those, 3.12 people conduct farm work. This compares favourably to northern Thailand, where we also surveyed small-scale farmers in June 2019. There, only an average of 3.85 people live in households, and only 2.07 people in each household do some farm work. This comparison is important, as the demographic profile of Savannakhet is now similar to what it was in northeastern Thailand a few decades ago, indicating the type of demographic and labour changes that are likely to occur in Savannakhet in the future.

In addition, in Savannakhet – as well as in other parts of Laos – many younger people are leaving their farms to study and work in other parts of Laos and especially to work in Thailand (Rigg 2005; Barney 2012; Manivong et al. 2014). Moreover, part of the way lowland rice-cultivating families work is for some young adults to go away to work, especially in neighbouring Thailand,

¹¹ Farmer, Dong Thada Village, Atsaphone District, June 2019.

¹² Seng Maleng, Officer, Agriculture Office, Xayboully District, Savannakhet Province, personal communication, June 2019.

often for extended periods (Rigg 2005). Migration for working has become increasingly common and more formalised in recent years. Some people also migrate to work in Savannakhet, Pakse, Vientiane and other parts of Laos. It is now common for one or more members of each family to send remittances back to the rest of the family on the farm. Most farmers in Savannakhet interviewed reported using at least part of remittances they received to fund lowland wet-rice cultivation on family farmland; this sort of labour strategy has become important in agriculture production in Savannakhet, although this is not always the case for other types of agriculture in mainland Southeast Asia (see Baird et al. 2019). What is the value of the family being together, and what time period should be prioritised for future generations? What spatial area of influence should be considered when it comes to lowland rice cultivation?

In Savannakhet, the average household has 2.35 members of their family working in Thailand. This high level of migration is one of the reasons why the cost of agricultural labour has increased in Savannakhet, although price increases differ depending on geography, and particularly the distance villages are from the border with Thailand. In 2018, the general cost of hiring labourers in Nong Bouatha Village, in Song Khone District, adjacent to the border with Thailand, was 70,000 kip per day. However, farther away from the border, the labour cost per day was between 50,000 and 60,000 kip a day, whereas the price in the even more remote area of Atsaphone was just 40,000 kip a day (see Figure 2.1). There are clearly important geographies of labour at play.

Labour availability is a crucial driver of changes in rice cultivation, but so are the remittances received by household members who do not contribute labour for farming, but do provide funding via remittances. In Savannakhet, 42 per cent of households surveyed reported regularly receiving remittances from family members; especially from across the border in Thailand, and 86 per cent of those who did receive remittances reported spending at least part on rice cultivation expenses. This compares to just 4 per cent of households receiving remittances twenty years ago, although 89 per cent of the households that received remittances twenty years ago used them to pay for expenses associated with rice cultivation.

4.7 *Changing Use of Chemical Herbicide and Insecticides*

Herbicides and insecticides are a crucial issue, but only 5 per cent of farmers in Savannakhet reported using any herbicide at all, which compares to none of the farmers we interviewed reporting using herbicides for rice cultivation in 2000. Herbicide use for rice cultivation is exceptionally low in Savannakhet, as compared to 24 per cent of farmers in neighbouring Thailand using them,

along with 90 per cent in the Red River Delta of Vietnam, 92 per cent in north-western Cambodia, 98 per cent in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, and 100 per cent in central Thailand. In some cases, farmers told us that they had switched to broadcasting recently, but that yields had been low because they did not use herbicides. Therefore, they decided to revert to transplanting rice seedlings, as they had done in the past.

One of the biggest changes in rice cultivation in mainland Southeast Asia, including in Thailand and elsewhere in the region, has been the adoption of 'broadcasting', or the tossing out of seed on to fields, as a labour-saving innovation, instead of hand transplanting. There are farmers in our study area who have adopted rice broadcasting for many years and have been successful in so doing. However, the vast majority of farmers in Savannakhet (84 per cent now as opposed to 95 per cent twenty years ago) still hand transplant rice seedlings. One key challenge that often results in increased herbicide use when broadcasting relates to water management. If one's field is not totally level, it is hard to manage water levels so that seeds are not either drowned under water or exposed on dry land, leading to significant weed growth. This is why those broadcasting often choose to keep water out of their fields and use herbicides to suppress weeds.

Farmers in Savannakhet frequently report that broadcasting results in low yields unless they apply herbicides, and that farmers do not want to use herbicides, because of concerns about the direct risks of doing so on human health, and also because they are worried about the possibility of aquatic animals that they harvest to eat and sell becoming contaminated and unhealthy to consume. Some farmers reportedly adopted broadcasting for one or more years and then reverted to hand transplanting, largely due to a belief that broadcasting results in decreased yields. This is even true in Nong Bouatha Village, near the border with Thailand, where labour costs are particularly high. This suggests that farmers are very concerned about the risks of herbicide use.

The statistics for insecticide use are similarly lopsided, with only 6 per cent of farmers reporting using insecticides on their rice fields, as compared to 4 per cent in 2000. Again, insecticide use is exceptionally low in Savannakhet, compared to 17 per cent of farmers in northeastern Thailand reported using them, 73 per cent in northwestern Cambodia, 98 per cent in central Thailand, 99 per cent in the Red River Delta of Vietnam, and 100 per cent in the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam. Indicative of the attitude that prevails in southern Laos, one farmer said, 'I don't use insecticides [in my rice fields] because people downstream from me drink the water.'¹³ The farmers who do apply chem-

13 Farmer, Lathanalasy Village, Song Khone District, June 2019.

ical insecticides tend to use only small amounts to control non-native Golden Apple snails (*hoi deng* in Lao), as well as crabs (*kapou* in Lao) and stinkbugs (*meng kheng* in Lao). Our interviews in June 2019 indicate that the above pests tend to become a problem in places where double cropping occurs. As with herbicides, farmers are concerned about the direct impacts of insecticides on human health, but also with negatively affecting aquatic life in their rice fields. Finally, they are concerned that using insecticides will make aquatic animals dangerous to consume. As one farmer put it, 'If we use insecticides, the Golden Apple snails and crabs decline, but people still eat them, which is dangerous for one's health. It is also bad for livestock.'¹⁴ During a June 2019 interview, a farmer reported that another farmer used insecticides in his fields and then, as a risk mitigation strategy, collected shellfish and crabs to eat from someone else's field, because he did not want to consume contaminated aquatic animals.¹⁵ Overall, many farmers expressed concern about using dangerous agriculture chemicals, and those who did not use insecticides expressed pride in not doing so.

5 Lowland Rice Agriculture Production and Risk Perception

Smallholder family rice farmers are certainly happy to be reaping greater yields. However, there has been a lot of negative media coverage in relation to the adverse impacts of insecticide and herbicide use in cultivating bananas in Laos (Radio Free Asia 2020; Xayxana 2019; Finney 2018). This has contributed to farmers becoming increasingly hesitant to adopt some green revolution methods, especially in relation to applying herbicides and insecticides. Although only some farmers occasionally use these inputs, almost all now apply at least a small amount of chemical or inorganic fertilisers, and farmers are using increasing amounts of organic fertiliser as well. However, as mentioned earlier, many farmers reported that it is now easier to transport manure and rice husks on to fields because they have hand-held tractors.¹⁶ Therefore, in many cases there is an increased use of both chemical fertiliser and organic fertiliser. While the main motivation to using less chemical fertiliser is cost, some farmers also mentioned being concerned about the long-term risk of reduced soil fertility due to a high level of chemical fertiliser use.

On the one hand, increased production – and the wealth that comes with it – is certainly contributing to improved livelihoods, in particular better

14 Farmer, Dong Thada Village, Atsaphone District, June 2019.

15 Farmer, Nong Bouatha Village, Song Khone District, June 2019.

16 Farmers, Xayboully, Outhoumphone, Atsaphone and Song Khone Districts, June 2019.

short-term economic security. However, the long-term implications of abandoning buffaloes for ploughing, adding increased amounts of chemical fertilisers, and using new seed varieties that make it difficult for farmers to control their own seeds, are more uncertain. Risk perception, as outlined earlier, depends on values and ethics, both of groups of people but also of individuals. On the one hand, farmers want higher yields, but on the other hand, they express pride in using no or less chemical fertiliser and no herbicides or insecticides. As the ideas of farmers gradually change, it is hard to know how best to reconcile the contradictions associated with considering the short-term gains in relation to potential long-term risks.

An issue that warrants consideration is that early adopters of new agricultural inputs, such as increased chemical fertilisers or insecticides, often experience considerable success early on, while those who follow are more likely to have trouble. Sometimes it takes time for problems such as those related to soil fertility to emerge. For example, it may take generations for resistant strains of particular pests to out-compete other strains and become dominant. Problems can accumulate over time, as more and more farmers adopt the same or similar chemicals. Agro-ecological systems can also be damaged by the use of chemical inputs of various types, thus negatively influencing certain natural control agents, and making crops more vulnerable to pests as they become more resistant. The pesticide treadmill is a well-known problem that farmers around the world face as they inadvertently wipe out natural predators for pest species and increase pest resistance to chemicals, thus necessitating increased use of pesticides, or the use of more toxic or dangerous chemicals. This can lead to even more resistance and bring on other problems related to the costs of these inputs, and the environmental and human health impacts of the increased use of these inputs (Benbrook 1996).

If one takes northeastern Thailand as an example of how lowland rice farming is likely to develop in southern Laos, we might expect chemical fertiliser usage to increase substantially in the coming years. Broadcasting also seems likely to increase along with herbicide use. It can also be expected that hand-held tractors will be exchanged for larger tractors, and that hand-held harvesting will be replaced by the use of combine harvesters, something that is already occurring in northeastern Thailand but which has still not happened in Savannakhet Province. Once large tractors and combines are in use, we can expect to see the levelling of fields and the removal of bunds – the mounds that separate different plots and are built to manage water – to facilitate the use of larger machinery. Although Manivong and Cramb (2020) reported that small combines are beginning to appear in the lowland plains of southern Laos, so far they are not being widely used in Savannakhet and most farmers

have not altered their rice field bunds. For example, in Savannakhet only 24 per cent of farmers reported removing bunds to make fields larger in recent years. Notably, only 15 per cent of farmers reported doing any kind of mechanised harvesting, and only 2 per cent reported using combines to harvest. This differs from northeastern Thailand, where 64 per cent of families report having removed rice bunds, and 68 per cent now use combines to harvest their rice.

There have been some recent efforts to promote less chemically intensive agriculture in Laos. At the policy level, for example, on 31 January 2019, the government released Declaration #20, in which it committed to what the declaration refers to as 'green development' (Bounsong InsideLaos 2019), economic growth with 'sustainability', without providing a precise definition regarding what 'green development' means in practice, or particularly mentioning agriculture chemical use.

At a more practical level, 'clean' rice production is being increasingly promoted, including in Savannakhet Province. 'Clean' rice production is a level below 'organic', where no chemical substances at all are permitted, but is rice grown with a small amount of chemical fertiliser, or none at all, and no herbicides or insecticides. Thus, 'clean rice' is not exactly organic, but it is close to it. Our research indicates that most rice grown in Savannakhet meets the criteria for 'clean rice' (DAWN 2013). Moreover, 77 per cent of the farmers we surveyed reported that part of their rice fields are grown without the use of any chemicals, including chemical fertilisers, which compares to 80 per cent twenty years ago.

In that IDP has been promoting 'clean' rice production (DAWN 2013; *Vientiane Times* 2016), the Director of the Savannakhet Province Commerce Office described the rice produced in the area we worked in as 'clean and chemical-free' (DAWN 2013), even though small amounts of chemical fertilisers are used. Still, it is true that other chemicals are rarely applied, and that chemical fertiliser use is low. This is providing a particular niche market reputation that complies with farmers' preference to avoid the health risks of using chemical pesticides and herbicides and may allow them to benefit from growing market demand for 'organic' or 'clean' foods such as rice. Small-scale farmers in other parts of Southeast Asia have also taken advantage of niche markets for heirloom varieties of rice, which has resulted in increased interest in cultivating traditional rice varieties (Glover and Stone 2018), but there is no sign of this occurring in southern Laos. However, since 2015 Laos has been exporting organic rice to China (Manivong and Cramb 2020). This niche rice market is allowing farmers to increase incomes, which is important, while not overly sacrificing their desire to limit the use of chemical fertilisers and chemical pesticides.

Sugar cane production in Laos is also increasingly becoming organic due to problems with meeting European Union quality standards when sugar was initially being cultivated using non-organic processes, and the importance of the European market for Lao sugar. In Savannakhet Province, in Xayboully District, Mitr Phol Sugar, a Thai company, has made this switch because of problems meeting EU standards¹⁷ (see, also, *Bangkok Post* 2015). This same sort of transition has also occurred in Attapeu Province, where the Vietnamese Hoang Anh Gia Lai (HAGL) also made some serious mistakes in the processing of sugar at its processing factory there, thus leading to the sugar quality not meeting European health standards (Baird 2020). Partially due to this marketing problem, HAGL sold its state-of-the-art \$100 million sugar processing plant and 6,000 hectares of land for cultivating sugar to Thanh Thanh Cong (TTC), in October 2016 (VietNamNet Bridge 2016), and since then TTC, like Mitr Phol, has converted to organic sugar production.¹⁸

There are also other indications that organic agriculture is likely to be increasingly promoted in other parts of Laos. For example, Vinamilk, Vietnam's largest dairy company, has recently teamed up with Lao and Japanese companies to build an organic dairy farm and tourism resort in Xieng Khouang Province, in northern Laos (*Vientiane Times* 2019). Indicative of this trend, a senior agriculture officer who has been working in Xayboully District, Savannakhet Province, told the first author that he believes that the trend is to more organic and 'clean' agricultural production.¹⁹ Although it is uncertain how these market influences will affect rice cultivation changes in Savannakhet, it seems reasonable to expect that they will have an impact.

6 Conclusion

A chapter written by Jonathan Rigg (2018: 1) makes the case – relying on longitudinal research done in northeastern Thailand – that 'the social adjustments and perturbations engendered by development have created second-order, often more intractable problems and challenges'. This suggests that we need to adjust our understandings of changes in lowland rice cultivation and associated risks in southern Laos over time. Indeed, the developments that have led to increasing rice yields represent real advances, at least in the short run. However, what about the 'second-order, often more intractable problems and

17 Seng Maleng, Officer, Agriculture Office, Xayboully District, Savannakhet Province, personal communication, June 2019.

18 HAGL employee, Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province, May 2019.

19 Seng Maleng, personal communication, June 2019.

challenges' that potentially lie ahead? The problems and challenges associated with green revolution approaches to lowland rice cultivation in southern Laos are likely to emerge, although at a level of severity that remains unclear. There are many associated factors, both environmental and social, and this makes many risks uncertain. What kind of life do farmers in Savannakhet want, and what is possible in this increasingly capitalist and pro-business landscape? We are not certain about either.

Yet old and new ideas associated with sustainability and environmental and social protection are being challenged by new economic, social, environmental and political circumstances. That is, following Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]), there is a sort of 'double movement' in play, with agrarian change associated with capitalist development leading to potentially serious social and environmental impacts, followed by increased concern about the impacts of chemical usage and modern forms of agriculture, and also an increased market for organic or 'clean' agricultural products. There is no doubt that these changes are influencing both risk perception and also the behaviour of farmers. Indeed, consumer demand for low-chemical agriculture is providing opportunities for smallholder rice farmers who perceive the risk of high levels of agro-chemical use as problematic. Although farmers have adopted many of the green revolution technologies, they have not adopted them all and have only adopted some to a certain extent, and this middle ground appears to be opening up opportunities for farmers to take advantage of new niche markets related to clean and organic rice. However, it remains difficult to predict how this trend might affect farming practices in the future, especially if there is less labour available for transplanting rice. In any case, this research give us some idea about how rice farmers are imagining the future and conceptualising a 'good life'. Indeed, farmers are on average getting older, and appear to be putting more importance on maining good health, thus increasing their perceived risks associated with using agricultural chemicals. This will undoubtedly influence their decisions in the future.

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Hmong Christianisation, the Will to Improve and the Question of Neoliberalism in Vietnam's Highlands

Seb Rumsby

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the convergence of mass Christianisation and economic transformations among the Hmong of Vietnam's northern highlands over the past thirty years. A history of impoverishment and ethnic discrimination has led hundreds of thousands of Hmong to follow Christianity as a perceived alternative path to progress instead of the state-led development agenda, despite sharing the same 'will to improve'. By exploring local understandings about the means to development as well as new religious teaching on prosperity, entrepreneurialism and calculativity in a rapidly developing Hmong village, this paper queries the 'elective affinity' between new Christian movements and neoliberalism posited by other scholars. The case study sheds light on the awkward combination of 'cooperative competitiveness' accompanying a community-benefit tourism development model. Hmong Christian activity can both overlap, and sit at odds with, government agendas and market expansion, resulting in complex transformations and subjectivities which cannot simply be reduced to neoliberal logic.

Keywords

Hmong – Vietnam – Christianity – development – neoliberalism – calculativity – faith – entrepreneurship

1 Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, Vietnam's northern highlands have witnessed a remarkable religious transformation as hundreds of thousands of largely impoverished Hmong converted to Protestant Christianity. One such convert

is 50 year-old Cua,¹ who enjoyed a relatively comfortable career in the local authorities before being forced to retire due to institutional religious discrimination after his public conversion. Cua's wife had been suffering from chronic body aches, neck pains and recurrent nightmares; after a series of unsuccessful doctor appointments and shaman rituals, she visited the local church to pray and converted to Christianity. A month later, she had recovered from her ailments and persuaded her husband and children to become Christians. Despite being a relatively new believer, Cua's social prestige and relatively high level of education means he now holds a respected position as church elder, while his daughter has attended Bible School and plays an active role in church ministry.

During fieldwork interviews, Cua explained that richer, well-connected Hmong like himself have plenty of opportunities to 'engage with society' (*va chạm xã hội*), to learn from others and change their lives. Conversely, poorer Hmong very rarely go out into wider society and have few chances to socialise; therefore, they don't know how to – or don't accept – change. Nevertheless, according to Cua, poor Hmong Christians *are* able to change, because they listen to the word of God preached by the pastor, so they don't need to 'engage with society' as much. From his perspective, poor Hmong households are generally stuck in a cycle – they just do hired labour and then spend their hard-earned (but meagre) salary on alcohol or traditional rituals. For Cua, however, Christianity is a 'way out' of poverty which is of particular use to poorer Hmong.

Tâm Ngô (2016) highlights the significance of the Hmong-language term for Christianity as the 'new way' or 'new road' (*kevcai tshiab*), which implies a means to an end. For Ngô it is, among other things, "clearly a project of modernizing oneself and one's world" (2016, 58). This chapter investigates both Cua's explicit claims about progress and their underlying assumptions to uncover the wider socio-economic forces at play, in a context where the goodness of rural lives has been put into question for decades, motivating ethnic minorities to find ways to improve their lives. This frames the tensions between state and religious visions, aspirations and practices regarding 'development'. Based on extensive fieldwork in Vietnam's northern highlands from 2016 to 2018,² I draw

¹ All names of research participants and locations are pseudonyms.

² I took a multi-method fieldwork approach of participant observation and in-depth interviews with hundreds of Hmong villagers across three highland case study sites, as well as further interviews and focus groups with Hmong students in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, with a Hmong-speaking research assistant available to translate for the many older Hmong interviewees who were not fluent in Vietnamese. While there are limitations for interpreting fieldwork data collected not in their mother tongue, the advantage of a Vietnamese-language analysis is the ability to associate and compare with state and policy discourses. For more details on research methods, see Rumsby (2023).

upon Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and 'technologies of the self' to explore how logics of discipline are cultivated through daily routines and economic practices (Elias and Rethel 2016). At the same time, these processes are never entirely successful and can be resisted or reinterpreted by local actors, often leading to contradictory, messy, and refractory effects (Ferguson 1990).

After this introduction, Hmong Christianisation is contextualised within broader academic debates about the explosion of Pentecostal Christianity across the developing world, often in tandem with neoliberal structural reforms in developing countries, leading to the common claim of an 'elective affinity' (J. Comaroff 2009) between the two. A conceptualisation of neoliberalism as governmentality overlaps with the 'will to improve' (Li 2007), which pervades everyday life in Vietnam's highlands as a fully internalised desire for modernity. Unlike other failed state attempts to transform Hmong subjectivities, the 'will to improve' was especially successful because state and Christian governmentalities overlap in their disparagement of traditional culture and promotion of progressive visions of the future. Nevertheless, these visions sit uneasily alongside the increasing awareness of economic inequalities and embroilment in the cash economy which characterise 'these modern times'.

This is followed by an analysis of four key factors which Hmong interviewees considered to be means to development: material assets, work diligence, connections to wider society and 'calculativity', a novel way of thinking which constantly looks for business opportunities and rationally assesses potentials for profit. 'Calculativity' is quite alien to traditional Hmong economic attitudes but a key feature in the 'development success story' of *Bản Thác* village, which provides an instructive case study. A closer inspection of the ambivalent tension between communalism and increasing market competitiveness with the development of 'community-benefit tourism' in this village points to a hybrid form of Christian subjectivity which cannot be wholly attributed to a neoliberal logic.

Religious self-fashioning of economic behaviour is further explored in the growing influence of Pentecostalism and Prosperity theology in Vietnam's highlands, which proposes another means to development in the belief that God will bless devout believers materially. One important dynamic is the translation of religious faith into confidence in the economic realm, cultivating a spirit of entrepreneurialism which allegedly leads to Christians to be more willing to embark on business ventures than risk-averse non-Christians. However, Prosperity teaching also has the potential to obscure and justify increasing inequality by attributing spiritual causes to material accumulation while blaming the 'godless' poor for their own poverty. Moreover, both the moral imperative to improve oneself, and the moralisation of failure to foster

and realise aspirations, highlights in how far aspirational projects are entangled in broader moral projects, with new and old constraints. These observations suggest that the neoliberal logic is not monolithic in upland Vietnam but intersects with other cultural and religious logics of communalism and state territorialisation projects to produce distinctive local subjectivities, which nevertheless appear to facilitate incorporation into the expanding capitalist market economy.

2 Faith on the Neoliberal Frontier

Recent Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam fits into two significant wider transformations: firstly, the conversion of 'tribal' peoples from localised beliefs to world religions, a key factor in the global history of what we call 'civilisation' (Hefner 1993). This process gained momentum from the 15th century with the dawn of European colonialism, but has in fact accelerated during the latter half of the 20th century with the expansion of state power to the edge of its borders (J. C. Scott 2009). This has turned peripheral peoples into 'minorities' facing assimilation pressures, as well as globalising socio-economic trends which render "the practice of localized animistic religions [as] markedly disjunctive with the world in which they now live" (Keyes 1996, 288). For example, traditional Hmong animist ceremonies (still widely practiced by non-Christians) were described by converts like Cua as economically burdensome, especially for poorer families (Chindarsi 1976) – with the introduction of Christianity seen as a 'way out' of poverty. The Hmong are by no means the only marginalised ethnic minority in South East Asia to turn to Protestant Christianity, but the timeframe of this phenomenon is particularly striking – with perhaps a third of the 1.4 million Hmong population in Vietnam converting in the space of just thirty years and counting. In fact, there is a longstanding Catholic presence in Vietnam's northern highlands since the French colonial era, but it was limited to a few locations and did not prove very popular, with most of Vietnam's Hmong having never been exposed to any form of Christianity before the 1980s.

Secondly, in what is arguably "the largest shift in the religious marketplace" (Miller 2007, 19) over the past 50 years, the Global South has witnessed an explosion of new Christian movements which can loosely be categorised under the label of 'Pentecostal'. Notwithstanding the huge global diversity of belief, Pentecostalism generally shares evangelical trademarks of the literalist authority of the Bible and the need to be 'born again', but additionally emphasises the importance of a personal, direct and miraculous encounter with God through

the practice of ‘speaking in tongues’, fasting and praying for healing and deliverance (Le 2018, 2). While some church networks explicitly label themselves as Pentecostal, the movement also influences other Christian traditions and denominations who are increasingly adopting similar values and becoming ‘Pentecostalist’ (Spittler 1998).

This is the case for the majority of Protestant churches in Vietnam who are not explicitly Pentecostal but share many features with these diverse new Christian movements, including the prominent role of ‘mediated evangelism’ (Lim 2009). In the absence of missionaries on the ground in 1980s Vietnam, highlanders tuned into Hmong-language evangelical radio broadcasts (which were recorded among the US-based Hmong diaspora but aired from Manila) and proactively spread the message from village to village (Ngô 2016). In recent years some church leaders have made contact with national and international Christian networks (Rumsby 2023), but for the first decade or so the radio was the only external religious catalyst. Religious proselytisation, church organisation and lifestyle changes were largely the result of local agency and most Hmong Christians have had no physical interaction with foreigners to this day.

The economic significance of Pentecostalism has been subject to increasing academic scrutiny in recent years. Critical perspectives posit a new ‘updated’ elective affinity between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism which realigns the Protestant ethic in accordance with contemporary labour demands of post-industrial capitalism (B. Martin 1995). These studies often emphasise Pentecostalism’s “concern for the pragmatics of material gain and the immediacy of desire” (Kramer 1999, 35) as a form of “embedding neoliberalism, particularly in the absence of viable state governance” (Barker 2007, 408). On the one hand, Comaroff & Comaroff (2000) depict the rise of ‘Neoprot-estant’ movements as a *response* to the perception of an epochal shift in the constitution of the lived world” (2000, 307), namely, the radical uncertainty of crises brought about by economic liberalisation. On the other hand, it is also alleged that born-again faiths in the Global South “often run ahead of such [neoliberal] transformation, bearing aspirations – visions of a this-worldly millennium – that help prepare the ground for more radical, market-oriented reform” (J. Comaroff 2009, 24).

Martin (1990) notes that economic advance and Pentecostalism often go together and may appear to reinforce each other, although any causal direction is hard to evidence. Aspects of Pentecostal teaching can promote self-worth among the poor and disempowered, and engender new skills of entrepreneurship and economic management (Le 2018). In both developed and developing countries, Pentecostal churches and organisations have allegedly become

‘surrogates of the state’ (Jennings 2008) by providing ‘mercy ministries’ to fill the gap left by state cuts in social welfare provision (c.f. Cooper 2015). Freston (1998) claims that the “Pentecostal ethic reinforces dominant capitalist values among people who have already embraced them but as yet without material reward” (1998, 353), while Freeman argues that Pentecostal churches “have a part to play in the conversion to capitalism that the neoliberal agenda requires” (2012a, 160), by bringing about a ‘personal transformation’ which other development agencies cannot easily achieve.

Such insights are useful for comparing and contrasting to similar trends among Hmong Christians, however the majority of this religion and development literature is based on research in Africa, Latin America or South Asia. The developmental impact of religious movements in late socialist states such as China or Vietnam, with their legacies of socialist developmentalism, ethnic marginalisation and antagonism towards religion, are relatively understudied and entail quite different dynamics between religious and economic transformations. Still less can neoliberalism be assumed to be a monolithic, consistent global factor and, as this chapter argues, it is not the only (or necessarily dominant) logic of governmentality or economic rationality in Vietnam’s highlands.

Of course, neoliberalism means different things to different academics. Perhaps most commonly, neoliberalism describes a set of macroeconomic policies and programmes guided by the ‘less state, more market’ maxim whereby “individual liberty is conceived in economic terms, and the ‘market’ – the mechanism of price – is to play a central role in all aspects of social regulation” (Gauthier, Martikainen, and Woodhead 2013, 13). Ten years ago Gainsborough (2010) claimed that neoliberal political economy was ‘present but not powerful’ in the Vietnamese state, in spite of supposed ‘reform’ and sustained engagement with various neoliberal actors. Masina (2012) agrees that while *đổi mới* reforms dismantled central planning and released the ‘animal spirits’ of capitalism, “Vietnam could hardly be considered a showcase for neoliberalism” (2012, 204) due to the state’s limited and ambiguous adherence to neoliberal prescriptions.

Yet recent fieldwork suggests that the situation is changing rapidly, and neoliberal political economy may well be becoming increasingly influential in Vietnamese policy. For instance, well-informed Hmong villagers said that poverty reduction welfare schemes to poor households are gradually being scaled back and replaced by low-interest loans from the Social Policy Bank (*Ngân hàng Chính sách Xã hội*) in order to “stimulate their ability to work for themselves”, in the words of one local cadre. This resonates with Nguyen and Chen’s (2017) findings on how both Chinese and Vietnamese regimes have increasingly emphasised ‘socialisation’ in the past few decades, which implies that

“people should rely on their own resources for their well-being while actively contributing to social causes... except for the neediest and most incapacitated, deemed to be failing subjects” (2017, 235).

This leads onto another conceptualisation of neoliberalism as a modern form of governmentality whereby social realities are reconstructed to facilitate ‘governance at a distance’, so that “political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy” (Foucault 2008, 131). Neoliberalism as governmentality intervenes not on the market but on social actors, by instilling technologies of the self which promote “the models and ideas of ‘entrepreneur’, ‘investment’ and ‘risk’ at the level of day to day life” (Cotoi 2011, 115). This understanding of neoliberalism is seen to be extremely malleable, utilised by democratic, authoritarian and communist regimes (Ong 2006) by emphasising the economic imperative above the political (Brown 2015). In addition, it has become a strategy of international development to promote values of personal responsibility and ‘resilience’ (Joseph 2013). Governmentality is not just a state project but is rather achieved through the participation of various institutions, including religious ones (Marshall 2009).

Along these lines, Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012) argue for a more nuanced analysis of how neoliberal and socialist regimes interact and overlap in Vietnam, seeing “not so much a decline in state power but a diversification of forms of governmentality” (2012, 385). The following empirical sections offer evidence of the ways Christianity may contribute to a hybrid of neoliberal subjectivity among Hmong communities, but this is complicated by state territorialisation, ethnic politics and other competing logics of governance and discipline.

3 Aspirations for Modernity: The Will to Improve

Implicit in Cua’s opening vignette is the need for *change*, that the Hmong should not stay as they are – a widely held concern of both Hmong Christians and non-Christians, as well as a fundamental doctrine of ‘development’ (Salemink 2004). An extremely common expression given was the desire of research participants to ‘*vươn lên*’: literally to ‘rise up’ or to ‘better oneself’, which could also be translated as ‘social upward mobility’. This is evidence of an almost fully internalised ‘will to improve’, a phrase which Li coined (2007) in relation to external NGOs and state actors who claim progress as a goal and seek to impose ‘development’ on a group of people whose conditions must be improved.

The ‘will to improve’ is a form of governmentality which stretches back to colonial logics of governance (Ludden 2005) and clearly predates the

current era of neoliberalism, but there are also overlaps including the ‘rendering technical’ of attempts to improve the population, and the concurrent depoliticisation of neoliberal development (Ferguson 1990). While there is some debate as to what extent Vietnam can be considered a developmental, neoliberal or predatory state (Gainsborough 2017), it is undoubtedly a ‘development regime’ (Ludden 2005) with its self-declared goals to eradicate poverty and ‘backwardness’ (Ngô 2016), its claim to have the skills and knowledge to do so and, not least, the legitimacy it derives from claiming to improve the people’s standards of living (Thayer 2009). This developmentalist stance also evidenced by the assessment of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ impacts of Protestantism found in government documents, framed in terms of its ability to deter ‘backward customs’ and encourage “a progressive religious direction, which is closely knit to the nation, conforming to [the Party’s] ‘wealthy people, strong nation, just and civilised society’ objective” (Anonymous 2008).

However, the striking fact emerging from fieldwork was the extent to which this will to improve was articulated by ordinary Hmong citizens with no reference to state agendas – almost every interviewee talked about it, often expressing frustration or concern about their lack of progress compared to their desires. The intended outcome of governmentality is to “artificially so arrang[e] things so that people, following their own self-interest, *will do as they ought*” (D. Scott 1995, 202), but Li (2007) contends that under contradictory capitalist forces, these external interventions are only ever partially successful and may inadvertently generate political backlash. Nonetheless, in Vietnam’s northern highlands the project to instil a will to improve among the Hmong has become so successful that it would not be an exaggeration to call ‘progress’ or ‘development’ a hegemonic desire (Beard 2007).

Over the past 60 years the Vietnamese state has embarked on several territorialisation projects to bring upland inhabitants and resources under its jurisdiction – to varying degrees of effectiveness. While ‘distance-demolishing technologies’ (J. C. Scott 2009) of infrastructure, telecommunications and army, police and local authority presence has brought a degree of control, everyday resistance still looms large in the form of undocumented border crossings and drug trafficking. Often heavy-handed attempts to instil a sense of civic duty, patriotism and loyalty to the Communist Party (Ngô 2016) have been rather unsuccessful among the Hmong, evidenced by the lack of engagement with state mobilisation campaigns (Bonnin and Turner 2014) and widespread cynicism or disillusionment with government propaganda articulated in (private) interviews. This makes the success of the ‘will to improve’ all the more remarkable. Why has this desire for progress been so deeply internalised, when other state governance agendas have failed among the Hmong?

Ngô (2016) argues that while Vietnamese state campaigns to ‘modernise’ its upland ethnic minorities was met with resistance as Hmong people interpreted it as assimilation attempts, they nevertheless had the effect of making ethnic minorities conscious of their ‘backwardness’ and socio-economic inferiority to the ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese majority). Ironically, the state derision of traditional Hmong culture arguably prepared the way for mass Protestant conversion (Ngô 2016, 40); the subsequent reversal of state policies which ‘encouraged’ new converts to renounce Christianity and return to their traditions (2016, 130) only caused more confusion and undermined the state’s legitimacy in the eyes of Hmong Christians.

The need to change has been a constant and shared feature of state socialist campaigns, post-reform development projects and also Christian outreach: “In the most practical terms, missionaries and the Communist authorities compete as agents of change” (Ngô 2016, 6–7). Many Hmong have become disillusioned with Vietnamese state rhetoric which has had little tangible developmental impact in their communities, and instead tried Christianity as an alternative ‘route’ out of their perceived backwardness. Notwithstanding the potential for Christians to overstate or exaggerate the differences of pre-/post-conversion life (Marshall 2009), the following interview quotes at least illustrate the interconnectedness between religious and economic transformation:

Nothing changes, only by following Protestantism can you change, otherwise you just follow the old way. You keep living your life like before.

But now, from 1993 we believed in God, so gradually we were able to change until now, it’s totally different. In the past it was so miserable.

Previously, there was a church over there so I went there, then I returned and tried to understand, then I thought, I do not yet have the ability to move up [*đi lên*] so I will follow Protestantism.

In the life of the church if there are any difficulties, we must help families to always move up, not go down, but every year to rise [*vươn lên*] a bit. The purpose of us believing in God is to get a bit closer to God every year. And for working and finances, each year we must improve a bit. That’s my hope.

As Li points out, “‘the state’ has seldom had a monopoly on improvement” (2005, 384). Here is a compelling answer to the question about the efficacy of the ‘will to improve’ among the Hmong of Vietnam compared to other

governance agendas; it was not just a state project, but was compounded by the efforts of Christian improvers – albeit resulting in “a different model of what it means to be modern than that offered by the Vietnamese Party-State and its Kinh officials” (Ngô 2016, 40). It is worth noting that levels of extreme poverty in upland Vietnam have decreased steadily over the past two decades, with state poverty reduction projects and welfare benefits clearly playing a role (Chaudhry 2016). However, many Christian interviewees were inclined to attribute the primary source of living standard improvements to the fact that so many Hmong people had embraced Christianity, playing down the role of the state in economic transformation.

Li also observes that the very “interventions that set the conditions for growth simultaneously set the conditions for some sections of the population to be dispossessed” (2007, 20). While the will to improve was practically universal, some Hmong interviewees also articulated some of the negative effects of ‘progress’ in their communities. Improved infrastructure has brought new livelihoods opportunities but has also a more competitive local environment and reluctance to share knowledge among neighbours, with a few notable exceptions like *Bản Thác* village (see below). What’s more, increased connectivity to the wider national economy has increased the visibility of educational, economic and ethnic disparities between the Hmong and Kinh. Another common complaint concerned land scarcity and lack of grazing pasture for livestock, due to a combination of sedenterisation policies and rapid population growth – one retired teacher claimed that during the past 30 years, the number of households in his village had risen from just 100 to over 600.

According to one local cadre, “if you’re not willing to study, then you cannot fulfil the demands and requirements of modernity, and it will be harder to earn money, and even production and farming will be difficult”. These ‘requirements of modernity’ include the need for what another Hmong official called ‘intellectual labour’ as opposed to the manual labour which characterised traditional livelihoods. For those who only had to worry about the latter, “when they eat, it tastes better for them; they just eat until they’re full, drink until they’re drunk and go to sleep” – whereas ‘intellectual labour’ brought with it more headaches and troubled sleep from worrying about the future. Although perhaps presenting a somewhat nostalgic view of the past (and ultimately no-one went as far as to say that things are *worse* now than their former poverty), this official articulates something of the stresses which many Hmong felt facing the uncertainties and challenges of a volatile market economy which was quite bewildering compared to what they had grown up with.

An additional widespread concern was the rising price of goods, as the Hmong shift away from subsistence livelihoods and become embroiled in the cash economy. In a perpetuating cycle, the increased dependence on purchasing goods makes Hmong people more keenly affected by inflation, which in turn forces them to devote more time and energy on wage labour. One student wryly remarked that “nowadays earning money is easy, but spending money is also very easy!” This was not just because of inflation but that now in ‘these modern times’ the Hmong – especially young people – acquire new consumption ‘needs’ by being exposed to the lifestyles of wealthier Kinh and want to follow them, but can’t always afford it.

Nonetheless, the ends of capitalist development and ‘progress’ had been accepted by most Hmong interviewees as fundamentally desirable, in spite of the concomitant competitiveness, stress and inequalities. In the next section I draw out the prominent ideas which Christian and non-Christian Hmong interviewees held about the *means* by which they could improve their lot in life, which can be categorised as assets, diligence, connections and ‘calculativity’ – an externally instilled value derived from market rationality.

4 Means to Development

Commonly articulated ideas of how to move up in the world, yielded from hundreds of interviewees across multiple villages, can be grouped into four broad categories. Firstly, it was widely agreed that having existing *material assets* in the form of land (especially land located near roads), cash, livestock, motorbike etc. was obviously an advantage, whereas the ‘have-nots’ would struggle to catch up with the ‘haves’. Conversely, having too many children was in a sense considered a burden, not only due to the cost of raising them but also because in the future, the household land would have to be divided up so that each son would receive less ‘assets’. These assets were often referred to as ‘*điều kiện*’ (‘means’ or ‘conditions’), i.e. ‘you need money [as a condition] to make money’.

The second consensus is that one’s economic success was at least partly determined by one’s *diligence* to work. The biblical principle “you reap what you sow” was quoted in multiple interviews to justify hard work as well as illustrating the wisdom of Christian principles. Both Christians and non-Christians spoke disparagingly of those who were ‘workshy’ or, literally, ‘couldn’t handle hardship’ (*không chịu khó*) and did not seek further livelihood opportunities beyond growing rice and corn for subsistence, thus staying trapped in poverty. This was also associated with a pejorative narrative of relying on state benefits,

although it seems unlikely that this narrative is a recent phenomenon owing solely to neoliberal cultivations of self-responsibility and ‘failing subjects’ (Nguyen and Chen 2017).

Thirdly, there was a widespread perception that those who had significantly improved their conditions had relied on the right *connections* with wider society. These connections included relationships with government officials, lowland Christians from the city, members of the transnational Hmong diaspora, cash crop middlemen and so on. For non-Christians, the right connections (as well as significant assets) were required to secure coveted civil service employment, while transnational religious networks offered the status and resources for Christian elites like pastor Vang of *Bản Thác* (see below) to become political brokers in their communities (Rumsby 2021). On the other hand, the wrong connections, such as entering informal manual labour in Vietnam’s cities or in China, could lead to drudgery, exploitation and even being trafficked. In spite of numerous such horror stories circulated around Hmong communities, many still took their chances at navigating these unequal power relations in the hope of upward social mobility, evoking Joan Robinson’s famous quote that “the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all” (1962, 46).

The need to ‘socialise’ or ‘have social interaction’ (*va chạm xã hội*) was seen as key to cultivating the most beneficial connections and relationships, however Hmong people faced significant barriers in achieving this. Many older people had not attended school and couldn’t speak Vietnamese language fluently, which seriously restricted their potential networks. Living in remote areas makes it more difficult to forge economically useful relationships, which is why the opportunity for church leaders to travel for Christian conferences is invaluable for their networking abilities. These factors, combined with ethnic discrimination, make many Hmong people understandably apprehensive and afraid to ‘go into society’ and build connections. Moreover, as Cua noted at the opening vignette, assets and connections tend to be mutually reinforcing as wealth affords the opportunity of travelling and investing in gifts or bribes to build relationships.

Fourthly, ‘intellectual assets’ were seen as another potential means of development. This includes formal education and literacy, information about upcoming business opportunities, ‘knowledge’ or ‘understanding’ about how to grow cash crops, ‘awareness’ or ‘wisdom’ to be business savvy, and so on. These descriptions can be encapsulated by the oft-repeated *tính toán*, a term that literally means ‘*calculation*’, but with connotations of self-interest. This was used to refer to someone’s intellectual ability to succeed and make a profit in the marketplace, whereas those who couldn’t calculate would get stuck in poverty spending their efforts on unprofitable ventures:

if you want to make a living, you must *calculate*, think about whether it will make a profit and only then do it. But if that land can't grow rice, you could change to plant something else and then sell for money to buy rice to eat.

This sort of rational calculating logic points to the social transformations accompanying the expansion of market exchange which involves “anonymization, the cutting of social ties, and rational, calculative and efficient post-social coordination”. (Berndt and Boeckler 2012, 199). It is arguably a hallmark of the historical Protestant work ethic during the rise of capitalism in Europe (Weber 2002). Calculativity was not simply portrayed as extra knowledge but rather a transformation of thinking, as one university-educated Hmong man described: “I have a wider perspective, I think about things which others find very complicated, but I find them simple”. This way of thinking enables the ‘enlightened’ to see economic opportunities that others don’t and understand the mundane business tasks and investments required, while the unenlightened are overwhelmed or daunted by the risks and uncertainties involved. Calculativity can be learnt at school and especially higher education, since Hmong students who move to urban areas become exposed to and familiar with the livelihoods of the Kinh – who have a reputation for being highly calculating (and self-interested). Because significant material assets or the right connections are required to pay for further education, secure a scholarship or find cheap accommodation, it would again appear that the different means of development are mutually reinforcing.

Rigg (2016, 41) notes how market reforms in Vietnam deepened inequalities that had previously been ameliorated under the socialist policies, with the losers suffering from (1) living in remote *locations* (especially highland minorities), (2) lacking the necessary state or private *connections* to access information, investment or employment opportunities, and (3) not having a formal *education* to help them adapt to the new economic environment. This maps strikingly closely onto the above local perceptions on the means to development, indicating that Hmong communities understand the politico-economic realities they are up against, as well as highlighting the importance of marketisation in people’s understanding of development.

5 The *Bản Thác* Village Success Story

One place where most Hmong locals felt they had collectively moved up the social ladder was *Bản Thác* village, the biggest development ‘success story’ across all my fieldwork sites. *Bản Thác* is a remote village of around 100

households near to a beautiful waterfall in the highlands of Lai Châu province near the Sino-Vietnamese border, an hour's drive away from the nearest major urban centre. In 1992, 18-year-old Vang became the first Christian convert in his village and assumed the role of church leader; now about three quarters of the village are Christian. Over the past ten years in particular, villagers have engaged in remarkable communal funding and labour which have transformed *Bản Thác* from an impoverished backwater to a thriving tourist destination, under the leadership of Pastor Vang. Building 5km of road from their remote village down to the main road has enabled villagers to sell flowers and livestock to visiting customers or to traders, who can drive large vehicles up there. Furthermore, the establishment of a weekly market from scratch brought crucial trade and wealth into the village, which makes it easier for most to earn a living. In 2015 the village was designated as an official tourist destination, which had a huge economic impact as it gave villagers permission to use their houses as homestays for both national and foreign tourists. Other Christians come to visit what is reputedly now the wealthiest Hmong village in all of Vietnam, to learn from and buy peach tree or orchid seeds to try planting back home.

Church leadership and structures played a key role in persuading and mobilising villagers for collective labour tasks, coordinating tourism and market activities, ensuring discipline and warding off external state attempts to muscle in and take over the profitable tourist industry. A Hmong visitor said the difference with *Bản Thác* is that “they know how to calculate [*tính toán*]; they have a pastor who works to make things convenient, they know how to work, so they're better off, richer”. Unlike in other fieldwork sites, several locals articulated the necessity of unity and benefits of working together for the sake of development: “Because we villagers are very constructive, share ideas for example, we understand each other”, unlike in other villages where “they will compete to talk, and they cannot do it, they don't unite”.

Pastor Vang is aware of contestations within the political economy of tourist development. “We want to learn from the experience of other [tourist] areas like Sapa or Hà Giang”, he said, where the Kinh reap all the benefits of ‘ethnic tourism’ while the Hmong on display get very little. Therefore villagers endeavoured to build everything themselves, so that they “wouldn't owe anyone anything” or give outsiders a foothold in *Bản Thác*. In other Hmong tourist areas, tourist entrance tickets are sold by local authorities who pocket the revenue and discontented locals see no direct benefits. In contrast, ticket sales and market stall rental income of *Bản Thác* is administered by an internally-appointed village council who allocate the funds for village maintenance or market infrastructure, and apparently do not pay anything on to the commune People's Committee.

Villagers refused to sell off the waterfall land, but this is an ongoing threat. Local authorities gave a deadline to Pastor Vang, who acts as a political broker, to start building a larger tourist resort by 2018, otherwise they would forcibly buy the land and sell to an external company to further exploit this opportunity. By the time of deadline, the villagers had not yet raised the collective funds to embark on this project, however Vang was able to negotiate with the authorities, who backed down and allowed more time to raise funds. Subsequently, Vang utilised his external Christian networks to borrow a large interest-free loan from a Singaporean Christian organisation and has recently joined forces with 12 households to invest in the construction of new luxury ‘Eco resorts’, an idea Vang picked up from fellow Hmong in Thailand. So for now, *Bản Thác* has managed to keep the state at arms’ length, as Scott (2009) might say – but crucially, this is enabled by the support of wealthy non-state patrons (Rumsby 2021).

In an interesting turn of events, *Bản Thác* has of late been heralded by state actors as an exemplary model of ‘community-based tourism’ (CBT) which others can learn from. In 2018 the deputy prime minister Vương Đình Huệ and his entourage visited *Bản Thác* to inspect the tourist site and interview prominent villagers, including pastor Vang, with an eye to promoting the community development model to other areas. For such a high-ranking minister to not only visit but seek to learn from a Hmong community is unprecedented and highly prestigious, even if it was partly a PR stunt. Soon after, when I was visiting, a team from the state-owned radio station Voice of Vietnam approached me for an interview about the village from an international tourist’s perspective. During the recorded interview, which was later broadcast nationally, the presenter asked leading questions and gave her own suggested answers in a manner which promoted a narrative that *Bản Thác*’s success lay in the inhabitants’ taking the initiative, looking for opportunities and, in her words, “not waiting for the state” to support them.

This relatively new discourse of self-responsibility and self-reliance strikes a chord with Nguyen and Chen (2017) about neoliberal governance in Vietnam shifting the moral obligation of welfare away from the state, except in this case the emphasis was not placed on the individual’s burden as much as on the local community. It resonates even more with McCarthy’s (2019) work on the responsibility of development in Myanmar where villages must prove themselves to be eligible for state benefits by proactively engaging in communal development projects, as *Bản Thác* inhabitants did by building the road themselves before local authorities saw and contributed resources. In doing so, McCarthy argues that state aid becomes seen as contingent and not a right, thus justifying the exclusion of certain ‘undeserving poor’ groups including ethnic and

religious minorities. However, in upland Vietnam the state-promoted vision of self-reliant village tourism development masks the significant private support received through Vang's development brokerage, which other villages without the right connections could not easily emulate. Furthermore, as mentioned above local state actors do not simply leave *Bản Thác* to find its own path, but are attempting to muscle in on the profits in an ongoing political struggle over land and resources.

6 Cooperative Competitiveness

The deputy prime minister's visit to *Bản Thác* coincides with increasing interest in the potential for CBT as an empowering model for development. For example, a recent international workshop in poorer rural areas of Vietnam aimed to challenge the 'Western' model of formal, for-profit tourism and instead "nurture both local social entrepreneur talents and develop local community capacities".³ CBT's original meaning of fostering community empowerment and self-reliance can become co-opted into a neoliberal agenda, although this is not an inevitable outcome – particularly if tourism assets, management and benefits remain under community control (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri 2012). Simpson also warns that CBT communities "may become subject to external pressures, issues of governance and structure, conflicting stakeholder agendas, jealousies and internal power struggles can be exacerbated or created, and the growth of artificial hierarchies and elites may occur" (2008, 13).

These dynamics are relevant for the case of *Bản Thác* where a peculiar culture of 'cooperative competitiveness' has emerged. Pastor Vang, himself a new local elite, claims that individualism and self-interested behaviour has decreased due to Christian conversion and moral transformation. This is reinforced by regular informal 'development meetings' in the church building, which provided an important collaborative space to share and learn livelihoods advice. On the other hand, fieldwork revealed unresolved tensions as tourism expansion has opened up new arenas of competition between different market stallholders and homestays over customers.

This awkward combination led to a denial of competitiveness, as market stallholders maintained that relations with other sellers were purely friendly and there were no feelings of rivalry. For instance, there were six families who had built homestays to date, including Pastor Vang who claimed they shared

3 See <https://www.thetourismcolab.com.au/post/walking-workshops-community-benefit-tourism> for more information.

out tourist customers on a roughly equal basis. This was later contradicted by another homestay owner who asserted that Vang and the village elder receive more homestay guests than the others – before reiterating that “we don’t compete, because wherever the guests want to go, it’s up to the guests to choose”. Since *Bản Thác* had only opened up to tourism in the past five years, it remains to be seen how these contradictions associated with marketisation unfold.

Pastor Vang accepted the principle of competition on a macro-level between, rather than within, communities, by exhorting other villages to consider their unique features which could be exploited as a ‘comparative advantage’ in the tourism industry. Of course, other church leaders who see the achievements of *Bản Thác* long to replicate this in their own communities but are less successful, lacking the natural resources, external networks, village unity and bargaining power with local officials. Interestingly, the state’s promotion of CBT entrepreneurialism instead of ‘waiting on the state’ was also pitched at a communal, rather than individual, level. This grates somewhat with many definitions of neoliberal political philosophy which include a possessive, competitive form of individualism that underpins claims of economic efficiency and ethical self-responsibility (Ong 2006, 11). However, in this case neither state programmes nor Hmong Christian activity are framed in an overtly individualistic fashion. Other Hmong church social outreach programmes observed during fieldwork subscribe to a cooperative economic logic – from livestock redistribution and husbandry mentoring schemes to collective hiring of a lorry to transport the village’s banana harvest and cut out the middle-man.

Hefner (2017) highlights the importance of spatial and cultural contingencies of different “interaction[s] of capitalist or neoliberal rationalizations with religious revitalization” which “do not always result in the hyperindividualized subjectivity highlighted in so much recent scholarship” (2017, 272). While neoliberal policies and practices are arguably becoming increasingly pertinent to everyday Vietnamese life, my fieldwork results treat it as one of several influences which often overlap but are not all part of the same all-encompassing logic. Rather, they combine to produce unique social outcomes and localised forms of governmentality (Cotoi 2011: 122). With regards to the logic of communality present in *Bản Thác*, pastor Vang taught his congregation an economic model based on the biblical description of the early church having “all things in common”, which has been interpreted as a form of ‘proto-communism’ (Montero 2017).

At another level, the wider relationship between the Vietnamese state and Hmong church could also be described as one of ‘cooperative competitiveness’. In Vietnam, Hmong pastors are indeed propagating the value of diligence and entrepreneurial faith as they act as informal business consultants to their

congregations; this element of Hmong Christianity is regularly praised by official government texts as “fostering their willingness to work and learn hard, and desire to be rich” (Nguyễn 2016, 117). Furthermore, Hmong Christians may consider their various outreach initiatives – including food distribution, visiting the sick, paying for medical costs, communal labour, and so on – to be necessary because of the weakness or absence of state development aid.

Yet it would be misleading to call them ‘surrogates of the state’, because in practice local authorities tend to consider Christian social initiatives as a threat to the state’s monopoly on being the bearers of development (Chung 2017). Indeed, arguably one of the goals of government poverty reduction support is to keep marginalised people like the Hmong engaged with the state and deter them from mobilising around religion instead (Chaudhry 2016, 230). Therefore, while some academics and officials from Hanoi evaluate Hmong Christianity to have a positive overall social impact which conforms to state development objectives, local authorities tended to emphasise the potential of religious development initiatives to “counter, subvert, disrupt, or reconfigure state power”, which Fountain et al. (2015, 24) identify as a wider dynamic of religion and development in Asia.

7 Prosperity, Faith and Failure

A controversial doctrine associated with Pentecostalism is ‘Prosperity theology’, which holds that religious devotion (especially faithful church tithing) will result in the miraculous blessing of all aspects of life, including one’s finances (Yong 2012). Vince Le presents Prosperity teaching as “an embodiment of the desire of ordinary people in late-communist Vietnam” (2018, 113), especially popular among poorer and marginalised sectors of society – including ethnic minorities – where the teaching of ‘health, wealth and blessing’ is easily understandable without the need for education or religious language. From its outset in the 1980s, Hmong Christianisation was more influenced by conservative American evangelicalism which took a rather austere approach to money, emphasising the value of simplicity, savings and tithing – but more recently Pentecostalism has been gaining popularity across the northern highlands. In particular, during fieldwork I encountered a strong emphasis on prosperity theology among Hmong pastors from the ‘Christian Fellowship Church’ denomination (*Hội Thánh Liên Hữu Cơ Đốc*), some of whom had met and forged partnerships with Pentecostal missionaries from South Korea.

The Pentecostal affirmation of an ‘enchanted worldview’ (Miller 2007), whereby believers engage with both heavenly and demonic forces with the

promise of “mastery in an uncertain world” (Marshall 2009, 9), can be easily inscribed onto traditional Hmong worldviews of overlapping and interconnected material and spiritual dimensions (Tapp 1989). The majority of Hmong Christians I interviewed agreed with the statement that God would bless his followers both spiritually and materially, often based on their own experiences of improving living standards since conversion. The prevailing wisdom is that this happened through mundane causal mechanisms, e.g. reduced expenditure on cigarettes, alcohol and shamans enabled saving or investing in education. With a few exceptions, most people saw God’s economic blessing as indirectly given through the ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’ they had gained since converting, and especially through learning to read and studying the Bible:

All my material possessions have been given by God, only from God’s blessing do I have good health to work; God has given me everything... And God gives me understanding so that I can earn money or buy these things, so God blesses me through this – it’s not like I believe in God and pray for God to give me, and He’ll just drop it from the sky!

Marshall (2009) sees the logic of Prosperity teaching – whereby believers are encouraged to ‘bet’ on God’s faithfulness to reward bigger offerings – as cultivating an attitude of risk-taking which converges with participation in a risky global economy. A key element in Pentecostal subjectivisation is “a shift from seeing oneself as a victim to seeing oneself as a victor” (Freeman 2012b, 12). This is particularly pertinent in contexts such as Vietnam’s highlands where, due to Kinh chauvinism, economic inequality and assimilatory policies undermining traditional culture, minority groups are characterised by low self-confidence and self-respect (Jamieson, Le, and Rambo 1998). Furthermore, Tapp notes that the traditional Hmong worldview is “rooted in a deep pessimism about the human condition in which the inevitability of death and the prevalence of sickness figure prominently” (1989, 92). Hmong Christians and non-Christians expressed shared concerns about their extremely disadvantaged socio-economic position and doubts about the prospects of their children to ‘move up’ in the world.

In addition, those more exposed to Kinh culture and life outside the village would criticise their fellow Hmong comrades for being too risk-averse regarding business and investment. In focus groups with Hmong students in Hanoi, where the ‘low intellectual standards’ (*dân trí*) of the Hmong – in comparison to the Kinh majority or even other ethnic minorities – was a commonly accepted notion. Another low-level Hmong cadre who married a Kinh man compared her fiancé’s mindset – “if you want to earn money, you must borrow

money to invest in this thing” – in stark contrast to the pessimistic Hmong who are afraid of business failure, “so they don’t dare investing to develop”. Of course, this fear can be partly explained by the discrimination Hmong people face doing business in a Kinh-dominated marketplace.

On the other hand, conversion testimonies often emphasised how believing in God had given them a sense of peace and assurance of God’s provision, in contrast with their former fear of ambivalent spirits, illness, future uncertainties, crop failure, human trafficking, and so on. Christians in *Bản Thác* asserted that their faith empowered them to be more entrepreneurial and take risks in livelihood decisions. This was illustrated during an interview with one of the poorest (non-Christian) households of the village, when it emerged that they had unused land which didn’t receive enough water to grow rice or maize. Upon hearing this my local (Christian) research assistant urged them to calculate first and consider growing ginger on the land, explaining the investments required and encouraging them not to be afraid of trying something new. Later, she informed me that if this household were Christian then they would have received this advice long ago at the church ‘development’ meetings. She then claimed that Christians took more risks in business because they have God to put their faith in. Others had boasted that in *Bản Thác* there was inter-religious harmony, and that everyone was invited to attend the church ‘development meetings’, but in practice non-Christians felt uncomfortable in that environment and rarely attended. Although there was no overt religious conflict in *Bản Thác*, unlike other fieldwork sites, informal boundaries of exclusion and inequality were still present.

The research assistant’s spirit of entrepreneurialism resonates with Nanlai Cao’s ethnography of Christian businessmen in Weizhou who were enthusiastic about “applying Bible principles to enterprise management” and “transforming faith to productivity” (2010, 66). At a more practical level, not just pastors but church laity gain experience organising and leading religious meetings, which can increase confidence and self-esteem (Le 2018). This certainly does not mean that the non-Christian Hmong population across Vietnam are poorer than their Christian neighbours, especially since the former are more likely to be able to access state poverty reduction assistance. Rather than attempting a detailed comparison with non-Christian village ‘success stories’, the focus of this chapter is to identify the distinctively Christian manifestations of the ‘will to improve’ which, as mentioned above, transcends religious boundaries.

For Christians in *Bản Thác* who have reaped the rewards of their collective communal development projects and the subsequent tourism boom, it makes a lot of sense to associate spirituality with economy. Conversely, the uncomfortable corollary to this logic is that while “True Christianity necessarily means

wealth... poverty indicates personal sin, or at least a deficient faith or inadequate understanding" (Gifford 1990, 375). Over the new year holidays, pastor Vang and some other members of his congregation visited an impoverished neighbouring Hmong village for a day of 'encouragement', with three objectives: (1) to 'share their faith', (2) to advise and teach on personal/food hygiene, and (3) to give livelihoods advice. However, tensions of inequality emerged as Vang accused the poorer neighbouring village of being 'jealous' of the economic success in *Bản Thác*. In his opinion, the most pressing task before economic development is to improve people's spiritual lives, otherwise they will not receive God's blessing. Nevertheless, it was problematic the neighbouring villagers were also Christians but remained extremely poor.

Leng, the church leader of the neighbouring village, also worries about his congregation's residual poverty and 'backwardness', who have "believed in God for over twenty years but have not moved forward one inch." Echoing the Prosperity theology narrative, Leng attributes this failure to his congregation's ungodliness, claiming that many are nominal Christians but don't pray or attend church, nor do they engage with government development initiatives; instead they spend all day drinking alcohol and gambling. Leng sees *Bản Thác* as a target they should aspire to but which, for now, remains tantalisingly out of reach: "they have God in their hearts so whatever they do, it becomes reality... they listen to God's word, and follow God's word, only then are they blessed. So whatever they do is better off." Thus, Prosperity theology becomes disempowering when spiritual explanations of the economic inequality serve to obscure the education, networks, external patrons, communal discipline and geographical factors which contributed to *Bản Thác* success. This also fits with a wider 'moral turn' whereby development in South East Asia is framed as "dependent on the moral qualities of individuals, families and communities rather than a matter of redressing structural conditions and power relations" (Derks and Nguyen 2020, 2).

8 Conclusion

Everyday life is messy, full of ambiguities, surprises and inconsistencies; it resists simple categorisations or clear cause-effect explanations. This chapter has documented the complicated and sometimes contradictory aspirations for modernity, perceived means to development and religious techniques of self-fashioning within Hmong Christianisation. Rigg notes that the "ends of development are rarely disputed by the subjects of development, however poor they might be" (Rigg 2016, 225). Christianity does not challenge the 'will

to improve' – on the contrary, it reinforces notions of progress which complement both Vietnamese state developmentalism and the capitalist growth paradigm. The *Bản Thác* success story is a rather exceptional case of economic growth, but given the reality that most Hmong communities sit at the bottom of Vietnam's ethnic and economic hierarchies with little hope of 'catching up' with the majority, this endless 'will to improve' may be disempowering on a macro level, to which Christianity provides no counter-narrative.

From their perspective at the bottom of the Vietnamese market economy, Hmong interviewees articulated a fourfold understanding of the means to development as material assets, diligence, connections and calculativity. Ngô writes that the Hmong "were painfully and acutely aware of the socioeconomic and political forces that were beyond their control. And... conversion to Protestantism was their way of achieving some control, however slippery, over their own lives" (2016, 103). Recall Cua's claim in the opening vignette that while poor Hmong have few chances for social interaction and thus don't know how to change, poor Christians can listen to the word of God preached by the pastor instead, which will be equally beneficial. Here Cua is arguing that religious self-cultivation – learning to read, practical application of Biblical proverbs, gaining experience leading and organising religious activities, and advice from business-consultant-pastors – can improve diligence and calculativity, replacing mainstream education or social connections as means to development. This is somewhat similar to Wong's (2013) examination of 'religious capital' among Chinese migrants in Hong Kong, although he concludes that such religious capital is not evenly distributed and only enables the poor to 'get by' rather than 'get on', since "the fundamental reasons for poverty are not addressed" (2013, 176).

Perhaps the clearest example of Christian neoliberal subjectification was the translation of religious faith into a willingness to engage in risky business ventures. The uneasy dynamics of 'competitive communalism' found in *Bản Thác* lend support the claim that "the capitalist transformations that have reshaped our world do not always end in a narrowed, 'neoliberal' self-interest" (Hefner 2017, 282). However, as more villagers trying to enter the homestay industry, the spectre of increased competition threatens to undermine the village unity and cooperation which contributed to *Bản Thác*'s success. Nonetheless, Hmong Christian actors should not be labelled as 'surrogates of the state'; rather, they resonate more with Marshall's view of Pentecostalism as a "challenge to the postcolonial state, not only indicting its failure to bring about 'development,' but proposing an alternate mode for achieving it" (2009: 125). From the state's perspective, tensions appear between promoting self-development and not letting the Hmong stray too far from the Communist Party's sphere of influence.

According to Freeman (2012b), Max Weber's main point was that "in order for a new economic system ... to be taken up by people, there had to be shift in their values and subjectivity in order to motivate new behaviours and to make the new economic system seem moral" (Freeman 2012b, 20), and Pentecostalism may be doing just that for neoliberalism in the developing world. The majority of Christians I interviewed attested that such self-fashioning has contributed positively towards their aspirations for progress, and indeed it appears to equip Hmong people for marketisation. On the other hand, incorporation into the bottom of an unequal capitalist economy simultaneously opens up communities to new possibilities of exploitation and oppression.

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Staying or Moving: Government Compliance in Post-Zomian Laos

Guido Sprenger

Abstract

James C. Scott claimed that upland Southeast Asians consider their good life as dependent on their autonomy from the state. Given that the state today is present in various forms in the uplands, current uplanders can be considered as post-Zomian. Staying and moving represent two contrastive values in this region whose realisation serves to make a good life possible. This chapter considers these values through the issue of resettlement in Laos, a situation in which local values intersect with or contradict government planning. Even in situations in which the state demonstrates its hegemony and force, ethnic Rmeet uplanders tend to stress their own agency. Therefore, resettlement and its avoidance may both appear as the realisation of local values, sometimes in the shape of ‘village agency’, as the good life is seen as life in a community.

Keywords

Laos – Rmeet – resettlement – housebuilding – Zomia

1 Introduction

The question of the good life in the Southeast Asian uplands has gained increasing attention since the publication of James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Scott interpreted features of everyday life in the uplands, such as swidden farming and egalitarianism, as indicators of particular values that people pursue, sometimes more and sometimes less explicitly. These aim to realise a life at the margins of, but with considerable autonomy from, the central states of the lowlands. The uplanders' good life, according to Scott, thus consists primarily of freedom from state coercion, even if some features of state societies are worth copying. This last domain of an anarchist way of life disappeared, he argues, after World War II.

Scott's account has caused considerable debate that is of immediate relevance for the study of cultural diversity in Laos, the only country that Scott includes almost in its entirety in 'Zomia', the upland zone that van Schendel (2004) had first established as a region. With only about half of Laos' inhabitants being ethnic Lao, the country exemplifies the distinction between historical galactic polities in the lowlands and a great ethnic diversity in its uplands. Also, the dynamics of lowland and upland, centre and periphery, as in other countries of the area, did not cease either after World War II or after 1975, when the country became a socialist one-party state after a prolonged war. While the state is present in virtually every village in the form of headmen, mass organisations and party representatives, policies of relocation and infrastructure betray ongoing concerns with security and control. In this sense, the situation of Laos continues to speak immediately to the issues that Scott has raised. The upland people I have been studying since my initial anthropological fieldwork in 2000¹ can thus be called post-Zomian, in so far as the Lao state has entered and now largely controls the uplands.

Following Petit (2015), I consider stability and mobility, staying or moving as contrasting values that inform uplanders' ideas of the good life. Values are concepts that motivate action and allow for judgements in any social setting. The good life primarily appears as the realisation of values that are articulated on various scales: individuals, households, villages, ethnic groups, nations and humanity. Not only do different people have different expectations regarding the future they are trying to realise, but the values they attach to different levels often do not match. Thus, there are lateral and lineal frictions of values both between and within these scales. Values of staying and moving therefore articulate in different ways when they intersect with state demands and policies.

Accounts of resettlement in Laos, however, are strikingly different. The more dominant ones accord with wider studies of resettlement, in particular on land grabbing in recent years (Oberlack et al. 2016). They tell of the dispossession and marginalisation of rural populations, many among them ethnic minorities who have to move to new places, often under dire conditions. Évrard and Goudineau (2004), Kenney-Lazar (2017) and Baird (2013) report how such resettlements occur in two forms. In some cases, the state takes the initiative to move villages out of inaccessible areas and closer to traffic arteries and state

1 Ethnographic fieldwork among the Rmeet was conducted for over two years from 2000 to 2018, with one year in 2000 to 2001 and stays ranging from two weeks to two and a half months since then, mainly in three villages in Luang Nam Tha and Bokeo provinces. I conduct interviews in the Rmeet language.

administration. Here, state control and security concerns are driving forces (Baird and Shoemaker 2007: 871). While resettlement for security concerns was dominant in the early years of the socialist government until the 1980s, it was later largely, but not entirely, replaced by resettlement in the name of economic development (Évrard and Baird 2017). In the latter cases, land is needed for often internationally funded projects and land concessions, such as mining and hydroelectric dams. In some cases, both forms of resettlement overlap (Dwyer 2014). As these studies show, villages rarely achieve any of the promised gains from the move. Their lands are insufficient to feed them, promises of education and well-paid employment hardly materialise, and state agents or investors do not heed their problems (Baird and Shoemaker 2007; Delang and Toro 2011).

Besides this pattern, there are also accounts of how rural people resist, sometimes successfully, the encroachment of their land and resettlement (Baird 2017; Baird and Le Billon 2012; McAllister 2015). Baird and Le Billon (2012) argue that successful resistance depends on specific historical and local conditions. There is, however, an increasing awareness that dichotomies such as resistance and compliance do not serve analysis particularly well (Baird 2017: 2). Rather, and often with reference to Foucauldian notions of the shaping of desires in fields of power relations (Foucault 1994), studies observe how locals accommodate state requests, even though they do so for their own specific reasons. In some cases, government-induced changes may match local aspirations for the good life (High 2014; see also High 2008; Baird et al. 2009; High 2009a).

In this paper, this picture will be unsettled in two respects. First, a case study will be presented that challenges what we know about the conditions of resistance, for instance, previous allegiance with the revolutionary movement; and second, a resettlement situation will be depicted from the point of view of villagers who may hold diverse assessments of their situation. The stress is, however, much less on the geopolitical and historical dynamics behind resettlement but on the values that villagers attempt to realise. While staying and moving are complementary values for villagers, they do not agree on how these values relate to the resettlement situation.

The focus is thus on the ways in which government initiatives are seen as supporting or impeding local ideas of the pursuit of a good life. The example comes from villagers who identify as Rmeet (also Lamed or Lamet), an ethnic category in northern Laos, and their response to resettlement. The ideas and practices reported here are presumably not so much distinctive of Rmeet 'culture', but rather an aspect of their post-Zomian situation. This situation is

characterised by a number of features: the presence of the modern nation-state and its laws and representatives; a greater degree of village autonomy in living memory; the continuity of this autonomy in aspects of village habitus, including subsistence economy and choices when to engage in wage labour; a sense of cultural difference with the state; a sense of the negotiability of one's position towards the state. For the present argument, it is thus less important that people say they are Rmeet than that this suggests a difference from Lao or Thai.

Despite the diversity of villagers' views, certain factors unite their positions. First is their stress of what is often called agency, a sense of making their own decisions and being in control of their fate; second, their ability to negotiate with the administration, that is, with a government that often appears as authoritarian and coercive in the literature; and third, the achievement of the negotiations through what is tentatively called 'village agency', a non-exclusive sense of the realisation of values as a community, through their leadership.

Village agency requires an understanding of agency that expands beyond the common definition above. Graeber (2001) has argued that the realisation of values may shift from individual to communal levels, for instance in times of crisis. Sax (2010) has termed one of these levels 'village agency'. Village agency, he argues, may articulate through particular leaders and ritual specialists who shape public opinion and action. Yet they are unable to do so simply as individuals. Rather, the condition of this agency is their fellow villagers' recognition that they act as representations of the community – not just representatives, but embodiments of the difference of their community from others. This distinction does not need to be expressed in terms of culture or ethnicity, but location, history, economy, etc. Also, village agency has nothing to do directly with equality, solidarity or participation. Its representations, like a guardian spirit or village leader, do not subordinate individual villagers' agency, but simply provide opportunities for marking action as 'communal'. Thereby, they create a dynamic of shared action. The village appears as a point of reference for belonging and integration where relationships accumulate in a way that differentiates their sum from their parts. Village agency is thus never given, but needs shared enactment and recognition. In the present context, it is an important aspect of post-Zomian agency. Below, this is illustrated by an instance of this communal realisation of the good life in Laos.

The example concerns the building of a road in the village of Takheung in Nalae district, Luang Nam Tha province, between 2002 and 2008. As my research focused on different matters at the time, my data are not complete, but they form part of a larger picture in which migrations of various kinds and relationships with states play a crucial role.

2 Moving

The Lao government today recognises fifty ethnic groups, the largest of which, the Lao, accounts for only a little more than half of the population. One issue that has driven Laotian nation building since independence in 1954 has been the accommodation of cultural diversity under the concept of a single nation. This became all the more pressing after the socialist revolution in 1975, which was brought about with significant help from non-Lao, especially those disadvantaged, marginalised and oppressed during the French colonial regime and under the Royal Lao government after independence. These groups were drawn to the socialist project with its promises of equality for everyone.

The current position of non-Lao is thus rather contradictory. On the one hand, there is an official discourse of equality and multi-ethnic brotherhood that contrasts with ethnically defined nationalism, for instance in neighbouring Thailand. On the other, earlier lowland Lao images of barbarian and slave-like people in the uplands have been transformed into a modernist discourse that stresses the underdevelopment of these groups and their need of guidance (Tappe 2011).

In everyday life, minority experiences are mixed. Some see a real chance of upward social mobility, partially achieved in the time of war and after the revolution, while majority prejudice is still rampant (Faming 2019; Pholsena 2018, 2020). According to Pholsena (2006), many minority people committed to the struggle found themselves in disadvantaged positions afterwards and felt betrayed by the government. In certain respects, they conceived of the government in terms of a patron–client relationship in which the mutual acknowledgment of hierarchy was more important than equality (see High 2014). Aspirations and expectations of a desirable future are thus tightly bound to historical and political circumstances for people of non-Lao background. This background also applies to the Rmeet and other groups in Luang Nam Tha – although, in this province, non-Lao form the majority of the population and top administrative positions are often held by them. Still, central government policies apply to this region as well.

The Rmeet number about 21,000 in all of Laos, mostly concentrated in Luang Nam Tha, Bokeo and Udomsay provinces. Culturally and linguistically, they are closely related to the Khmu and in many respects can be considered ‘archetypal Zomians’. The majority of them live in upland villages, where they grow rice on shifting fields. They are not Buddhists but have been travelling to Buddhist areas for labour for many generations.

The village of Takheung is a case in point. It is situated on a mountain slope some eight kilometres from the Nam Tha river as the crow flies. When I started

field research there in the year 2000, the closest village on its banks was about three hours' walk away. A trip in a narrow wooden boat to the next town on a road took another three to four hours. Takheung thus seemed like an example of a remote mountain village, surrounded by forests, hills and dry rice fields. At least in certain respects, the impression was deceptive. Only a few minutes' walk from the village, I was told, there had been an US airfield during the war, staffed with Lao personnel. After the revolution of 1975, villages on the right bank of the river, like Takheung, found themselves on the losing side (Goudineau 1997: 23, quoted from Dwyer 2014: 391–2). Takheung villagers were thus doubly disadvantaged, both as non-Lao and as former allies of the 'enemy' (Lao: *satou*).

Takheung and a number of other Rmeet villages were targeted by government resettlement efforts in the 1990s. While some cases of resettlement in Laos are clearly related to development projects like hydropower, in many instances the motif is a kind of reverse infrastructuring – instead of linking remote areas by roads, they are depopulated (Évrard and Goudineau 2004). The Lao government appears to reverse the relationship posited by Scott (2009: 54): when the state cannot climb mountains, the people of the mountains have to come down to the state (Dwyer 2017). The Lao state thus appears as the heir of an older centripetal dynamic. Moving the 'slaves' (*kha*) into the galactic polity (*müang*) is a common momentum in the history of the fiefdoms of mainland Southeast Asia, in particular Laos and Thailand (Turton 2000: 16). The required control over the uplands, however, was not in place earlier in the twentieth century (Scott 2009: 10). This makes the Rmeet today 'internal Zomians', to borrow a term from Frédéric Bourdier et al. (2015): people who live out their somewhat strained relationship with the state as part of their citizenship but who still define themselves by cultural, local and geographic differences (see Sprenger 2017a). In particular, aspects of livelihood that have been constrained and illegalised by the government, including swiddening, hunting and some forms of labour migration, are highly contested. The local ritual system, which I identify as animism, is considered backward and superstitious by the government. However, even when external forces like the government demand changes, this does not rule out options to realise the good life in local terms. This implies a sense of agency, of being in control of the decisions shaping their lives.

My Rmeet informants certainly conveyed this impression when they talked about the negotiation of resettlement that occurred early in the 2000s. According to the headman of the time in Takheung, he foresaw that the government would demand the village move down from the mountains, closer to a road or river. This request was made to neighbouring villages as well, and some of them complied. The villages of Kha'aang and Mbling, situated somewhat

closer to the Nam Tha, moved to its banks entirely in 2000 to 2001, the latter being joined by about ten families (of sixty) from Takheung.

It took me a long time before I realised that this move came about at the instigation of the government. Everyone I asked stressed their own will and decision on these matters. There was more water available on the river banks; going to the market, accessing goods and travelling to Thailand became easier, I was told. Nobody explained the move in terms of government pressure. I received these answers even years into trustful relationships with the Rmeet, and during informal conversations conducted in their own language. Therefore, it seems unlikely that I fell victim to the kind of fake compliance shown outsiders that some external researchers have experienced in Laos (Baird et al. 2009: 612). It was only in 2016, when the villages that had moved to the riverbank faced another resettlement (see below) that I brought up the subject once more and learned about the government initiative. Thus, here is a case in which the ambiguity of voluntary and involuntary migration Baird and Shoemaker (2007) observed on the state level is mirrored at the village level.

Moving villages is not alien to Rmeet society. While there are indications that present-day villages have been close to their current sites for centuries (Évrard et al. 2016), splitting and moving villages, especially for seeking new fields or because villages had become too dirty, was rather common in the twentieth century (Izikowitz 1979: 81–4). Given that swidden cultivators are often quite mobile, the Rmeet value what Petit (2015: 417) has called a ‘pioneer ethos’ (see also High 2008). Like the Tai Vat he describes, the Rmeet translated government policies of resettlement into their own value system. Thus, the government’s demands as such were not completely outside the framework of Rmeet decision-making. Therefore, when narrating the history of the move, my interlocutors were able to stress the reasons they would have had for making it.

Specifically, labour migration was eased by resettlement and, as in many parts of the world, it has been a source of ideas about the good life for a long time. Labour migration works through aspirations that are shaped by both local and translocal influences: local, insofar as the money earned is supposed to be spent at the origin of migration, and translocal, as the inspiration for what a good life might look like is often derived from the lifestyle of the wealthier places where the money is earned. Therefore, values of moving influenced ideas of staying. As Schewel (2020) has pointed out, staying demands agency as well, and the following analysis will show that retain factors (Schewel 2020), like building permanent houses, contribute to its valorisation. Temporary movement for labour provides input on how to realise its contrasting value of staying, in the form of housing.

3 Staying by the River

Virtually every household in Takheung had a member who worked in the Lao lowlands or in Thailand for more or less extended periods of time, and this experience strongly shaped people's idea of a good life. This cultural input presumably dates back at least to the late nineteenth century (Izikowitz 1979: 347). Khmu from Laos formed the major workforce in the teak business of northern Siam in the late nineteenth century (Amnuayvit 2017). The Rmeet were always close to the Khmu (Izikowitz 1979: 20) and sometimes identify as such when working in Thailand today. It is likely that they were among these teak workers from early on. This has significantly shaped their ideas of a proper and good life, for instance regarding clothing (Izikowitz 1979: 111).

I speculate that their skill in handling large woodsaws originates from this occupation. This may have opened later opportunities to work on construction sites and in house building closer to home, in the Lao lowlands, one of the main sources of work for able-bodied men. The expertise people gained in the process, but also their ideas of what constitutes a desirable house, was probably strongly shaped by these experiences (for a parallel development among neighbouring Khmu, see Stolz 2019).

In the past, people reported – and earlier ethnography from the 1930s corroborates this (Izikowitz 1979) – that most houses were constructed of bamboo, with floors on short poles. Wooden boards were rare, as making them with axes was laborious. The introduction of long saws made processing wood much easier, and the changes this brought about made Rmeet vernacular architecture more similar to Lao architecture: the poles on which the houses rested became higher, the roofs flatter, verandahs larger.² These changes, however, could still be realised without roads. This was also the case with zinc sheets and other kinds of roofing bought on the market that have almost entirely replaced roofs made of leaf bundles on houses.³

However, the introduction of concrete and bricks was only possible in villages close to traffic arteries. Thus, when Mbling and Kha'aang moved to the Nam Tha, some of their inhabitants started building houses with these

2 This comes from descriptions by informants, comparison with a few houses identified to me as old-style, and pictures in Izikowitz (1979: 149–60; 2004). In one respect, the introduction of saws supported Rmeet vernacular architecture. Rmeet granaries often bear elegant ornamental carvings on their fronts, depicting buffalo horns. These were exceedingly rare when boards had to be made with axes, but have become common, almost standard, today. The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang uses this Rmeet ornament as its emblem.

3 Workshops, granaries and field huts still have leaf bundles as seen in Izikowitz (1979: 159–60).

materials for the first time. Like lowlanders, they would mostly use them only for certain parts of their buildings, while the rest was made of wood.

Overall, there are three types of house with brick and concrete. The first type has only the house posts and their foundations made of cement, leaving an open space of some two metres height below the wooden body of the house, similar to the preceding style of wooden buildings. A second type consists of a ground-floor, single-storey building made of bricks, often with a wooden kitchen building attached. The third type is a variety of the first type and effected the most significant change for the interactions in the house: the space surrounded by poles is walled in with bricks, thus creating a new kind of lower room in a two-storey building. Instead of being a storage space, as in previous buildings, this closed space has become the place where visitors are received.

A parallel development occurred in Lao and Khmu architecture, as well as in the Lao-speaking northeastern region of Thailand (Clément-Charpentier and Clément 1990; Keyes 2014: 154; Stolz 2019: 6–7). Rooms for receiving guests and for sleeping, often identical before, became distinct, as the former were located on the ground floor and the latter above. Therefore, it seems that the change from wooden houses on posts with a storage space underneath to stone buildings with a ground-floor living room began among lowlanders and is currently being picked up by uplanders – an observation I also made among Jru' (Loven) uplanders in southern Laos. Thus, there is a tendency towards a national standard, dominated by Lao, in many places in Laos. At the same time, those Rmeet who built cement and brick houses for themselves were able to apply the skills learned on lowland construction sites. The shift also emphasised the work of men, as women were mostly responsible for the leaf bundle roofing of previous house styles and have no experience on lowland construction sites.

More importantly for the question of staying and moving, the Rmeet built houses from very durable materials for the first time in their history. The bamboo huts of the early twentieth century would deteriorate quickly but could be easily rebuilt. The wooden boards of the houses that replaced them could still be reused, and it is quite common to build new houses out of old boards when a family moves to another village close by. Concrete and bricks, however, are a long-term investment into staying, and these new buildings are often slow to become complete, as material needs to be bought on the market rather than drawn from the forest. Concrete and brick buildings also absorb a significant amount of money earned over an extended period of time, as villagers' income is irregular. Here, government policies aimed at sedentarising swidden farmers matched farmers' own desires for a good life. While the government did

not support building permanent houses in these villages, people themselves did not want to abandon swidden farming, and the cumulative effect of these asymmetric agencies resulted in settlements that were more permanent in their layout than ever before. Swiddening continued but, by moving to the river, people made a significant step towards integration into labour markets, in terms of both production and consumption.

However, these developments realised only some aspects of a good life. Life on the riverbank was decidedly more crowded, and there were a few conflicts over arable land. Also, neighbours that once lived at a safe distance now became closer, for better or worse. While relations between neighbouring villages, including culturally different ones like those of the Lao, were amiable overall, there were some instances of conflict that people kept talking about. In one case, a group of allegedly drugged young men from one of the resettled villages killed a cow from another settlement, which was just a few minutes' walk away. The potential for conflict between members of neighbouring villages, previously subdued by distance, now became more prominent in people's awareness.

4 Staying in the Mountains

However, not all villages complied with the government's demand for resettlement. Takheung managed to stay put. This resilience was not fed by a general aversion to migration in the village. On the contrary: Takheung had a reputation for being comparatively wealthy due to the number of men and women who went on labour trips to lowland Laos and to Thailand. Rather, the impression was that it was their intense involvement in migration that fuelled their will to maintain their village where it used to be. As argued below, experience in the lowlands, through contrast, reinforces local notions of communally shared love and caring.

In the late 1990s, when the resettlement of Kha'aang, Mbling and other villages in the vicinity was planned, the administration's initial idea had been to move Takheung to a different province, far from the original site. Villagers complained, however, as they feared that the government would not help them, so they would become poor and not able to see their relatives again, as one of my main informants explained. Instead of moving, the village headman told me in 2002 that he had the idea that the villagers should build a road themselves. This was, he claimed, even before the district administration demanded the village should resettle. The idea was only made a reality at a time when Kha'aang and Mbling had already moved. In spring 2002, the people

of Takheung, in cooperation with their neighbouring villages to the east and west, began building a road, employing the same technique as for levelling the ground for a new house – hoes and boards dragged across the ground with ropes. Both men and women worked on the road.

When I visited the place in April 2002, work had not proceeded very far. Yet the village proudly sported a used Chinese-made tractor that all the families had bought jointly. The heavy piece of equipment had been transported by boat, disassembled and carried along the narrow footpaths up the mountains. One of the younger men knew how to drive it, and another had learned how to repair it – again, skills acquired during labour trips. Even before having a road, the village leadership had designed an incentive to join the effort. As everybody was driven to join these efforts, village agency became apparent and exerted a visible effect on its inhabitants.

However, the plan was not made without the administration's involvement. Sometime after its onset, the road building became part of a food-for-work programme in which each man-day was paid with three kilos of rice.⁴ According to the headman, money would have been even better, as there was no shortage of rice. At some point – before the road had reached the next village, I was told – the German Society for Technical Cooperation (then GTZ, now GIZ) became involved in the process, and from this time onwards money was distributed instead of rice.⁵

The plan was to connect the road to the village of Ban Mo on the Nam Tha to the southeast and to Tafa, a larger settlement that had been a trading hub since at least the early twentieth century (Izikowitz 1979: 31–2), thus joining six villages. A few of these villages moved from their original sites to a place on the road, but they did not need to abandon their lands for this. The road was completed in about 2008. It thus connected to the national road system in Tafa and, since late in 2015, to a new road leading from Ban Mo along the Nam Tha.

By the time of completion, the road was regularly used by villagers with motorcycles and the occasional tractor. For Takheung, it was a success. The village received a health station staffed with two medical workers and a new school building. It attracted a few newcomers from other villages in the area, and at least one family returned after having moved to Mbling in 2002. When I visited the village again in 2016, I noticed a number of brick and concrete houses. The road, even though it is bad and hardly passable during the rainy

4 According to a different account, the food-for-work programme was by the GTZ.

5 A reverse example of government-instigated road building that failed due to passive resistance among Phounoy is documented by Ducourtieux (2013: 457).

season, had enabled access to materials that had been the prerogative of river dwellers before.

This is all the more surprising as Takheung did not have much bargaining power. As some scholars observe (Baird and Le Billon 2012; Kenney-Lazar 2016: 148; Kenney-Lazar et al. 2018), villages that manage to connect to Laos' revolutionary history – as homes of revolutionary heroes or long-time allies of the communist movement – are in a much better position to negotiate government measures. Takheung, with its history of involvement with US forces, had nothing like this to muster. However, as Baird (2017) notes, there is a broad range of means to accomplish such negotiations, and the case of Takheung is not simply about resistance but about compromise. According to Pholsena (2006), former allies of the revolutionary movement feel that the government is indebted to them and thus are disappointed when the good life promised by socialism does not materialise. I believe that Takheung villagers knew they had nothing to expect in this regard. This may explain why they rallied behind the headman's plan to resist the government's demands for resettlement but to comply with its spirit of developmentalism. Instead of moving to a traffic artery, they built their own.

This account seems to suggest that ideas of the good life among Southeast Asian uplanders closely resemble a developmentalist – even capitalist – notion of increased consumption, and there is some truth to this. Development, modernity and market integration have been prominent aims for the Lao government and have increasingly shaped local perceptions of a good life (Rigg 2009). The comparative wealth of Laos' neighbours, Thailand in particular for the Rmeet, has provided further models of a desirable future. However, there are other values less visible that are more in tune with a Zomian mindset.

5 Post-Zomian Agency

In his *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), James C. Scott is not very explicit about the kind of agency behind Zomian anarchism. Often, he seems to talk about a conscious agenda of state avoidance, resulting from bad experiences with violent and exploitative states. He describes matters as if 'freedom' was an explicit value that uplanders take as guidance for their decisions (Scott 2009: 178–9, 244). Insofar as he suggests this, Jonsson (2012) is correct when he detects a projection of specifically American values on to Southeast Asia in Scott's work.

However, there are other notions of agency that Scott documents without explicating the differences between their implicit and explicit forms. In these

instances, he speaks of upland autonomy as an effect of state–periphery relationships and thus as more structural than purposeful (Scott 2009: 28, 155). Agency, then, unfolds through habits that do not look like decisions but are like traditions to those performing them, as well as through decisions that apparently have little to do with communal values. Shifting agriculture, for instance, has prevented upland subsistence from becoming measurable and predictable for the lowland state (Scott 2009: 75–8). It enabled villages to move quickly, but this did not need to be explained as escape from the state; the necessities of shifting cultivation would do the job just as efficiently.

Avoiding dangerous spirits used to be another reason for moving villages. While Scott deals with millenarianism – a historically common but not at all comprehensive form of cosmological politics in Zomia – he underestimates the power of what is usually called animism (Sprenger 2022). Spirits – most of them ancestral or territorial – are highly relational beings specific to particular places and kin groups (Tannenbaum and Kammerer 2003). While there is a certain body of ritual knowledge for addressing them, dealing with them usually requires rather explicit negotiations. Thus, animism is not so much a matter of fixed rules that work everywhere but rather one of experience, as well as the personality and knowledge of individual ritualists. Differences in ritual between families, villages and ethnic categories do not violate standards of cosmological uniformity but, on the contrary, are to be expected (Sprenger 2016, 2017b).

These officially backward customs contrast with most state-sponsored religions like Buddhism. In its current form, Buddhism makes conformity expectable, a similarity of rituals and texts across different villages, provinces and states.⁶ The close relationship between this religion and the state in Thailand and Laos therefore brings a kind of ritual expertise to Buddhist villages that is more hierarchical and more externally controlled than animism ever could be (for example, Bouté 2018). The ranking of monks and the hierarchy of temples developed in parallel to state control in mainland Southeast Asia (Stuart-Fox 1999: 157, 163; see also Swearer 1999). Not becoming Buddhist, as the Rmeet have done, is thus one practice that keeps the state at bay.

Therefore, in their negotiations with powerful spirits, uplanders find themselves in situations of contested subordination that compare to their relationship with state administrations (for example, N. Århem 2016). Like spirits, visiting state officials need to be hosted and feasted, but the reverence shown to them on these occasions does not guarantee that all their demands

6 Scholars on Buddhism in this region have repeatedly stressed its flexible and non-doctrinal features (for example, Terwiel 2012; McDaniel 2011), but probably because they expected faithfulness to doctrine.

are to be followed up on. While I was unable to witness actual negotiations between officials and village headmen, their accounts of past incidents conveyed a sense of leeway similar to the one shamans expressed in their relations with spirits. They never said they did something just because the administration asked for it, but considered such demands as the basis of an exchange of interests. Similarly, spirits usually desire buffalo sacrifices and need to be talked into accepting something less, like a chicken.

The realisation of a life at the margins of state control is thus not just a matter of explicit values but also one of practices that realise these values in more implicit ways. A notion of agency appropriate to this is thus less defined by intention but rather by effect (Fuller 1994). This notion has been prominently developed by Bruno Latour (2008), in order to account for the effects that non-human beings have on networks of relationships. Both intentional and non-intentional acts as well as material features of beings have comparable effects on relationships. This allows aligning intentional acts of state evasion – like lying about taxable resources – with non-intentional aspects of habitus – like swidden agriculture and animism.

This, of course, does not exclude the possibility of articulating these ideas more explicitly. Two examples from Takheung will serve, both from conversations with men who had extensive experience with labour migration and with outsiders. The first comes from a man who is one of the most curious people in Takheung when it comes to strangers. He was among the first villagers to seek my company and regularly makes friends with travelling salesmen passing through the village. Thanks to his skills with his power saw, he made more money in the lowlands than many others, using this to build the first two-storey stone house in the village.

By the standards of modern state and market, he would seem a particularly entrepreneurial character, driven by values of material accumulation. I was thus surprised when he revealed to me, in 2016, that he was looking forward to not working for money any more. He was then around forty and appeared satisfied with what he had. His idea of the good life consisted of working his fields and caring for his animals, while having a little more than most others with his new house, a TV and some income from lending out his equipment. This contrasts with a record of uplanders who despise working the fields and aspire to their own offspring becoming something other than farmers (for example, Bouté 2018: 213).⁷ However, his attitude is quite common among rural dwellers

7 Bouté's example of the Phu Noy in Phongsaly differs from the Rmeet in important respects. Soils in Phongsaly seem worse than in Luang Nam Tha, and a wave of outmigration has emptied the villages.

and people with agrarian roots even in the lowlands (Baird, personal communication). It may thus be less specific to uplanders than to settings that are somewhat peripheral to modern states in general. Still, a certain post-Zomian resilience can be seen here, set against a capitalist promise of ever-expanding consumption and the sacrifices necessary for attaining it. Post-Zomian agency does not evade the state in any obvious way, by moving out of the state's grip. However, it refuses to accept the state as the sole provider of values and maker of definite decisions, even in a late socialist regime such as Laos, where the party–state claims to lead the people to the good life. Even if my informant were to have second thoughts sometime in the future, it is a remarkable expression of an alternative.

The second example comes from a family father who had spent several periods of time in Thailand. In a conversation in 2001, he explained the difference between Thailand and Rmeet villages in these terms: 'In Thailand, you have to be afraid of robbers; in the village, you have to be afraid of spirits.' By this, he referred to a value expressed by the verb *kho am po*, 'to love and care for each other'. *Kho am* is 'to love' in the manner that family members or couples feel for each other, expressing compassionate attention to the other's needs and emotions. *Po* means 'together'. *Kho am po* suggests a group of closely related people who would not harm each other (see Petit 2015: 420).

With *kho am po*, the Rmeet presuppose a kind of familiarity and intimacy that may equally reference households, villages or their entire ethnicity – for example, when they invoke *kho am po* as a quality of the Rmeet in contradistinction to the Thai or Lao, who are considered selfish. This relationship also includes the village guardian spirit who loves the villagers and is much less dangerous than the external spirits to which my informant referred. This way, *kho am po* also implies its opposite, social situations of mistrust, structured in similar scales of ethnicity, village, etc. For people making these comparisons, like the migration-savvy father, it represents a notion of the good life that has nothing to do with consumption or property.

Kho am po conceptually encompasses village agency. This is a kind of agency in the aforementioned sense of being mostly present in its effects even when represented by persons. Villages emerge as agentive beings when there are effects and actions that can be attributed neither to individuals and households nor to forces like the state. Rather, events in Takheung and Mbling suggest an intermediate level with its own internal dynamics of persuasion and value realisation that is still not identical with modern concepts of democratic representation.⁸

8 There is nothing specifically post-Zomian, Asian or 'non-modern' about this. It is assumed here that communal agency is common to human sociality, 'modern' or 'non-modern'.

This also implies, however, that the village as the level of solidarity and *kho am po* cannot be taken for granted. Rmeet society resembles Lao and other Southeast Asian societies in that village agency appears in specific contexts while, in others, the solidarity and interest of households and kinship networks prevail (High 2014; Petit 2008). Communal rituals provide one such context (High 2009b), but so does village leadership, under the condition that villagers differentiate between personal and village-oriented actions of leaders. A leader who seems selfish thus loses his claim to be representative of the values and aims that people locate at the community level (Robbins 2018; Sax 2010). In the early twentieth century, Rmeet village agency was embodied by the village priest, who managed relationships with the guardian spirit – also said to be the spirit who loves the villagers – thus directly linking the loving togetherness of humans and spirit in his leadership. In the sense of de Coppet (1992: 65), he represented – made present anew – the reality of the village-as-entity in relationship with the spirit.⁹

Today, the diarchy of village priest and headman may articulate village agency in its external, administrative and internal, ritual dimensions. Headmen are elected but require state approval. Often, they come from families of earlier headmen and stay in office for several terms, even decades. The headman of Takheung at the time of the contested resettlement was the wealthiest man in the village, but seemed to me genuinely protective of the villagers. He had been in office for a number of terms but was removed early in the 2010s, allegedly for corruption (see Baird and Shoemaker 2007: 881).

The headman of Mbling who advocated the resettlement to the Nam Tha was equally well regarded, the son of an earlier headman and a well-known shaman. He realised a different value for his community by supporting its move to the river, successfully enough to attract families from Takheung as well. It is possible that his ability to align government policy and community interests helped him become the party secretary of the village after he left his office as headman. Both men, however, were successful leaders because they realised the values of staying in the mountains or moving to new opportunities that are both inherent in post-Zomian society. They were able to make these values relevant for the village as such – a community that only converges and emerges when the pressure to realise it arises (Graeber 2001, 2013; Robbins 2018). This is, of course, not always the case and, often enough, headmen

9 For the Katu, Nikolas Århem (2015: 206) shows that, when a villager violates a moral proscription, the mountain spirit overseeing village morality may punish any villager. From the spirit's point of view, the transgression is village agency, not personal agency.

clearly act against their community's interests (for example, Baird 2017: 9; for the importance of leadership in resettlement, also see Katus et al. 2016). In all these cases, the difference villagers make between personal and communal interests acknowledges the village as a level of agency.

All of this allows determining the elements of a post-Zomian agency. Both Zomia and post-Zomia are situated near the limits of state control, but while Zomia is just outside them, post-Zomia is already inside. The administration, both in terms of persons like elected headmen, party representatives or visiting officials and in terms of laws and regulations, is always present. However, local habitus still contains memories of a greater autonomy in the past, enshrined in subsistence practices that are common but opposed by the government, like swiddening and hunting, and in non-doctrinal animism. This is combined with a sense of distance from markets and wage labour that allows people to decide for themselves when they own enough and when they need to work for money. This latter trait is exclusive neither to the Rmeet nor to uplanders, but may be shared by rural dwellers elsewhere. However, the distance is enhanced in post-Zomia by an awareness of cultural difference understood not only in terms of centre–periphery relations and the ritual system (animism), but also in those of wealth, language, looks, etc. Ultimately, the feature of post-Zomianism highlighted here is a local stress on autonomy when dealing with authorities, even if this is exaggerated and local power is limited. However, examples such as the road building in Takheung demonstrate that the refusal to see themselves as victims may yield tangible advantages for uplanders on occasion.

6 Moving Again

When I revisited my field sites in late summer 2018, Kha'aang and Mbling had moved again, and this time the forced character of resettlement was indisputable. Their previous site on the Nam Tha – and that of over thirty other villages – had disappeared under the surface of the reservoir of the Nam Tha 1 hydroelectric dam. For a number of villages, this meant moving higher up the slope of the riverbank, but the Rmeet villages on the right bank were relocated to a place much further away, on one of the tributaries of the Nam Tha and a fairly good road that is nevertheless quite some distance away from the next town. Here, seven villages are clustered in a row along the road, on land mostly used by two Khmu villages that had moved there some twenty years earlier. People seemed to appreciate the houses provided by the part Chinese,

part Lao company, with ground floors made of stone and upper floors of wood, and connected to electricity, unlike their former village. However, there was not sufficient access to land for fields, and the water supply was unreliable. Subsistence was thus difficult, and due to the remoteness of the place regular paid labour was not available – overall, conditions not unusual for resettlements in this area (Évrard and Goudineau 2004).

In this way some people expressed their readiness to give up their newly provided houses and move again, thus resisting the pull of permanent buildings. Everyone I talked to during my rather brief and informal stay was ready to discuss his or her difficulties, but they hardly conveyed the sense of broken promises and unfulfilled obligations recorded by Pholsena (2006) or High (2014: 40) elsewhere in Laos. I surmise that the Rmeet of the right bank, as former allies of the ‘enemy’, grew up knowing that the state owes them nothing. Paradoxically, this may lead to a sense, not of abandonment, but of empowerment: what they have they have through their own achievements.

Still, the two ways of pursuing the good life, staying or moving, remained different. In 2018, I talked about Takheung’s remaining in the mountains with one of my main informants, who had joined Mbling when it moved to the river in 2001. Although he found himself in rather unfortunate circumstances after the resettlement in 2017, he still defended the idea of moving. Yes, he agreed, today Takheung does have brick and concrete houses as well; however, building them was much more expensive than here, close to a river and a much better road. A bag of sand would cost up to 12,000 kip when brought up to the mountains; here, he said, you fetch it from the riverbank. Complaining would have been an easy option for him; instead, he chose to stress that his decision to move out of Takheung was the right one. Certainly, he may have been only trying to save face when he said this. But he was doing so by claiming agency for himself, not victimhood and thereby making the state or the company responsible for his situation, as uplanders elsewhere in Laos have done (Petit 2008).

7 Conclusion

The realisation of values that constitute a good life among Rmeet villagers in northern Laos unfolds in relationship to the demands of the state, whose developmentalist and socialist agenda allows resettling villages in the name of national development. Still, in the accounts of the Rmeet I talked to, the state does not appear as an irresistible and violent force, even though it may be experienced as such. Rather, people situated themselves in a broad field of what Baird has called ‘contingent contestation’ (2017). All along, they

conveyed a sense of making their own decisions, in contrast to seeing themselves as victims at the hand of forces out of their control. This demonstrates a kind of post-Zomian agency in their dealings with state administration. While village leaders significantly enacted this agency, they could not do so without realising a level of village agency that was oriented towards values villagers saw as communal. Future research may reveal that the role of state administration in this particular case study is greater than I am able to figure out at this point, and the role of village agency less pronounced. But my argument remains that those Rmeet I talked to emphasised their own communal decision-making and that this agency was constructed along ideas of what a village is. This, by itself, is a contingent and specific feature of the situation, as contrasting studies from other parts of Laos have shown.

Therefore, I argue that the way the good life is realised is not just a matter of personal imagination but equally a communal effort. The concept of village agency makes it possible to rewrite a history told in terms of manipulative individuals striving for power as one in which single persons only share in structural opportunities (Sahlins 1992). In the case of Takheung, this agency is quite conspicuous, but even those villages that complied with the government's call to relocation in the early 2000s demonstrated this faculty. After all, their initial replies to my inquiry stressed their own decision-making; this was particularly pronounced among those who had decided to move from Takheung to the river. Village agency is thus not a binding or determining force for all its members, but something that emerges through action that realises values at the level of the community. Both types of decision, however, realise the complementary values of staying and moving. These values are at once local and designed to interact with the state.

I am thus not trying to downplay the indisputable negative impacts of resettlement in Laos (see High 2008; Baird et al. 2009). Rather, I attempt to grasp why villagers would say that they made their own decisions about staying and moving even in the face of government measures. Wherever people locate the ability to make decisions – at the individual, household or village level, for instance – it constitutes a central value for uplanders I talked to. My findings thus offer a qualification of Scott's concept of Zomia that puts too much stress on state avoidance. Both in the past and in the present, upland villagers have not been shy of engaging with the state, but valorised doing so on their own terms. What has changed over the past century is the disappearance of their independence from the state – this makes upland villages post-Zomian.

Rmeet villagers thus demonstrate the unity of what would, in other contexts, appear as a contradiction. On the one hand, relationships to the outside are highly valued – as demonstrated here by the many Rmeet who adapt their

ideas of a good life to observations made during labour migration. On the other hand, they see such changes in their way of life predominantly as the result of negotiated decisions they made themselves. The value placed on the outside thus provides a way to deal with a demanding, late-socialist state as a force that is always present in post-Zomian Laos. Then, the value of autonomous decisions allows seeing processes instigated by the state as a matter of one's own agency.

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Good Baby, Good Life: Exploring a New Akha Way of Life Free from Abnormal Birth

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Abstract

This chapter, through a daily-life perspective, explores the question of “a good life”. It focuses on a case regarding the abolition of infanticide, through which the relations and interactions between the socialist state and ethnic minorities of southwest China are examined. By elaborating how an Akha custom (infanticide) that guarantees communal goodness/purity was abolished, the research reveals three competing or collaborating notions of “good life”. The Akha’s cosmological “good life” cherishing religious purity over contaminating “not-good” baby is partly reformed to obey state law which promises to protect people’s fundamental rights of life and property, and further to meet its members’ personal desires in keeping a wanted baby, maintaining complete family relations across generations, and securing property. This is an unusual case in that the ethnic cultural authorities from a small, politically marginalised, frontier-dwelling and egalitarian group in southwest China do not “resist” or “collaborate with” the state in the expected way. Instead, they draw on state power to oppose their own customs in a highly disassembled way. With such a unique case, the research helps to diversify our understandings of “good life” as well as state–society relations in southwest China in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

good – abnormality – legality – personhood – purity – governance

1 Introduction

“Girl, the Communist Party is good!” The renowned master ritual specialist Pima¹ made this heartfelt remark the moment he saw me, with a big relieved

¹ *Pima* is an Akha term, literally meaning “the master of ritual specialists”, the only one who possesses full knowledge of Akha traditions, a powerful one who is capable of diagnosing

smile on his face. It was 31 July 2012, the day sixty representatives from nineteen Akha villages came to Pima's village to take part in an official meeting to abolish an "outdated and bad ethnic custom" involving infanticide. The meeting was organised for the sake of Pima's newborn grandson, a baby born with webbed toes. This tiny physical deformity, according to Akha *li*² (礼) (Wang 2019: 30), the Akha "way of life" (Alting Von Geusau 1983: 249) that defines their ethnic identity (Kammerer 1990; Tooker 1992), made the child a dangerously polluting "not-good baby" (*buhao de wawa* "不好的娃娃") or "*tsawrpaeq*"³ who, in Akha terms, ought to be eliminated. The Akha concept of a "not-good baby" includes those born as twins (or other multiples), or having cleft palates, extra digits or webbed digits. As in many other non-Western cultures, a baby is not automatically a culturally accepted human (Lancy 2014). The main condition of its humanity is a "normal" body. This kind of baby is cosmologically defined as a ghost rather than human, normally seen as having to be killed and buried at a place belonging to "the territory of ghosts".

Unwilling to perform such a *li* for personal and legal reasons, Pima and his family mobilised their social networks to gain the local government's attention. The latter, when receiving the case report, was concerned that a possible crime was about to be committed and that there was potential for communal conflict. To maintain social stability in this border area, several cohorts of officials were sent to the village to alleviate "tension" among villagers. Shocked by this "evil culture" of infanticide, Han officials strove to save the baby and to abolish the ethnic custom. Debates arose within the Akha community; dissent appeared. After months of hard work in persuading and educating villagers, officials announced that a consensus on abolishing the *tsawrpaeq* system had been reached, and that infants of abnormal birth should be treated in the same way as normal ones. From then on, the Akha villagers had to start exploring a new way of life, in which the "not-good baby" becomes a "good" one. The case

illness, curing sickness, calling souls back and officiating at funerals. This is a culturally authoritative figure indispensable to the well-being of the whole Akha community. Here I specifically name the grandfather after his social role of *Pima*, highlighting his special role and status in the community. The orthography utilised to record Akha terms chapter follows the most recent script developed in December 2008 by Akha scholars from China, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos, which is gradually becoming popularised in these countries.

- 2 The Akha *li* is taken by villagers as their way of life; it is a term with multiple layers of meanings but mainly encompasses ceremonies, traditional customs, rules of behaviour and etiquette. The Akha consider that each ethnic group has its own way of life. Each is a special ethnic way or *minzu li* (民族礼) and *li* defines who they are.
- 3 The Akha term *tsawrpaeq* literally means "not-good person", but villagers more specifically mean "not-good baby". Since *tsawrpaeq* always refers to newborns, I here use "not-good baby".

presents the competition and support between three notions of the “not-good” or “good” life in China.

China’s socialist government insists that legality, social stability and science are the core elements for ensuring that its people live a “good life”. Under such a governance approach, the Akha have experienced a “reformation” in their way of life, such that a package of their practices, organised according to a communally held religious definition of “goodness” in terms of purity, is adapted to conform to state law that is made on the basis of a secular definition of “goodness” as one that secures family happiness. While once they sacrificed the lives of abnormal births to maintain a collective ideal of purity, now some Akha are increasingly concerned about personal well-being and maintaining a complete family in a law-based country. Their desire for this new “good life” over the old vision is reasonably supported and shaped by state laws. The competing or collaborating process of these three notions of a “good life” involves delicately balanced socio-political and cultural interactions at varied levels among multiple actors, including state agents, ethnic elites and ordinary people. It sheds light not only on intra-ethnic social change, but on relations between the state – the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – and ethnic minorities.

This research is a part of the volume “Rural Life in Late Socialism: Politics of Development and Imaginaries of the Future”, which aims to explore what constitutes a “good life” among the rural population in contemporary socialist Laos, China and Vietnam, and how their specific political economic trajectory helps shaping people’s ideas of the “good life” and imaginaries of the future (Wilcox *et al.* this volume). In this chapter, I address the question of “What is a good life?” around a case regarding the abolishment of infanticide, through which the relations and interactions between socialist state and ethnic minorities of southwest China are examined.

The topic of state–society relations among ethnic minorities in China has received much scholarly attention, but the geographic and ethnic distribution of those studies is uneven. This research focuses specifically on that of southwest China, where the majority of discussions have mainly developed “from the perspective of the state project of identification, cultural and identity representation and the imagination about the state and modernity by the elite and the ordinary people” (Ma 2013: 4). Previous studies, which have concentrated on southern China,⁴ have portrayed socialist China from several angles as they deal with different ethnic minority groups and at different times, but

4 Western China has also generated important theorisation concerning ethnicity in China; however, current state–society relations in the west are drastically different from those in other areas of the country.

nevertheless agree on three main characteristics of the state from the late 1990s. First, it appears as a coercively powerful state with explicit political concerns, for instance through the state-run projects of ethnic identification or classification, family planning or poverty reduction (Harrell 1994; Mueggler 2001; Ma 2013). Second, it creates “a zone of indifference” (Laliberté 2011: 208) for its governance in the Reform Era. Ideological relaxation in the cultural domain and expanded legal guarantees for minority rights and religious rights have allowed ethnic and religious revival in general, as long as the revived practices do not harm the state’s stability or people’s lives or property (Zhao 2008; Wellens 2010). Third, the state sometimes collaborates with ethnic minorities to promote revival. Both central and local government provide administrative and financial support to revive ethnic culture for developing tourism and expanding tax revenue among ethnic minorities such as the Tai/Dai, Bai and Hui (Hansen 2004; Davis 2005; Chu 2005; McCarthy 2009; Liang 2018).

In southwest China, ethnic minorities have varying responses to the multifaceted state, as is evident from the overall study of the southern regions. These responses largely depend on the state’s attitude, on the political importance of the particular minorities, and on the political positions and influences of their elites. In particular, ethnic elites’ or cadres’ roles are greatly highlighted, and in some cases the position or agency of the ordinary people is also discussed. If we draw on studies from ethnic groups that are represented in the southwest specifically, the diversity among elites is visible. Some are labelled as “compradore elites”, such as Yao elites, who speak in favour of state-run projects (Harrell 1994; Litzinger 2000). Elites among the Lahu (“Lahu-minded Han”), have no relations to Lahu traditions or social networks, but appropriate Lahu identity and political resources as promoted officials, keeping non-elite Lahu in a marginalised position (Ma 2013). By contrast, influential Mosuo or Yi elites possess dual identities and shoulder the political tasks of the state and also their ethnic obligations to protect traditions. Indeed, their ethnic traditions often constrain them from fully implementing state policies (Guo 2008). Among other ethnic groups, such as Tai/Dai, Bai, Hui, Premi and Miao, the elites and the ordinary people have gone further and sought governmental support to recover their previously suppressed traditions (Hansen 2004; Davis 2005; Chu 2005; McCarthy 2009; Wellens 2010; Liang 2018); or nonelite Miao engaged with cultural production through active self-commodification (Schein 2000).

These studies reject the model of “ethnic resistance” pitted against “state dominance” (Scott 2009) because it oversimplifies the complexity of interactions. They remind us that both parties seem often to appropriate each other’s symbols, categories and resources (Liang 2018). The Akha case of abolishing

the custom of infanticide has the potential to further develop our understanding of state–society relations in the twenty-first century. It is unique in four senses. In the first place, the case reminds us that the state still distinguishes between ethnic customs and practices: some cannot receive protection or promotion from the state. The custom of infanticide surrounding *tsawrpaeq* clearly violates state law, and thus it presents a case in which the question between the state and society is not about revival. This custom faces the opposite fate: abolishment. Second, although the state opposes the custom, this is not a case in which ethnic minorities react by resisting the state. Rather, in this case, it is Akha ethnic cultural authorities that, unusually, draw on state power to oppose their own customs. Third, there is no clear delineation of ethnic community vs state in terms of who supports the custom and who wants to abolish it. The Akha members (ordinary or elite) and state agents (Han or Akha) have fragmented into many actors, each with particular, sometimes divergent, interests. Fourth, the Akha in Menglian are a small, politically marginalised, frontier-dwelling and egalitarian group. Their situation is therefore unlike those of politically significant, hierarchical ethnic minorities such as Dai, Miao, Bai or Yi, and of politically marginalised, inland-dwelling groups like the Lahu of Lancang. This case, overall, reveals a highly “disassembled” interactive process by disaggregating ethnic customs, state agents and ethnic society to an extent that has not yet been described as a salient characteristic of relations between ethnic groups and the state in southwest China.

By focusing empirically on this case and exploring it through a daily-life perspective (Ma 2013: 6), I am trying to examine state–minority relations from yet another angle: what happens when individual, ethnic and state visions of a “good life” are at odds? More specifically: how and why is abolishment the solution for addressing an Akha custom that guarantees communal goodness and purity but interrupts the pursuit of an individual family’s happiness? Why do Akha elites seek the support of state and the law to abolish their own custom? How do common Akha villagers respond to the abolishment of their most significant ethnic custom?

To answer these questions, I, at first, present the “old” Akha version of the “good life” and how infanticide secured it. That is, I interpret the cosmological significance of abnormal births for the Akha, and how infanticide and the ostracisation of parents functioned as solutions. I then outline the state’s intermittent historical engagement with infanticide and its influence on the Akha people from the 1950s to the 2010s. Then, this chapter turns to the case at hand: an abnormally born child wanted by its parents and grandparents who were, furthermore, unwilling to give up being “Akha” as the price for keeping the child. Here, I elaborate the situation of the family concerned, their desire

for a “complete” family and the responding governmental support. Finally, I examine the socio-cultural influence of the abolishment.

The research is based on long-term fieldwork among the Akha community in Menglian, a multi-ethnic county on the border between China and Myanmar. The Akha are a transnational ethnic group spread throughout Yunnan and the Southeast Asian countries, comprising a population of about 650,000 in total (Yang and Yu 2010). In the multi-ethnic socialist state of the PRC, the Akha, also known as the Yani or Aini, are classified as a branch of the Hani nationality. They are mostly settled in Xishuangbanna Prefecture and in the counties of Lancang and Menglian in Pu'er Prefecture. There are 41 Akha villages with a registered population of 9,585 (2010)⁵ in Menglian, spreading over highland and, in some cases, valley areas. I undertook field research for a hundred days in a hill village called Hakaq for my Master's programme during 2008–2010, focusing on the topic of twin infanticide (Wang 2010). I returned for my Ph.D. project on childcare practices between July 2012 and September 2013 (Wang 2019), and spent most of my time in Hakaq and in a valley village called Kekaq. In the summer of 2017, I revisited Hakaq and Kekaq, staying for over two weeks catching up on the latest changes.

Both Hakaq and Kekaq are medium-sized villages by Akha standards, with respectively twenty-nine households of four patrilineal lineages and twenty-three households of five lineages. Each has a registered population of over one hundred people. Their resident population is often much less, changing along with the number of those migrating to cities. People staying in the village mainly include: the old, the married, children, and a small number of young people unattracted to the outside world. Hakaq is often considered “conservative” by its own people because there are more than twenty elders who are professed to hold traditional knowledge, and they incline to faithfully adhering to the Akha *li*. By contrast, Kekaq is taken as a “young” village because elders there are much fewer in number and much younger in age than those in Hakaq. They tend to make aggressive changes in terms of living environment, dressing style, livelihood, marriage, etc. Following the networks and contacts of these two, I also paid short visits to other Akha villages in neighbouring areas. These villages are all connected by a patrilineal descent system and asymmetric alliance system. It is noteworthy here that the discussion of the case study is limited to the Akha group in Menglian; it by no means assumes that infanticide has been abolished across the entire transnational ethnic group.

5 Sixth National Population Census of the PRC 2010, issued by Menglian County Statistics Bureau.

For the field research, I mainly applied four methods: participant-observation, interviews, a household survey (2012–13) and archive collection. I stayed with villagers on a daily basis and participated in major meetings held by governmental officials. From 2012 to 2013, I interviewed the family concerned, the county officials involved, village cadres and the local policeman for their opinions. I also paid attention to villagers' opinions on the event through a household survey. Meanwhile, in and out of the field, I collected historical records, memoirs and current governmental documents related to the Akha tradition of infanticide.

2 Ethnic Cosmology: A “Not-Good Baby” and an Impure Life

The Akha's abnormally born babies have been the topic of study by many anthropologists (e.g. Lewis 1969; Grunfeld 1982; Tooker 1992; Mansfield 2000). Lewis, for the first time, provided a detailed ethnographic account of the cosmological meanings as well as the ritual process of both infanticide and purification among the Akha group in Burma. His successors then often briefly mentioned that a “not-good” baby is the greatest calamity for an Akha couple and that such a child, or children, must be killed at birth. These studies mainly focus on the cosmological connotations of such births and their links to ethnic identity. Few, however, paid attention to changes in this custom or of further interactions between the Akha and the state in matters concerning infanticide. Such a significant custom, however, in which an illegal act is considered crucial to ethnic identity, could easily become a legal and public issue in any modern state. Thus, although this study shows how an abolition of infanticide helps us to understand the respective concerns of a “good life” and the contextual variables of both ethnic minorities and the socialist state in twenty-first-century China, it also establishes a foundation for comparative study among Akha communities elsewhere.

As among other Akha living in Southeast Asian countries, the Akha in China used to consider a “not-good baby” a polluting danger to the entire community. The Akha cosmology closely follows the lines of Mary Douglas's classical formulation of purity and danger: the “not-good baby” is categorised as an anomaly of a given set of classifications regarding societal norms and what is acceptable and unacceptable (Douglas 1966: 40–41). Therefore, it also presents great danger to the normal order.

As noted above, the “not-good baby”, or *tsawrpaeq*, refers to multiple births and deformed infants. In contrast, a “good” baby has a normal physical outlook, even if it may have other problems, such as being deaf, mute and/or blind, or

any other problems that are undetectable to the naked eye. The *tsawrpaeq* is a specific example within the Akha classification system in which everything (humans, livestock, crops) falls into one of two categories, “good” (*meer*) and “not-good” (*maqmeer*). “Good” is usually understood through outlining the “not-good”, which includes: abnormal births and deformed bodies of humans; abnormal births and cross-species mating of livestock (such as a sow delivering only a single or twinned birth or a dog mating with a pig); and deformities found in crops, such as two eggplant fruits growing from the same node. In a word, abnormalities and deformities are “not-good”, while the rest are normal beings that conform to “natural order” (Grunfeld 1982: 57), are “good”.

According to the Akha’s best-known myth, the supreme god Apeimiye is the creator of the world. He created the living beings which eventually developed into humans and *naevq*, those who set the fundamental framework of classifying the whole world through an inter-family division. He also created the Akha *li*, a set of rules for how things should be done, and might punish violators of the Akha *li* by causing them sickness or disasters. Performing rituals, which were created by Apeimiye, is the only way to restore the proper cosmological order of the world in which the Akha live. This came about with an inter-family division between Human and his cosmological brother Naevq. After their mother died, everything was divided between these two brothers, and henceforth that which is “good” belonged to Human while the rest, the “not-good”, went to Naevq. The human world is separated from the *naevq* world, or so-called “ghost world”,⁶ and the boundary should be carefully maintained. Abnormally born humans actually belong to *naevq*. They are not human, and thus should stay in the territory of *naevq*. Their presence in the human world implies that *naevq*-ghosts are intruding into the human world, jeopardising the cosmological order.

Moreover, as an elder explained, “Being not-good equals being impure.” *Tsawrpaeq*, the worst thing, thus occupies the apex of epidemical impurity. Once it shows up, it contaminates the parents, the household, the village and even neighbouring Akha communities. In a word, through their mythology of the creation of the world, the Akha labelled anomalous beings “not-good”, announcing them impure and dangerous events. Since “cultural categories are public matters” (Douglas 1966: 40), abnormal childbirth is no longer a private issue for a family, but a cosmological crisis in need of communal involvement.

⁶ Naevq is not the ghost of dead people, as in the Han Chinese world, but villagers often translate *naevq* as “ghost”. For detailed information on their cosmology, please see Wang, *Kinship, Cosmology and Support*.

To resolve the impending crisis, humans need to destroy the “not-good” and return them to the *naevq* through numerous purifying rituals, exactly as Douglas assumed: “the existence of anomaly can be physically controlled” (ibid). Because abnormal babies are classified as dangerous non-human beings, killing them seems to be justified as an appropriate, ethical action. That is why, as Paul Lewis (1969: 370) once described it, the father, the one who is obliged to commit infanticide,

rather than feeling sorry to have to do this, is terribly angry at the curse which caused this horrible tragedy to befall his house. He hates the sight of the twins, and is anxious to get rid of them as quickly as he can.

In this way, order is restored, future disasters are averted, and Apeimiye's *li* is properly observed (Wang 2019: 141–156). This rule of destroying anomalous things affirms and strengthens the given dual classification of “good” and “not-good”.

According to historical reports from the 1950s to the 1980s, an abnormal birth can drag a whole community into a disastrous situation. When an abnormal baby was born, it was discarded in the wild or killed immediately, while its parents had to live in the jungle for a month after a ritual expert sent away “the ghosts”. The parents were deemed impure and excluded from any ritual events or ceremonies. The house in which the abnormal child was born was destroyed. Indeed, the entire village often moved to another site and built anew (SSCGD 1951: 4; Song and Dong 1982: 132).

During my research between 2008 and 2013, knowledgeable elders told me that abnormal births would not force them to move the village to another site and the parents did not need to live in the wild. Above all, they had developed three options to deal with the crisis brought on by the appearance of *tsawrpaeq*. The first was to kill the baby. In this way, parents complied with the Akha *li* but violated state law. Two of my main informants, both knowledgeable elders, told me that once a *tsawrpaeq* child is born and its parents decide to give it up, it is the father's job to secretly suffocate the newborn with his bare hands, or put a mixture of paddy husks and wood ashes into the nostrils and mouth of the baby,⁷ or not feed the newborn and let it starve to death. Meanwhile they should inform the elders of this bad news and the latter would hold rituals to purify the couple and the whole village. During the process, other villagers are usually given a very vague message that something really bad has

⁷ This way of killing is also recorded by Paul Lewis, see Lewis, *The Akhas of Burma*, 370.

happened and told that they should follow certain behaviours related to abstinence, shunning the family concerned and contributing their help in various purifying rituals to resolve the crisis if needed. The second option was for the parents to move out of the village. In this way, they could keep the baby, but they had to give up their Akha identity. I was told that in 2007, for example, a couple from an Akha village in Myanmar gave birth to a pair of twin boys. They wanted to keep their children, thus immediately left the village and joined a Lahu hamlet. The third option was to give the baby away to any non-Akha person who would willingly take it. Many villagers recalled a case, three decades previously, when a family from a neighbouring village gave their newborn baby girl with deformed digits to the father's sister, who was a governmental official and married to a Han man (Wang 2019: 152). Both solutions indicate that as long as the baby, as the source of contamination, was removed from the Akha community, the cosmological crisis would be resolved.

Despite these changes, abnormal birth remained a major source of "damage" to the infant's family. Parents who chose to kill their child were still required to hold several livestock-consuming purifying rituals and faced lifelong social and ritual exclusion. Moreover, their property was destroyed, and they were socially despised. Over successive decades, the Akha also learned that infanticide was considered a crime by the government (Su, *et al.* 1989). Because of these severe economic, social and ritual losses and the potential of a criminal penalty, villagers often told me that their biggest fear was to have an abnormal child.

The second option of moving out with the baby nicely avoids the legal issue, but still brings a heavy social cost. Keeping an abnormal child instead of respecting the greatest *li* means giving up ethnic identity (Tooker 1992). It is self-imposed exile. The family concerned have to cut off bonds with the kin who would normally comprise their social support network (Wang 2019). Before leaving, they are also expected to cover the ritual cost of purifying the village.

The last option would seem to be the best. It enables the baby to live and the parents to retain their Akha identity and avoid legal penalty. But here too the costs are high. The parents are separated from their child, and they still bear the stigma of impurity. The child is saved, biologically, but the parents are socially and ritually excluded for life. As long as they stay in an Akha village, their own situation is quite similar to that of parents who choose to kill.

From the perspective of Akha elders, killing, exiling, purifying, excluding, destroying, and so on, are all the right things to do to protect the rest of the villagers from dangerous contaminations and potential disasters. Behind them, there prevails an Akha definition of "good" that cherishes cosmological order,

proper classification and purity. The three options show their attempt to balance collective good and personal interests under the law in socialist China. The elders argued that these reforms were reasonable because they kept both the important custom and the baby.

Nonetheless, the state agents hold a different and precisely opposite point of view, often simplifying the complicated situation (Scott 1999). In their eyes, a newborn's life – as well as the parents' house, livestock and money, all law-granted fundamental rights – is being overwhelmed by and sacrificed in the interests of an “outdated and bad ethnic custom”. Thus, to abolish the custom is to do justice to the harmed. In the following section, I examine the historical process of socialist China's handling of this “harmful” custom, and explore its concerns in constituting a “good life” for its people.

3 State Vision: Outdated and Bad Ethnic Customs

While the Akha cosmology considers a “not-good baby” a polluting danger to the entire community, the state has long outlawed the custom of killing such babies. Socialist China established its governance along the southwest border in the early 1950s, but before that the Akha in southwest China were effectively governed by the Dai, a powerful neighbouring group (LCCCMDLWC 1999; ECXDAPC 2001; LCCCPC 2012). The ruling Dai, so the elderly Hakaq recalled with a folktale, were the ones who prohibited the Akha ancestors from raising twins because twins possessed magic power that would challenge Dai governance. Whether the folktale has any truth or not, the Akha continued their *li* of ritual infanticide until Dai governance of the region was replaced by the PRC in the early 1950s.

Socialist China treated the custom in an opposite way. Early in 1935, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had split ethnic customs into two groups: ethnic customs that deserved respect and outdated ethnic customs that ought to be reformed. While such a distinction seems to be in line with a civilising project (Harrell 1994), it was not imagined solely as a top-down effort led by the state. In 1944, Mao emphasised that the CCP should mobilise the common people to reform outdated customs themselves (Jin 1994). This distinction and the reforming principle were inherited by the newly founded socialist state of the PRC in the early 1950s, and were embraced by the state-run working crews sent to ethnic regions (CCHM 1993).

In 1952, the Yunnan Ethnic Work Team (YEWT) was established to develop contacts with the ethnic masses and gain their support, so as to integrate them into the state (Ha and Du 2016). Members of the YEWT were required to respect

diverse ethnic customs for the political purpose of ethnic solidarity (Xiong 1993). However, while living with ethnic villagers, team members found some “outdated and bad ethnic customs”, such as ritual healing, expulsions of those who were blamed for causing illness, and – worse – killing “not-good” babies (Wang 1998; CCHM 1993: 81–82). These ethnic customs were considered unscientific and harmful from the perspective of the state agents. For the sake of ethnic solidarity and the officially promised freedom that all ethnic minorities should have the right to carry on their customs and habits (or to reform them), the central government repeatedly emphasised that YEWI members must not force the reformation of these “harmful” customs. They were to avoid conflict and resist antipathy from the ethnic minorities. Rather, they should encourage and mobilise ethnic elites and the ethnic masses to make the change, through “persuasion and education” (*shuofu jiaoyu*, 说服教育) (Wang 1998; Liu *et al.* 2002). This approach was successful, and Hakaq elders recalled that they had discarded the custom of infanticide in accordance with policy in the 1950s.

Nonetheless, abolishment was often interrupted. According to several state-run ethnic investigations carried out in 1958–60 (YEITIE 1964) and 1981 (Song & Dong 1982), the custom of infanticide among the Akha still continued to be practised, albeit intermittently. Since these regions had already been successfully integrated into the PRC, the local governments decided to govern the people employing direct political power and the force of law rather than “persuasion and education”. Particularly, from the Reform era, respect for or destruction of ethnic customs became a question to be resolved in the first instance by law, rather than politics. The Constitution (1982), the Criminal Law (1979) and the Autonomous Law of National Regions (1984) all reiterated their protection of ethnic minorities’ customs and re-granted minorities the freedom to keep or reform their own ethnic customs (Zhang 1997).

However, official protection and freedom would be possible only if ethnic customs did not violate state law. Otherwise, they would be officially classified as harmful “feudal superstition” that ought to be abolished, and anyone practising these customs would be legally punished. Hence, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the People’s Congresses of Xishuangbanna, Menglian and Lancang, where most Akha are settled, specifically targeted infanticide among the Akha and all passed a resolution prohibiting the killing of twins or deformed infants (Li *et al.* 2005; SCOMDLWCPC 2001).

The governmental interventions helped to reshape the custom by pushing the Akha villagers in Menglian to develop alternative solutions, as mentioned earlier. Yet they did not eradicate the custom. Infanticide persisted from the 1980s to the 2010s in both Menglian and Lancang County, as reported by Hakaq villagers (personal communication with the author). The most recent case took

place in a neighbouring village to Hakaq in 2011. According to interviews, the fact that the appearance of *tsawrpaeq* is widely taken as a threatening taboo ensures that news of any abnormal birth spreads only within a very limited circle. Professed knowledge of *tsawrpaeq* and the rituals required to restore purity within an Akha community are restricted to very few elders. They keep the knowledge but do not seek to spread it, because the topic alone causes dangerous contamination. Couples of childbearing age intentionally avoid listening to, let alone talking about, anything involving abnormal births lest they themselves become contaminated and have abnormal children in the future. Indeed, recent generations have gained even less tacit knowledge than earlier ones because they leave the village for school or to work in cities, and barely know about the custom until the moment they have such children.

Besides, the custom has remained almost entirely invisible or unknown to current governmental officials, for two reasons. On the one hand, villagers rarely thought to report these things to the government because this is a taboo topic that might bring disaster upon themselves simply by speaking about it. On the other hand, the low frequency of *tsawrpaeq* makes it unlikely that governmental officials will come across such events if they do not look for them. Since they rarely read investigation reports written decades ago, most government officials have no idea of such a custom, let alone expect to encounter infanticide, and the relevant governmental regulations appear meaningless to them until a case comes to light.

This is what happened in 2012. Pima's own son, who had spent years in cities, happily married a non-Akha woman. Then, with the birth of their baby boy with webbed toes, he was suddenly threatened by this powerful custom. Unwilling to carry out what custom demanded, Pima and his family managed to bring their case to the attention of the local government. The latter, unsurprisingly, had inherited their predecessors' methods of ethnic work, and mobilised the Akha elites and masses to abolish this "harmful custom".

The bad news of an abnormal birth also reached me at home in Yunnan, throwing me into a panic because I knew how serious the matter was, given the knowledge I had gained during the three-year Master's project on this same custom. Being close to Pima – one of my main informants – and his family, I felt very sorry for their difficult situation. My panic was also mixed with academic excitement and curiosity. I could not stop wondering how they would deal with the crisis and what would happen next. Such curiosity made me feel very guilty: how cold-blooded was I, in this moment, to stand by and observe their sufferings rather than to offer help? Troubled by this ethical dilemma, I returned to Hakaq in late July, met people and interviewed them, trying to catch up with what had happened and what was going to happen.

4 Pima's Family Dilemma

What, then, exactly happened in 2012?

Pima's family⁸ who had the baby boy with webbed toes went over the three options discussed above, finding each too painful to choose. They decided to search for a new and less painful way to keep their child. Their decision aroused a fierce debate among Akha communities and the local government. Even I was shocked when I first learned of their decision: if they were allowed to keep the child by moving out, why did they go so far as to destroy the system? In the following sections I will: first, explain the family's situation and their decision; second, examine the interactions among the family, the Akha community and the local government, in particular shedding light on the role played by Akha elites; and last, discuss the resultant, wider changes in Akha communities. Through the process, I reveal the various notions of 'good life' flowing around the case.

As it happened, this baby was born into an unusual family. His father, a young man in his early thirties, had left his village for the urban labour market as a teenager. Because he had left home at a young age, he knew little about Akha *li*, especially a rarely mentioned taboo topic like *tsawrpaeq*. He remained ignorant of this until his father, Pima, told him. The young father, with some difficulty, explained the situation to his wife, a Lahu woman from the neighbouring county, Lancang. She had grown up in a different cultural context where abnormal birth is not a problem. The struggling father was at the point of observing the *li* by killing the baby, but this was adamantly rejected by his wife, who threatened a divorce. She also gained support from her brothers, who were working as governmental officials.

After several days of indecision, as the final decision-makers concerning their child's destiny, the couple decided to keep him. As mentioned, it is possible for a couple to keep their child alive, but only by moving out of the Akha community or giving the child away. In this case, the couple and their other children already lived in the county town, outside of the village. Nevertheless, to follow the *li*, they would need to cut ties with all relatives still living in the village. The father found this unacceptable because "it was impossible to discard my parents". His parents had respected the PRC's family control policies, and as a result he was their only child; he was the only one to take responsibility for his parents in old age. The village elders agreed, in my interviews,

8 Villagers often refer their family to an extended one that involves three generations or more. In this paper, 'Pima's family' includes Pima himself, his wife, his son, his daughter-in-law and his grandchildren.

that “killing the child is not good nowadays”. They suggested, “You could give him away to whoever wants him.” But the parents rejected this proposal too, because they wanted to raise the baby themselves. Hence: how to keep the baby without tearing the whole family apart?

Pima was suffering greatly. He wanted his grandson, but found himself trapped between state law, the Akha *li* and personal desire. The local government supported his decision to keep the baby but went further, encouraging him to abolish the custom. As the cultural authority, he is, in fact, entitled to reform outdated customs. But in this egalitarian community, such power is limited because Pima can reform the *li* only with the elders’ permission. Moreover, in this instance his authority became a focus of dispute. Akha villagers across Menglian, near and far, who objected to abolishing the *li*, mostly did so because they thought it was self-serving; they complained, “Pima never thinks of changing the *li* until it happens to his own family.” Under such pressure, Pima could not simply abolish the *li*. Eventually, he was able – or rather the Akha agreed – to abolish the *li* because of the firm support Pima received from the local government.

5 The Local Government Intervenes

According to governmental officials I interviewed, as soon as he received the report the county secretary set cadres to work. The imperative for a quick response from local officials, as an Akha policeman told me, has been ingrained since the notorious Menglian “7.19” event of 2008. On 19 July 2008, a violent conflict erupted between policemen and peasants planting rubber trees, resulting in the death of two peasants. The central government was concerned that the event threatened social stability in the border region. As a consequence, the central government punished a number of local officials⁹ and required all high-level officials of Yunnan to avoid making the same mistake (Yang 2014; Yin 2008). From then on, the local government has given importance to rebuilding a harmonious relationship with local people, and making peace among groups that are at odds.

Other government officials confirmed the policeman’s point when I interviewed them, agreeing that the county secretary reacted quickly to avert any social unrest. He thought that there would be violence, with villagers

9 Sina, “The Responsible for ‘Menglian Event’ Were Severely Punished by Yunnan Provincial Government”, September 5, 2008, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-09-05/032814405367s.shtml> (accessed on June 13 2023).

breaking into Pima's house, killing the newborn baby and potentially provoking a fight between lineages. Government officials, mostly of Han ethnicity, set to work to peacefully persuade villagers to accept the baby through scientific and legal education, disseminating a "common-sense" and "scientific" view that abnormal births were normal phenomena. Such instances happen everywhere, they explained, and have nothing to do with ghosts or spirits. They invited a doctor to examine the baby's toes and make a medical evaluation of his "deformity". At the same time, the officials repeatedly told villagers that infanticide is against the state law, and a crime.

The officials' effort against infanticide indicates a legal definition of personhood. The law recognises anyone born alive into this world, be they physically normal or abnormal, as a human who is granted all fundamental life rights (Ding and You 1988). Moreover, the scientific view, by dismissing supernatural explanations of abnormal birth and announcing it to be a normal phenomenon, further implies that appearance is never the determining attribute of humanity, and thus physical deformity does not make a newborn less human. With exactly such legal and scientific approaches, Han officials found the Akha's infanticide custom unbelievably "backward" and "evil", a label I found very unpleasant.

Closer analysis, however, reveals further complexity in the state-minority relationship. During the mediation process, the ethnic cadres indeed spoke in a governmental voice. Unlike strong minorities like the Yi or Bai, whose elites occupy a superior position in both local politics and the ethnic community and create a buffer zone between state and minority (Guo 2008; Liang 2018), the Akha are a small group in Menglian and quite marginalised politically. They have only a few low-level officials – policemen and village cadres – to carry out the government's orders. Such individuals rarely hold authoritative positions within the Akha community, especially on cultural matters. As an Akha policeman stated, "Within the village, it is the elders that are in charge. I am a young man knowing nothing about the Akha *li*. I cannot tell them what they should not do. I can only suggest Pima reports the case to the local government and gets them to address the problem."

As the policeman anticipated, higher-level (Han) officials did pay attention to the matter, but interestingly they also perceived how limited their power was to penetrate the local community. Instead of addressing the problem directly, local government had to rely on ethnic Akha cadres possessing dual identities. These Akha village cadres were the tips of the government's administrative system and were tightly connected to the local community, though they did not necessarily have any traditional authority. Unlike the influential ethnic elites described by Guo (2008) or Litzinger (2000), it was these low-level

cadres – individuals with very limited authority in both the state and the minority community – who were meant to do the work of persuasion.

The process was quite strenuous, varying case by case. One Akha official, who used to feel ashamed of her Akha identity, determinedly applauded the abolishment. She once complained to another official, right in front of me, that in order to persuade her grandfather – an authoritative elder in her village – to accept the abolishment, she had to personalise the result by saying, “If you do not support my work, I will have to quit my job.” The old man finally compromised to support his granddaughter’s work. In contrast, the policeman mentioned above chose to follow his father – a cultural authority in Hakaq – and shun the work of persuasion. In another case, an ethnic cadre was reluctant to cooperate with the governmental official until he was promised a reward by the latter.

By examining the efforts that the local government put into abolishing a “bad” ethnic custom, we can see socialist China’s concerns with constituting a “good life” in the twenty-first century.

The state agents believed that the “outdated and bad ethnic custom” of infanticide threatened people’s fundamental rights, was wrong, and thus should be abolished. After all, people by no means live a “good life” unless their lives and property are secured by law. Besides, maintaining border security and stability is undoubtedly the top priority, in need not only of enforcement but also of gentle moves involving “persuasion” and “education”. “Persuasion”, a tactic developed by the CCP to win over ethnic elites in the 1950s (Mortensen 2019), reveals itself as a persistent political strategy to solve potential mass events in the twenty-first century, while “education” reflects a civilising project combining modern science and citizen-moulding through state law. Overall, the local government takes part in “the mass work” (*qunzhong gongzuo*, 群众工作) by which the CCP goes deeply into the living spaces of the common people and consults with them (Shen 2012), a strategy that benefits the CCP’s efforts at stable governance as well as assuring the people’s general well-being.

In the process, Akha cadres play a key role by going between the local government and the Akha community. They possess a dual identity in both local politics and the ethnic community, but their position is inferior rather than “superior”, as they are neither politically nor culturally authoritative figures. High-level ethnic leaders might be capable of deflecting state influence and protecting local traditions (Guo 2008: 231), yet the politically marginalised situation of the Akha, plus the illegal dimension of the *tsawrpaeq* system, makes thoughts of protecting the ethnic custom, if there are any, impossible. Their dual identity certainly helps the local government to penetrate the ethnic

community, but their persuading work requires a great effort due to their lack of authority and influence in cultural matters.

6 A New Way to Be Explored

Eventually, Pima was able – or rather the Akha agreed – to abolish the *li* because he received firm support from the local government. Grateful for the support of the authorities, he nonetheless disagreed with some of their tactics. He himself, for example, never accepted the scientific explanation of birth defects. From beginning to end, his stance against the *tsawrpaeq* system was simple: it violates state law because it involves infanticide and the destruction of property. Pima repeatedly emphasised this point to me whenever we got on to the topic of abolishment. He also demanded that the authorities take a stronger stance. Once he complained angrily to me, “Persuading is too weak a method. The government should act tough, like Myanmar! Just abolish it, no matter what! If anyone disagrees, shoot him!” After all, “Since now it is the Communist Party rules, we should of course comply with its law. No way can the ethnic *li* go beyond the state law!”

In reality, Pima and the government officials seemed to agree on the best approach. What was stressed by officials was the lawbreaking dimensions of the *li*. Through numerous formal and informal meetings with villagers, officials constantly emphasised that infanticide is a life tragedy to the family and a crime to the state. Besides this, officials went further, announcing seven other “outdated and bad” customs involving marriage, funerals and gender inequality that needed to be abolished. These were Akha traditions that forbid uxorial marriage or inter-ethnic marriage,¹⁰ and customs that prevent a daughter from supporting her parents or attending their funerals. These so-called “outdated and bad” customs were, in fact, merely cultural fragments detached from the Akha kinship system and interpreted in a distorted fashion by those who reported them, and as such were misperceived by officials. Nonetheless, officials insisted in interviews that, “These extra abolishment demands were presented by Akha villagers themselves during our investigation. By taking this chance, we decided to simultaneously abolish those bad customs creating bad influence or restricting their development.”

The “chance” to abolish further customs may or may not be realised. Pima shared his criticism with me, “This has gone too far! These customs, unlike

¹⁰ Inter-ethnic marriage is only forbidden between the Akha and the Dai or Wa groups. Nonetheless, this kind of marriage, though rare, has happened in recent decades.

the *tsawrpaeq* system, do not violate state law. If all are abolished, Akha will not be Akha any more.” Here Pima drew legality as his bottom line in reforming ethnic customs. Unlike him, or a state that remains indifferent to all legal practices, the government officials obviously attempted to move beyond the boundaries of the law. Pima’s reaction indicates that such intervention was not welcome. Nonetheless, no one publicly opposed these extra proposals. One village cadre did not care at all: “No worries, let it be.” Another young man remarked, “We listen to whatever the government says, but we do it in our own way. People agree in words but not truly from their heart (*koufu xinbufu* 口服心不服)!” Clearly the Akha showed a sense of “false compliance”, as their counterparts did when dealing with lowland officials in Thailand (Tooker 2004: 256), a sort of “weapons of the weak” to avoid head-on confrontation (Scott 1985). They are clear about their possibilities for manoeuvre: as one young man said, “No way can an egg collide with a rock!” As a weak and marginalised group, they nevertheless survive.

Yet the place of the *tsawrpaeq* system in Akha lives is also shifting. Pima’s family effectively, if not intentionally, pushed the abolition of the *li* in the pursuit of a new “good life”. They were driven by a fundamental personal desire, the desire to have a complete family. The *tsawrpaeq* system, as it had been refashioned until 2012, still required breaking some family links in the face of an abnormal birth. Many other factors – growing labour mobility, inter-ethnic marriage, complex relations with government and its officials – contributed to the sense of impasse with this custom, but also to its successful resolution as a collective response. No longer “not-good”, the birth of future *tsawrpaeq* will leave families unbroken, property undamaged, reputations unstigmatised and legal penalties avoided. These immediate secular desires, transcending cosmological impurity or future disasters, fit well with governmental concerns. The dangerous impurity is left to the other villagers.

7 As “Not-Good” Becomes “Good”

The question remains: why were villagers “persuaded” to abolish the *li* of infanticide in 2012? Despite governmental support, not everyone agrees with the abolishment. Impurity, after all, is expected to jeopardise collective well-being. Certainly, 2012 was a tough year for Pima’s family, and villagers in Hakaq and in neighbouring villages also found it difficult. When they learned of the abnormal birth, they fell into a great panic, then gradually split into several groups holding different attitudes to the rule-breakers as the government-initiated campaign went on. Their fear slowly weakened, until finally some of them

dared to take the baby into their arms. For most of them, this final tolerance of the baby involved many factors that together allowed a new “good” Akha life.

From the beginning, Pima’s family did have some supporters. Two elders in Hakaq, a retired schoolteacher and a retired road mender who was also Pima’s ritual assistant, expressed their sympathy to me, “What a poor thing the baby is! It is a life! Why not keep him?” They determinedly supported the family. The most authoritative elder of Kekaq not only expressed his personal support but also encouraged his villagers to embrace the abolishment.

Some, however, resisted the change. Another elder emotionally insisted in my interview that the abolishment betrayed the Akha *li* and destroyed their ethnic identity. In his opinion,

Every ethnic group has its own way of living. Keeping the baby is to discard our way. It is not the decision made by you Han people, neither the law; rather, it is our supreme god Apeimiye that decides it. Abolishing the *li* destroys our ethnic identity!

More dissidents silently made a stand by refusing to attend all the meetings, formal or informal, called by officials. Several elders from neighbouring villages were also unhappy with Pima’s family; one even publicly criticised them and stingingly said that the family concerned should be chased away from the Akha community.

In between, there were some swing elders, hiding their honest opinions for unspoken reasons. Pima told me his patrilineal kin were supportive but dared not express their opinions in public; another ritual specialist from a neighbouring village was “the most malicious” (in Pima’s words), double-dealing by constantly changing sides. Only one elder from a very small lineage clearly analysed his awkward position to me: “I supported Pima, but our lineage is weak, having only one household. I could not win over those powerful lineages. Nobody listened to me.”

Most people in Hakaq or in other villages, however, were lost in the battle between the Akha *li* and state law. Many gave an ambiguous response, “If others all agree with the abolishment, so will I.” Some became very anxious. As one elder stated helplessly,

We Akha don’t want these children, but the government prohibits the *li*. The country is ruled by the Communist Party; we don’t know what to do. What else can we do? We do not know what is going to happen in future.

His anxiety struck me much as Pima’s suffering did, making me feel very sorry. Given my knowledge of the *tsawrpaeq* system, I totally understood the

dissidents' fears and worries, feeling uncomfortable when outsiders criticised them behind their backs for being "stubborn". I, too, shared their concerns on uncertainties and insecurities that might be caused by the abolishment.

Within Hakaq, many elders, whatever opinions they had on abolishment, actually shared an immediate concern for the collective contamination that was caused by *tsawrpaeq*. Directly after the officials had announced the abolishment at a village meeting and left the settlement, these elders organised a ritual to purify the village's divine water source. The officials were not happy, but had no legitimate reason to stop it. As mentioned above, *tsawrpaeq* contaminate the human world, and even after the initial destruction of the baby and its family's property, the parents, household and village still need to be purified. Most of these purifying rituals ought to be performed only by the ritual expert *pima*. The exception is the purification of the divine water source. This is a ritual officiated by the village father,¹¹ and the village office covers the cost. It neither involves any illegal activities nor demands Pima's participation, financially or socially.

Therefore, when the village father and the elders decided to perform this ritual, no one could stop them, neither the government officials nor Pima. In the end, this ritual was performed, and most of the village seniors participated. Apparently, both the state agents and Pima himself have their limitations here. The state agents, once again, have no right to ban legal customs, while Pima, important and authoritative as he is, is not a political or institutional leader who decides everything. After all, there is no supreme leader but a group of elders, mediators, ritual experts and the village father who share responsibilities in the *li*-related matters of the community (Wang 2019: 101–112), a defining attribute of its egalitarianism.

Whatever their earlier opinions, in the end most villagers decided to follow the local government. With regard to abolishing their most important *li*, villagers, particularly couples of childbearing age, were astonishingly submissive to the political power governing them, saying, "Now we are allowed to keep these children" or "Others [*renjia*, 人家] now allow us to keep these children." The expression refers to the folktale that, once upon a time, it had been "others" (their powerful Dai governors) who had prohibited them from raising *tsawrpaeq* children because they possessed fearful magical powers. If once a "government" had prohibited the existence of these children, it seemed quite reasonable for another to lift the prohibition.

11 The village father is usually the purest man in an Akha village. His purity represents the good fortune of the whole village. He is in charge of all rituals and ceremonies at the village level, such as building the village gates each year, and officiates at the sacrificing ritual to the spirits of the divine water source.

Besides, young couples in both Hakaq and Kekaq villages were greatly relieved at the abolishment. None would face the same dilemma in the future. One woman happily told me, “Before, what concerned us most is giving birth to [a] ‘not-good baby’, but from now on, it is our children’s health that we care about the most.” Even the topic was not taboo any longer. Young people started to talk about twins or other *tsawrpaeq* children at home, and this was tolerated by their elders. As they said, “Before, we could not talk about twins at home or in public. Since the government has told us it is fine to keep twins, now we feel free to talk about it, and we can keep the children, too.”

However, villagers’ social practices often do not correspond with their opinions. Welcoming the abolishment does not necessarily equate to welcoming the baby. I rarely witnessed young couples, particularly young wives, holding the unusual baby when they encountered it. I had an impression that young couples, despite being happy to get rid of the dilemma, still carefully maintained their distance from the baby to avoid contamination. The taboo seemed broken yet was by no means demolished. Embracing the abolishment while staying away from the baby is in the best interest of the young couples. By contrast, anyone outside the childbearing period – kids, unmarried young people and the aged, even those elders unhappy with the abolishment – felt free to make physical contact with the baby. In fact, the elders, male and female, were the group that made the most frequent contact with the baby after the abolishment, through blessing rituals or communal feasts. They were at zero risk of having children, let alone having abnormal ones, and were immune to cosmological contaminations.

How the community will adjust over the longer term remains an open question. Given all that happened, the Hakaq village appeared as peaceful as usual. The father’s cousin reminded me of what was unspoken: “It seems harmonious, but villagers do not welcome them at all.” For several months, the baby’s parents strongly felt unwelcome in the village. They preferred to stay only at Pima’s. They avoided attending rituals or ceremonies. However, as time went by, the young couple gradually became more confident. Their close relatives expressed support by paying them visits. The father started to be invited to feasts by a supportive elder. Above all, he made a step towards taking part in healing rituals by giving a blessing to his sick grandfather.¹² His effort was accepted by the sick man and the sick man’s family, signalling his new status

¹² The old man is Pima’s first wife’s father. After this wife died, Pima remarried and had a son, the baby’s father. Though the old man is not bonded by blood to the young father, he is socially regarded as his grandfather.

of being pure. Though he had undergone no purification rituals, to a certain extent his participation in ritual officially made him a pure person rather than a life-long contaminated man. The flexibility of their definition of purity really astonished me. However, it was just one household that considered him to be pure; it remained problematic when and whether the rest would share the idea.

Nor has the abolishment of infanticide destroyed the Akha's fundamental classificatory scheme of "good" and "not-good", or the pursuit of purity. Several cases of sows giving abnormal births and of dogs mating with pigs took place in the following months. These livestock became "not-good" and were ritually slaughtered in accordance with the Akha *li*. Their owners also host purifying rituals for household well-being, just as they would have done before. Apparently, as the "not-good" human is legally forced to be tolerated, other "not-good" beings remain unwanted.

Overall, the villagers' response shows the vitality and resilience of the Akha *li*, as well as the power and limits of government intervention. On the one hand, the Akha *li* entails practice rather than belief (Tooker 1992: 803). It remains flexible so that the Akha can adapt to majority cultural norms and other outside pressures (Alting von Geusau 1983: 249–50). On the other hand, villagers were well aware of the state's power and their own vulnerability, and took no actions to directly resist its intervention. Most expressed acceptance and obedience to the government's decision, while admitting that the collective acceptance might be superficial. Still, the official intervention of peaceful persuasion and education through science and law seems indeed to be on the way to redefining the Akha's ideal of a "good life" and bringing changes to their socio-ritual life.

I, as a bystander, was also emotionally troubled and ethically trapped in this crisis. I was sorry for Pima and his family's suffering as much as for others' anxiety. Often, I found myself in dire straits, boggling at the complexity of the situation. Somehow, it greatly relieved me as villagers gradually, but rather quickly, accepted Pima's son and grandson after the government's intervention. It seemed to indicate that the community was willing, though controversially, to accept the reformed vision of the "good life" that the young couple had claimed. Moreover, the reformed vision of the "good life" is spreading to other Akha villages. In 2017, when I revisited Kekaq village, an elder informed me that an abnormal child had been born in another neighbouring village. He and other elders had been invited to visit the family. They had visited, and they had tied threads around the baby's wrists to bless him with health and happiness. He said, "It was a good baby, it deserved a good life."

8 Conclusion: Good Baby, Good Life

The research presented here has focused on a reformation in Akha conceptions of “goodness” and on the distinct Akha way of life. The reformation, driven by personal desire and political purpose, reveals three notions of “good life” that are delicately competing with and sometimes supporting one another.

The first notion of “good life” is defined by Akha cosmology, which equates “good” with religious purity, “not-good” with contaminating impurity. For the sake of a good, pure communal life, parents having a “not-good” baby were forced to give up their child, destroy their property, and suffer lifelong contempt and socio-ritual exclusion. Since the governance of the CCP in the early 1950s, this pursuit of a cosmological “good” life has been gradually simplified in the state’s view of things to be comprised of superstitious and illegal activities threatening people’s life, property and reputation. Being aware of the legal risk attached to infanticide, villagers developed two other ways of dealing with the crisis to balance the Akha *li* and state law. But even these alternatives were challenged by a concerned couple in the twenty-first century because they still found such ways unbearable in terms of family separation and social exclusion.

The second is promised by the state, with the core qualities of stability, legality and science. Socialist China takes border security and social stability as key to safeguarding its governance and its people’s “good life”. By claiming its mission to be governing for its people’s happiness or “good life”, it has also resumed its long attempt to abolish “outdated and bad ethnic customs” that harm people’s fundamental rights of life, property and reputation. With respect to the Akha, these customs have long included those related to infanticide.

The third notion of “good life” is an Akha one that is a modification to the way of life defined by their cosmology. This new “Akha way” allows for an immediate personal happiness to be realised in keeping a wanted baby, maintaining complete family relations across generations, and securing property. It nicely accords with the contemporary vision of socialist atheistic China and its laws. Its realisation relies on the collaboration of personal desires, state concerns and the flexibility of the Akha *li*.

The three notions of “good life” seem to be disassembled into many fragments, among which those that conflict is discarded while the rest are reorganised, eventually coexisting among the Akha community. Together they form an “all-in” type of lifestyle: religiously pure, officially legal, socially integrated and financially secured.

The interaction process among these three notions of “good life” is, in practice, that between state agents and a group of Akha people. It also presents us

with an interesting angle from which to understand relations between socialist China and a marginalised ethnic group in the twenty-first century.

In the first place, the concepts of personhood held by state agents and the Akha villagers, largely defining each concept of “good life”, are undoubtedly in conflict with each other in a theoretical sense. The state agents stand by law and science, yet the Akha hold by their cosmology. Killing a “non-human” child might be appropriate or even demanded according to the Akha *li*, whereas it is a criminal act for the state, because such a “non-human” child is legally and scientifically recognised as a person.

Compared to these directly opposed views, the interactions in practice between socialist China and the Akha community turn out to be highly “disassembled”. I call this interaction “disassembled” because the local government, the Akha community and the ethnic customs they are dealing with are broken into specific actors with diverse backgrounds and concerns; the ways in which they interact appear to vary case by case. There is a lack of uniformity or consistency during their interacting processes.

In the first instance, socialist China and the CCP are undoubtedly recognised, rather than resisted or escaped from, as powerful superior governors by all Akha, whether they are ordinary villagers, custom-protectors or rule-breakers. State agents display their art of governing, a hodgepodge of soft and tough tactics, legal resources and private social networks. The coercive image of the socialist state armed by law is entangled with its gentle facet. Yet governmental intervention could be welcome in one case and rejected in another, particularly when their interventions were considered to lack validity. This is not a state of “indifference”, but rather of powerlessness in certain case.

As for the studied Akha group, their interactions within the community and with the state are even more “disassembled”. The Akha mass make various responses to these governmental interventions according to their specific situations, concerns and desires, displaying their “art of being governed”, to borrow a term from Szonyi (2017), instead of “the art of not being governed”, as Scott (2009) claimed. Ordinary villagers seem most ready to accept any final decision made by the government and their elders. Once the decision is clear, they quickly adapt themselves to the change. Young couples particularly applaud the abolishment that liberates them from potential loss, yet for their own safety still cautiously maintain social distance from the family concerned.

Ethnic elites split into three groups that complicate the situation: the Akha cadres, custom-protectors and rule-breakers. The Akha cadres are indispensable actors, though interestingly holding inferior positions in both the local government and the Akha community. Low-level though they are, the Akha cadres are heavily relied upon by their Han superiors to penetrate the local

community via personal networks. Yet, lacking cultural authority, the cadres have to gain support from the local government to intervene in communal cultural matters. During this process, Akha cadres also work differently, in accordance with their specific concerns and interests.

Among those cultural authoritative figures, many elders resist the abolishment, both in their initial opinions and in their eventual mobilisation of purification rituals that have not been, and cannot be, prohibited. They silently express their disagreement through absence from meetings and keeping at a distance from Pima, but never publicly confront the local government head on. They demonstrate their “weapons” as a weak marginalised minority group, being submissive but not being manipulated. However, it is important to note that even the elders’ rejection of the custom’s abolishment does not necessarily stop them from giving blessings to the baby later on.

For his part, the major cultural authority and also the rule-breaker, Pima, has the most complex relationship to his people and to the state. As one of the most influential figures entitled to reform ethnic customs, Pima cannot use his power at will in this egalitarian community. That is why, initially, he strives to draw on state power to resolve a personal family crisis. Even so, he criticises the government’s unnecessary intervention regarding legitimate ethnic customs. The rule-breaker in one custom, obviously, remains a protector in another. Meanwhile, he somehow expects an arbitrary state to quickly enforce the abolishment, and complains about its careful and patient engagement of the Akha through soft measures. He greatly differs from the powerless peasants who pretend to comply with the power, or the Akha of Zomia who tried to escape from the state. As a man being governed by socialist China in the twenty-first century, he employed “the art of being governed” in the way that “people interact with state structures and regulatory regimes and their representatives indirectly rather than directly, and by manipulating them, by appropriating them, by turning them to their own purposes” (Szonyi 2017: 22).

Overall, the Akha group in Menglian, despite being small and weak, benefit from their frontier-dwelling location, in that they are treated mainly with peaceful interventions by the state. The Akha *li* that shapes people’s lives by age and gender, their participation in government or in the market, and their egalitarianism, produces a community of many agents, each with specific interests and concerns. In the process of pursuing a “good life”, these agents create a highly “disassembled” way of interacting with the state around ethnic customs. Here, despite it being a single case, this helps to break down the state–ethnic dichotomy by disassembling the involved entities and presenting their interactive complexity on a daily basis. The case can undoubtedly

diversify our understanding of what a “good life” is, as well as state–society interactions in socialist China in the twenty-first century.

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Single Mothers' Livelihoods in Rural North Central Vietnam: Struggles for a Good Life

Tuan Anh Nguyen, Cam Ly Thi Vo and Binh Minh Thi Vu

Abstract

Single mothers in rural North Central Vietnam face many difficulties in carrying out their livelihoods. Since they deviate from the norms of the patriarchal family, many do not receive support easily from their own relatives or access livelihood assets from their parents. As units of production, their households lack the support from the relatives of spouses normally available to married women and face discrimination in accessing livelihood capitals. Finally, the stigma induced by the state-sponsored notion of 'Happy Family' acts as a social deterrent to their pursuit of the good life. Thus, regardless of their efforts in crafting their livelihoods, many single mothers find themselves unable to improve their income and reduce poverty. Despite greater social acceptance of single motherhood, their experiences suggest that the good life in Vietnam today remains invested in the ideal of heterosexual marriage reproduced by state discourses and enduring patriarchal ideas and practices.

Keywords

single mothers – livelihoods – good life – households – social discrimination – kinship

1 Introduction¹

The trend of late marriage, divorce, separation and single motherhood has come along with the process of economic growth and social modernization (Dales 2014; Zarina and Kamil 2012). While marriage remains central to what the family means in Vietnam, the country has also been experiencing greater

¹ Tuan Anh Nguyen and Cam Ly Thi Vo were the main authors of the paper with the contribution of Binh Minh Vu Thi and invaluable fieldwork support from students Hoa Thi Nguyen, Hai Thanh Phan, Nguyen Cong Hoang, Ly Thi Nguyen at Vinh University.

prevalence of and a shift in social acceptance of single parent families (Lê Thi 1996; Phinney 2005). This study is concerned with single mothers, women who have children and raise their children without getting married in rural North Central Vietnam. It examines how these women deal with prejudice and social discrimination and how these practices are part of their struggles for livelihoods and wellbeing. This question arises from our observation that single-mothers are structurally disadvantaged compared to married couples not just on account of the absence of an adult male, a potential source of income and support, but also the support structure that comes from the familial network of the husband. We suggest that despite certain changes in social attitudes towards single motherhood, the opportunity and economic structure remains prejudicial towards heterosexual marriage as the ideal of the family. Single mothers demonstrate much resilience and agency operating within their structures of constraint to ensure wellbeing for their children and themselves, yet face barriers in the rural economy arising from their marital status. The study suggests that the idealization of the patriarchal family is reproduced in the very combination of social and economic arrangements that punish those who deviate from its norms and standards.

Despite much recent research and development projects on rural livelihoods, including those of poor women (Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2014) and the struggles of single women as migrant workers (Nguyen 2015; Nguyen 2019), little attention has been paid to the livelihoods of single mothers in the countryside, whose opportunities and constraints differ from the same group of women in the city. Compared to single mothers in urban areas, they face the aged-old stigmatization of women who “become pregnant without a husband” to a higher extent, a quasi-crime in past village life that called for such severe punishments as public shaving of one’s hair. Economically, rural single mothers do not have the support network of the husband’s family that is available to married women. Such double constraint on their social and economic life is likely to have significant implications for their livelihoods and wellbeing. In-depth knowledge of how they sustain family and economic life under such social and economic conditions shall be significant for the understanding of the change and continuity in Vietnamese family and kinship in the new economy.

2 Patriarchal Family and Kinship, the Role of the State and the Livelihoods of Single Mothers

Vietnamese kinship is characterized by a bilateral model, with emphasis on both the paternal and the maternal sides (Luong 1989). However, only relatives

on the father's side make up the patrilineage as an entity (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010). Prior to 1945, a woman had a subordinate position in kinship relations. She had a 'half-membership' in her father's patrilineage before her marriage and a 'half-membership' in her husband's patrilineage after her marriage (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010: 75). Daughters had no rights over property of their parents (Đào Duy Anh 2000[1938]: 135). In principle the married woman became a component of her husband's family (Đào Duy Anh 2000[1938]: 133) yet she did not become a full member of her husband's patrilineage. The position of the wife in her husband's kinship network was enhanced, especially after she gave birth to a son, thus strengthening the patrilineage of her husband (Phạm Quốc Sử 2000: 15–16). Therefore, in the context of the patriarchal family and kinship relations, marriage has an important meaning in term of improving the position of women. For the traditional family,² single motherhood was unacceptable. At the village level, custom often decreed that an unmarried mother had to pay a heavy fine to her village (Pham Van Bich 1999: 87). At national level, if an unmarried women got pregnant, she suffered heavy punishment. For example, an unmarried women caught in sexual relationship was punished with 100 lashes according to the Gia Long Code³ (Pham Van Bich 1999: 87). Thus, the logics of the patriarchal family deem single mothers as deviating from its norms, harming kinship relations and traditional customs.

After the August Revolution in 1945, the Vietnamese traditional family and women position were changed significantly. The Women's Union was founded along the line of the Communist Party to improve the situation of women (Rydström and Drummond 2004: 3). The Law on Marriage and the Family passed by the National Assembly in 1959 also confirmed many rights of women (Quốc hội [National Assembly] 1959). Moreover, women's liberation movement in Vietnam also transformed the position of women in terms of education, employment, political participant, upward social mobility (Pham Van Bich 1997: 131–140). In addition, the Vietnamese family and women's position changed significantly as an effect of the wars against the French and the

2 In "The Vietnamese family in change: The case of the Red River Delta", Pham Van Bich characterises the traditional family with the following features: collective community, hierarchy of sexes and ages, patrilineal family, patrilocal post-marriage residence pattern and gender separation through division of labour and spatial segregation. While he notes the French influence on the family, many of these traits remained throughout the colonial French regime from the late nineteenth century to 1945, when the socialist revolution introduced major changes to family relations and kinship practices. (1999: 7–43). In this paper, therefore, our notion of the traditional Vietnamese refers to family forms and relations that existed before 1945.

3 Gia Long Code was issued in 1815.

American as well as the wars in Cambodia and in the border between Vietnam and China. One of the biggest consequences of these wars was the greater loss of male lives leading to a large demographic imbalance between men and women. In addition, during the wars, many young women went to the front. When the war was over, many could not marry because of the absence of men due to war deaths and the perception that a thirty-year-old unmarried woman is no longer marriageable (Pham Van Bich 1997: 157–163). Thus, mature single women had great difficulty in finding a husband (Bélanger and Khuất Thu Hồng 2002). They also faced the stigma of being “unmarriageable”, loneliness (Phinney 2005: 219–221), and the worry about being cared for in their old age (Pham Van Bich 1997: 159).

This led to the practice of “asking for a child”, in which women conceived a child through intercourse with men who were either friends or strangers in hospitals (an arrangement facilitated by doctors) or through private arrangements. Gradually, this came to be accepted by the general public given the post-war context (Phinney 2005: 219–221). The new 1986 Law on Marriage and the Family gave all women the right to have a child (Quốc hội [National Assembly] 1986). Regardless of this recognition, until 1980s, unmarried women getting pregnant were sharply criticized (Pham Van Bich 1997: 159). Single mothers also have to face up to the benchmarks of the state-promoted notion of a “happy family”, a family with “an adequate income, two children, and stable conjugal relations”. Unmarried single mothers are clearly excluded from this vision a ‘Happy Family’ (Phinney 2005: 219–221). Similarly, Earl (2015) identifies that the twenty-first century situation of family and marriage in Vietnam centers on heterosexuality in a normative marriage. The expected responsibility of women is to get married, give birth to sons, to serve as a loving mother and a helpful wife. These discourses of women persist as Neo-Confucian patriarchy continues to play a significant part in Vietnamese culture (Earl 2015). Despite legal approval and greater social acceptance, the predominant conception of heterosexual marriage as the basis of the family along the line of the ‘Happy Family’ continues to produce stigma towards single mothers.

The socio-economic changes following Vietnam’s 1986 reforms towards a “socialist-oriented market economy” had particular implications for single mothers. With a less centralized economy, a diminishing socialist welfare system and the re-emergence of the family as the main unit of production and reproduction; families are allowed to pursue their own livelihoods and made responsible for their own livelihoods and wellbeing. The family, at this point, became the strongest institution in Vietnam with the position, the means, and the motivation to take advantage of the new economic opportunities created by the reforms (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; Werner 2009). The

increased autonomy of the family has an effect in enlarging social space for single mothers for meaning making and livelihoods pursuits. However, as a unit of production,⁴ a single mother's household faces particular challenges in carrying out livelihood strategies. Among others, the household cannot rely on the contribution from a husband/father or the support of his extended family. As regards kinship networks' effects on single mothers, the male-oriented model "persisted to a much greater extent than many studies suggest" (Luong 1989). As such, under the new social contract between the family and the state, single mothers are structurally disadvantaged both as a unit of production and a unit of reproduction.

To further understand their struggles in the new economy we shall use the categories developed under the livelihoods analysis framework. Ellis (2000) points out that the concept of livelihood paints a complete picture of the complex components and pathways in making a living. According to Chambers and Conway, "A livelihoods comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living" (Chambers and Conway 1991: 6). Three important components of livelihoods include: livelihood assets, livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes. Livelihood assets are five types of capitals: Human capital (skills, knowledge, and ability to work and physical health); social capital (social networks, group membership, trust, reciprocal relationships); natural capital (land, trees, etc.); physical capital (infrastructure, production tools, etc.); financial capital (cash savings, money earned from joining credit groups, etc.) (DFID 1999: 2.3 - 2.3.5). Bebbington (1999), in another study, proposes a detailed framework for analyzing rural livelihoods including four main aspects: (a) access to five types of capital assets; (b) means of transforming and combining those assets in forming livelihoods that meet their needs; (c) means of expanding assets through interaction with other actors; and (d) means of deploying and enhancing their capabilities (Bebbington 1999).

The livelihood framework is a useful analytical tool to understand the social and political economic constraints that single mothers face and the strategies that they deploy to deal with these constraints. We show that these constraints are related to the normative gender structures that punish single mothers as deviants from the norms of a heterosexual nuclear family, especially according to the standards of a state-sponsored 'Happy Family' a campaign that is promoted throughout the country with omnipresent slogans and posters in the

4 The households have land use right (not private ownership). The households' production depends on their land, their production tools and their members. Thus, households are basic production units in rural areas.

media and in public spaces (Minh Thu 2016; Quỳnh Chi 2011). The livelihood strategies that the single mothers in our study adopt indicate their resilience at the same time with continued reference to normative family frameworks in evaluating their lives and future prospects.

The livelihood framework offers the scope for comprehensive consideration of single mothers' struggles for a good life. From the perspective of this framework (Bebbington 1999; Chambers and Conway 1991; DFID 1999), a good life is one that is free from poverty, resistant to vulnerability, and one in which people are able to maintain viable income and well-being. In what follows, we will analyze the ways in which single mothers carry out their livelihood strategies and their outcomes in the social and political context that defines the Vietnamese family today.

3 Research Site, Research Methods and Features of the Sample

This chapter is based on a field study in a half-hilly, half-plain rice-growing district in Nghe An province, from April 2015 to December 2016 and some follow-up interviews in 2020. The district has a natural area of 54,829 hectares, of which agricultural land is 22,817 hectares, forestry land is 20,788 hectares, non-agricultural land is 9,928 hectares, and unused land is 920 hectares.⁵ The population by 2014 was 284,204 people, and there are 30 communes with Catholic residents including communes with religious worship facilities (Catholic) with 37,804 people, accounting for 13.3% of the district's population. There are 10 churches and 9 parish priests.⁶

This district is also a district with a large number of single mothers currently living and working (994 single mothers in 2014).⁷ The district had a village in the name of Son (anonymous name) in which only single mothers lived in the past. This village was set up about 40 years ago after the end of the American War in 1975. Many women joining the army or working as youth volunteers on the front then returned home and was not able to marry suitable people. Many of the women's boyfriends had died in the war and they were "too late/old" to find other suitable men. The perception that these women were too late/old to marry was only the traditional perception because many were still young

5 Data from the Report on Socio-Economic Development in 2013 and in first quarter of 2014 of this district.

6 Data from the Report on Socio-Economic Development in 2013 and in first quarter of 2014 of this district.

7 The data come from the Vietnam Women's Unions of one commune in this district in 2014.

then. Wishing to have children, the women engaged in the practice of “asking for a child”, meaning getting pregnant with men who were their acquaintances. The strong stigma they experienced led 30 of these single mothers to leave their home village and settle down together in an area not far from their home village, and in doing so setting up their own village (Hồng Thắng 2011). At present, Son village is part of the district administrative system. Over time, married couples in the commune also came to build houses and settled down in the village. Since it was merged with another hamlet, the village now has nearly 300 households. Of the 30 single mothers who first settled in the village, eleven still live here; the others have followed their children to other regions, and several have died.⁸

This study employs a mix-methods design, combining long-term fieldwork with a questionnaire survey. During fieldwork, observation was conducted in conjunction with in-depth interviews with single mothers, focusing on their current lives and livelihood activities. In total, 31 in-depth interviews were conducted, 25 with single mothers, three with local officials, and three with family members of the women. The women selected for in-depth interviews are single mothers living and working in the district, differentiated by occupation, age, reasons for single motherhood, family structure, health status and social status. The in-depth interviews provided information on the social characteristics of single mothers and their livelihoods activities. The interviews also sought to understand how the women build their assets to develop their livelihoods. In 2020, 5 further interviews were conducted to collect additional data for this chapter.

In addition, we also conducted a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire consists of 45 questions focusing on different aspects of the social life and livelihoods of the single mothers. In terms of sampling, 16 communes in 38 communes and one town of this district were selected for the survey. The selected communes reflect a broad range of the natural, economic, social and cultural characteristics of the district. Specifically, these communes represent a group of communes with high, medium and low income per capita. These communes also represent the groups of plain and semi-mountainous rural communes. Altogether, 285 single mothers in 16 communes were interviewed (out of the total of 994 in the district).⁹ The survey team included students with

8 Mr. Chung in Son village, interview on 5 November 2020.

9 Catholicism is likely to shape people's perceptions of single-motherhood and how families treat their daughters who are single mothers. However, among 285 single mothers of the quantitative survey, there are only eight single mothers who are Catholics. The percentage (2.8 percent) is too small to compare Catholic single mothers with non-Catholic single mothers. In addition, none of the single mothers selected for in-depth interviews are Catholic. Thus, we just focus our discussion on non-Catholic single mothers.

sociological expertise, and the second author of the paper directly collected data and supervised the process in the field.

About the group of 285 single mothers that were surveyed, there are significant feature as follows. The average of age is 43.52 years old; the youngest is 20 years old; the oldest is 60 years old. About the number of children, 76.8 percent of the single mothers have one child per person; 22.5 percent of the single mothers have two children per person, and 0.7 percent of the single mothers have three children per person. Among 285 single mothers, 50.5 percent graduated secondary school; 25.3 percent graduated primary school; 16.1 percent graduated high school; 1.1 percent graduated university/college; 1.7 percent graduated vocational school. Thus, education levels of many single mothers of the sample are not high. About their occupations, 90.2 percent of this group follow agricultural production; and 82.1 percent consider agricultural production as their main job. The main jobs of 17.9 percent single mothers of the sample are small traders (4.9 percent), government employees (0.7 percent); workers (4.6 percent), teachers (1.4 percent), self/flexible/free-laborers (6.0 percent), housewives/laborers (0.35 percent). Thus, agricultural production is the main job of most single mother in this district. The survey result indicates six main reasons why this group of women became single mothers (Table 6.1). In the following sections, we will discuss how these gendered perceptions of singlehood are entangled with the women's gendered access to livelihood assets to shape their livelihoods outcomes.

Our quantitative survey shows that the average age of the single mothers is 43.52 years old, with the youngest being at 20 and the oldest at 60. The survey

TABLE 6.1 Main reasons for being single mothers

Reasons	Number of people	Percentage
Got pregnant but could not marry	80	28.1
Too poor to marry	77	27.0
Too old to marry	64	22.5
Could not find a suitable person	51	17.9
Wanted to live independently	40	14.0
Had disabilities, thus could not (have opportunities to) marry	33	11.6
Not good looking, thus could not (have opportunities to) marry	6	2.1

also shows that the shortest period of single motherhood is one year and the longest is 41 years and the average number of years as a single mother is 13.5 years. Therefore, the average age when a single mother becomes pregnant for the first time is 30.02 years old, which is relatively late for being pregnant for the first time according to local practices. Single mothers who are heads of households account for a very large proportion (84.2 percent) compared to those (15.8 percent) who are members of the household, namely those who, after giving birth, continue to live with their parents, or siblings. The majority of single mothers thus set up their own households rather than living with their parents, or brothers, sisters, with implications for familial support in terms of money and labour, a point we will take up later on in the paper.

4 Dealing with the Lack of Agricultural Land

According to the livelihood framework (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999), access to natural capital in terms of agricultural land in order to carry out livelihood in agricultural production is essential to achieve livelihood outcomes. Agricultural land is the most important livelihood asset of single mothers in this district because 90.2 percent of this group follow agricultural production; and 82.1 percent consider agricultural production as their main job. In addition, agricultural land is more important for single mothers than for other households because they are less able to mobilize support for childcare than married couples, who have parents and siblings from both sides to rely on; thus they could not migrate for wage work.

Overall, single mothers have two types of agricultural land, including garden and farmland. Garden land is the type of land surrounding houses or households. The key question here is the distribution of garden land in single mother households. Concerning this issue, the quantitative survey gives the following specific results. Firstly, 90.8 percent (259 households) are engaged in agricultural production. Among agricultural production households, only 79.1 percent (205 households) have garden land for cultivation. Secondly, the household has the smallest garden land area of 10m², the largest household garden land area is 3000 m², and the average garden land area of each household is 367 m². Thus, the area of garden land of each single mother household is not much; especially many single mothers as indicated above have no garden land.

Single mother households' limited land use right in terms of garden land use right can be explained by the fact that families tend to pass property down the

male line. Although the Civil Code in Vietnam confirm the equal right inheritance of daughters and sons (Quốc Hội 2015), the favoring of sons continues in practice. The case of Ms. Quy, a single mother, illustrates this impartiality. Ms. Quy has four older brothers. She gave birth to a child when she was 30 years old, an age that was considered neither too young nor old. After giving birth to a son in 2000, she lives with her son in a small house built in the garden of her parents' house. However, her oldest brother argued that the garden belongs to him as the oldest son of the family, not allowing her to cultivate anything in the garden. He prevented her from digging a well in the garden for daily use, and even showed a contemptuous disregard for her suggestion that she might dig the well (Ms Quy, interview on 23 October 2015). From the perspective of traditional customs and patrilineage kinship system (Đào Duy Anh 2000 [1938], Pham Van Bich 1997, Phạm Quốc Sử 2000), and the image of Happy Family (Phinney 2005),¹⁰ this story reflects two obstacles preventing single mothers to access and control the garden land. First, the traditional customs and patrilineage kinship system in which land/property was transferred along the male line prevented single mother's access to the garden land of their parents. Second, being a single mother, the woman faced stigma from her own siblings. The fact that Ms. Quy's brother prevented her from digging a well in the garden for daily use reflects the discrimination toward her. In everyday, siblings are expected to support each other when in need. However, in this case he did not support her and showed a contemptuous disregard to her because she is a single mother. In a conversation between the second author and Ms. Quy, the latter said: "No, I could not borrow even one thousand Vietnamese Dong from my brother... When I asked my brother to borrow some money, he refused, he sworn... chased me away". (Interview on 23 October 2015).

Households of single mothers have much less farmland than the average. There are two types of farmland that households including households of single mothers, cultivate. The first type of farmland is the farmland that households were allocated by the People's Committee of the communes under Decree 64 of 1993. According to this decree members of all households were allocated farmland areas equally. For this type of land, the local field survey

¹⁰ The interviewees do not mention directly the Happy Family Campaign. However, they seemed to internalize the spirit of the campaign. For example, the chairwoman of Women's Union in a commune said that: "Not only single mothers but also their children feel that it is an incomplete family. [If they] have both parents, they can enjoy a full happiness of a true family". (Ms. Ly, interview on 23 May 2016). Another interviewee, Ms. Van, a single mother born in 1972 said: "Being a single mother is not happy as a normal family. It is better to get married, but because my circumstance cannot take it". (Interview on 24 May 2016).

showed that 259 single mother households (90.9 percent) are cultivating on an allocated field.¹¹ The remaining women were not provided fields because they were born after 1993.

The survey results show that the allocated farmland area of single-mother households is as follows. Households currently cultivating the smallest land area own 180 m²; households currently cultivating the land with the largest area own 4500 m²; the average area that a single mother household is cultivating is 939 m². However, the households with large farmland areas are those in which single mothers live with their parents because the agricultural land of these households consists of land shares of the single mothers and other family members. As the interview with the chairwoman of Women's Union of a commune confirms, single mothers who do not live with their parents, have around 1 *sào* (500m²) to cultivate (interview on 10 May 2020).

We do not have the data on the average of land area a household with both husband and wife have for the sake of comparison. However, all individuals born before 1993 were allocated with an equal area of land. Thus, the single mother who does not live with her parents has only her own land share and the share of her child/children. Meanwhile, the single mother who lives with her parents (consisting of her parents, she, and her children/child, and maybe other relatives) might be able to cultivate the land shares of all household members.

To increase the area of agricultural land that they can cultivate, single mother households might rent or borrow land. In the three years up to the time of our survey, about 30 percent of those households did so. The rental area ranges between 150m² and 2170m², averaging 1017m². The land is usually rented from the public land of the commune, or relatives and neighbors.¹² However, a large proportion of the single mother households are not able to rent land to expand their production. The chairwoman of a commune's Women Union explained that most single mothers are not confident enough to rent agricultural public land from the commune, because they are afraid that they cannot cultivate the land effectively and become indebted to the commune (interview on 10 May 2020). Meanwhile, the commune authorities are often hesitant to rent agricultural land to the single mothers out of a belief that they are not likely to pay back the rental fees. The local authorities' mistrust in the productive

11 Fields were allocated according to Decree 64 in 1993 on the allocation of agricultural land to households and individuals for stable and long-term use for agricultural production. Individuals who were born after 1993 did not receive any allocation.

12 Compare the single mother's households with those of a husband and wife, the data from in-depth interviews in the field do not show any differences of price for renting land.

ability of the women clearly is rooted in misgivings about the incomplete family without the strength of the husband and father as a reliable collateral for the rental. The self-perception of the women and the evaluation of the local government might be mutually reinforcing in producing an unfavorable distribution of rental farmland.

Such constructions of single women as incompetent economic and contractual actor stem from the patriarchal notions of the family that emphasizes the economic and moral role of the husband in the family (Đào Duy Anh 2000[1938], Pham Van Bich 1997, Phạm Quốc Sử 2000). Moreover, the limited abilities in accessing additional land by single mothers's households also comes from the post-reform socio-economic changes that put the burdens of making a living on family members (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; Werner 2009). The single mothers' limited natural capital makes it difficult for them to achieve better income as part of their agriculture-based livelihoods. (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999)

5 Diversifying Finance and Income Sources under Constraint

Financial capital is one important asset to carry out livelihoods in order to achieve a good life (Bebbington 1999, DFID 1999). With growing costs of agricultural inputs and living costs, financial capital assumes much greater significance for household livelihoods in the new economy in which self-subsistence plays a bigger role than before. Our findings suggest that single mothers generally have to stretch the limited funds they can access to invest in their livelihoods activities. The average income of single mothers in our study is 1,842,000 VND/month (42 USD) compared to 2,166,666 VND/month (49 USD) in average local income (Mai Hoa 2015). This means that many have to borrow money in order to pay for daily expenses and invest in household economy production. Among 285 single mothers, 179 single mothers (62.0 percent) reported borrowing money and there are 258 loans recorded. The purposes of loans of single-parent women households are presented in Figure 6.1.

The chart suggests that most of the loans are used to cover everyday consumption and expenses. Borrowing for house construction is quite common in rural areas today. However, our observation show the poorer housing conditions among single mothers compared with married-couple households. The quantitative data from our survey show that 90.5 percent of the single mothers lived in grade 4 houses (a one-storey house with a roof; under 100 m²)¹³

13 Features of a grade 4 house: expected to last no more than thirty years; walls made of brick; low quality finishing materials; low living comfort.

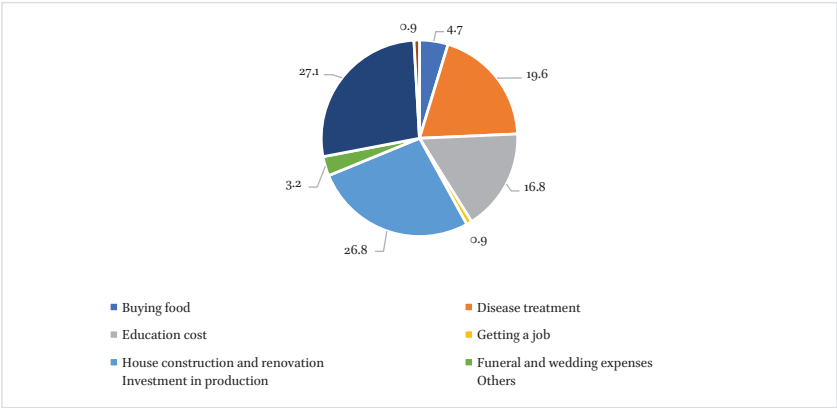


FIGURE 6.1 Purposes of loans of single-mother households

with near-poor or poor conditions. As such, the single mother’s houses were in greater need of rebuilding or upgrading.

The higher proportion of the consumption loans indicates high pressure on the single-mother household to prioritise immediate needs over longer-term investments in productive purposes. In comparison with married-couple households, the heavier burden of everyday consumption and expenses fall on the single mother’s household because of their lower income. The need to prioritise immediate consumption prevents livelihood activities that generate better income in the long term.

The sources of single mothers’ loans are highly diverse, encompassing formal and informal financial institutions and lenders, as indicated in Table 6.2.¹⁴ The table suggests that not many single mothers borrow from commercial banks because they do not have valuable properties as collateral. Moreover, not many single mothers borrow from Farmer Association Fund and Women’s Union Fund because these funds at communes are limited. Many instead borrow from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies and the poverty reduction program/fund. Poor households can borrow money from these institutions with no collateral and with low interest rate. However, in order to borrow the money from Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, the borrowers have to be selected by the mass organization at communal level. If the borrowers are women, they will be selected by the local Women’s Union depending on several criteria (Vietnam Bank for Social Policies No Date).¹⁵ Many single mothers, especially very poor

14 In the area where we did fieldwork, there were no NGO programs providing micro-credit schemes for single mothers.

15 The regulations surrounding borrowing money from the poverty reduction programme/fund are very much the same.

TABLE 6.2 Sources of loans for single mothers

Source of loan	Number of people	Percentage
Vietnam Bank for Social Policies	88	30,9
Commercial banks	12	4,2
Poverty reduction program/fund	24	8,4
Farmer Association Fund	6	2,1
Women's Union Fund	7	2,5
Relatives and friends	92	32,3
Private loan lender	28	9,8
Other sources	1	0,4

ones, were not selected to borrow money from this bank because the leaders of the local Women's Union and authorities were afraid that they can not make repayment. This practice reflects a mistrust in the single mothers as economic actors, a mistrust informed by the notion of a "happy family" as a stable unit of production. If the women cannot borrow money from this bank, they normally do so from their relatives and friends or even private lenders. As the table suggests, 32.3 percent of single mothers borrowed money from their relatives and friends. Meanwhile, 9.8 percent of single mothers borrowed money from private loan lenders. If they borrow money from private loan lenders, they will be charged high interest rate, which can be a burden on single mothers.

Single mothers experience further difficulties in obtaining loans. Apart from the difficulties in accessing certain lenders, some are hesitant to approach the lenders. According to the chairwoman of Women's Union in a commune, this is again due to their lack of confidence and a certain level of self-discrimination:

Single mothers have a sense of inferiority. They consider themselves as people with low social status. That has negative impact on their livelihoods. For example, they are not confident to borrow money because they are afraid of having to deal with the risks alone without husbands and not being able to repay their debt. For 'normal' households with husbands and wives they can borrow money to invest in trading or set up stores to have high income. For the group of single mothers, because they lack money, they mainly depend on growing rice, catching crabs in the rice field, and cutting *thysanolaena latifolia* (cây dốt) to produce traditional booms. With these livelihoods activities, their incomes are very low.

INTERVIEW ON 23 MAY 2016

What the Women Union cadre sees as self-discrimination is clearly in line with the prevalence of the prejudicial notion that a single mother cannot be trusted to be a reliable economic actor. In this logic, a husband seems the de-facto guarantee of the financial integrity of a household and without him the household is not likely to make sound investments and able to repay the loan. The mistrust seems not only based on the attribution to the presence of a husband as an indispensable economic actor in the household, but also as a moral guarantee for the repayment of the loan, as indicated by the following quote from Ms. Luan, a 41-year-old single mother:

I intended to follow the livelihood of small trading. However, I did not have money. I wanted to borrow money but the lenders refused. The lenders only let 'normal' households having husbands and wives to borrow money. Because I am alone, without a husband, I could not borrow money from private lenders. They were afraid that I could not pay the debt to them.

INTERVIEW ON 24 OCTOBER 2015

Thus, the obstacle for single mothers in obtaining the necessary loans seems to be rooted in the same mistrust towards their households as incomplete families that makes it difficult for them to rent agricultural land from the local government. The discrimination sometimes comes from their own families and neighbors, as illustrated by the case of Ms. Quy 44 years old in another commune. She told us that people around her, including her relatives and her neighbors despised her for being a single mother and being a poor person, which makes it hard for her to borrow money from them. One time, when her mother asked her older brother to let her borrow money, the brother not only refused but also cursed her loudly. She also intended to get a bank loan mortgage using the residential land on which her mother's house stands as mortgage (she and her son live with her mother in the latter's house). However, her older brother claimed that the land of their mother belongs to him as the son of the family (interview on 23 October 2015). As a result, she could borrow money neither from her relatives nor from the bank, as she describes:

No loans. Neither my mother nor my brother lent me money. [He said that]: 'If you die, our family is very happy'. If I die, he rejoices. When my mother asked my brother to lend money to me; my brother cursed and throw chairs.

INTERVIEW ON 23 OCTOBER 2015

This case indicates several layers of the structural disadvantage experienced by single mothers, including how the male dominated property regime works to prevent their access to the financial resources that are critical to their livelihoods activities. Despite the availability of social policy measures aimed at assisting disadvantaged groups such as the Bank for Social Policy, the single mothers are experiencing mechanisms of exclusion induced by the norms of the patriarchal family that continue to permeate social relations and public life.

Given their limited access to credits, the single mother households conduct a diverse array of productive activities apart from rice growing. A majority of these households engage in husbandry activities, including keeping buffaloes, pigs and chicken, although most have make-shift facilities. The poor breeding facilities impact negatively on the income they make from the animals. For example, Ms. Loan, 60 year-old single mother trades vegetables in the market, grows wet rice and breeds pigs and chicken. The three livelihoods activities combine to produce an average income per month of about one million VND (around 42 USD) (interview on 27 April 2016). The poor animal breeding facilities of single mothers result from them not having enough funds for investment and in comparison to other families with male adults, they have to build and maintain the facilities themselves. It is common for rural households in Vietnam that men build the sheds, sties and coops for keeping the animals. According to the chairwoman of Women's Union of a commune, the absence of an adult male in the family constitutes a major disadvantage in the work of diversifying household income:

Compared with households having both husbands and wives, the households of single mothers are disadvantaged in both social and economic domains. In the social domain, they are not confident, they feel self-pity (*tủi thân*). Regarding the household economy, they do not have husbands to build or repair breeding facilities. Without husbands, they have to hire someone to build or repair breeding facilities, which costs money and then they no longer have the money to buy young pigs or poultry to raise.

INTERVIEW ON 10 MAY 2020

In such statements, the multi-dimensional disadvantage that the single mothers experience boils down to the absence of a husband, a self-explanatory cause of their poverty and difficulties in developing their livelihoods. The explanation ignores the deeper structure of opportunities that punishes those who deviate from the norms of the patriarchal family and by extension, those of the "happy family" being promoted by the state. A woman not having a husband

thus might be grudgingly accepted by those around her, but the social and economic consequences of not having a husband on the life of a woman, it seems, are made to all too visible, and emphasized repeatedly, through the working of social, political and economic institutions that uphold such norms. In the same vein, the “self-pity” and “lack of confidence” attributed to the women are seen as the causes of their problem rather than the effects of prejudicial social discourses and practices. The fact that the women themselves also use these terms when talking about themselves indicate that they, as do the others, continue to refer to the normative gender norms that frame such discourses and practices.

6 Mobilizing Kinship Networks in the Face of Limited Human and Social Capital

According to the livelihood framework (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999), social capital and human capital are important for single mothers to carry out their livelihood. However, single mothers have limited access to these capitals. A quarter of the survey sample report poor health as the biggest difficulty for them in carrying out their livelihoods activities. The high incidence of poor health is strongly related to the lack of money to pay for health care and treatment, for many also the difficulty in obtaining loans to pay for health expenses. As Ms. Quy, a 44-year-old single mother revealed: “I have a lung disease and stomach disease. I would need to borrow money to pay for the treatment costs. However, I could not borrow any money, even from my relatives. Thus, I have to accept living with these diseases” (Interview on 23 October 2015). This practice also demonstrates a significant point related to health insurance policy. The Government provides free health insurance cards for poor households and near poor households. However, when people are hospitalized they have to pay for several kinds of services and medicines that are not covered by health insurance cards (Nguyen 2020). Thus, many single mothers are in poor health status. According to the survey, only 3.6 percent of the single mothers said that they are in good health; 50.2 percent of the single mothers self-evaluated that they are not in poor or good health; and 46.2 percent of single mothers are in poor health. Thus, human capital in terms of health of many single mothers is limited.

Health issues and the limited means to deal with them are related to the meagre social capital that these women have. Our survey results show that single mothers are less likely to participate in mass organizations, socio-political organizations, and social and professional organizations. The reason for this is

again to do with their experiences of being singled out for their marital status. An example is Ms. Loan, 60 years old in 2016, who only interacted with people in the cluster of households around her house. She does not participate in mass organizations, socio-political organizations, and social and professional organizations in her communes. She explained that she is very busy while at the same time feeling self-pity and lonely. She said that many people are not kind. In case of a contradiction between her and them, they will say something hurtful about her being a single mother. Many times she feels obliged to explain to people that she wishes to live in a 'normal' family with husband and wife, but because of her fate, she has to accept being a single mother (interview on 27 April 2016). She said:

They are people without a conscience. I told them: 'Because of my fate [I have to live miserably]. I also want to have a normal family like your family. I [don't] want to live miserably'.

INTERVIEW ON 27 APRIL 2016

As such, the punishment of their deviation from the norms of the patriarchal family works subtly. Despite the women's insistence that their adopted family form is not a willing choice, they are still seen as culpable for their failing to conform to the norms (Ms Loan, interview on 27 April 2016). The women's resulting lack of participation in local organizations and groupings, however, have real consequences for their livelihoods. In particular, it leads to their limited access to the wider network of support during periods of ill health or when there is a greater need for labor, for example during transplanting or harvesting time.

Being quasi-excluded from the wider community network of support, most single mothers rely on kinship networks and neighbors for support in carrying out their livelihoods activities, be it in terms of money or labor. In terms of financial support, their siblings help them the most (28.8 percent), followed by other relatives (19.2 percent), and parents (18.5 percent). Within terms of labor support, siblings also help them the most (41.9 percent), followed by their parents (19.6 percent), and other relatives (17.8 percent) and neighbors (12.3 percent). In short, the social capital of the single mothers is largely confined to the relationships they have within their parental families and immediate neighborhood.

Clearly, certain single mothers receive support from their relatives and other do not, even suffering from discrimination by their own relatives. This seems to depend on how they became single mothers. This is demonstrated through the case of Ms. Quý (interview on 18 June 2015). Quý's father died at

a very young age. Her mother alone had to raise five children on her own. In order to share burden with her mother, she delayed marrying in order to toil to earn her family's living and look after her siblings. Thus, at more than 30 years old she was still single, which was considered too late to marry around 20 years ago. At the age of 32, she "asked for a child" from a man so that the child will look after her when she is old. She said she does not suffer the social stigma of being a single mother because her single motherhood was due to her sacrifices for her family. Her relatives and neighbors support her when she faces difficulties in everyday life. While her livelihoods are difficult, she is in a slighter better situations than the others.

The case of Ms Liên, twenty-five years old in 2016, stands in contrast to Ms Quý's (interview on 13 July 2016). When she got pregnant, her boyfriend refused to marry her, and she decided to keep the child. She said that when she became pregnant, neighbors gossiped about her and showed contempt for her pregnancy. She just ignored and let them say whatever they wanted until they felt bored, she said. Ms. Liên thus suffers a greater degree of discrimination and social stigma than Ms. Quý and does not receive as much support from her relatives for carrying out her livelihood. In short, the social valuation of single motherhood, while generally demeaning, also depends on the contribution of the woman to her family's wellbeing, much in the same way that women's contributions to the war and socialist building had led to the legal recognition of their desire to have children.

7 Livelihoods Outcomes and Obstacles to a Good Life

Having discussed how single mothers make use of their limited livelihood assets to carry out their livelihood, we now return to the notion of a good life according to the livelihood framework (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999). We will assess the livelihoods outcomes of single mothers along the lines of income and living standard, vulnerability and wellbeing.

The first dimension is income. The average monthly income of single mother in the study area is 1,842,000 VND/month (around 78 USD), compared to the local average income of 2,166,666 VND/month in the district (Mai Hoa 2015).¹⁶ Almost half of these households are formally classified as poor (35.8 percent)

¹⁶ According to Decision No. 59/2015/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister on 19 November 2015, poor households in rural areas are those with per capita income per month is 700,000 VND or less; near-poor households in rural areas are those with per capita income per month ranges from 700,000 VND to 1,000,000 VND.

or near-poor (12.3 percent). Compared to the district's poverty rate of 6.29 percent in 2015,¹⁷ the incidence of poverty among single-mother households is disproportionately high. The self-assessment of living standards by the single mothers indicates a strong perception of their families as living in poverty. Specifically, 64.2 percent of single mothers rate their households as poor, 22.8 percent say that their households are near-poor. Just over one tenth think that their household is in the middle rank, and very few (0.7 percent) think that their living standards are high. Thus, many single mothers could not achieve a good life in terms of a good income and lifting themselves out of poverty. Our quantitative survey shows that 90.5 percent of single mothers have a grade 4 house. The proportion of single mothers with permanent or good houses stands at 4.6 percent; 9.9 percent of single mothers live in temporary houses and 0.7 percent live in rented houses. The survey results also show that most single mothers' households do not have common living facilities. Only 25.6 percent of them own motorbikes, the most common means of transport while 35.4 percent of the households do not have televisions and 12.9 percent of households do not have rice cookers, household goods that have almost become basic necessities in Vietnam today.

The second dimension is their relationship to vulnerability and general well-being. Following the livelihoods framework, the level of wealth accumulation, especially that of financial capital and the degree of job stability are crucial for sustainable livelihoods that reflects well-being and reduced vulnerability. Our informants score relatively low on both counts. Only 12.9 percent of them have some savings, while a large proportion of single mothers (62.8 percent) are indebted. The high percentage of single mothers indebted reflects high degree of vulnerability to single mothers when they face uncertainties in their everyday life such as sickness or unemployment or natural hazard. In addition, a large proportion of single mothers occasionally or rarely have paid jobs. Among 285 single mother there are 132 people having paid jobs. Among the group of 132 single mothers having paid jobs the percentage of single mothers who have paid jobs frequently is low. For example, only 10.0 percent of brick-layer's assistants and 14.3 percent employees of cottage industry households have paid jobs frequently. This low degree of job stability of many single mothers reflects that not many single mothers could achieve a good life in terms of well-being and reduced vulnerability.

The final point concerns the future of the children in these households. The low level of education, the low income, the low degree of job stability, and

17 Data from the Summary Report on the Implementation of Socio-Economic Development Objectives in 2015; Objectives and Solutions for the district in 2016.

the poor health of single mothers as presented above could be obstacles to the education of their children. Our observations show that children of single mothers generally are not able to achieve have high levels of education, which is essential to securing good employment. In some rare cases, single mothers' children can pursue higher education. However, in order to support their children's pursuit of higher education, the single mothers can become indebted heavily, and those who do worry about the burden of the debt. Even when higher education is possible, often with great sacrifices on the part of the mothers, it remains uncertain whether good employment will eventually result. Ms. Loan, 60 years old in 2016, has a daughter who is a second year student of University. Her income is only around 50,000 VND per day from selling vegetable at small scale and she has 500 kg of rice per crop from growing rice. Each university semester, she has to borrow 5,000,000 VND to pay tuition fee for her daughter. In addition, every month, she gives her daughter 1,200,000 VND to cover living expenses. Besides, every month her daughters takes rice from home to cook. She said that when her daughter had just entered the university she was very worried because the education cost a lot of money. However, when her daughter was in the second year of the university she was calm again. She is proud of her daughter because many children of her neighbors could not attend university. She believes that the life of her daughter will be better. However, this is an uncertain prospect because a university education no longer necessarily leads to stable and good incomes nowadays – many university graduates have to hide their degree certificates to apply for jobs as factory workers. At the same time, the household has significant debts to pay back in the years to come.

In most cases, the women's decision become single mothers despite all the stigma is driven by the desire to have a family and the concern with having children to care for them in old age. This desire is that which drives them in their struggles for a viable life within the limits of their circumstances. Their hopes for the future are invested in the children, and yet there is much uncertainty in how well the children are able to meet these expectations because they seem to inherit much of the social constraints that their mothers face.

8 Conclusion

With their limited capitals, livelihood assets, single mothers implement a variety of livelihood strategies to increase income and improve their lives. Within the social and economic constraints of their marital status, they have sought to increase the area of agricultural land, diversify the sources of their

loans, and rely on family and kinship networks in the organization of household production. Despite all their efforts, they are able only to access low-paid non-farm jobs and generally have low incomes. A disproportionate number of them remain poor, both according to formal criteria and self-evaluation. Thus, for many single mothers, there is a gap between the current life and the good life in terms of good income and lifting out of poverty, increased well-being and reduced vulnerability. This indicates that social welfare policies for single mothers must address the structural causes of their vulnerability and poverty.

Our analysis suggests that the undesirable livelihood outcomes of single-mother households are the effect of a discriminatory structure of opportunities that punishes them for deviating from the norms of the patriarchal family and by extension of the 'Happy Family' promoted by the state. Even as they are now recognized by law, their households continue to be faulted through the workings of local social and economic institutions, such as family property or credit provision, for the absence of a male adult. This takes place even through institutions that are supposed to improve the lives of disadvantaged people such as they are, not least the Women Union. The account of their livelihoods struggles indicate the enduring power of the patriarchal norms that permeate family, community and state institutions to shape people's gendered behavior as far as family making is concerned. As we have seen, the single mothers are made to be consistently aware of their marital status as a social deficiency and an economic obstacle, and they keep referring to married life as the ideal of family life. As such, the space that women are allowed to make their own family without men is heavily circumscribed, even as it goes some way in addressing their needs. The Vietnam state has had to allow them such space because of their historical and social claims and because of its delegation of reproductive and care responsibilities to the family in the new economy. Without their children, the women are likely to put their claims on state care in their old age. Their supposed "deviation", however, must be kept well in check through a combination of punitive social and economic measures; the "deviation" should remain a deviation for the sake of the "normal" family and the nation.

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Rural Schooling and a Good Life in Late Socialist Laos: Articulations, Sketches and Moments of Good Time

Roy Huijsmans and Mr Piti

Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research in northern Laos, this chapter analyses articulations of a good life in primary school textbook imagery and how this resonates with everyday life in rural upland communities. This is contrasted with children's sketches of a good life found in the classrooms and ethnographic accounts of moments of 'good time' in the context of rural schooling. It is argued that these latter moments constitute brief instances of a good life in the present. Given the hierarchical power relations in which rural education is embedded, not all of these good times stay good for very long. This is reflective of the condition of late socialism in rural Laos.

Keywords

Laos – good life – children – school – textbooks – rural – ethnography

The social condition of late socialism in East and Southeast Asia is shaped by several intersecting transformations. In the case of Laos, these transformations are perhaps most visible in rural areas and include large-scale infrastructural projects such as the China–Laos railway project (Suhardiman et al. 2021), hydro-power projects (Blake and Barney 2018), land concessions and land closure for environmental protection (Baird 2011; Ducourtieux, Laffort, and Silinthone Sacklokham 2005) and village relocation and resettlement (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). These developments are all centrally planned in a one-party Leninist political system that leaves very little space for dissent. While 'authoritarian rule' thus characterises Lao state power and authority, so does the descriptor of 'weak state capacity' (Creak and Barney 2018: 693–4). This leaves an empirical question: how, precisely, do these large-scale developments pan out in specific local contexts within Laos? While the booms

and busts of transnational capital are increasingly marking Laos' physical and social landscape, the phrase 'late socialism' used in this chapter serves to emphasise that this has not led to any significant changes in the political system and associated set of ideas.

Since notions of the good life are part of a system of ideas (Appadurai 2004: 67), the condition of late socialism is particularly fertile ground for furthering debates on the good life because, in late socialism, systems of ideas have become manifold and are in a constant state of flux. Furthermore, the Lao paradox of authoritarian rule exercised through a state system with a relatively weak capacity (Creak and Barney 2018) raises questions about how state-sanctioned articulations of the good life actually reach the populace in remote, rural locations, but also emphasises the importance of going beyond state-centric analyses. With regard to the latter, we make a case for attending to situated practices or, more specifically, practices through which moments of good time unfold. It is shown that these instances of good life in the present may not stay essentially good, or at least not necessarily for all involved. This way, it is argued, those involved come to experience the contradictions of late socialism in Laos in a highly situated and intimate manner.

Empirically, this argument is developed on the basis of research on rural schooling in northern upland Laos. Compared to the transformations listed above, in the Lao context education has attracted much less critical scholarship. Yet the expansion and intensification of basic education that can be observed across rural Laos has certainly not been any less impactful. Moreover, the location of schooling on the intersection of state and society renders it a space in which various ideas of a good life are articulated, reworked, negotiated and possibly resisted (Dungey and Ansell 2022; Morarji 2016).

A focus on the productive function of rural schooling does not seek to deny the many problems that continue to characterise rural schooling in much of the Global South. This includes poor learning outcomes (Nag, Snowling, and Asfaha 2016), meagre infrastructure, difficulties in realising quality teaching and attracting qualified teachers (Mulkeen and Chen 2008), its poor fit with rural life (Ansell et al. 2020), and the politics of language of instruction (Christie 2015). Indeed, these issues can easily be identified in rural Laos too (e.g. UNICEF and MoES 2015). Yet that does not take away from the fact that in present-day, rural, remote Laos a primary school¹ is easily found, there will be a teacher representing the modern ideal of uniformed, educated, salaried employment (but who is probably also involved in commercial activities

1 Admittedly, these may be 'incomplete' schools that do not offer the full (five grades) primary education cycle.

besides her/his teaching job) and most children receive a few years of education during which they are exposed to state-sanctioned ideas of a good life. All this was far from the norm among the parents of today's students (see also Gerber and Huijsmans 2016). In addition, more so than a generation ago, in remote, rural Laos children bring to the school alternative ideas of a good life which have reached them, for example, through migrating peers and digital media (Huijsmans and Trần 2015; Huijsmans 2019a).

In the next section, we ground the chapter is theoretically, followed by a description of the methodology used. Next, we present our empirical material comprising an analysis of articulations of a good life made through textbook imagery as well as ideas of a good life transpiring from children's creative expressions found in schools. This is complemented with an analysis of ethnographic descriptions of moments of good time observed during our school-based ethnography in upland northern Laos. We conclude by relating our findings to the conditions of late socialism.

1 Schools and a Good Life: Philosophies, Articulations, Sketches and Practices

Education features centrally in ideas of a good life and does so at different scales. At a global scale, international development agendas have long embraced education as a key ingredient for realising better lives. For example, the now expired Millennium Development Goal 2 and the current Sustainable Development Goal 4 are squarely about education. Despite the widespread consensus on the importance of education there are, however, notable differences in how, precisely, it relates to a good life. For example, for Sen, education is intrinsic to a good life (Sen 1999). Sen's capability approach is underpinned by a liberal idea of the good life. From this philosophical position, realising a good life is about maximising the range of choices one has reason to value. Education, thus, is key to his idea of 'development as freedom' (Sen 1999). Education may also be seen as instrumental to realising a good life. This is most notably the case in relation to human capital theory, another key paradigm in development thinking, especially in connection with education and young people (World Bank 2006; White 2021). The logic of human capital theory posits that education increases productivity and competitiveness. At an individual level this means that the human capital acquired through education enhances one's employability. The status conferred by being in successful self- or salaried employment might be a form of good life in and of itself, but the link to a

good life may also be realised through the income resulting from this and the consumption and associated lifestyle it permits.

These globalised philosophies of a good life inform many an education system. In addition, education systems may also reflect more regionally rooted ideas of a good life. The notion of *buen vivir/vivir bien* (literally: 'good living' or 'living well') is the case in point. It refers to various understandings of good living originating from indigenous peoples of the Andes revolving around core concepts including 'nature, community, labour and *Ayllu*, consensus and democracy, spirituality', and key principles such as 'reciprocity, complementarity and relationality' (Villalba 2013: 1439). The educational reforms implemented under the Morales administration in Bolivia, for example, reflect the notion of *vivir bien* (Lopes Cardozo 2012: 759–60). More commonly, though, state-provided mass-schooling reflects more national(ist) ideas of a good life (Lall and Vickers 2009). This is evident from the content of the curriculum, teaching aids, the decoration of the classroom, as well as from various national rituals that are often part and parcel of everyday school life (Moser 2016; Benwell 2014; Cheney 2007; Evans 1998). Finally, education is not just filled with global-, regional- and national-level notions of a good life, it also features in poor people's own imagination of a good life. For example, for adults and children alike education continues to constitute a beacon of hope through which they seek to realise a better life (Dungey and Ansell 2022; Jakimow 2016; Kaland 2021).

The various relations between education and a good life inform how education, in the form of schooling, is organised as an institution as well as the concrete forms it takes in practice. Since the provisioning of education is a national affair, state-sanctioned ideas of a good life are typically most easily observed and most fully expressed. Therefore, these are referred to here as 'articulations'. Yet the state does not determine what happens in the classroom: there are teachers and students too. Our data show that students are not just the targets of the intervention of compulsory mass-schooling: they also use the space of the school for their own practices of future-making. This may not amount to a coherent account of a good life on par with the state-sanctioned 'articulations'. Rather, these are rough drafts found in the margins of the classroom and referred to here as 'sketches of a good life'.

The above two future-making dimensions of schooling we juxtapose with a focus on the school as a site of practice. The latter shifts attention to activities unfolding in the present, which we discuss in relation to Berlant's (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. In this book, she theorises about practices one chooses to engage in because they bring one closer to something one longs for, be it upward social

mobility or recognition. Yet she argues that one's very attachment to such practices can be cruel because they often do not help one in actually getting there, or may even get in the way. Although Berlant writes from a US perspective and bases her argument on a critical reading of cultural material produced in the West, we would suggest her work is good to think with in relation to rural schooling in the Global South too. In Berlant's terms, children's everyday school attendance can be understood as an optimistic attachment. Rural children and their parents attach themselves to the idea that schooling can bring them 'closer to satisfying something' (Berlant 2011: 1–2) that they cannot realise on their own (see also: Jakimow 2016).

Berlant's work also helps in theorising the spatial dimension of rural schools as sites of practice of a good life. In remote rural settings, schools are a place of distinction in a number of ways. Often, rural schools are the only constantly present and visible mark of the state. In addition, school life contrasts with village life on a number of accounts including its temporal organisation (the role of clock time), its generational structure (age-graded classroom organisation and teacher–student relations), in an embodied manner (e.g. school uniforms and other forms of bodily disciplining such as hairstyles, footwear, clean nails, etc.) and in relation to the nature of work (non-manual work, and teachers in salaried employment). For its main actors, children and teachers, mere participation in the everyday practice of school *already* constitutes a break with village life at large and an engagement with a good life. For students, involving oneself in various school activities holds the promise that this other and better life can be sustained more permanently. The uniformed teachers with their salaried positions and completed education are the living examples of this. On this basis, everyday school attendance can be conceptualised as 'nearness' to a something that 'will help you or a world to become different in just the right way' (Berlant 2011: 2).

These theoretical premises led us to zoom in on moments of 'good time' that we observed unfolding as part and parcel of schooling as everyday practice. These are moments in which life was experienced as good, and thus constitute instances of good life in the present. But as it goes, not all good moments stay good or are inherently good. As we go on to argue, these moments can easily become cruel as people become aware of the limitation of their possibilities within the social system of which they are a part, precisely in instances of good time when the contours of social divisions appear to have given way.

There is also a generational argument for looking at school-based practices taking place in the present. After all, for students, teachers provide a glimpse into what the future, and by implication a future good life, might look like. So even if children themselves observe these moments of good time only from a

distance, from their perspectives these can be read as concrete manifestation of a possible future good life, including its cruel footnotes.

2 Methodology and Context

The data presented in this chapter were collected as part of an ESRC-DFID funded project. As with all international research conducted in Laos, the research was a collaborative exercise. For this, we partnered with the Laos office of PLAN International, whose activities were demarcated through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports. This effectively rendered the Lao Ministry of Education our Lao research partner. Because of this set up, we had little control over the choice of study sites and we ended up conducting the research in two target villages for an early childhood education programme run by PLAN International in a northern Lao province. Throughout, our research was carefully monitored by district level officials of the Ministry of Education (the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB)).

The two study villages are referred to using the pseudonyms Baan Nyai, for the larger village (nearly 140 households), and Baan Noi, for the smaller village (nearly 70 households). Baan Noi has a majority ethnic Hmong population and Baan Nyai a majority ethnic Khmu population, both complemented by residents of various other ethnic groups (e.g. Lao and Lue).² At the time of study, Baan Noi had a full primary school (five years), a few household-based shops and some other facilities. Baan Nyai had a full primary school, a partial secondary school that would grow into a full secondary school (seven years) in the near future, and more and larger shops.

The two villages are rural sites, but their degree of remoteness is relative. Both villages can be reached by car and motorbike virtually throughout the year. Depending on the season this takes a two- to four-hour drive from the district centre. Their location on the road network renders these villages less remote than many others in rural Laos, where access may be by foot and/or small boat only. Further, over the course of the research the remoteness of the research setting changed substantially. The district in which the villages are located was part of the Lao-China railway project (Suhardiman et al. 2021).

² Consistent with the national slogan of 'the multi-ethnic Lao people' (see below), the government of Laos refrains from using the phrase 'ethnic minority/ies' and instead uses the term 'ethnic group' (*son phao*). This phrase is used here too, although our analysis problematises the idea that these ethnic groups are indeed all equal in relation to the politics of representation.

This mattered in the following ways, at the onset of the fieldwork in 2017 the presence of Chinese engineers was noticeably in the district centre, and by the end of the project (early 2018) Baan Nyai had become home to a sizeable labour camp providing accommodation to about 100 Chinese construction workers (mostly men) working on the Lao–China railway project. The presence of these Chinese labourers not only affected social life in the village: the works also transformed the infrastructure beyond the railway. For example, the road running from the district centre to Baan Nyai was upgraded significantly in order to allow the passing through of heavy machinery. At a more micro-level scale, the pétanque court in front of the teachers' houses was upgraded noticeably by using cement blocks discharged by the Chinese workers to demarcate the court, and some young men had found casual employment as drivers for the Chinese railway project, while children and young people made some money by selling chickens and vegetables to the labourers.

Per the requirements of the Laos-based partner organisation hosting the research (Plan International Laos), the bulk of the data collection was conducted by a Lao national researcher who uses the pseudonym Piti. Mr Piti visited the two study villages regularly between January 2017 and August 2017, complemented with a few additional project visits thereafter (the last one in March 2018). The fieldwork took the form of village stays during which Mr Piti used a range of methods, including participatory research activities with children (e.g. drawing, role play, etc.), qualitative interviews with children and young people as well as adult villagers, a household survey and classroom-based observations. The first author accompanied Mr Piti on some of these research trips. With a few exceptions, Mr Piti was always accompanied by a DESB official. This was formally explained as necessary for protecting his security, but more plausibly it was to enable the Lao state to keep a close eye on this foreign-funded research project conducted in an upland area populated by mostly non-Lao ethnic groups (Creak and Barney 2018: 696). The advantage of this arrangement was that we were in a privileged position to observe the working of state–society relations at this very local level and across the various social divides in which these are embedded (Singh 2014).

This chapter draws on an analysis of the visuals in Lao primary school textbooks and village- and school-based ethnography. The accounts of 'good time' presented are drawn from our ethnographic fieldnotes and children's sketches of a good life were collected during our classroom-based observations. The idea of schools as sites in which state-sanctioned ideas of a good life are articulated is developed on the basis of a textbook analysis. Compared to teacher guides which are consulted only rarely and selectively, let alone followed, the ideas presented through textbooks reach most students and do so in a fairly unmediated manner.

2.1 *A Note on Textbooks*

In the rural Lao context most students have access to their own set of textbooks which they are allowed to carry home. For students in the poorest districts (and the two study villages are located in one such district) access to textbooks is free of charge.³ International development actors have funded textbook development projects, making textbook shortages, at least at primary school level, a thing of the past. For international development actors, funding textbook production (and revisions) is attractive because it constitutes a clearly demarcated intervention with tangible deliverables. The problem of textbook shortages has also lessened because of curricular reforms that have led to the bundling of subjects, reducing the number of textbooks children use at primary school level. In addition, the cost of printing and distribution of textbooks has dropped. An additional argument for focusing on textbooks is that, because of global, and donor-embraced, shifts in pedagogical approaches, primary school textbooks have become less text-heavy and increasingly feature colour-printed images of reasonable to good quality. This means that even if primary education systems do not succeed in equipping (rural) students with basic literacy and numeracy skills, as is indeed often the case in rural Laos (UNICEF and MoES 2015), students are still exposed to the articulations of a good life conveyed through primary school textbook imagery.

The illustrations in the Lao textbooks are produced by artists linked to the School of Lao Fine Arts. In line with Koshcheeva's analysis (2020: 33) of the Lao arts, the artwork included in school textbooks must be appreciated 'as a product of the alignment between artists and the authoritarian state' and fits within the genre of neo-traditional arts promoted by the Lao state. An interview with one of the artists working on textbook illustrations showed that artists are well aware of the conventions within which they are expected to work when producing such illustrations. When talking about his work, this relatively young Vientiane-based artist explained he had taken over the task of drawing textbook images from a senior colleague at the School of Lao Fine Arts. He showed us around in his studio where he was experimenting with various art forms. When we asked why he did not use any of this for his work on textbooks, he explained that if he were to depart from the established convention his work would simply not be approved by the Lao government office in charge of textbook production.

This chapter focuses on the textbook series combining the subjects 'Moral Education' and 'The World Around Us' of the full primary school cycle (Primary

3 Students effectively borrow the textbooks and return them at the end of the school year.

1 through to Primary 5). The imagery in this textbook series represents the Lao state's articulation of a good life. Yet this leaves open the question of how children understand these images. Bayly's research (2020) on images and moral citizens with adults in Hanoi, Vietnam, sheds light on why it is so difficult to get to people's own understanding of state-produced images in contexts of late socialism – especially those used in school textbooks. According to Bayly (2020: 1582), for her Hanoian respondents to admit that one is not clear about the meaning of lessons or images in moral education textbooks, or to point out any contradictions or alternative interpretations, is neither valued nor regarded as 'a sign of cleverness'. Rather, it means the individual is at fault in the sense of 'I've failed to prepare properly and can't work out what I should have seen' (ibid 2020: 1583). Therefore, in classroom spaces where the emphasis is on 'getting it right', 'silence is a choice: a best option and an agentive one' (Bayly 2020: 1582). Bayly's insights from Vietnam were reflected in our work with children in rural Laos. Seeking to overcome the problem of 'getting it right', we have experimented with creative and participatory methods including drawing activities, role play and having children design their own timetable. The participating students seemed to enjoy these alternative forms of classroom work but struggled to express themselves more openly. For example, the timetables designed by children themselves largely reflected their regular timetable and the role plays they enacted were fairly realistic reflections of everyday school life. In spite of this, careful observation of the classroom environment did yield some evidence of children imaging alternative ideas of a good life which are discussed after the following section.

3 Textbook Imagery: A Good Life Articulated

When analysing representations of a good life featured in primary school textbooks, it is important to acknowledge that textbooks are typically written from the centre. As such, the texts, illustrations and exercises are often urban or even capital-city centric. With that in mind, Lao primary school textbooks stand out because a conscious effort appears to have been made to be inclusive of rural life too.

Laos can be described as a 'development context', which in the words of Jakimow (2016: 11) is a locale that is 'thick with the discourses, practices and institutions of international development'. The inclusiveness of rural life in primary school textbooks presents a subtle nuancing to dominant development discourse in Laos, which is urban-centric and revolves around the idea of prosperity (*chaleun*) and progress (*khaonaa*) (Singh 2014). The inclusion of

rural scenes in primary school textbooks is no doubt also influenced by the neo-traditional arts genre promoted by the Lao state. Still, the very inclusion of images of rural life is no small matter. It conveys the important message that a good life can be a rural life too. This counters the dominant development narrative which renders rural spaces as backward and in need of development (Rigg 2005: 83; Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021).

However, taking a closer look at the particularities of representation this general statement requires some nuancing. Koshcheeva (2020: 58) observes, about Lao neo-traditional arts, that 'it is not an accurate depiction of the country's condition or events that the artwork presents but rather a dream of rural romance – happy people with a rich and authentic culture, immersed in the perpetual performance of tradition'. An illustration and accompanying exercise in the 'World Around Us' part of the Primary 1 textbook is representative of the way a rural good life appears throughout the textbook series (RIES 2013: 61). The picture is a colour image, drawn in a realistic style (see Figure 7.1). The caption above the drawing asks the students 'What do you see in this picture?' (*nakhian hen nyang dae nai houpnii?*). What is depicted is a rural scene with untouched, unpopulated, green hills in the background. There are rice paddies in the plains in front of the hills, and adjacent to this there is a tidily organised village consisting of clusters of houses separated by neatly maintained dirt roads, with some coconut and other trees here and there. The houses in the village are traditional lowland Lao houses, built on wooden stilts, with walls of plaited bamboo mats and grass-thatched roofs. There are four concrete buildings in the image: an impressive (relative to the village) Buddhist temple, a primary school with a flagpole in the centre of the fenced school grounds flying the Lao national flag, a health centre and one more concrete building, which is most likely the village office (*hong kaan baan*). There are children in the school grounds, itinerant vendors on the main road running through the village and a farmer with a buffalo.

This description highlights some important qualifications about the way in which a rural good life is depicted in Lao textbooks. First, what is represented is a lowland, Buddhist, ethnic Lao version of rural life. Second, the textbook representations must also be recognised as a romanticised rural idyll, which stands in friction with the more material aspirations of a good life documented in ethnographic studies of rural Laos (High 2014; Stolz 2019).

The bias towards lowland rural scenes in textbooks means in the good life that is proposed hills and mountain slopes feature at best as a background to the good life, and at worst as sites that are a danger to it. With regard to the latter, the few textbook images which show that hillsides are inhabited and used productively (e.g. trees are cut, land is cleared by using fire, wildlife is

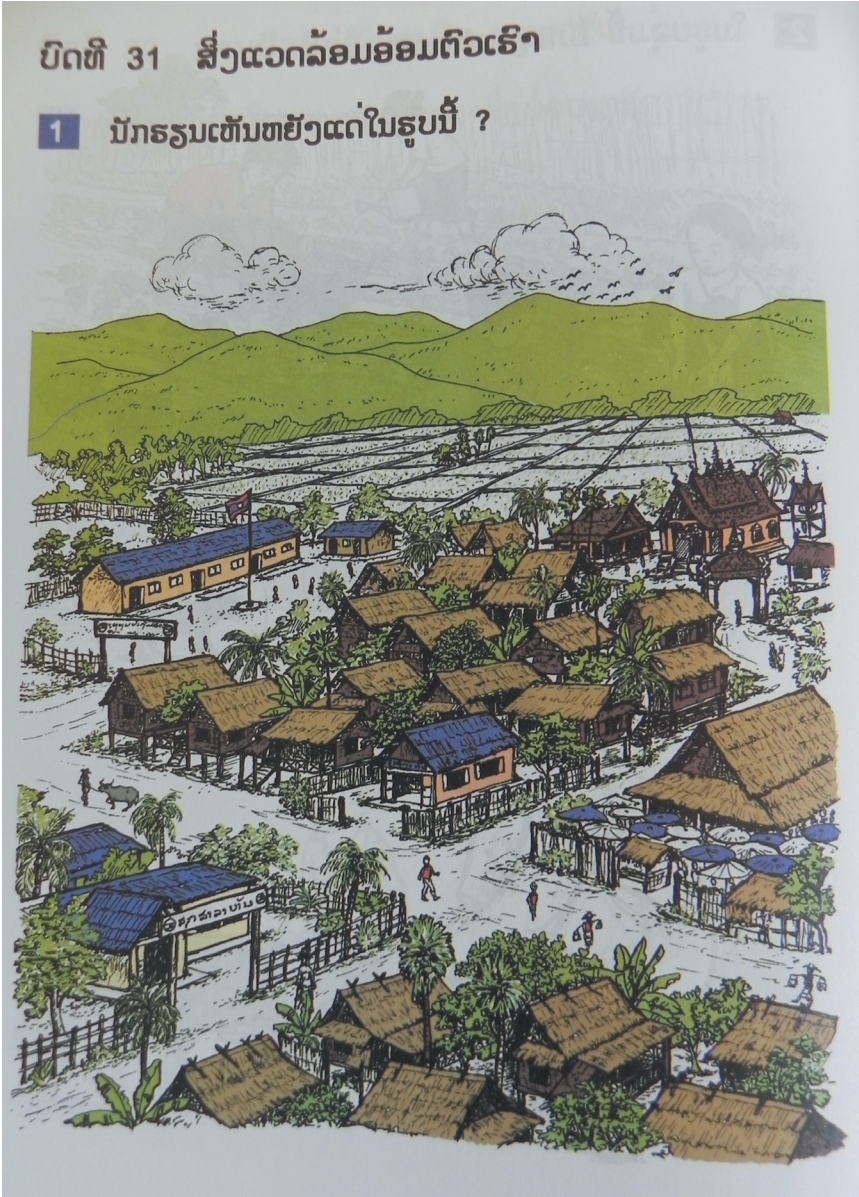


FIGURE 7.1 Representation of rurality in Lao primary school textbook.

hunted) are without exception used in lessons about harmful practices, detrimental to a good life because they destroy the environment (e.g. RIES 2015b: 95, 150; 2016: 213; 2015a: 103). Since shifting cultivation was practised by most of the parents of the children in the study, these children are caught between

different systems of ideas and related versions of a good life: the one that is articulated in textbooks and the one that sustains their families. Problematically, while textbooks ask children to reflect on the various problems attributed to shifting cultivation (their parents' economic mainstay), these textbooks do not propose or stimulate any alternative suggestions of a rural good life that is positively inclusive of upland rural spaces.⁴

The representation of Lao rurality intersects with an ethnic dimension because in Laos the hills and mountainsides are mostly populated by various ethnic groups other than the Lao. Again, Lao textbooks must be complimented for incorporating a degree of ethnic inclusion, but also here it is a partial inclusion. This is best illustrated by an image of an ethnic Hmong family in the 'Moral Education' section of the Primary 1 textbook (RIES 2013: 11). The father and mother are enjoying time with their daughter, who is playing on a swing (Figure 7.2). The houses in the background are indeed drawn in a way that is representative of how Hmong houses in rural villages often look (compare with the houses on stilts in Figure 7.1 representing traditional ethnic Lao architecture). Yet here too the mountain slopes are a green, untouched background. This mutes the economic mainstay of many Hmong families and other ethnic groups (e.g. Suksavang Simana 2003) residing in upland Laos: shifting cultivation. Therefore, the ethnic inclusion demonstrated in Lao textbooks appears shaped more by an interplay between the politics of ethnic representation in Laos (Pholsena 2002) and the government of Laos' development policies that seek to halt shifting cultivation through encouraging permanent forms of agriculture and establishing protected forests (Vongvisouk et al. 2014: 2), and much less by an accurate representation of livelihoods practised by ethnic groups in upland areas. Similarly, the fact that in the 'Moral Education' part of the textbook series fifteen of the twenty-seven images clearly featuring people from ethnic groups other than the ethnic Lao also include ethnic Lao people reflects the state's desire to foster 'ethnic solidarity' captured by the slogan *pasason Lao banda phao* ('the multi-ethnic Lao people') (Tappe 2007: 98).⁵ This national slogan is best illustrated by the image of three girls studying together that appears in the 'Moral Education' section of the Primary 4 textbook

4 The possible exception is images of children belonging to ethnic groups other than Lao engaged in tree-planting activities in upland areas (e.g. RIES 2015b: 46). Such representation amounts to a 'limited legitimacy' of upland communities (as protectors of the natural environment) which delimits the claims they can make to a larger share of the natural resources (Walker 2001).

5 The Moral Education parts of the textbooks included a total of 329 images across the five years. The share of images clearly including representations of people of ethnic groups other than Lao ranged from 8 to 14 per cent across the five years.



FIGURE 7.2 Ethnic inclusion in Lao primary school textbooks.

(see Figure 7.3). The image accompanies a lesson with the title ‘Solidarity between all ethnic groups’ and presents a story of the three girls entitled *siewhak*, which can be translated as ‘close friends’ (‘close as kin’). These two headings weave together socialist language (solidarity), nationalist language (ethnic groups) and everyday intimate expressions (*siewhak* for ‘close friends’). As is the case for other state-produced images of Laos’ ethnic diversity (Huijsmans 2019b), here ethnic diversity is reduced to three ethnic groups: the ethnic Lao (represented by the girl on the left), the ethnic Hmong girl (represented by the girl in the middle) and the ethnic Khmu (represented by the girl on the right) (RIES 2015b: 44).⁶ The accompanying lesson elaborates the ideal of good inter-ethnic studentship by telling a story of friendship and how these students help each

6 This is reminiscent of the Lao Lum (valley Lao), Lao Theung (Lao of the mountain slopes), Lao Sung (Lao of the mountaintops) ethnic classification, dating back to the colonial era (Pholsena 2002: 180). While officially disregarded and replaced by new systems of ethnic classification, these phrases remain widely used in everyday speech.



FIGURE 7.3 Representing good inter-ethnic studentship in Lao primary school textbooks.

other in their studies.⁷ However, the image also sends a subtle message of hierarchy between ethnic groups. After all, it is the ethnic Lao girl who is explaining the lesson to her peers. Despite these critical remarks, we acknowledge that the partial and particular inclusion of ethnic diversity also has a positive effect. For example, when discussing a similar image in the Primary 1 textbook with a group of Hmong students it was noteworthy that the students remembered

7 Next to messages about harmony and equality between ethnic groups, the textbook imagery also stands out for its insistence on gender parity. Virtually all images that include more than one person are carefully balanced, with as many girls or women as there are boys or men. Furthermore, some of the images stimulate students to question gendered stereotypes. For example, the Primary 5 Moral Education text (RIES 2016: 29) includes an image of a woman acting as a village chief (*naibaan*) even though most village chiefs are men.

without effort the name of the Hmong girl featuring in the lesson (for which a common Hmong name was used) but had forgotten the name of the ethnic Lao children, even though the name of the Hmong girl was only mentioned in the caption of the picture while the other names appeared throughout the lesson.

Finally, the image of the rural scene (Figure 7.1) subtly sends a message about the drivers behind transformations in the countryside. In this image, the villagers live in traditional Lao houses. In contrast, all state buildings (the school, the health centre, the village office) represent modern architecture: low-rise concrete structures. The image thus suggests that the state is the agent of change, a model which villagers over time may emulate. Unsurprisingly, such a state-centric reading of how change happens is over-simplistic, even in Laos where the Communist Party has remained firmly in power for almost half a century. For example, the work of Stolz (2019) on 'housing aspirations' in an upland ethnic Khmu community in rural Laos illustrates that, rather than officials, it is ordinary villagers that are the drivers of change as cross-border migration experiences have changed their ideas about the housing dimension of a good life.

4 Sketches of Good Life: Children's Creative Expressions

The Lao school system does not leave much space for children to express ideas of a good life that do not conform with the state-sanctioned ones. However, this does not mean that children do not do so. Rather, such non-conforming ideas were just less visible to us as researchers.

A first example of an aspect of a good life expressed by one of the students, and different from what is articulated in textbooks, is a drawing (Figure 7.4) we found on the wall of one of the classrooms in Baan Noi. The drawing features a Toyota Vigo, a popular pick-up truck in rural Laos (and beyond). The drawing was put up in the classroom and carried the teacher's writing (*lot vigo* in Lao script) at the top of the drawing. This suggests that the teacher has approved of this more material and individualistic expression of a good life. Notably, Vigo has also emerged as a name that parents give to their children. At least one boy in Baan Noi used the name Vigo in addition to his official (Hmong) name.

Another sketch of a good life we found on the seat of a stool used in one of the three classrooms comprising the Baan Noi primary school. It is a drawing of a fashionably dressed young woman (Figure 7.5).

We found a similar drawing in one of the classrooms in Baan Nyai. Unlike the case in Baan Noi, here the drawing was put on display on the classroom



FIGURE 7.4 Students' sketches of a good life (Baan Noi).

wall, suggesting that the teacher approved of it (Figures 7.6 and 7.7). As Figure 7.6 illustrates, the work was part of a series of similar artworks (all produced by girls). The women in these drawings are all fashionably dressed, wear jewellery and use make-up and mobile phones, representations that stand in stark contrast with the neo-traditional-inspired art featured in the textbooks. Moreover, none of the women have their hair tied in a ponytail, as Lao school rules prescribe and is etiquette for Lao women in official function (see Figure 7.3).

The drawing in Figure 7.7 was much admired by other students in the class. When we asked the class about the artist behind this artwork, her fellow students (both boys and girls) were very quick to point her out. Although this piece of work was put on display by the teacher, it is worth pointing out that it was graded lower than that depicting a woman less obviously engaged in such forms of conspicuous consumptions, and lower too than the drawing of a cat and a dog (see Figure 7.6).

Children's sketches of a good life, as presented above, contrast with children's descriptions of a good life in (informal) interviews. When asked about their aspired occupation they typically mentioned the figure of the teacher, nurse/doctor, police officer or soldier (and, more exceptionally, district governor or



FIGURE 7.5 Student's hidden sketch of a good life (Baan Noi).

architect). When probed further, children (boys and girls alike) explained their answers on the basis of a collective vision of a good life. So rather than emphasising the salaried nature of these forms of employment and the consumption this would facilitate, they would say that they wanted to become a teacher in order to educate the children of the village, become a nurse/doctor to provide care for their parents and other people in the village, join the police force or army to protect the village and/or country from thieves and bad people, etc. Going on the grounds of these interviews only would suggest that more material and individualistic notions of a good life have no place in children's ideas about the future. Yet children's artwork shows that they imagine more material and individualistic notions of a good life, too, but express these in the margins of the classroom and in a non-verbal manner.



FIGURE 7.6 Students' artwork (Baan Nyai).

5 The School as a Site of Practice: Moments of 'Good Time'

This section presents ethnographic accounts of instances observed at school that were evidently enjoyed as moments of 'good time' in the sense that they were enjoyable and made people feel happy. In doing so, we contrast a mass event (the primary school-leaving exam) with two moments of good time involving a more select group of participants (martial arts and dance). It is argued that these moments of good time can be read as brief instances of a good life in the present. While the joyous atmosphere around the school-leaving exam quickly turned toxic for at least some involved, this was not observed in relation to the dance and martial arts practices. The moments of good time around the exams confirmed Berlant's assertion (2011: 27) that the efforts of staying near to what one desires wear one out, because they confront one with the limitations of one's conditions of possibility. Here, good times became toxic. Yet in the other instances described, these moments of good time stayed essentially good.

5.1 *Primary School-Leaving Exams: Good Times Turning Toxic?*

In remote rural Laos, the primary school-leaving exam constitutes a significant undertaking. The one observed by Mr Piti in 2017 involved a total of seventy-four



FIGURE 7.7 Student’s articulation of a good life (Baan Nyai).

students (coming from two different primary schools) and thirty-two adults (including teachers, district-level officials, village representatives, etc.) organised in a range of different committees tasked with responsibilities for the various exam-related activities, including setting up the classrooms, invigilation, grading exams and preparing food. Paper sheets pinned on the wall of the school named the various committees and their members.

An official of the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) was assigned to personally deliver the exam script, oversee the various procedures and return to the district centre with the exam results. However, it would be a mistake to view the various activities related to the exams as ordered by the district. As the summarised fieldnotes below show, district-level guidelines at best provided a context within which villagers largely self-organised the exam and the various activities around it (compare with High 2014).

Observing the exams, Mr Piti noted that teachers and members of the exam committee were busy helping students in answering the exam questions. He also noticed how the invigilators allowed students to copy each other's answers. It was only when they noticed Piti that the teachers told students to stop doing so. Given this awkward situation, one of the teachers from Baan Nyai approached Piti and said 'Just help them, otherwise many students will fail.' It took Piti a few seconds to realise he was not being asked to help the students, but the teacher was appealing to him to help the teachers by not reporting the practices he was observing.

Later, the district education officer charged with overseeing the exam confided to Piti that they had been practising the 'helping of students' since 2015 when Laos announced that primary education completion was made compulsory. He explained: 'That's why we have to help them, to complete primary school.' He continued, justifying the practice: 'A lot of effort has been put in building school infrastructure, producing educational materials, training teachers and setting up school feeding programmes in order to keep students in school and avoid them dropping out.'

Despite these efforts to make all students pass, the students themselves were generally uncertain about the outcome of the exam. After the first day of exams an ethnic Hmong student, a girl, said she was '50–50' confident that she would pass the exam. Another ethnic Hmong student, a boy, confided to Mr Piti that he feared he had not done well in the dictation part. 'The teacher read out the text very quickly and I was too scared to ask him to repeat the dictation.'

No doubt thanks to the teachers' interventions, the pass rate was indeed 100 per cent – all students had passed.

Already well before this excellent result was announced the teachers and others on the various committees were in a festive mood thanks to the jars of *lao hai*⁸ the students had offered to the exam committee.

8 Traditional home-brew, rice-based liquor especially common in Khmu communities.

The district education officer explained: ‘Students bring *lao hai* to show their gratitude to their teachers and because they are happy to complete primary school.’ With the exam writing still ongoing, the drinking took place in a small hut on the school grounds accompanied with lots of loud laughter and banter. In addition, other members of the various exam committees combined the drinking with games of pétanque on the court in the school ground. Meanwhile, the newly constructed classroom for pre-primary education paid for by Plan International had been turned into a kitchen and taken over by the cooking committee. Several ducks, chickens, one dog and a goat did not survive the primary school-leaving exam.

SUMMARISED FROM FIELDNOTES, 22 MAY–5 JUNE 2017

Realising a perfect exam score, children providing teachers with home-made alcohol and enjoying some good food ensures a good time. Such instances, we would suggest, constitute moments of a good life in the present. This assertion is confirmed by the fact that a district education officer (ethnic Hmong) who worked closely with the researchers shared images of the 2019 schoolleaving exam alongside the various other pictures of ‘good times’ that filled his Facebook timeline. When the first author reached out to him through Facebook Messenger for further details about these pictures, he confirmed they were taken at a school-leaving exam he oversaw, and pointed out that one of the photos depicted a *baci* ceremony organised by the village authorities for the DESB staff to celebrate the achievement and mark their hard work.

The *baci* ceremony, teachers helping students answer questions, sharing food and alcohol, the collective work through which the exams and festivities were realised and the complicity in the production of excellent statistics all worked to surmount the social divides across which the various transformations briefly mentioned in the introduction of this paper unfold in upland rural Laos. These include the hierarchical relations between teachers and students, unequal state–society relations and the hierarchical ethnic relations on to which they map in upland rural Laos.

In her analysis of the role of the *baci* ceremony in district-level governance in rural Laos, Singh (2014) notes the ambiguity in the practice of state–society relations. She explains that the levelling of inequalities enacted through the *baci* ceremony co-exists with hierarchical, secular village meetings that are also part of these visits by district-level officials to rural villages. Singh’s point is not contested here. In fact, upon the arrival of the DESB official in the village, he called for a preparation meeting and this left no doubt about the hierarchical nature of state–society relations. However, by bringing Singh’s argument in

dialogue with Berlant's thesis it is clear that the collective work and festivities around the school-leaving exam had a twofold effect: it brought people nearer to the thing they desired, through recognition by seniors, becoming educated and realising perfect results from one's work, yet simultaneously it made concrete the limitations of the possibilities within – at least for some. For example, many students realised that their ability and knowledge was insufficient for passing the exam on their own. They needed the help of their teachers. Secondary school teachers were quick to complain about students coming out of primary school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, the alcohol that flowed between these very differently ranked and gendered educators certainly facilitated more informal interaction across social hierarchies, but not without the risk of unpleasant encounters also stimulated by alcohol and unfolding along social divides.⁹ It is for this reason that we suggest that the moments of good time observed during the school-leaving exams were deeply ambiguous as they might easily turn out to be toxic for at least some of those involved.

5.2 *Good Times That Stayed Inherently Good: Martial Arts and Dancing*

The practices around the school-leaving exam are usefully contrasted with two other practices that we observed: a martial arts activity led by the sports teacher and a dancing activity involving some of the students and teachers, both in Baan Nyai. The practices took place at the end of a regular teaching day at the secondary school during a slot marked on the timetable as 'local curriculum'. The idea behind this slot is that teachers can teach or organise activities of relevance to the specific locality in which they are working – this in contrast with the larger part of the curriculum which is nationally set.

The young male sports teacher called together a small group of male students in front of the main structure of the primary school. The boys started doing a number of martial arts. Despite the heat, the students beamed with joy, and the strict discipline conveyed by the bamboo stick the teacher carried (and threatened to use) only seemed to add to it. In contrast to the usual classroom sessions, both the students and the teacher were actively involved in the activity. Although the teacher acted

9 In this specific event no such unpleasant encounters were observed. However, during an earlier visit by DESB officials it was noticed that it was the expectation that junior female volunteer teachers would accompany the district officials (all men) in beer-drinking sessions. On the surface, such drinking sessions were joyful too, yet it should be remembered that these volunteer teachers depend on district officials for getting a permanent (and salaried) teaching position, which leaves such encounters open to exploitation.

as a coach and did not join in in the movements, the relation was different from what we normally observed in the classroom. The teacher didn't stay in front of the boys but moved between them; students did not wait for the instructions of the teacher but initiated their own spectacular moves and laughed loudly when something went wrong (as compared with the silence and embarrassment we would observe in the classroom in the case of mistakes).

Meanwhile, behind one of the secondary school classrooms a female teacher set up a speaker system. She connected it with her mobile phone and soon the school grounds were filled with loud music. She called together a group of female students and started practising (ethnic) Lao traditional dance. She ran through a number of hand gestures and foot positions. Here the teacher joined in too: she danced with the girls, explaining the positions and moves as she danced. Then some boys passed by and they joined in too.

After some thirty minutes the martial arts session had come to an end in the same unassuming manner as it had started. The students had also stopped dancing. However, their place had now been taken up by other teachers, both male and female. One of the teachers changed the music and we moved from traditional dance to line dancing. The sports teacher joined in too, as did the research team. We had fun.

SUMMARISED FROM FIELDNOTES, BAAN NYAI, MARCH 2018

In instances like these, we would suggest that moments of good time stayed essentially good. Teacher–student relations were much more egalitarian than were ever observed in the classroom and this did not change over the course of the activity. Students practising martial arts took the liberty to initiate their own movements and enjoyed mistakes as much as success. In the case of the dance session, boys and girls and male and female teachers had a good time together without this setting up potentially problematic encounters.

The exams are an essential feature of modern mass schooling, while the two practices described above were only lightly rooted in the curriculum and involved only a few students and teachers. Furthermore, events such as the martial arts and line-dancing activities were never mentioned in any of the many interviews we conducted with students, teachers or parents (exams, or at least exam results, certainly were). Even when we asked specifically about the time allocated on the timetable for 'local curriculum' and how this was used we learnt nothing about such moments of good time. However, there is no intention to suggest that all that happened during the 'local curriculum' timeslot was experienced as 'good time' – certainly not. We also observed 'local

curriculum' sessions in which nothing much happened or in which teachers assigned students to clean up the school grounds, draw water for the teachers' private bathrooms or collect firewood for the teachers.

Moments of good time staying inherently good are usefully contrasted with the ideas of the good life conveyed through textbooks. Unlike the message conveyed through textbooks, the martial arts and dancing sessions were not meant to be all-inclusive. Only some students became involved, and these evidently were the talented few. The same holds for gender; no girls were involved in the martial arts activities and the dancing session initially started without boys.

6 Conclusion

In late socialist Laos, systems of ideas, and therefore the bases of notions of a good life, are in constant flux. This is perhaps truest for rural Laos, rendering rural schools a fertile space for studying diverse and shifting notions of a good life. We have made the case that state-sanctioned ideas of a good life reach the rural populace most directly through the illustrations in school textbooks. In these illustrations, it is acknowledged that a good life can be rural. Such a rural good life is articulated as a stable condition characterised by harmony and equality, with little attention to more individualistic and material notions of a good life revolving around consumption, which has also become a key part of being young (Nayak and Kehily 2013; Taye and Huijsmans 2020) and a known manifestation of late socialism also evident in rural spaces (Huijsmans 2021; Huijsmans and Trần 2015). The textbook-based articulations of a rural good life are out of sync with the rapid developments that are transforming rural Laos (see also Koshcheeva 2020) which, if anything, articulate and possibly deepen the social divides the textbooks are careful to leave unpronounced. We have further noted the absence of upland spaces and forms of livelihood of ethnic groups inhabiting these spaces in the textbook articulations of a rural good life. Hills and mountains were certainly there in the illustrations, but featured at best as a background to images of a rural good life predominantly set in lowland, ethnic Lao spaces.

Classroom-based observation indicated that the state does not have a monopoly on the expression of ideas of a good life even in the state-space of the classroom. Children themselves were sketching out the contours of their views on a good life too. Unsurprisingly, there is a gap between the imaginaries of a good life articulated through primary school textbooks and those found in children's artwork in the margins of the classroom. We argued that this is a gap not only in content but also in methodological terms. Uncovering children's

ideas of a good life that are different from those promoted by the school system was not easy and required going beyond oral methods.

Further, we have made a case for expanding debates on a good life in late socialism to include practice. We have done this by taking seriously moments of good time that unfolded as part of the everyday practice of schooling. The instances described ethnographically were rooted differently in the organisation of mass schooling. The case of the school-leaving exam is a constituting element of it and reflects most closely the larger project of schooling. The martial arts and dancing sessions came much more loosely and selectively from the organisation of modern schooling but were by no means less part of it.

Three pairs of distinctions differentiate the textbook-based articulations of a good life and instances of good time: those between the regimented and the spontaneous, the future oriented and the present moment, and the ideological and the experiential. Formal organisation of education plays to the first of each of these pairs. It is at once regimented, geared towards preparing Lao young people for a late socialist future, and informed and shaped by a particular ideological view of a good life. But an analysis of education is incomplete without taking account of schooling as practice. This perspective illuminated an alternative and co-present practice of a good life filtering through and being produced within – and, in a sense, by – the same educational system and context. These moments of good time were characterised by spontaneity, attending to the present moment, and made good not by ideology but by the joy of the moment.

With these distinctions in mind, we are left with the questions of why these moments of good time did not stay good, and how moments of good time sit with the textbook articulations of a good life.

The primary school-leaving exam was a mass exercise; everybody got involved, and existing social differences were made to disappear in the name of the collective work and advancement. This moment of good time was thus similar to the good life promoted through textbooks. Yet when social inequalities resurfaced – and they inevitably did because of the mass nature of this moment of good time – things were not that good any longer, at least not for all. In Berlant's terms (2011), the limitations of the possibility within dawned. In contrast, the martial arts and dance sessions take us beyond Berlant's cruel optimism. Here, no attempt was made to be inclusive in whatever terms. This was just for the select few. Yet here the good remained good truly.

These very different outcomes of moments of good time practised as part of rural schooling are reflective of the condition of late socialism more broadly. The various transformations unfolding across rural Laos deepen the already existing social divides, rendering very real the limitations of possibilities within any of the multiple systems of ideas emerging from these transformations. At

the same time, such transforming and competing systems of ideas produce notions of a good life which continue to be realised by some, albeit often in deeply idiosyncratic ways. In this sense, moments of good time offer an important lesson about future-making in late socialist Laos: life can indeed be good in multiple ways, but whether it stays good for all, and if so for how long, is the question.

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Translocal Households and Family Visions in Contemporary Vietnam: A Neoliberal Shift?

Hy V. Luong

Abstract

In relation to the international academic debate on global neoliberal ideology and its influence on individual subjectivities, this paper examines family visions among the older and younger members of translocal households in contemporary rural Vietnam. Data from a longitudinal study of seven rural Vietnamese communities from 2000 to 2015 suggest that people in rural Vietnam consider the care of the young and the old, including its financial aspects, primarily an individual and family responsibility. They define a good life in terms not only of material and modern comfort, but also of family relations and responsibilities. While neoliberalism constitutes one ideological strand in contemporary Vietnamese policy circles, this paper suggests that it is ahistorical and simplistic to attribute people's emphasis on individual and family responsibilities in caring for the young and the old to neoliberalism.

Keywords

family – migration – childcare – elderly – ideology – neoliberalism – rural Vietnam

With the increase in migration in the past half century, more and more households in Vietnam and in other parts of the world have become translocal, with members spread over a country or the world at large. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Vietnamese migrants seek additional income, among other things, as a part of achieving a good life. However, the additional income is not simply for greater personal material comfort, but also to fulfil moral obligations to parents and children, among other family members (Luong 2012). In the process of migration, a migrant may be separated from his/her spouse, from his/her children (normally entrusted to grandparents or other relatives in their home communities) or from elderly parents living by themselves. How do they deal psychologically and morally with separation from close family members, and

what are the family visions of these migrants and their household members? In relation to the theoretical literature, in the context of family separation, how do migrants and their household members conceive the responsibilities, financial and non-financial, of caring for the young and the old? If people in Vietnam consider this care primarily an individual and family responsibility and largely absolve the state from this role, to what extent can we attribute such a view to global neoliberal ideology and/or the discourse of the current Vietnamese state on *xã hội hóa* (societalisation), meaning that society, family and individuals partially or totally shoulder the social burden, including the care for the young and the old?

Drawing on data from a longitudinal study of seven rural Vietnamese communities from 2000 to 2015, this paper suggests that despite modernity in urban life, many older rural residents had no desire for migration to cities, and that people in Vietnam consider the care of the young and the old, including its financial aspects, primarily an individual and family responsibility. Their discourse strongly emphasises the utmost care for family members as a part of their moral worth (Luong 2012). Migrants and their family members define a good life, therefore, not only in terms of material comfort, but also on the basis of their fulfilment of moral obligations to immediate family members.

The emphasis by migrants and their household members in the countryside on obligations to care for family members is congruent with the Vietnamese state's aforementioned discourse on societalisation (*xã hội hóa*), as well as the global neoliberalist ideology that emphasises the responsibilities, not of the state, but of individuals, families and communities for the welfare of individual citizens/societal members (Rose 1996).¹ In the academic literature on the Vietnamese family and society, Bélanger and Barbieri suggest that 'starting in the 1980s, state withdrawal reinstated the family as the de-facto locus of social security and welfare' (Bélanger and Barbieri 2009: 13). Regarding the elderly in particular, Barbieri argues that 'government assistance to the elderly has virtually disappeared in recent years and ... most of the responsibility for old-age caregiving now falls on the immediate family and community' (Barbieri 2009: 149). Similarly, Minh Nguyen argues that '[i]n Vietnam ... welfare responsibilities are now divested from the state to a wide range of social actors and the direct welfare relationship between the state and citizens has been minimized' (Nguyen 2018b: 630–1). Parallel to such a shift, Nguyen suggests, is the state's neoliberal logic emphasising individualised responsibilities 'to care for

1 The global neoliberal ideology became prominent in conjunction with the social welfare retrenchment policy of the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s (Rose 1996: 53–9).

one's family through private means and a heightened sense of compassion for the disadvantaged other' (Nguyen 2018b: 642; cf. Nguyen-vo 2008).² However, this paper argues that: (1) the Vietnamese socialist state's welfare responsibilities before the mid-1980s and even at the height of the command economy were much more limited than assumed by Minh Nguyen and Barbieri, among other scholars; (2) the Vietnamese state has increased its support for the elderly in the past two decades; (3) the Vietnamese state's and rural people's discourses on family obligations had emerged well before the mid-1980s; and (4) it is therefore ahistorical and simplistic to attribute people's emphasis on individual and family responsibilities in caring for the young and the old to the global neoliberalist ideology or to the Vietnamese state's discourse on *xã hội hóa* (societalisation).

In other words, it is suggested that the discourse and logic of care among rural people in Vietnam have to be understood in their historical context. The last part of the paper examines the recent historical context, starting with the command economy era when it was families and rural cooperatives, not the Vietnamese state, that took the primary roles in the provision of welfare for rural dwellers. This part of the paper also examines whether the Vietnamese state's policy on the very young and the elderly in the past three decades has consistently shifted in the direction of transferring the burden of care for the very young and the elderly to families and communities.

1 Research Methods

The research on domestic migration in Vietnam was conducted in seven rural communities in the three main regions (north, centre and south) of the Vietnamese lowlands, as well as in migrants' major destination areas.³ It is a

2 Following Nikolas Rose, Minh Nguyen calls 'new prudentialism' the logic that 'casts social problem as private responsibilities', idealises 'private choice and self-optimization', and considers 'socially and morally inferior' people failing on these terms (Nguyen 2018b: 630).

3 Four of these seven communities – two in southern Vietnam and two in central Vietnam – were selected in 2000 as a part of a 1997–2001 interdisciplinary study of migration and urbanisation. That study focused on Hồ Chí Minh City. These four communities are located in the two provinces that sent the largest number of migrants to Hồ Chí Minh City at that time: specifically, Long An province in the upper Mekong Delta and Quảng Ngãi on the central coast. The latter is located about 100 km south of Đà Nẵng (see Luong 2009). The US Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the Institute of Social Sciences in Hồ Chí Minh City jointly managed this interdisciplinary project funded by the Ford Foundation from 1997 to 2004. I served as the leader of the SSRC expert team. At the same time, with funding by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Toronto, I also

longitudinal study, first conducted in 2000, and then in 2012–15, designed to investigate changes over one decade.⁴ Research methods combined household survey, participant observation and in-depth interviews.

- A survey of 1,430 households chosen by random probability sampling was conducted in 2000. A restudy in late 2012 and early 2013 covered 1,801 households, including households whose members had split off from the 1,430 original households. Ninety-five of the original 1,430 households were not resurveyed, mostly because of the temporary absence of adult household members or because of death.
- The household survey was complemented by in-depth interviews and participant observation of a sub-sample chosen by random probability sampling. In 2012–13, in-depth interviews were conducted with 282 households, or 20 per cent of the 1,430 households originally surveyed, and with a small number of households with migrants that had split off from the originally surveyed households. Twenty-two fieldworkers also stayed for one or more days in 141 of these 282 households in order to conduct participant observation. In addition, 273 in-depth interviews were conducted with migrants, the majority during migrants' Lunar New Year home visits and others in destination areas in Hồ Chí Minh City and surrounding provinces, in the Central Highlands, in Hanoi and in some other northern towns and cities.
- In 2013–15, I conducted interviews with the owners of enterprises in different sectors and with community leaders, including officials and heads of voluntary and government-sponsored associations in all study sites in order to gain insight into local economic and sociocultural dynamics. I also revisited hundreds of interviewed households in all study sites to gain further information.

The panel survey data from the research project indicate that 42 per cent of migrants in the 2000–12 period had returned to their home communities by 2012. Theoretically, in relation to the neoclassical model of migration, interview and survey data also reveal that decisions on migration and migrants'

conducted my own research in three other rural communities, one in the Mekong Delta in the south and the other two in the Red River Delta in the north, where I had started research in the 1987–92 period. These three communities were added in order to provide a broader geographical scope for a study of migration and rural–urban linkages in 2012–15.

4 In one northern community, due to political turmoil, fieldwork had to be postponed to 2004. See Luong (2010: 247–52) regarding the political turmoil in this village. In 2006, one southern community, 'Southern 3', was divided into two administrative units. They are labelled 'Southern 3a' and 'Southern 3b' in publications coming out of the project.

return to their home communities have to do not only with economic reasons but also with non-economic ones, including the local moral framework for family relations (Luong 2012 and 2018b).

2 Translocal Households and Family Vision

The migration of a household member renders such a household translocal. In the twenty-first century, the challenge of distance – even across different continents – becomes socially and psychologically more manageable with smartphones and social media (Miller 2012; McDonald 2016), as well as with more convenient, cheaper and faster transportation.⁵ If in the late 1980s it took seven hours to travel 80 km from Sơn Dương village ('Northern 2') to Hanoi, it took only about three hours in the mid-2010s, with four buses running this route daily.

For a young migrant with grade 9–12 education, it has been relatively easy in recent years to find a job, in either the formal or informal sector of the economy. Manufacturing in Vietnam has expanded rapidly since 2000. According to official statistics, the manufacturing labour force (not including construction) increased from 3.2 million in 2000 to 7.1 million in 2012 and 9.3 million in 2017 (Vietnam-GSO (General Statistical Office) 2002: 41; Vietnam-GSO 2014: 115; and Vietnam-GSO 2018: 135). The value of manufactured good exports from Vietnam increased from US \$9.8 billion in 2000 to 80 billion in 2012 and 174 billion in 2017 (Thời báo kinh tế Việt Nam 2001: 18–21, Vietnam-GSO 2014b: 20; and Vietnam-Ministry of Industries and Trade 2018: 12). Less educated migrants with physical strength can easily find jobs in the construction industry, which had a labour force of 3–4 million in the 2010s. Rural migrants who do not like strict industrial discipline in the manufacturing sector can opt for trading careers to have a greater control of their time and lives. For example, villagers from 'Central 2', with their village-based networks, moved easily into their own

5 Virtually all adult migrants and many members of their households remaining in the home communities had cell phones (in many cases, smart phones) during our research period from 2012 to 2015. In 2018, out of a Vietnamese population of 96 million, of which about 75 million are above the age of 14, there are 58 million Facebook accounts originated in Vietnam (Thúy An, 'Việt Nam đứng thứ 7 thế giới về lượng người dùng facebook' [Vietnam Ranks 7th in the World in the Number of Facebook Accounts], *VTV Online*, 18 April 2018. Available at <<https://vtv.vn/cong-nghe/viet-nam-dung-thu-7-the-gioi-ve-luong-nguoi-dung-facebook-2018-041817264185.htm>>.

and rapidly expanding niche in the itinerant trading of sunglasses, nail clippers, toys, among others, in the southern half of Vietnam (Luong 2018a).⁶

2.1 *Migration Odysseys: With Children or Without?*

The majority of migrants start their migration odysseys as single men and women. However, within a decade, a good number of these migrants get married and have children. They face a major challenge of juggling work and childcare. Many from the south and the centre of Vietnam try to raise children in destination areas, but may end up sending their children back to their home villages to be raised by grandparents. In contrast, married northern migrants moving south tend to entrust their children to grandparents at the time of departure, and may bring their children to the south only after successfully establishing careers and settling themselves in destination areas. Of the 1,198 migrants at the time of our resurvey in 2012–13, 297 had children aged 18 or younger, and 214 (72 per cent) of these were separated from their children, who stayed behind in their home villages. Migrants' separation from their children (normally entrusted to grandparents in home villages), as well as from their aging parents, has been observed in many countries in Asia and beyond (Chen et al. 2011; Ye et al. 2013; Knodel and Nguyen 2015).

Needless to say, for many migrant parents such separation is not psychologically easy. However, for mothers working in the formal sector of the economy, workplace daycare facilities have been rare even in this decade, notwithstanding the exhortations of trade union leaders that large companies provide such facilities and subsidise childcare services for workers with small children (see below). Most workers in the formal sector and all in the informal sector with small children in destination areas have to rely on informal and private daycare arrangements, of which the monthly costs normally amount to 25–33 per cent of the monthly minimum salaries for industrial workers in foreign enterprises. Costs aside, the need to care for small children in the evening also reduces the opportunity for overtime work.

One migrant couple (both born in 1979) in a nuclear-family household in Tĩnh Bình ('Central 2') is a case in point. They had two daughters (born in 2000 and 2006) and one son (born in 2012). Like many Tĩnh Bình migrants, both parents engaged in itinerant trading of sunglasses, nail clippers and toys. The husband left his native village in 1995, and the wife even earlier. After giving

6 The number of Tĩnh Bình ('Central 2') villagers in this trading niche increased from about 480 in 2000 to 1,300 in 2012 (see Luong 2018a). The trading niche of Tĩnh Bình villagers is similar to other trading niches of migrants from many villages in northern and central coastal Vietnam (see Luong 2018b; Digregorio 1994; Nguyen 2018a).

birth to their first child, the wife stayed for a while in her own parents' household, as customary for new ethnic Vietnamese mothers in the south and the south central coast of Vietnam. When the first child was 1 year old, the wife resumed trading and brought her daughter along to the destination area. Both her mother and her widowed mother-in-law were itinerant traders themselves and not available to help with childcare in the home community. The daycare costs for the child were only 150,000 dong a month in the early 2000s, since the caregiver took pity on the mother's poverty and reduced it from the normal monthly charge of 200,000 dong.⁷ After more than two years of taking care of her daughter in the destination area, the mother sent the child back to her home village to be cared for by her father. She did the same with her second daughter, born in 2006. During her home stay in connection with the birth of their third child in 2012, she elaborated on the difficulties juggling childcare and itinerant trade:

Q: How could you continue trading when you brought Thu [your first child] to Sài Gòn?

A: I relied on informal daycare, paying 150,000 dong a month. My junior cousin had to pay 200,000 dong a month. The caregiver took pity on me, and reduced the charge.

Q: Why did you send Thu back to your natal family?

A: I could not earn much in those years. My husband and I quarrelled often. I felt sad and decided to send Thu back to my own family so that I could concentrate on trading and earn more money ... Finding it tough raising my first child, I did family planning [and did not plan to have a second child]. But contraception failed, and I had the second girl in 2006 ... When the girl was 13 months old, I left my natal household, and brought her with me. When the girl was almost 4 years old, I sent her back to my natal family. My father and my first daughter took care of my second daughter.

7 At that time, the Vietnamese government set the monthly minimum salary at 626,000 dong for workers at foreign enterprises in the urban districts of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and 556,000 dong for those in other districts of these two cities and in urban districts of Hải Phòng, Biên Hòa and Vũng Tàu (Decree 708/1999/QĐ-BLĐTBXH). Thus, the normal daycare charge of 200,000 dong a month amounted to almost one third of the monthly minimum salary in urban Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City at the time. In 2012, our interviewees reported daycare charges in Hồ Chí Minh City at about 20,000 dong a day, or 600,000 dong a month. This amounted to 30 per cent of the 2 million dong minimum salary in foreign enterprises in Zone 1, which included most localities in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and industrial areas of Hải Phòng, Bình Dương, Đồng Nai and Vũng Tàu provinces.

Q: How often did you visit your child(ren)?

A: I went home often, almost on a monthly basis.

Q: How long did you stay during such a visit?

A: About half a month. When I was pregnant with the second child, I was in Đồng Tháp [in the Mekong Delta]. After childbirth, I followed other traders to Gia Lai [in the Central Highlands].

Q: How much money did you send to your parent for taking care of the kid(s)?

A: 200,000–300,000 dong each time. Later on, with two kids, I increased it to 300,000–500,000 dong. Occasionally, I did not send any money for two months ... the kids just ate grandparents' rice.

...

A: After I sent Thu [first daughter] back to my family, I earned more and saved a few million dong. When Thu was with us, it was so tough; it was difficult to engage in trade. No savings at all.

Entrusting their children to the grandparents, a number of parents still interrupted their migration odysseys for months or even longer in order to supervise a teenage child more closely in the home community. The case of a couple (household 338) in 'Central 1' community who returned to care for the husband's aging parents as well as for their own children demonstrates the importance of this web of obligations:

Wife: I felt that it was not enough to make a living with agriculture. We needed to find work elsewhere. But we could not leave our home village for good. After I got married, my husband and I went to Dak Lak [in the Central Highlands] to run a hospital cafeteria as our business, but he said, 'I can abandon neither our home village, nor parents, nor ancestors' tombs. When parents are old, we have to take care of them.' As a result, he returned to the home village [in 1999] ...

Also at that point [in 1999], our children were growing up, and we were also concerned that our [growing] children would get into bad behavioural patterns [without parents at home].

Interview with the wife in household 338, 'Central 1', 26 February 2013, conducted by NGUYỄN NGỌC ANH

Similarly, in Tịnh Bình ('Central 2') household 468, the senior couple took many major decisions with top priority given to their children's educational pursuits. In 2000, for example, the wife interrupted her trading career and returned to the home village for a year when the eldest son's grade 12 studies appeared to have been sidetracked by his non-academic interests.

Wife: That year, when in grade 12, Sơn [eldest son] just loved fun. People said that as a mother, I was not present to take good care of him, and that he had been spoiled in getting whatever he had asked for. He did not listen to my husband. As a result, that year, I stayed home for the whole year and switched my business to trading hogs [in the local area]. My husband worked as a carpenter at home. We both tried to correct Sơn's course and to get him to study.

Q: Did your husband ask you to come back, or did you decide on your own?

A: My husband said that Sơn did not listen to him, and just fooled around. He said that if I stayed home, Sơn might listen to me and focus on studying ... It has been more than a decade since I stayed home that year ... After that year, Long [my youngest son] entered junior high school, and his two elder brothers were also in secondary school at the time. Their educational expenses kept mounting. Although my husband's carpentry shop was doing pretty well, I thought that his earnings were not sufficient, and I decided to resume my mobile trading activities to help cover their educational expenses.

Interview with the mother in household 468, 'Central 2', on 20 February 2013, conducted by LÊ THẾ VŨNG

In a number of households with migrants, the closer parental supervision of children may mean the return of only one parent to the village, leading to a split couple. A married couple is also split when the wife gives birth to a child and stays in the parental home until weaning. Of the 435 married migrants in the sample in 2012–13, 242 (56 per cent) lived separately from their spouses.

In contrast to their counterparts from the south and the southern central coast, northern migrants to the south tended to wait until their successful settlement in the destination area before bringing their children along. The decisions in household 77 in Sơn Dương ('Northern 2') illustrate this pattern:

In 2012, household 77 in Sơn Dương *officially* included an elderly couple, both retired teachers, their second son and his family (wife and two children), their daughter and her son. Until 2010, it had also included the two children of their first son, Hùng. Both the second son, his wife and the daughter had migrated to the southern province of Bình Dương to join their eldest brother Hùng and the latter's family. Hùng and his wife had started a successful garment trading business and had a house constructed there for their family. When the senior couple's three children and two children-in-law first left Sơn Dương as migrants, all of these migrants' children stayed behind in the village.

The second son and his wife decided to move to Bình Dương after the failure of their garment business in Sơn Dương. Their primary migration objective was to pay off debts incurred due to their business failure.

The senior couple's divorced daughter decided to move to Bình Dương to earn enough money to build a house in Sơn Dương. (She had worked in the garment industry in Taiwan for three years. But her savings from Taiwan were not sufficient for house construction.)

The retired grandmother in household 77 reported that it took a lot of patience to persuade Hùng's two children to move to Bình Dương, because they wanted to stay with their grandparents. These two children moved to Bình Dương in 2010 after Hùng had bought land and had a house built there. The retired grandmother said that these two children, especially the elder daughter, wanted to return to Sơn Dương to live with the grandparents because Hùng and his wife were busy working and because the children were locked inside the house after school. The grandmother told the interviewer and participant observer that she was pleased to raise all the five grandchildren by her three children, and thus to help her children and children-in-law concentrate on working and on accumulating savings in Bình Dương for the latter's eventual settlement back in the home community.

Grandparents help raise grandchildren not only in the cases of their children's migration, but also when they live close by but need childcare to go to work. In household 209 in Sơn Dương ('Northern 2'), for example, at their own expense, a couple raised their 6-year-old granddaughter, the child of their first daughter, starting when the child was 18 months old.

Married migrants with children at home routinely send remittances to their parents for the care of their children. These remittances are normally equivalent to the daycare and/or educational expenses for these children in destination areas and are thus sufficient for the care of the children in rural home communities. However, when the remittances are not sufficient or are even non-existent due to the hardships of migrants, the grandparents normally take it in their stride.

Many migrants, without property in destination areas, leave their children aged 18 or younger in their home villages, as living costs are much higher in cities and they tend to be too busy with work to provide quality care. That work may include overtime work in factories or early-morning or night-time work as traders. Leaving children behind presents the psychological challenge of separation, especially from small children. It also means less parental supervision of these children, and possible behavioural problems in teenage years (as

with household 468, above). The children are normally raised by the grandparents or, in a number of cases, by one parent, in the home village.⁸ For migrant parents, grandparents are first-choice caregivers. If grandparents are not available or healthy enough to care for grandchildren, or if a teenage child may have behavioural problems, one parent normally returns to the home village, while the other parent tries to earn enough to provide additional income for the family back in the home village. When one or more children succeed in passing an entrance examination to a college or university, financial pressures mount. The stay-at-home parents may migrate. At such a juncture, migrant parents intensify their economic activities in destination areas to increase earnings and to support their child or children through college or university.

2.2 *The Elderly Living by Themselves: Filial Piety and Family Vision*

Few elderly people in the seven studied communities wanted to join their children, even when the latter succeeded in purchasing their own houses in destination areas. Of the 673 people aged 60 or older in our survey sample, 651 said that they had no plans to move anywhere in the following three years; 20 said that they had not made any decision; and only two planned to move away from their home communities. These two respondents mentioned medical needs and, in the case of a southern elderly person, no land in the rural home community. For the overwhelming majority of the elderly, who did not want to move anywhere, they cited advanced age, the attachment to ancestral land and the desire to be close to friends and relatives in the home communities. The 58-year-old male head of household 468 in Tĩnh Bình ('Central 2') explained:

Q: Do you plan to move elsewhere to live?

A: No, I will not go.

Q: Why not?

A: I am old now. I have heavier responsibilities at home. I have to worship ancestors and to organise their death anniversaries. I also have to take care of my [84-year-old] father. If my father passes away, I will have to take over all the responsibilities for my ancestors. Furthermore, I am used to rural life. Urban life is different, neither clean nor healthy. The environment is not appropriate for me. Besides, my heart conditions are not great.

8 In contrast, among married Vietnamese international migrants, it is much more common for only one parent to migrate, with the other staying behind to take care of children and elderly parents. Although data are not broken down by country in Hoang et al.'s study of international migration in Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, only 181 (4.4 per cent) of 4,073 surveyed households in their study had both parents migrating (Hoang et al. 2014: 268–69).

In the survey of 1,801 households, 688 households had one or more members migrating at the time of the survey. Of these households with migrants, 237 (34.4 per cent) had one or more elderly members (at least 60 years old), and 64 (9.3 per cent) had the elderly members living either by themselves or only with small children.

Many elderly informants were resigned to the prospect of living by themselves. They emphasised the importance of their children's success, and mentioned the lack of opportunities in the home communities for their well-educated children with professional careers. In contrast, a number of elderly informants, especially northern ones with children in non-professional careers, strongly wanted their children to return to their natal communities.

Out of filial piety, many migrants whose parents might live by themselves in old age decided to return to care for their elderly parents. Household 338 in Tịnh Minh village ('Central 1') illustrates both the resignation of a senior couple to the prospect of living by themselves for the benefit of their children with professional careers, as well as how filial piety played an important role in their children's decisions.

In 2012, household 338 was composed of a couple, the husband born in 1960 and the wife in 1962, and two sons, born in 1987 and 1990. In the early 2000s, the household had also included the couple's two daughters, born in 1983 and 1984, and the husband's parents, the father born in 1915 and the mother in 1923. The husband was the eldest son of his parents. The couple in household 338 had migrated in 1994 to the Dak Lak province in the Central Highlands, entrusting their four children to their grandparents in the home village. Initially working as seasonal coffee pickers, they received help from the wife's younger sister, who worked in a hospital in the same province, and obtained permission to open a cafeteria in the local hospital. In 1999, not successful in re-bidding for the concession to operate the cafeteria, concerned about their children reaching teenage years without parents at home, and also facing the declining health of the husband's parents, they returned to Tịnh Minh ('Central 1'). The couple felt responsible for the care of the husband's parents because he was the eldest son. The husband's parents passed away in 2007 and 2009. The couple's two older daughters, who had received post-secondary technical training of relatively short duration – just one or two years – in the early 2000s, got married in 2007 and 2010, and moved with their husbands to the Central Highlands. The two sons each pursued four or five years of university education in Hồ Chí Minh City. In February 2011, with two sons in university at the same time and only a modest income from agriculture, and despite her arthritis and respiratory problems, the mother decided to resume her migrant life. She found a job as a kitchen helper in the provincial capital of Quảng Ngãi. The elder son

completed his studies in interior design in the summer 2011, while the younger son planned to finish his university study in the summer of 2013. The husband replied in an interview:

Q: You have two sons, one working and the other studying in Sài Gòn. What would you think if both of them get married, continue living in Sài Gòn and do not move back here with you?

A: Great! I like it that way. What can they do here in Quảng Ngãi [province]? It is not easy for them to find [professional] jobs in Quảng Ngãi ... If my two sons succeed in their work, if each of them sends me and my wife one million dong a month, I will not need to work as hard [as now]. I will rent out our farmland and buy rice for our consumption. At present, I still have to work hard to support the younger son's education.

Q: Do you and your wife plan to join your children in the south?

A: No, I stay here despite hard work, especially as my wife now works in the provincial capital to earn money to support my younger son in his university study ... It is difficult for me at this point. I work on the farmland and have to cook for myself.

In an interview near her workplace in the provincial capital, the wife echoed her husband:

Q: Will your sons return to the home community?

A: No. They will work in the south. Back here, without connections, power and money, we cannot find jobs for them ... A lot of young people from here work in the city [of Sài Gòn].

Q: Do you plan to join your children?

A: No. I am old. I work here until my younger son finishes his university study ...

I plan to return home in 2013, when my [younger] son graduates, has employment income, and after I have helped to pay off [a part] of his educational loan. I will let my children take care of things at that point, and I will return to live with my husband ... we will just grow vegetables [and rice] to feed ourselves. If we are short of money [in old age], my working sons, with their successful careers, will not forget their parents.

Interview with the mother in household 338, in 'Central 1', on 26 February 2013, conducted by LÊ THẾ VŨNG

In summer 2011, the elder son of this household graduated and landed a job. With a fairly good monthly income of 10 million dong for a young graduate and

in a pattern typical in Vietnamese families, he covered the food and accommodation costs for his younger brother. This helped relieve the financial pressure on the parents, since the younger brother's government-sponsored educational loan was sufficient to cover most of his tuition, and his part-time job provided him with pocket money. In a separate interview, the elder brother told a fieldworker his vision for his career and family life with his parents.

A: Next year, I will move to Đà Nẵng and establish my [interior design] career there.

Q: Why do you choose Đà Nẵng?

A: First of all, my parents are old and not in good health. I and my wife also have a small child now. If my wife moves to the south, we have to hire a nanny. It is expensive. If we are in Đà Nẵng, it is close to my and her parents. If any of them is sick, we can take care of them more easily. Or if we need help with childcare, my mother can come to help [for a while].

While many elderly parents whose children pursued careers elsewhere resigned themselves to the prospect of living by themselves in old age, many children in all studied communities planned to terminate their work elsewhere, and did so, to return home and take care of elderly parents who could no longer care for themselves. Household 53 in Mỹ Lệ ('Southern 1') was composed of a 55-year-old husband, a 52-year-old wife, his 83-year-old widowed mother, their 31-year-old daughter and her husband, a 28-year-old daughter and the latter's nuclear family (with two children born in 2002 and 2010), as well as two unmarried adult children (21 and 16 years old). The 52-year-old wife took care of the grandson born in 2010, so that her second daughter and her son-in-law could go to work.

Q: Is your husband's work stable?

A: It is stable. But he says that he is prepared to quit his job.

Q: Why does he plan to stop working?

A: Because his mother is sick. I am busy with the kids and cannot take care of her. He plans to stop working at the end of this year in order to take care of his mother ... If he stops, our monthly income will be reduced by a few million dong. It is going to be a financial squeeze ... But I have to accept it. If I interfere in this decision of his, and if anything does not go well, I will get blamed ... my husband is the youngest son of his mother [thus having to take the primary responsibility for caring for his parents].

Q: With responsibilities for the 2-year-old grandson, your wife cannot go to work.

A: (Husband) What else can we do? We care for our daughter and grandchildren.

(Wife) It is my fate that I have to work hard [caring for children].

In household 188 in Long Sơn ('Southern 2'), after the wife's many years of employment as a textile worker and the husband's long-standing bus transportation work in Hồ Chí Minh City, the couple decided to give up their jobs and to return to the husband's native community in the Mekong Delta out of moral obligation to the husband's elderly grandmother. 'And as a wife, I felt that I had to return here with him,' the wife said with a touch of resignation. In the north there was an even greater expectation on the part of the elderly that their children should return to their natal communities.

In Sơn Dương ('Northern 2') household 77, the elderly couple who at one point or another raised five grandchildren by their three children strongly hoped that their children would return to the village. Hùng was the eldest and the earliest migrant among the three children, and had a clear plan to return to his native village out of filial piety, despite his good business in the destination area and his property there:

Interviewer: You say that you want to return to your home village. Why? You have a successful business here.

Mr Hùng: There are a few reasons. First, I am the eldest son, and my father wants me to stay in our home village. I also want to take care of my parents in their old age. It is easier to do business here, but I have to listen to my father. Only if I respect my father would my children respect me. If my father insists that it is an obligation, I will return.

Interviewer: You would not return if you were not the eldest son?

Mr Hùng: No, I would not.

Interviewer: Why?

Mr Hùng: Many reasons. In the home village, a lot depend on personal relations. For example, if somebody in the home village does not like you, he/she will cause you trouble. Here, there is more room to do as I want. It is more difficult to do business at home. Furthermore, there are all the social gatherings, drinking, banqueting there ... If I return to the home village, it is only for retirement. Not to do any business.

Interviewer: When do you plan to return to your home village?

Mr Hùng: I do not yet know when. It depends on my parents. I just know that I will return for sure.

Interviewer: Does your wife agree to this plan?

Mr Hùng: She will have to follow me. If I return to the home village, she will return for sure ...

Interview of the husband in household 77.10 on 19 May 2013 in BÌNH DƯƠNG, conducted by NGUYỄN THỊ NHUNG

In general, the family vision communicated in one interview after another involved a moral framework of strong mutual care among family members. People in all the studied communities considered it their moral responsibility to care, financially or otherwise, for their family members, including the young and the old. This raises the important question of whether this is something that has recently emerged as part of a neoliberal 'turn' or is long-standing in Vietnamese history and culture. It is to this question that the paper now turns.

3 Hegemony of Global Neoliberal Ideology?

It is widely accepted in the literature on contemporary Vietnam that after *đổi mới*, social welfare policy in Vietnam, including the care for the young and the elderly, has been transformed in line with the state's discourse on *xã hội hóa* (societalisation). This discourse suggests that society, including families and communities, shoulders a burden for social welfare, in a shift away from state responsibilities (see, for example, Barbieri and Bélanger 2009: 23–4; cf. London 2018: ch. 9). However, this paper suggests that, even at the height of the command economy, social welfare was not always as generous as portrayed, and rural families and communities played the main role in the care of young children and the elderly. The state's and people's discourses on the family's and the community's care responsibilities did not emerge during the past four decades or only in post-colonial Vietnam. They had much deeper local historical and cultural roots. Furthermore, the state's social policies in the past four decades have not consistently been in the neoliberal direction of shifting responsibilities to society and families.

3.1 *Social Services during the Command Economy Era: No Universal Access*

A command economy before 1986 notwithstanding, the state in North Vietnam from 1954 to 1975 and in the reunified Vietnam in the following decade was not the sole funder of health, education and care services/facilities. In the countryside, where about 80 per cent of Vietnamese resided (Trần Văn Thọ et al. 2000: 239), it was not the state but the cooperatives and families that played

the most important role in social welfare provision. For example, the staff at a commune health centre where rural people could receive rudimentary care received monthly salaries not from the state but from the local agricultural cooperative. Similarly, the staff at a rural daycare centre normally received not state salaries but work points from a cooperative, like other members of agricultural cooperatives. They received products at the time of harvest on the basis of their work points.⁹ Childcare for cooperative members was normally free, but there were service limitations. For example, in 'Northern 2' village, during the command economy era, the earliest age for admission to its daycare centre was 12 months, when the baby was weaned off the mother's milk (*cai sữa*) (cf. Chaliand 1969: 170). Furthermore, cooperatives did not provide lunches for children at daycare centres under their management. Rural parents picked up their children for lunch and rest at home before bringing them back in the afternoon. In health care, if a local commune health centre provided free rudimentary services for cooperative members, district and higher-level hospitals charged for meals and medication, although these charges could be partially or totally exempted for poor people (Đặng Phong 2005: 696). As to the elderly, agricultural cooperatives did not provide any pension or supplementary income to retired/elderly members, although the latter could buy up to 19.5 kilograms of paddy at the official price (called *định suất*) from cooperatives (Nguyen Xuan Lai 1977: 205). The state in North Vietnam specified in its 1959 family law that children had the obligations to respect, to care for and to support their parents (Article 17), and that adult children still living with parents were obligated to take care of the family (as a whole) (Article 20).¹⁰ Thus, both the state and people expected the elderly and former cooperative members to be supported by their own children. This expectation is underlain by the millennium-old concept of filial piety in Vietnamese culture.

Even the most basic daycare and health care services were not universally available to rural dwellers, because the resources of cooperatives varied tremendously from one locality to another and through time. For example, after 1975, in the southern third of Vietnam where the cooperative movement barely took off, the rural welfare system was not in place. 'Southern 3' commune had no daycare centres for small children at all from 1975 until 2001, and this was

9 In 'Central 2' community, where the cooperative was fairly strong in the early 1980s, a teacher at a kindergarden which accepted children older than 3 years old reported being paid only 13 kilograms of paddy (equivalent to 9 kilograms of rice) a month in 1984 and nothing else.

10 <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/quyen-dan-su/Luat-Hon-nhan-va-gia-dinh-1959-2-SL-36857.aspx>

typical of rural communities in the southern third of Vietnam. Even in 'Central 2' community, where agricultural cooperatives were established in the early 1980s, no public daycare centre has ever been formed for children under the age of 3. During the command economy, the only social services to which rural dwellers across the country could have free access were rudimentary local health care.

In urban areas, for industrial workers, it was not the state but state companies and company-based trade unions that provided the bulk of funding for childcare centre construction and *partially* subsidised the operation of childcare centres. For civil servants, few public service agencies had resources to operate daycare centres. Their employees had to rely on public daycare centres, for which there was a waiting list. A cadre in Hồ Chí Minh City reported that daycare centres gave priority to households without daycare resources at home (that means, without family members to take care of babies) (personal communication). She reported that despite the two-month maternity leave at the time and the lack of daycare resources in her nuclear family, her baby was given a place in a daycare centre only at the age of 9 months. A Hanoi cadre of the same age reported that in the 1980s, a child could be admitted to a public daycare centre only when s/he was at least 18 months old (personal communication). Furthermore, urban daycare services were free neither to industrial workers nor to cadres. Directive 118 of the Vietnamese Prime Minister in 1961 (118/TTg) specified that the family of an industrial worker or civil servant putting a child in a daycare centre would have to pay not only for the child's food but also a service fee. In the context that the minimum worker/civil servant salary was 27.3 dong a month at the time, this service fee was specified not to exceed 2 dong a month for the first child, 3 dong a month for two children, and 4.5 dong a month for three children (respectively 7.3 per cent, 11 per cent and 16.5 per cent of the minimum monthly salary).¹¹ In general, childcare services were not universally available in urban areas, as there was not sufficient space and access depended partly on whether the family could take care of a baby at home (see Circular 18/TT/LB in 1960). Even after a considerable service expansion, in 1975 in North Vietnam only 50 per cent of urban children in the 0–3 age range and 24 per cent of rural children were in childcare centres (Phạm Thị Sửu 2006: 115–16).

Beyond daycare services for small children, state employees (including workers at state enterprises) had free access to state hospitals during the

11 Minimum salaries for industrial workers and civil servants were specified respectively in Article 5, Decree 25-CP and Article 7, Decree 24-CP, both issued in 1960. Childcare centre fees were set in Article 111.2 of Directive 118/TTg of the Vietnamese Prime Minister in 1961.

command economy era. Those with sufficient service in the state sector also received a pension upon retirement. However, in 'Northern 1' village, a state employee reported a meagre pension of only 5 kilograms of rice a month in the late 1980s and having to depend on his children even for food.

In general, the perception of universal access to free medical care, education, and childcare during the command economy period in Vietnam is clearly mistaken (see Luong 2023; cf. London 2018: 339). The elderly and other people in rural Vietnam only had access to free rudimentary care at commune health centres. Access to daycare services was not universally available, neither in urban contexts nor even in rural northern Vietnam before 1981, when agricultural cooperatives still had considerable collective resources. Even in urban contexts and among civil servants, whether a grandparent was available to take care of a small child determined whether this child was admitted to a daycare centre soon or much later, and daycare services were not free. In rural North Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, although cooperatives provided free daycare services at least to children aged 12 months and above, the earlier-mentioned low participation rate of 24 per cent by 1975 suggests that the majority of rural families preferred to take care of their small children by themselves, out of love for children and grandchildren and as a part of the culturally rooted moral framework for family life. This moral framework includes the care of and material support for the elderly, few of whom living in the countryside had pensions or any income (retired state employees being exceptions).

3.2 *Social Services in a Market Economy (1986 to Present)*

At least for rural Vietnam, available data do not fully support the assertion (Nguyen 2018b; Barbieri 2009) that, since 1986, the Vietnamese state has divested itself of its previous welfare responsibilities. In the context of the contraction, collapse or lack of agricultural cooperatives, the Vietnamese state has actually assumed greater responsibilities in some areas, such as kindergarden teachers' salaries, the funding for commune health centres and support for the elderly. At the same time, in line with the state discourse on *xã hội hóa* (societalisation), families and individuals have directly paid more for medical, daycare and educational services in the market economy era.

For young children in the countryside, the Vietnamese state has gradually taken responsibilities for kindergarden teachers' salaries, starting in 2002 with the salaries for qualified teachers in remote poor communes and for kindergarden principals and vice principals in other rural areas (Phạm Thị Sửu 2006: 324). By 2020, the state was fully responsible for kindergarden teachers' salaries throughout the country.

For the elderly, unprecedented in Vietnamese history is the universal income supplement for the elderly without a pension aged 80 and above. This supplement provided 180,000 dong a month in 2012 and 270,000 dong in 2013 (Government Decree 136/2013/NĐ-CP, equivalent respectively to 20 kilograms and 30 kilograms of rice a month).¹² For the elderly, this income supplement is in addition to the agricultural land allocation to rural dwellers in north and central Vietnam in 1994, when collective agricultural land was allocated per capita, regardless of age. A number of interviewed elderly people in our studied communities reported renting out their allocated land due to the migration of children and their inability to continue farming. The rental income paid in paddy was normally sufficient to cover their rice consumption in old age. The unprecedented social assistance to the elderly by the Vietnamese government is contrary to M. Barbieri's claim regarding the precipitous decline in government assistance to the elderly (Barberi 2009: 149).

For medical services, the Vietnamese state has taken over the funding for rural commune health centres, including the salaries of medical staff, in the context of the contraction, collapse or lack of agricultural cooperatives. In the larger picture, the government has launched a health insurance programme which currently covers about 90 per cent of the Vietnamese population.¹³ The state provides free health insurance to children up to the age of 6, the elderly aged 80 or above, people officially classified as poor, people with recognised contributions to the Communist Party-led revolution, as well as to members of ethnic minorities in mountainous areas. The government also subsidises health insurance for the near-poor, up to 80 per cent of the premium, as well as to students.¹⁴ People in the formal sector of the economy have health insurance through their employers, including in their retirement.

12 This benefit applied only to the elderly aged 90 or above without a pension in 2002. In 2010, it was extended to anyone aged 80 or above without a pension, as well as those in the 60–79 age range without children, grandchildren or other relatives supporting them. The basic amount of 180,000 dong in 2010 quadrupled that in 2002. Anyone aged 80 or above with a disability received double the basic amount (Giang and Wesumperuma 2013; see also Giang 2013).

13 <https://suckhoedoisong.vn/ty-le-bao-phu-bhyt-gan-90-dan-so-vuot-chi-tieu-chinh-phu-giao-n181432.html>

14 The government provides a 30 per cent subsidy to students' health insurance premiums, and in 2019–20 a student's family paid only 563,220 dong a year (<https://ebh.vn/tin-tuc/muc-dong-bhyt-cho-hoc-sinh-sinh-vien-nam-hoc-moi-2019-2020>). In 2019, 95 per cent of the elderly had health insurance coverage (Announcement 445 of the Vietnamese government, 445/TB-VPCP).

The rest of the population, including agricultural cultivators and workers in the informal sector of the economy, can buy insurance, of which the premium amounts to about 3 per cent of the average rural income.¹⁵

In education and daycare services, rural families and individuals have generally paid more in the market economy era. For daycare services, rural parents have to pay for these services not because of the state's withdrawal but because agricultural cooperatives can no longer provide income to daycare staff. Among the seven rural communities in this study, daycare centres admitted children from the age of 2 (in 'Northern 2') or 3 (in 'Northern 1', 'Central 2', 'Southern 1') upwards. The monthly daycare charge varied from 76,000 dong to 130,000 dong (US \$3.5 to US \$6), and daily food charges from 10,000 dong to 20,000 dong (50 cents to US \$1, the higher charge being for three meals a day).¹⁶ For rural-to-urban migrants with small children, the urban daycare costs, mostly at private centres, are higher, because factory-based daycare for infants after the end of mothers' maternity leave has been rare in the booming foreign and private sector.¹⁷ However, the daycare costs to rural parents and migrants

15 According to the Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey, the average per capita income in rural Vietnam was US \$904 in 2012 (Vietnam-GSO 2014c: 202). Since 2015, the Vietnamese social insurance agency has sold voluntary health insurance policies not to individuals but to households. The premium per individual decreases with each additional household member included in the household's insurance policy (Dao 2018: 166). However, individuals considering themselves healthy find loopholes and, after three to six months, opt out of their households' health insurance policies in order to save money without affecting the enrolment of other household members needing health insurance because of the directive that currently enrolling individuals cannot be dropped. This makes it difficult to achieve 100 per cent health insurance coverage in Vietnam.

16 Some of my studied communities also had *private* daycare centres that admitted children less than 1 year old, and, in 2013, charged from US \$1 to US \$1.5 a day, depending on community.

17 The Japanese company Yazaki EDS Vietnam (manufacturing automotive spare parts) led the pack in providing daycare for children as young as 4 months old. The company does not charge any fees, and workers bringing their children there for daycare have to pay only for their children's food, which the company also partly subsidises. Local Vietnamese governments in a number of provinces support the building of daycare centres through land grants, or through funds for daycare centre construction (<http://www.thuvienbinhduong.org.vn/?ArticleId=6693534a-277e-498d-90da-bbb14a3d1f77>; <http://congdoanbinhduong.org.vn/tin-tuc/chi-tiet/co-mot-truong-mam-non-mien-phi-tai-cong-ty-yazaki-1408>; <http://www.congdoan.vn/tin-tuc/chuyen-de-510/nha-tre-mau-giao-cho-con-cong-nhan-lao-dong-tai-cac-khu-cong-nghiep-khu-che-xuat-hien-nay-182640>). However, despite this government support and the exhortation of trade unions, factory-based daycare centres are very rare in foreign and private companies.

result not from the state's divestment of previously assumed responsibilities in this area, but from the collapse or lack of agricultural cooperatives and the weakness of trade unions in the private and foreign sectors of the economy.

In education, although schooling is officially free from grade 1 to grade 5, local schools impose various fees – for lab equipment, school facility improvement, among many others (Luong and Vũ Văn Ngọc 2009). Tuition is charged at the high school level and above.¹⁸

Rural families' partial payments for educational services and health care insurance are in line with the Vietnamese government's discourse on *xã hội hóa* (societalisation), meaning the share of social service costs by communities, families and individuals. However, for people in the southern third of Vietnam who have benefited little from socialist policies on social services, it is not clear that they shoulder any more responsibilities for the care of the young and the old in the market economy era than during the command economy period. Furthermore, the state has provided more to the elderly than in previous periods of Vietnamese history. It is therefore not correct to conclude that the Vietnamese state has consistently shifted responsibilities to households and communities, its discourse on *xã hội hóa* (societalisation) notwithstanding.

3.3 *Hegemony of Global Neoliberal Ideology?*

Among the hundreds of interviews that we conducted, few interviewees voiced complaints about contemporary state policies regarding the care of small children or of the elderly. Why did few voice such complaints despite the fact that migrants found it challenging to raise their small children in destination areas, and that many had to arrange for their parents to raise their children in their rural home communities? This was partly because, even in the command economy period, it was employers and cooperatives, not the state, that provided most childcare services. In general, few interviewees looked back with nostalgia to the command economy period. To numerous rural interviewees, the phrase 'the command economy era' evoked memories of deep poverty and severe shortage of foods and basic commodities.

Interviewees discussed the care for members of their families in terms of strong moral obligations among family members. This moral framework is transmitted from one generation to another through the pervasive discourse of sacrifice and moral debt in the extended family (see Shohet 2010 and 2013). Interviewees considered the care of small children and the elderly primarily as an individual and family responsibility (see also Hoang et al. 2012). They talked

¹⁸ The state Bank of Social Policy provides student loans. The loan ceiling was above the tuition level at most public universities in 2019.

proudly about their filial piety to elderly parents and their moral worth in caring for children and other family members (cf. Nguyen 2014). To migrants and their family members, a good life was defined not simply by material and modern comfort but also in terms of morally sound relations to closest relatives. However, rural dwellers and migrants' discourse on community, family and individual responsibilities for the very young and the elderly, like that of the state, does not represent a fundamental shift from the dominant discourse in the command economy period and previous periods of Vietnamese history. It is therefore ahistorical and simplistic to attribute the long-standing emphasis on family obligations in rural Vietnam to the state's discourse on *xã hội hóa* (societalisation) or the global neoliberal ideology, which have gained ascendancy in the past three or four decades.

4 Conclusion

A large number of older rural residents in Vietnam do not consider urban life highly attractive, its associations with modernity notwithstanding. For various reasons, including the need to care for family members, many younger family members have returned to their home communities in the countryside (Luong 2018b). Interviewees consider the care for elderly parents and young children primarily as an individual and family responsibility. To migrants and their family members, a good life was defined not simply in terms of material and modern comfort but also in terms of morally sound relations to closest family members.

In the Western ideological landscape, with the emphasis on the individual, it is not surprising that the dominant ideology has long focused on the relation between the individual and the state. The state discourse on more family and community responsibilities in the 1980s in the US and UK represents a neoliberal shift in state policies and in the Western ideological landscape (Rose 1996).

In Vietnam, for centuries if not millennia, it is not the individual but the family and the community that have been considered the fundamental social units. This emphasis is reproduced through a socialisation process. Only over the 1954–86 period did a post-independent Vietnamese state, inspired by Marxist ideology rooted in Western historical experiences and ideology, try to be all-encompassing. Even so, at the height of socialist construction and the command economy, when it came to the care for the young and the old, there were major limitations on the reach of the state, and the family and community still played a major role. The ideological landscape of post-*đổi mới* Vietnam is complex, with multiple ideological strands, some of which, with the emphasis

on the family and the community, have exerted a major influence on the state's and people's thinking for millennia. In this context, while acknowledging the impact of global neoliberalism on some policy circles in Vietnam, I argue that it is ahistorical and simplistic to attribute the contemporary discursive emphasis on the family in Vietnam solely to global neoliberal ideology (see also Nonini 2008 and Luong 2023; cf. Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012).

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Making a Good Life by Building a Good House: A Case Study of Baikou New Village in Southeastern China

Lan Wei

Abstract

Over the past two decades, Chinese rural architecture has experienced dramatic changes through the Building the Chinese Socialist New Village movement. Thousands of new houses, particularly in the model of the New Village, have risen abruptly out of the ground. These western-style new houses with a garden (*huayuan yangfang*), which often appear in the media as typical family houses in western society, largely represent the imagination of the good life of the state and the peasant in contemporary China. In this chapter, I focus on how the family house is produced and consumed in Baikou New Village in south China. By presenting the materiality of the dwelling space, this paper probes the intertwined processes of the materialisation of the blueprint of the good life and how the new houses influence family life (especially intergenerational relationships) in post-socialist Baikou New Village.

Keywords

materialisation of the good life – anthropology of house – intergenerational relationship – New Socialist Village construction – rural China

1 Introduction

The house is not an object, a ‘machine to live in’; it is the universe that man [sic] constructs for himself by imitating the paradigmatic creation of the gods, the cosmogony. Every construction and every inauguration of a new dwelling are in some measure equivalent to a new beginning, a new life.

ELIADE 1959: 56–57



FIGURE 9.1 Typical Housing in Baikou New Village (photographed by author).

In response to the rising rural-urban gap, the Chinese government enacted a series of policies to reduce the fiscal burden of the rural and promote development.¹ Among all the changes in rural China, the change to the family house and the rural landscape may be the most visible and tangible. In 2015, when I went to Yingde city to find a model of a Socialist New Village in order to conduct fieldwork research into Chinese rural architecture and landscape transformation, the county government immediately introduced me to Baikou because it is considered to be a successful example of a Socialist New Village.

Baikou village is located in Yingde county in Qingyuan City in Guangdong Province in southern China (see Figure 9.2). It is directly under the administration of the Chengnan Residents' Committee. According to local government documents, the population was 373 in 2015, which encompassed 76 households

1 For example, the new rural cooperative medical system was introduced in 2003 by the government whose aim is to ensure basic healthcare for the rural population. The policy of educational surcharges waiver eliminated the collection of most educational charges for compulsory education (primary and middle school) in 2006. The tax-for-fee reform in 2002–04 and the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2005–06 largely eliminated the tax burden. The Building a New Socialist Countryside programme in 2006 apparently improved rural living conditions, especially the condition of the infrastructure. Then, the Rural Minimum Living Standard Guarantee program (or *Dibao* program) that aims to alleviate rural poverty was initiated in 2007. Most recently, 'The Beautiful Countryside' policy was implemented for the purpose of beautifying and ameliorating the rural living environment in 2013. 'The Beautiful Countryside' programme is the latest step in the Building a New Socialist Countryside programme. As rural development and construction have become the main work of policy concentration again since the middle 2000s, various effects have become apparent.



FIGURE 9.2 Location of Baikou.

and 11 surname groups. As the village is only about two kilometers from Yingde, many young villagers find jobs in the city centre. Thus, unlike many other villages in this region where the villagers are often working as migrants, there are only a few villagers working as migrants in nearby metropolises such as Guangzhou and Jiangmen. In the 1990s, government officials were encouraged to go abroad to learn about development processes. In 1996, the party secretary of Yingde county visited villages in Taiwan to learn how to pursue development. After he returned to Yingde, he decided to build a new village following a Taiwanese model.

There are four main reasons why Baikou was selected as a model New Village by the local county government. Firstly, the village owned plenty of land which could be exploited. Secondly, it was one of the poorest villages in the region because of the low soil quality, which means not much paddy rice can be cultivated. However, in the early 1990s, giant Taiwanese bamboo plants were imported and planted in Baikou, as well as in other nearby townships. The cultivation of Taiwanese bamboo significantly increased the income of the villagers. Thirdly, more houses were needed due to the rise in population in the 1980s and 1990s; this coupled with a demand for better living conditions when the average income suddenly increased in the 1990s. Last but not least, a Baikou villager who was the former secretary of the Chengnan Resident's Community Committee has good *guanxi* ('particularistic ties' or 'personal networks') with the relevant county government officials. Therefore, in 1997, Baikou is selected by the county government to be built as a model New Village in the region, completely changing local architecture, with forty-two new houses built in

half a year. It is worth mentioning that some families did not join the project, mainly because of financial difficulties. Later, these families built houses behind the forty-two new houses. According to the villagers, the total cost of the houses built in 1997 was approximately 80,000 yuan. Those who could not afford to join the New Village project do not exactly know how much they spent on building their houses because the construction process often took 2–3 years to complete. Extending the process in this way was a strategy used by many families in order to deal with the financial burden. Since 1997, approximately 20 self-funded new houses have been built behind the forty-two new houses and villagers have gradually moved in. In 2011, the local county government expropriated approximately a thousand *mu*^{2,3} of land from the village, which largely changed the local production mode. Agricultural production is no longer the main income resource for the majority of families. In 2012, the land where the old village stood was expropriated by the county government and the village was razed to the ground so the construction project, managed by real estate companies, could begin. Thus, the elders who were reluctant to move away from the space where they have lived for decades moved to the new village too.

In anthropology, since the 1980s, the house, or the home, has come to be seen less as a backdrop or reservoir of an almost unconscious *habitus* constructed out of order and relations, and instead, ‘a mode of expression, a means by which people constructed themselves and their ideologies’ (Miller 2001: 183, 192). As Amos Rapoport suggests, built forms are a communicative device that are encoded with meaning as a result of human interactions with them and they act as a mnemonic for cuing appropriate behavior (Rapoport 1982: 47, 73). For example, Inge Daniels’s research into Japanese houses shows both the cultural representation of the house and how the conflicting ideologies that are practised in the domestic space result in domestic tensions between the inhabitants of Japanese homes (Daniels 2010: 183). According to Daniels, the domestic arena where everyday life, state control and religious intervention intertwine as abstractions and ideologies from the world of religion and politics may be turned into personal, lived experiences. Thereby, individual and familial concerns can be elevated to a communal, national and otherworldly level (Daniels 2010: 192). Victor Buchli’s research on Soviet architecture shows that to eradicate petit-bourgeois consciousness, the material culture of the house was largely eliminated and simplified (Buchli 1997). The house is definitely a

2 1 *mu* = 666.67 square meters.

3 There are no precise government statistics for the land in Baikou but villagers agreed that it is about 3,000 *mu*.

space where meaning is represented. Also, it plays a significant role in reshaping local life, as well as family and social relationships.

Something similar can be said of the Chinese situation. In the 1990s, a slogan was used by the Chinese government in relation to the construction of new houses: 'the condition of the house in which you live determines whether you reach the good life' (*xiaokang bu xiaokang, guanjian kan zhufang*). Similarly to the Beautiful Countryside (*meili xiangcun*) programme launched in 2014, and the Rural Revitalisation Strategy that was launched in 2017, the New Socialist Countryside programme was interpreted at the local level mainly through the construction of new houses in villages. For this reason, the house has become a particularly significant symbol of rural development in China.

Tim Ingold argues, 'the properties of materials are not fixed attributes of matter but are processual and relational' (Ingold 2007:1). Thus, this paper will focus on the intricate process of materialising a good life as conceived by the state and the villager. It aims to shed light on the transformation of social and family relations by explaining the building process and the way new houses are consumed in Baikou New Village. The process of building and consuming the new houses is not only bringing a new model of family life (which refers to both the familial relationships and the individual's *habitus* in everyday life), but also endowing new meaning to the new houses which was unintended by the New Village programme.

The data collected for this paper comes from twelve-months of ethnographic research in 2015 in Baikou New Village in southern China. Approximately 115 interviews were conducted with local villagers and government officials. During the twelve months, I employed participate observation by living in the village and joining local activities. I lived with a local family for twelve months which enabled me to participate deeply in family life, including witnessing everyday routines, ritual, conflict, bodily perception of space and so forth. I also participated in various community activities including ancestral worship, villager assembly and village committee meetings. Also, historical archives provided by the local government are part of the research data. As aforementioned, in 2011, the local county government expropriated⁴ approximately a thousand *mu* of land from the village. This has resulted in many conflicts between different interest groups over the distribution of land compensation (Wei and Nguyen Forthcoming). This tension between the different interest groups in the village required me to be very sensitive to ensure people trusted my neutral

4 It means the transfer of land ownership from the village to the county government.

standpoint and the confidentiality of the interview. It took me several months to persuade people to accept my 'neutral role'.

Baikou people mainly speak Fucheng dialect in their everyday lives, which is a combination of Cantonese and Hakka. After nearly half a year, I could generally understand Fucheng dialect but could not speak it well. The villagers use some colloquial phrases and terms, which cannot be precisely translated into Mandarin; as a result, this limited my understanding at times. For privacy protection, all the names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

2 The Paradox of the Socialist New Village

2.1 *Imaginations of a Good Place*

Since 1997 when it became the model of a Socialist New Village, the village leaders explained that many leading villagers from other local townships visited Baikou in order to learn how to build a good New Village. In this way, it became a successful exemplar. Sometimes, even representatives from villages from other provinces come to Baikou to learn from the model. These visiting groups are expected to find a way to build a New Village by emulating exemplary model villages. This kind of activity is usually organised by the local municipal government and county government who are the major drivers of the New Village. As a model village, Baikou New Village offers an ideal or a blueprint that can be copied.

In the village committee office, there are silk banners and medals hanging on the wall which show that Baikou has received many honours from different levels of the local government. These accolades include: a 'Civilised Village' award from the Langping Street Communist Committee in 1997; a 'Model Village of Ecology' award from the Qingyuan Municipal Government in 2007; an 'Advanced village sub-committee' award from the Chengnan Resident's Committee in 2010; and a 'Healthy village of Guangdong Province' award from the Patriotic Health Campaign Committee of Guangdong Province in 2015. These awards clearly outline the expected characteristics of a 'model' village. The awards Baikou New Village received from 1997 to 2015 relate to categories including: 'civilised', 'advanced', 'scientific', 'hygiene' or 'health', 'ecology' and 'livable'. These qualities can be understood as the imagination of the good life of the state which is interpreted specifically in the landscape of the village. 'Health' is often interpreted as providing a clean public toilet (which is hardly used), a sports centre, as well as keeping the streets and lanes clean. 'Ecologically friendly and livable' is often interpreted as planting trees and flowers in the village. 'Scientific, advanced and civilised' in general refer to the modern

buildings, the Culture Centre which is supposed to be a space for community life and for holding feasts (although it was leased out as a commercial property in 2015), and the library which has never really been used, possibly due to poor management and the irrelevance of the books.⁵ (Most of the books are children's textbooks donated by the villagers). In a broader sense, all the acclaimed characteristics of the model village suggest that a modernised village life will not only contribute to improved living conditions but also to the *suzhi* (human quality) of the villagers.

In terms of living conditions, there were also various opinions amongst the villagers. The majority tended to agree that there has been a general improvement in their living conditions, but they also emphasized that the new houses built in 1997 were of a very poor quality. Some young villagers (born after the 1970s) emphasize that the ecological environment of the old village was much better. As a young man Zhiwen Zhu said, 'there was always a big yard in the old houses. And grasses and flowers were everywhere in the old village, so we didn't have to grow flowers' (Interview on 29th March 2015, recorded in fieldnotes). A 41-year-old woman Shu Ye said, 'the environment of the houses in the past was more beautiful than present – we had a stream just in front. But the new house is more beautiful than the old ones' (Interview on 30th November 2015, recorded in fieldnotes). However, according to the villagers who were born before the 1970s, the straight road and strictly ordered houses clearly accord with their imagination of a good place.

Additionally, the New Village is believed to improve the *suzhi* of its inhabitants. The concept of *suzhi* can be referred to as 'the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and ideological characteristics of a person' (Murphy 2004, see also in Bakken 2000: 50–72; Anagnost 1997). The discourse of *suzhi* is considered as a substitutional discourse of class in post-socialist China for its less political and more liberal character (Kipnis 2007; Anagnost 1997, 2004). As Murphy argues, the articulation of diverse policy initiatives through *suzhi* gives legitimacy to increased state intervention in the private sphere but encourages retreat from the public sphere (particularly the withdrawal of collective welfare) (Murphy 2004: 19). In the case of Baikou, the concept of *suzhi* is often interpreted as 'better hygiene habits', a cleaner living environment (including

5 In 2012 and 2013, I worked at a non-government organization and participated in the evaluation of various development projects in southwest, northeast and northern China. The village communities often required a library. However, according to my observations, the village libraries are often left unused. In other words, the development projects that build libraries in rural areas are the most wasted. Most of the libraries we built are covered in dust and hardly used.

the domestic space), higher educational levels and so forth. Unfortunately, as 'material foundations' (*wuzhi jichu*) of *suzhi*, the new houses have also led to stinging family conflicts. In summary, the Socialist New Village Programme is not necessarily bringing egalitarian values and solidarity to the community, and the improved living conditions are not necessarily facilitating a happier and more harmonious family life.

2.2 *Rising Conflicts in Baikou*

The national Building a New Socialist Countryside programme launched formally in December 2005.⁶ In 1997, in response to the party secretary of Yingde county's plan, the county government launched the New Village programme in Baikou. With cooperation between the local government and the village leaders, the New Village was planned and designed in a short time. Forty-two families who could afford new houses joined the programme. The county government promised to pay half the cost of the new houses (30,000 yuan), and the villagers would pay the other half (30,000 yuan).

At the beginning of my fieldwork in 2015, several families showed me how poor the quality of the houses was. The low proportion of cement used had caused metope cracking. Also, they complained that the total cost per house was approximately 80,000 yuan which was the equivalent of about eight-years' annual net income for a core family living in Yingde city at that time. According to the former village head, Xuede Ye, the county government did not have a budget for the project even though they had the blueprint to build a model of the Socialist New Village. As a consequence, the village committee owed a huge debt (about 1.6 million yuan) to the building material dealers and construction companies. In 2000, this caused the building material dealers and construction companies to launch several protests against the village, which drew the attention of the national media including China Central Television (CCTV)⁷ (Ma 2003) and *Beijing Morning* (Zhou 2003). In the end, the protests did not escalate, instead, the county government successfully suppressed the conflicts by force. According to the news report, building material dealer, Jianwen Wang, revealed the village still owes him 440,000 yuan. In March 2002, the People's Court of Yingde county reached a verdict decreeing that the village must pay all its debts in 15 days. However, the verdict was not properly executed (Ma 2003). According to Xuede Ye, the dealers and construction

6 Guangdong was the pioneer of social reform in China in the 1990s.

7 According to the former village head, Xuede Ye, a CCTV journalist tried to extort 100,000 yuan in return for not reporting this issue. The party secretary of the township refused to do so and therefore a negative report on the issue was released.

companies then gave up on recovering the debt. He said, 'The debt has yet to be repaid even today, but time solved all the problems. The bosses forgot the debt as time went by' (Interview on 30th July, 2015, recorded in fieldnotes).

The idea was to create a strictly ordered village with highly uniform new houses to demonstrate the egalitarian and well-organised character of socialism. However, in reality, financial wealth determined the social stratification of the village. Whoever paid the deposit (10,000 yuan) first had priority to select the position of their house. According to the villagers, the first row in the southernmost corner of the New Village was considered the best location at the time of building. Thus the families with sufficient means to pay the deposit immediately selected houses in the first row. Eighteen years after the New Village was established, the households in the first row are still the wealthiest. The majority of the village heads and primary leaders of the post-collective period reside in the first row. The villagers who are considered the smartest (*jing*)⁸ and politically the most influential in the village all live there too. In 2011, the county government expropriated more than a thousand *mu* of land in Baikou, which not only brought the villagers⁹ sudden and considerable wealth, and dramatically changed their production mode, but also caused a lot of conflicts between the villagers due to the biased distribution of the compensation fee from the land expropriation. The people living in the first row are considered as the vested interest group who receive more benefits than others from the land development. Therefore, the villagers often use the term 'first row' to indicate the 'first class' who are the wealthiest, the most influential in village affairs and decision-making, and also the most furtive vested interest group.

To sum up, there is an ironic paradox between the 'socialist' goal of the New Village and the reality which includes unaffordable debt (for both villagers and the government), and conflict-ridden social stratification. Hans Steinmüller's research into the face projects in rural constructions in Hubei shows how local intimate knowledge or the 'communities of complicity' contribute to the paradoxical co-existence of modernist representation and traditionalist self-knowledge, which results in 'involution' (Steinmüller 2013). In the case of Baikou, the paradox of modernisation and traditionalism is also clearly seen in family life. In the next two sections, I will focus on the structure, décor and

8 According to the local definition, 'smart' often refers to 'flexibility' (*ling*), which encompasses being good at gaining social and financial capital.

9 According to the expropriation fee distribution rule, every villager was entitled to a compensation fee for the fixed amount of five *mu*. This included both those whose land was and was not expropriated. The remaining part of the compensation fee was paid into the collective account.

usage of the new house to illustrate the transformation of domestic space since 1997, which contributes to portraying a new prospect of a good family life. I argue the change in the houses not only represents changing family relations, but also contributes to the remaking of them.

3 Spatial Reorientation and Social Order Restructuring

As Carsten states, 'house structure reflects in a complex way the social relations that are enacted within it' (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 124). The transformation of the house structure can be considered as a representation of transforming social and family relations. In this section, I will focus on the dynamics of change in domestic spatial organization and family relations. There are two concurrent principles of domestic spatial restructuring that contribute to the remaking of family relations. First, spatial restructuring tends to be decentralized from the Confucian principle in which the senior is valued above the junior, and patriarchally, the male above the female. In contrast, the new house built after 1997 is unlike the old one built before 1997 which has a certain centre that reified the hierarchy and power of the principle of Confucianism. Second, the structure and the usage of the new domestic house clearly presents how the idea of a good life has been interpreted by centralizing around private consumption and privacy.

3.1 *Decentralisation from Confucian Hierarchy*

In this region, the architecture was mainly in the *tianjing*-style. *Tianjing*-style architecture was characteristic of the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) and the Republic of China era. It is considered an appropriate aesthetic for the landscape of southern China. This means that the ancestral hall, used for ancestor worship, forms the centre of the strictly symmetrical building. Additionally, there is a yard in front of the ancestral hall. Until 1995, the layout of the houses in Baikou still followed the *tianjing*-style. There is a hall in the middle of the building and rooms that lie symmetrically at the east and west wings of the hall. There is a yard in front of the main building, and a kitchen and storage spaces at the east and west of the yard (see Figure 9.3). This structure echoes the architecture of the lineage village or a single-surname village in that the placement of an ancestral hall at the centre dominated the orientation and symmetry of the whole (Bray 1997: 71). The structure of the family houses has not changed much in the rural areas in this region, though the Soviet-style residential buildings were the model portrayed as ideal for Chinese socialist life in urban areas during the Collective Era (Li 2017). It is only since 1997 that the

house structure has undergone a revolutionary transformation: the traditional symmetrical structure has been replaced by a Western-style asymmetrical one (see Figures 9.3–9.4), according to the local definitions of “western-style” and “traditional style”.

In the new house, the living room is considered by local people to be the substitution of the ancestral hall of the old house, but its ritual function is largely dispelled. The living room is also called *keting* in Chinese, which literally means guest hall: *ke* means guest, and *ting* means hall. It is mainly used for receiving guests and for family gatherings. The living room may be the space

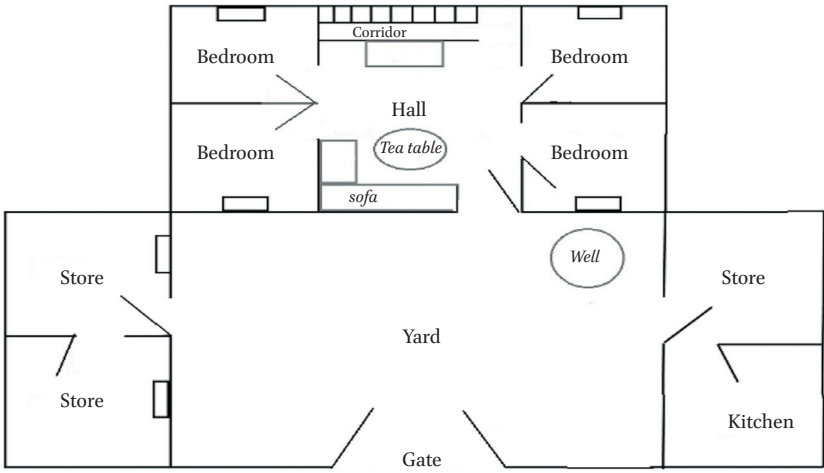


FIGURE 9.3 House of Yangtu Wei built in 1995 (drawn by author).

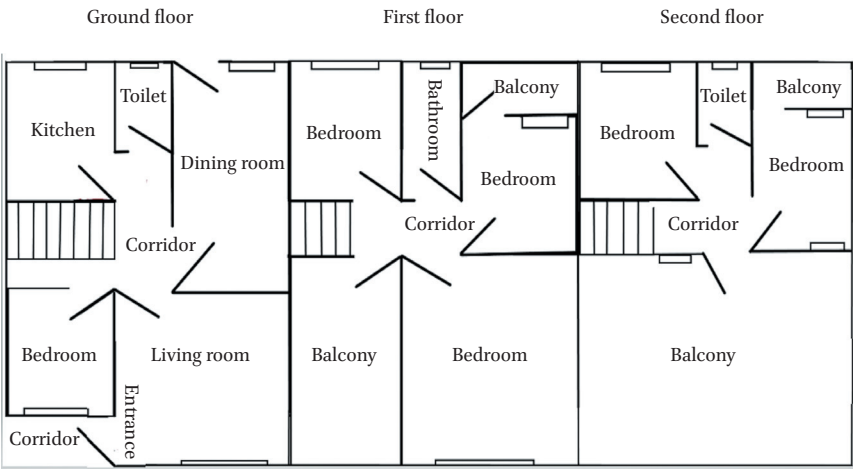


FIGURE 9.4 House built in 1997 (drawn by author).

where people spend the most time in everyday life, compared with the other rooms in the house. Here families chat, watch television, sometimes have dinner, and children do their homework, even though it is not absolutely considered the centre of the house. In the houses built before 1997, the ancestral hall was the centre in both a physical and symbolic sense. This is always the largest room in the house and all the other rooms are an extension of the ancestral hall. However, in houses built in 1997 and later, the centre of the house is not as self-evident as in the old houses. The senior villagers often believe that the living room on the ground floor is the centre, but some villagers (both the young and the elder) believe that the second floor is the centre, as the house comprises three floors. Some young villagers believe the bedroom is the centre because it is the most private space. For example, Yicong Liu, a man aged 33 who got married in 2012, said, 'I think the centre of house is my bedroom. Because centre means harmony (*hexie*). I feel peace in my bedroom.' Clearly, the concept of 'centre' in the new building is not so absolute as in the old buildings where the (ancestral) hall is the absolute centre. In the new houses, the centre can be defined in the sense of size, the extent of personal attachment, the frequency of usage or the significance in family life. The uncertainty of the centre of the new houses points to the decentralization of the dwelling space which has definitely deconstructed the implications of Confucianist hierarchy as I will now demonstrate in detail.

The Confucian principle includes a strict hierarchy of every social and family role. The orientation of the body or the position of the person is very much ordered by the hierarchy of social status. For example, the ancestor's tablet or portrait is often put on the northernmost wall of the hall, which is considered as the most superior position in houses built before 1997. Meanwhile, the north-facing position is considered inferior and normally reserved for someone younger or with an inferior social position. Chinese people are often trained to be sensitive to the connection between spatial position and social position which shows the embodiment of *li* (ritual). The practices of *li* discourse sought to encompass and control all potent activity (Zito 1993). Nevertheless, the new houses built in 1997 almost completely betray the Confucian principle of spatial construction. For example, inhabitants hang the ancestor portrait in any position rather than solely south-facing and the seniors are not necessarily allowed to occupy the south-facing bedroom (discussed further below). In other words, the connection between the social and spatial order has become unaligned in relation to traditional Confucian practices.

The bedroom distribution clearly shows the change in intergenerational relations. Stem family co-residence is the dominant mode of residence in Baikou, which means a family composed of three generations (in most

cases) - a senior conjugal pair, one of their sons and his wife (in other words, the junior conjugal pair), and the unmarried children of the junior conjugal pair - live under one roof. The senior conjugal pair often live on the ground floor which is always very humid in Spring and Winter and causes bedding to become damp and mouldy. Also, the bedrooms of the seniors are often simple, crude and less decorated. In contrast, the junior couple often choose the south-facing bedrooms on the first floor which are considered the best as they receive more sunshine and are bigger and better furnished than those on the ground and second floors. For example, in Dingliang Liu's home, his son and daughter-in-law merged the living room, the small bedroom and the toilet on the first floor to create a large en-suite. Therefore, their bedroom is approximately four times bigger than their parents' little bedroom on the ground floor. It is much cosier and better furnished, thus indicating the superiority of the junior generation in the family. Dingliang Liu and his wife sometimes complained, to my landlady and I, that their son worked for many years but he never gave them any money. All his wedding costs and the house were paid for by them. This financial pattern occurred in other families in the village too. In addition, the increasing popularity of the en-suite (including a bathroom in the bedroom) further highlights the increasing consciousness of privacy.

Another significant difference is that the kitchen is no longer an unheeded space but has become more visible. In the houses built in 1997, the north room on the ground floor was supposed to be used as a kitchen. However, nearly all the families who did not build a second house at the north of the yard built a kitchen behind the main building. According to the memories of some villagers, in the old houses (built before 1997), the kitchen is often positioned far away from the centre of the house at the corner of the yard (see Figure 9.3), at the west or east side of the main building or behind the main building. In Chinese, 'go to the kitchen' can be expressed as '*xia chufang*' – literally, down to the kitchen, which implies the lower status of this room in the house. It further indicates the low value of kitchen labour, because traditionally it was a female job. In a patriarchal society, the female space should be inconspicuous. Hayden also argues that the patriarchal ideal that 'a woman's place is in the home' was one of the most important principles in architectural design and urban planning in the United States in the twentieth century. This thoroughly divided the public and private space and limited women's potential to engage in communal activity (Hayden 1980). Feminists regard domestic labour as a common burden imposed on women by patriarchy and lazy husbands (Anderson 2000). However, in recent years, as in many other places, housework has become not only the obligation of the women but also of the elders. Since the communist era, women were pushed to go out of the family and participate in building

socialism (Honig 2000). This is regarded as an emancipation of women from the patriarchy of the old society. Women have become a significant force in the labour market in the post-socialist era.

In the case of Baikou, the 'emancipation' seemingly hasn't really happened. Rather, women have to take more responsibility for the family, including more work and housework. In fact, many young women complained that their husbands are lazy. Many young men neither make money in the labour market nor do housework at home. The young village head Anle Liu said to me, 'Look, men at my age in our village, what are they doing every evening? Whoring! ... It is not Mao's era anymore. Nobody will work that hard these days ...' (Interview on 18th December, 2015, recorded in fieldnotes). Besides the lazy men, some are self-employed businessmen and some are relatively low-skilled labours such as drivers. Women often do some low-paid work in the city as cleaning staff, waitresses, salesclerks and so forth. However, it is not easy for grandparents to find a job in the labour market. This has transformed the power balance within families as the young have become the economic backbones. The value of housework is never perceived as being as important as labour in the economic market. Therefore, the significance of the kitchen has not really been upgraded to the level of the 'postmodern kitchen' which Tim Putnam defines as the centre of the house rather than the master bedroom (Putnam, 2006: 11). Most families continue to build the kitchen behind the house where it is still considered to be in a lower position.

3.2 *Centralization around Private Consumption, Privacy and Hygiene Discourse*

The concomitant change of the decentralisation of patriarchy is the rising desire for consumer goods, privacy and hygiene. The separation of the various new social strata follows the logic of consumerism, and the success of the middle-class is measured in commodified expressions of social distinction (Anagnost, 2008: 504). In Baikou, although all the houses are almost identical, which emphasizes the equality and unification of the community, the desire of each family to distinguish their identity and become the superior group can be traced in the house décor and the garden gate. The more well-off families often try to distinguish themselves by choosing a splendid gate, displaying luxury sofas, furniture, tea tables and wine shelves, as well as by building more bathrooms. As the gate is often considered as the face (*mianzi*) of the family, the Chinese often include a large door as the main entrance to an individual house. The gate is generally about four meters high and made of stainless steel, often with some floral patterns or auspicious Chinese characters. Although the households in Baikou share very similar gates, there are several in the first row which are obviously more sumptuous than the others.

Amongst the young who were born after the 1970s, the need for privacy within the domestic space is more apparent compared to the elders. In Baikou, when I asked for permission to photograph the rooms in the house, the senior hosts often agreed without hesitation, while, the younger generation often felt awkward and sometimes refused – further evidence that the younger generation has a stronger consciousness of privacy in the domestic space compared to their parents. In the old houses, the bedroom is more multi-functional than in the new houses; it is more frequently visited during the daytime and often used to receive close friends and kin. The bed is sometimes even used as a sofa. According to my observations, the door of the senior couple's bedroom is often left open and kept accessible for all family members, while the junior couple's bedroom is often closed. In the houses built between 1960 and 1990, the door of the bedroom directly faces the hall or the main entrance of the yard. In other words, the bedroom in the old house can be more easily accessed than in the new one. Access to the bedroom in the new house, on the other hand, means crossing through the living room first, and there is also a hall between rooms that serves as a transitional space to the private zone.

The young couple often apply the expression 'more quiet' to express their preference for the bedroom on the first floor. 'More quiet' in this context, is identical with 'more private'. It means the separation from others in the house. According to Yunxiang Yan's research in Xiajia village, couples living in new houses have more convenience to 'develop conjugal intimacy, to be left alone, and to make decisions without parental intervention' because private space is also more clearly demarcated (Yan 1997: 197). He further argues that the rise of intimacy in courtship 'represents the rise of the individual and the development of individual rights' (Yan, 2002: 51). In post-socialist era Chinese society, there has also been an institutionalised process of individualisation (Yan 2003, 2010). Nevertheless, it worth mentioning that familism has never really been collapsed by the series of social movements in the socialist era, nor by marketisation in the post-socialist era. As Gonçalo Santos and Steven Harrell argue, Yan overstates the extent to which individuals have become unmoored from family and other social and cultural ties (Santos and Harrell 2017). In Baikou, where I conducted research, contrastingly, the senior couple often use the word *fangbian* (convenience, easy) to express their preference to having a bedroom on the ground floor. In Xiajia village, investigated by Yan, the term *fangbian* refers to 'more privacy' in the context of the arrangement of domestic space (Yan 1997: 197), while in Baikou, *fangbian* should refer to 'easily accessible', as the senior parents have to move around frequently because their working space and living space are both in the domestic. In other words, the privacy of domestic space is not the main consideration for the seniors in Baikou. The consciousness of privacy may be a pertinent subject to testify the

consciousness of 'self' (in other words, the consciousness of the relation and the division between self and others). As Judy Attfield says, privacy is about being able to control access to your own space. An occupier of a new house spoke of the pride they experienced from 'having [their] own front' (Attfield 1999: 76). But privacy management is much more than simply limiting access to the self. As Denise Anthony, Celeste Campos-Castillo and Christine Horne state, 'it involves a range of strategies for regulating access to the self and others that intersect with social norms and actors' preferences and structural positions' (2017: 252). Moreover, the unit of privacy is not changeless and non-contextual. As Maria Khayutina explains, the unit of privacy in ancient China could be as large as the clan. She asserts that the private sphere in premodern societies was not a separate sector that was wholly removed from communal life. Multiple private spheres existed at various levels with definable boundaries (Khayutina 2002: 84–5). The unequal distribution of privacy between juniors and seniors not only shows the increasing demand for privacy, which implies the rising 'self-awareness' of the young generation, but also shows that the unit of privacy tends to reduce to a smaller unit – a conjugal pair, and possibly, to a minimal unit – an individual.

The toilet is another of the most demanded spaces in the new house. The perception of 'cleanliness' or hygiene in Chinese culture has been reconstructed as part of the changing living environment and also because of education. *Weisheng jian*, literally hygiene room, which is identical with a bathroom or toilet, is a new space that has appeared in modern China since the early twentieth century. In the ancestral-hall-centered architecture, there is only a latrine outside the main building of the house, usually in the pig sty. According to some villagers' memories, during the 1960s, the village built three public toilets. Human excrement was the main fertilizer used in agricultural production and thus it was also collective property.

*Weisheng*¹⁰ goes far beyond bodily and mental health, or the cleanliness of the environment, to become 'a central element in the definition of modernity'

10 Improving hygiene is also one part of the modernisation movement. The word *weisheng* (hygiene, sanitary, health or public health), derived from the Daoist term *weisheng zhidao* (the way of guarding life), refers to 'a variety of regimens of diet, meditation, and self-medication that were practised by the individual in order to guard fragile internal vitalities' (Rogaski 2004: 14–5). However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, under the influence of the western ideology of modernity, the word *weisheng* 'shifted away from Chinese cosmology and moved to encompass state power, scientific standards of progress, the cleanliness of bodies, and the fitness of races' (ibid., 1). As a result, even now, there is still a coordinating organisation that is subordinate to the State Council of the People's Republic of China: the Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns Committee (*aiguo weisheng*

as Ruth Rogaski suggests (Rogaski 2004: 2). Before the Collective Era in Baikou, every family had a toilet in the sty used for defecation, while people urinated in a commode in their bedroom, which was emptied every morning by women. Sheneng Tong, born in 1957, said that after land was distributed to every household at the end of the 1970s, 'you must have your own toilet because you will not have fertilizer if you do not have a toilet. ... some families immediately built a toilet, some had difficulty and built it after one or two years' (Interview on 9th December, 2015, recorded in fieldnotes).

The newer the house, the more toilets it includes. The young generation often expect a neater and tidier domestic space than the seniors who are expected to take on the obligation of housework. This is likely to be because of the health education they receive (*weisheng jiaoyu*) which is part of the *suzhi* of modern citizenship. However, the health habit (*weisheng xiguan*) is often a significant cause of conflict between the two generations for their perception of '*weisheng*' is obviously different. When I began living with my landlady, I realised that the air on the first floor was smelly so I asked her if there was something wrong with the toilet. She was embarrassed and said she was collecting urine for vegetable cultivation. She explained that before moving to the new houses, every family accumulated urine for agricultural production. Even during the early years of living in the New Village, some villagers of her age (she was born in 1949) were still doing it. This is because the taste of vegetables fertilised by urine is believed to be much better than those cultivated by chemical fertilizer (see also Santos 2011). However, after their land was expropriated by the local government, only very few families continue to engage in agricultural production and the ones that do use chemical fertilizer because it is more convenient. Also, the young generally do not like the seniors to accumulate urine in the new houses. As my landlady explained, her son and granddaughter have asked her to stop doing it several times but she continues because she doesn't notice the smell at all. In fact, it is impossible to accumulate urine due to the flush toilet of the new house, so she still uses a plastic close stool to urinate. (Later I discovered a few relatively poorer families in the village do the same thing too). I felt very sorry for making her embarrassed. Even though I agreed that it is good to accumulate urine as organic fertilizer, she stopped doing it and started to use chemical fertilizer instead. Possibly, she saw me as a 'cultivated' outsider, so she felt embarrassed to continue this 'backward' habit. In other words, her 'embarrassment' and my sensitivity to the smell in the domestic space could be attributed to the discourse of *suzhi* which

yundong weiyuan hui). The main duty of this organisation is to improve China's 'health, appearance, and national status' (ibid., 2).

clearly includes stressing the '*weisheng*' habit. I often heard daughters-in-law complain that their mothers-in-law have bad health habits which implies they leave the house messy, the toilet unclean, do not wash the bedding frequently, skip showers and give children unhygienic food. For example, a young lady named Wei Huang was very unhappy with her mother-in-law's health habits. She explained that her mother-in-law often washes her underwear with the children's clothes which she feared could result in infection. She also complained that the house is always messy because her mother-in-law is not good at cleaning. Her husband Yicong Liu complains about his mother too:

As for living together with parents, I think if the relationship is not very good, it is better not to talk too much. My parents are not very clean at home in the term of hygiene, and we don't have lots of common language. I am not very often at home neither during the daytime nor the night. ... my parents have different habit of *geren weisheng* (personal hygiene), and they always shout at a child. They don't know how to educate children. (Interview on 19th June 2015, recorded in fieldnote)

Due to these conflicting living habits, the economic advantage of the co-residence of the stem family does not seem to match with the level of relationship quality. As a result, the desire to reduce the family size to a nuclear family seems inevitable for the younger generation. In 2016, Yicong Liu and Wei Huang wanted to buy a new apartment in the city centre of Yingde with the financial support of their parents (both sides). Wei Huang implied they planned to move out of Baikou and enjoy a posh urban life. At first, when Yicong Liu's parents heard the plan, they were angry and there were serious disputes in relation to the financial support the young couple expected from the parents and the necessity of buying an extra apartment. In the end, Yicong's father Dingliang Liu explained to me that he and his wife no longer believed that a family should live together because they were tired of seeing their daughter-in-law's grey face every day. Possibly, the elders will find a new way to enjoy a good later life if their descendants are not willing to live under one roof.

According to research conducted by the China Research Center on Aging, 66.47% of elders help look after grandchildren in China, especially when they are under two-years-old (China Research Center on Aging 1993). Another study shows that 56.77% of grandparents (between 60-79-years-old) were taking care of grandchildren in 2014 (Song, Wang and Qin 2018: 97). Without any exaggeration, grandparents play a key role in child-rearing in the majority of families in China. In Baikou, some grandparents said that raising children is more relaxing than doing agricultural work, while contrastingly some said it

makes them feel greater pressure and responsibility. The most common complaint concerning childrearing is about the lack of freedom and the lack of economic independence. As Yixiong Tong, a 50-year-old man explained, 'I like working outside because it is more free. But now, I can't find a way to do it. I like clipping trees. My son and daughter-in-law work outside of Yingde. They travel to many different places. They enjoy freedom but we (he and his wife) are not free' (Interview on 8th December, 2015, recorded in fieldnote).

According to the *hukou* registration system (or household registration system), the nuclear family has become the core family type in contemporary China (Wang 2006: 120, 2010: 76). However, the stem family is still the dominant family structure in Baikou due to its economic advantage and the strength of local custom (namely, stem family co-residence and also patrilocal residence). Yan suggests, the traditional Chinese family, which is characterized by the centrality of the parent-son relationship in family life, tends to be substituted by the conjugal relationship in contemporary China, while the economically more functional stem family guarantees its persistence (Yan 1997: 191–212). The senior conjugal pair often help the married child to take care of grandchildren and so the junior conjugal pair, as the more valuable labour force, are able to participate in the labour market (often as migrant workers). Philip Huang also claims the three-generational stem family still retains its significance in the social, economic and legal institutions of contemporary China, which is different from the assumption that the family as a unit of production will be gradually replaced by the individual in the process of industrialisation (Huang 2011: 82–105). To simplify, there is still a high demand for intergenerational co-operation within Chinese families. However, harsh intergenerational conflicts have become the main challenge for stem family co-residence, as I witnessed in Dingliang Liu's family.

Daniel also found that two conflicting domestic ideologies co-exist in the Japanese family: the prioritisation of the patrilineal blood tie which comes from the Confucian ideology, and Western ideals of domesticity which stress the importance of the bond between the marital couple and value informal personal relationships driven by affection and spontaneous sentiment (Daniels 2010: 183). This co-existence also results in domestic tensions. However, in the Chinese family, the domestic ideological tension may be even sharper. Thereinto, the discourse of *suzhi* clearly plays a significant role in intergenerational conflicts. The young have higher expectations of hygiene (cleanliness), orderliness and privacy. Also, they favour a more democratic approach to education. As a result, although the senior generation may believe that an ideal life should be lived under one roof with a son and grandchildren, they also expect more freedom rather than being imprisoned at home and

taking on sole responsibility for the housework. The young may not survive without parental support, especially before the children go to kindergarten, but at the same time they expect a core family co-residence because the lifestyle (or living habit) of the elders is different from theirs. Even so, the seniors are more self-sacrificing to their offspring both in the sense of materiality (economics) and spirituality. This is seen in the way they take responsibility for child-rearing, reduce their consumption to save money for their family, and change their lifestyles to please their children (for example, by paying more attention to the *weisheng* habit). However, it's important to note that the senior generation is not always in a passive position when adapting to the new social environment. Also, it is likely they may begin looking for other ways to arrange their later lives.

3.3 *Décor – Searching for Aspiration in Life*

If the Socialist New Village presented the state narrative of the good life which subscribed to a notion of modernity revolving around being 'civilised, advanced, scientific, health-focused, and ecological' as discussed above, then the décor system of the house apparently claims the idea of a good life and represents the agency of the inhabitants of the new space. In this section, I will focus on the décor system of the living room to demonstrate how the multiple ideas of what makes a good life co-exist. The living room is the most decorated space in the new house as it is not only the space for family gatherings, but also the space for receiving guests. It is the face of the family which is as important as the gate. In Baikou, the conventional elements of décor include calligraphy work, landscape paintings, Mao's portrait, the Chinese character '*fu*' (literally, happiness), portraits of ancestors, a clock and wall calendar, deity status and children's awards, to name just a few (see Figure 9.5). The décor system of the living room is a symbolic codification which contains value and meaning for the houseowner.

3.4 *'Nostalgia' of the Past*

In the Collective Era of China (between 1956–1979), the ancestral tablet, deity statues, traditional artefacts and so forth all became regarded as superstitions to be eradicated from the domestic space (or replaced by revolutionary elements such as Mao's portrait or statue). However, once the Collective Era ended, these eliminated elements were soon revived in domestic life (Feuchtwang 1992; Guo 2000; Fan 2010; Lin 2009; Chau 2011). Portraits of deceased ancestors are hung in different places in the living room as mentioned above. Since the 1980s, villagers have re-commenced worshipping the portraits of deceased ancestors. Some young people think it is not good to hang a portrait of the



FIGURE 9.5 A guest hall in a villager's home in Baikou New Village (photographed by author).

deceased ancestor at home, even a close ancestor. This is because this kind of portrait (*yizhao*) is often black and white, large and prepared particularly for funerals (the eldest son holds it on the way from the family house to the cemetery). Therefore, the colour and function of the portrait is considered ominous. In contrast, others believe that by integrating this element of family history into the new house, they can consolidate their self-identity and ally themselves with their ancestors. Jiale Tong, a 26-year-old villager explained:

What is the traditional virtue of Chinese? If you forget your ancestor, forget the root, how can you inherit the virtue? Worship in the ancestor hall is for remembering our root, it is not feudal superstition. ... A village needs cohesion. Where is it from? If a village can forget its root, it cannot be a good village. The community cannot be a good community. Because you forget where your forefathers, and you forget where you are from ... (Interview on 2nd February, 2015, Taped).

Jiale Tong is from the biggest and the oldest families in the village. The ancestral hall of the Tongs is the largest and has been considered a public space for the whole village since the collective time. According to Jiale Tong, during the conflict around land expropriation, the Tongs were not solidary which resulted in a loss in their power. He explained that community cohesion was important for each inhabitant of the village but, more significantly, he implied that family cohesion was vital in order to win land expropriation conflicts. Interestingly,

ancestral worship has increased in Baikou in recent years because it is believed to bring more family cohesion.

According to my observations in many places in China, Mao's portrait is still one of the most popular adornments. This is also the case in Baikou. As the caption on a Mao portrait I saw in a villager's home reads, 'the great Chairman Mao unified all the people, his contribution can be compared with the sun and the moon'. Villagers believe Mao's contribution is much more significant than the 'mistakes' he made. Meanwhile, Mao's moral quality is highly valued. A villager called Dingliang Liu criticized Deng's governance a lot, mainly because of the corruption, though he agreed that material life (which generally refers to food, living conditions, medical system and so forth) is much better than in Mao's era. In this case, deifying Mao can be understood as a resistant behavior which expresses discontent for the present social reality. Of course, the portrait also contains commemorative meaning for many senior villagers. Above all, Mao is viewed as representing the sun and a god; people believe he can bring happiness to the country and to the family. In the neoliberal era, there was no warm collective as a backup, and the individual was pushed into the sea of the competitive market.

Richard Sennett shows that nostalgia for the past became the rage in bourgeoisie circles in Europe in the nineteenth century (Sennett 1977:168ff). For example, Orvar Löfgren and Jonas Frykman found that ancestor worship prevailed in Europe as a practice of nostalgia - a way to legitimize the present through history (Löfgren and Frykman 1987). Similarly, the resurrection of ancestor worship in Baikou appeals because it gives a sense of authenticity and legitimacy, which in turn enhances self-identity. Therefore, the 'Mao cult' may be an ideological weapon used to criticise the present. To some extent, both point to counter the evolutionary temporality of development that was led by the logic of marketisation. China's revolutionary twentieth century correspondingly inspired a strong longing for a sense of belonging and the certainty of self-identity in the decollectivised era.

3.5 *Future Expectation*

The awards children receive in school are always displayed in the living room. These include prizes for being an impressive student (*sanhao xuesheng*), an outstanding class leader, an excellent athlete and so forth. Their performance in school often bears the hope of the family. Then, the calligraphy work presents auspicious words and mottos; '*Jiahe wanshi xing*' (harmony brings wealth) and *fu* are among the most frequently seen in rural homes in China. They express the core value of Chinese people – the happiness of the family. According to the Rokeach Value Survey, the happiness of the 'family' is always the

goal of every individual across the generations. The family is the fundamental unit of society for the Chinese, rather than the individual, nation or church (Fairbank and Reischauer 1989), even though since the end of the nineteenth century, the family has been viewed as one of the biggest enemies of the state in China.¹¹ However, the ultimate goal that the individual is struggling for is still the happiness of the family. As aforementioned, the co-residence of a stem family is still the dominant family type in Baikou. Though the young may wish to live as a nuclear family unit, they need their parents' support and although the elders endure lots of 'grievances' they still choose to live with their sons and grandchildren.

Besides the best wishes of the family, some inspirational mottos are presented in the living room. Ancient poems that express the wisdom of life, the beauty of nature or the ideal life, are also the subjects often seen in these calligraphic works. Landscape paintings and bonsai are also frequently used as decorative elements in the living room. The landscapes are often natural with mountains, forests, and rivers, while some show modern buildings. The bonsai are either flowers or potted little trees. Francesca Bray wrote an analysis of the Chinese aesthetical taste for natural landscapes in the house. She suggested that a house always embodies the social world, and the garden which contains natural and wild elements 'offered escape from the red dust of human commerce into a tranquil contemplative world of mountains and waterfalls where social relations were irrelevant' (Bray 1997: 84). Furthermore, she said, 'For those with lesser means, a landscape scroll, some pot plants or bonsai, carved latticework in the windows or a view of a more fortunate neighbour's trees could serve a similar purpose' (ibid., 84). The landscape painting is, to some extent, the representation of the ideal dwelling world. People frequently employ the word '*yishan bangshui*' (nestling under mountains and besides rivers) to describe their ideal dwelling which was always the ideal in Chinese tradition. Simultaneously, people expect a modernised living environment which refers to a 'western-style house with a garden', a big and straight road, and highly ordered space. The contradiction between the two kinds of prospects is reconciled by the interior decoration. This is similar to Krisztina Fehérváry's findings in Hungary. From the 1960s to the present, Hungary witnessed a shift from the dream of a modernist utopia embedded in "man-made" miracle

11 To be specific, since the end of the Qing Dynasty, the family has been accused of being the 'root of all evil', a shackle that hinders the development of the country and the nation, and the root of China's backwardness (Fu 2003; Xiong 2001; Hu 2003). Constructing an ideal society without a family through the family revolution, was a crucial part of the social revolution in the first half of the 20th century (Zhao 2020).

materials like plastic and concrete to a neoliberal social order embedded in “natural” or “super-natural” materials like organic wood flooring, high-quality roof tiles, and floor-to-ceiling posters of nature scenes (Fehérváry 2012). It seems ubiquitous to embed ‘natural’ elements at home as a form of resistance to the stiff modernist utopia.

In addition, some families enshrine Buddhist gods, local deities and Daoist deities in the living room; for example, the Buddhist goddess Guanyin (avalokitesvara), the fortune god (*caishen*), and goddess *caozhu* (a local deity). Worship of these deities was also forbidden in the socialist period. Since the 1980s, they have returned to the everyday lives of the Chinese. They are expected to bring a good life and protect the family. As Kleinman notes, the corrosive cynicism that has tarnished Confucian conventions and Communism has undermined traditional Chinese moral values. Religion offers special sanctioning for values, along with a feeling of sharing in a community of believers and finding a framework to make sense of the dangers and uncertainties that are a normal aspect of everyday life (Kleinman 2011: 273).

To sum up, the décor is a symbolic system of the resident’s multiple ideas of a good life. It also reflects the aesthetic practices of the political and moral orders as Eli Elinoff found in the northeastern Thai urban housing project. He argues, the homes of the local people in Khon Khaen ‘reflected and refracted competing notions of a good life tied to internally conflicting models of good citizenship’ (Elinoff 2016: 627). In post-socialist Hungary, the material aesthetics of the self-built new houses reinforced acceptance of neoliberal ideologies. The values materialised in anti-socialist aesthetics legitimated the new suburban house forms along with the diverging fortunes they represented (Fehérváry 2011). The contested house, in this sense, is an object that can be used to claim the inhabitant’s ideology and value. While, in the case of Baikou, as Jeffreys argues, the associated decline in the reform era of social(ist) values and the rise of individualistic materialism present neither a serious nor ongoing problem, because China is capable of reinventing the past to serve different present and future needs (Jeffreys 2012: 26). Despite the incompatible elements of the décor system in the Socialist era, now they easily coexist in the domestic space of every family where they are re-signified in the present social context. The past and the future are both serving the present.

4 Conclusions

The idea of the ‘ideal life’ originates from the ideology of the people, but an ideology always exists in an apparatus (the house can be considered as an

apparatus in this sense) and its practice, or practices (Althusser 2006). Thus, houses are the site where visions of social, political, and moral transformation can be enacted (Elinoff 2016: 627). In the case of Baikou, by building ‘a western-style house with a garden’ (*huayuan yangfang*) for every family, which is often presented in the media as a typical image of the western family house, the socialist ideal of making a good life is supposed to be achieved materially. Yet in reality, this was done with a range of conflicts and paradoxes as I have described above. Even so, the local county government in fact killed three birds with one stone. First, they changed the material condition of the good life by building western-style houses with gardens; second, the New Village programme promoted land development which largely contributed to local finances (including all levels of local government); and thirdly, the village won many awards which can be used as evidence of political achievement by local government officials.

On the other hand, when the county government imported the new dwelling model from Taiwan to Baikou, it also imported a new lifestyle which has contributed to shaping new family relations, especially intergenerational relationships. The restructuring of the spatial orientation of the new house symbolizes a decentralisation from the Confucian hierarchy in which the senior is superior to the junior. When the principle of the economic market permeated everyday life, the intergenerational power transfer became clearly reflected in the distribution of bedroom and labour. With agricultural production no longer the main source of livelihood, the senior parents have had to retreat from the household economy as their occupational skills do not easily adapt to the labour market. Meanwhile, according to the *suzhi* discourse, their low educational level and alienation from ‘civilised’ modern life makes them largely inferior to the younger generation. As a result, the seniors have to some extent lost their authority and power in family life. Even though the concomitant intergenerational conflicts are torturous for many due to different living habits which are reconstructed by the education of *suzhi*, intergenerational co-operation and interdependence is still important for Chinese families. The junior couple still rely heavily on the seniors, especially in child-rearing.

Meanwhile, the décor system shows how the local people adjust the hard structure of the house and create a domestic space that displays their values, beliefs and aspirations. Although meanings may arise from cultural texts and traditions and relate to society-wide events, it is always the individual who remakes collective values and explanations into a special combination of ideas, feelings, and practices that matter (Kleinman 2011). In real lives, the quests do not necessarily appear solely, and personal struggles to fashion meanings that matter may intensify meanings that are contradictory (ibid.). The décor system

of the new houses in Baikou clearly expresses the contradictory quests-for-meaning. All in all, in Baikou, the new houses built in 1997 during the Socialist New Village Movement are an exotic product, which are very different from the living space familiar to locals. When the blueprint of the modern rural life of the state is materialised in reality by building new houses, social and family life collides in its (the blueprints) restructuring. The house, as the subject of anthropological study, is all-encompassing. As Carsten and Hugh-Jones state, 'the significance of a focus on the house is that it brings together aspects of social life which have previously been ignored or treated separately' (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995: 20–21). My research through the case study of Baikou claims that social and family life can be understood comprehensively through an examination of the house.

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A Good Life Postponed: Working in the Countryside, Retiring in the City in Contemporary China

Catrina Schwendener

Abstract

This chapter explores how steel workers contend with hopes and aspirations of the good life in the context of policy reforms on the level of the industry, state, and enterprise. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in Anhui Province, China, to explore how rural mine workers plan for and imagine the future. The reforms of the socialist work-unit (*danwei*) and gradual de-industrialisation of an iron ore mine in the 1990s shifted viable futures for worker families to the city. To access urban life for their families and themselves, workers commit to working in the rural mine until retirement, separated from their children who migrate to the city. Mine workers' conception of a good life is influenced by the socialist good life of the past and by the anticipation of a future in the city. In preparation workers invest significantly into their retirement plans, imagining the reunification with their families and community without considering the generational differences in aspiration for a good life.

Keywords

family – generations – urban retirement – steel workers – state-owned enterprise (SOE)

1 Introduction

My visit to Peach Mine, an iron ore mining village in Anhui Province, had started with rain and there seemed no end to the July monsoon weather, as we ran across Peach Mine's main square to the noodle restaurant on the main road. There were a few people eating their breakfast, the steam of their bowls mingling with the humidity of the weather. Er Shu ordered three bowls of noodles, each with a fried egg on top, and chatted about our visit to Peach Mine with the restaurant boss. As we were eating, one of Er Shu's workmates spotted

him and came in to say: “Old Wu passed away (*zoule*)”. The news spread quickly through the room in a muffled tone and was repeated by the other workers eating their breakfast. “He only just picked up his pension certificate (*tuixiu zheng*) last week,” said someone. The worker who brought the news said: “Yes, he didn’t get one cent (*yi fen qian*).” A few more words were exchanged, “What a pity, right after retirement”.

Old Wu’s death came as a shock to the workers in Peach Mine, and his death was still a topic of conversation a few months later when I went to visit Er Shu’s younger brother, San Shu, at another mine. Over and over, I heard people mention how Old Wu had just retired, and how he had not even received his first pension payment before he died. Old Wu’s early death was a family tragedy. At the same time, it emphasised the gap between workers’ lives in the rural mine and their hopes and dreams to retire in the city. Although Peach Mine workers spent a major part of their lives working in this rural iron ore mine owned by a state-owned steel enterprise, the city of Ma’anshan was central to their and their families’ futures because of how life in Peach Mine had changed as a result of China’s market reforms. Following the work and family histories of the Xu brothers who were born and raised in Peach Mine, this chapter explores how changes on the level of the state, market, and state-owned enterprise (SOE) influence Peach Mine workers’ plans for retirement and their visions of a good life.

Peach Mine is a district of Ma’anshan city, despite its 100 km distance. This relationship between what in essence is a village and Ma’anshan, developed because of the mine’s iron ore reserves which were strategically important for the city’s steel SOE.

In Maoist China, the state provided for, organised and controlled workers’ lives through the work-unit system (*danwei* henceforth) of SOEs (Walder 1986). The *danwei* provided workers’ employment and social security provisions, which meant permanent jobs, cradle-to-grave welfare, housing provisions and medical and pension benefits (Lee 2005).

These aspects became part of the aspiration of a socialist good life, but remained accessible only to urban SOE workers, placing them at the apex of the Chinese socialist work hierarchy (Lee 2005). China’s market and *danwei* reforms resulted in a commodification of many of these benefits, and influenced visions of what a good life is (Zavoretti 2017). However, the conception of a good life is not just based on an economic understanding of life but also on shared moral values of what constitutes a worthy life (Albó 2018). Core values which centre around family and intergenerational commitments shape workers’ decisions and plans for the future (Kipnis 2007; Wielander and Hird 2019).

Through their employment at the SOE, workers and their families at Peach Mine obtained an urban household registration (*hukou* henceforth), despite

living and working in a rural part of Anhui.¹ In the Maoist era the urban *hukou* gave Peach Mine families access to employment at the urban SOE and reduced barriers of migration to the city. Following market reforms, the importance of the *hukou* diminished (Zavoretti 2017), but SOE employment continued to provide workers with unique access to the city and has influenced workers' and their families' plans for the future.

The reform of the *danwei* in the 1990s had serious consequences for Peach Mine workers' livelihoods. While the SOE continued to depend on their labour, workers' families had to deal with the retreat of the *danwei*. The infrastructure and services previously provided through the *danwei* were abandoned, limiting the possibilities of living a good life in Peach Mine and resulting in the need for migration of workers' children at a young age. These experiences were at the same time accompanied by people's hope for retirement in the city, which had become a space for the future of the family because of the reforms. Thus, the Xu brothers' aim was to retire in Ma'anshan. This is a reversal of the more common migration pattern and retirement strategy from the city back to the village (Luong 2021; Parry 2020; Pine 2014) and is rooted in the above-mentioned socialist worker identities and institutions.

The chapter draws on the experiences of the Xu brothers, Xu Shushu (the oldest), Er Shu (the second brother) and San Shu (the third and youngest brother), as well as their family members and colleagues. I was introduced to the Xu family through Xu Shushu's son, Xu Bai, whom I met in Ma'anshan during my PhD fieldwork² and who invited me to dinners with his father and uncles, and accompanied me on the visits to the three different mines where they each worked. Although the three brothers' employment experiences within the steel enterprise were different and their plans for retirement differed accordingly, the city of Ma'anshan and the family figured prominently in their ideas of a good life.

The first part of this chapter considers the economic and historical development of Peach Mine and looks at how this binds workers to the city. The second part discusses the effects of China's market reforms on Peach Mine workers' lives and how these macroeconomic policy shifts abandoned SOE workers in the countryside, which is contrasted by the anticipation of a future in the city. Lastly, the chapter discusses the retirement strategies of workers, and the hopes and expectations of a good life informing these strategies.

1 The *hukou* is an instrument of migration control in China, distinguishing between urban and rural households (Davin 1999).

2 This chapter is based on twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork in Ma'anshan between March 2019 and November 2020.

Old Wu's story foregrounds that waiting for a good life after retirement is not always successful. His death emphasises the elements of hope and uncertainty that are at times overshadowed by the concrete plans workers and their families have made for retirement. In addition, the chapter shows that workers and their children do not necessarily agree on ideals and dreams of a good life as these have shifted along generational lines as a result of socio-economic changes in China.

2 Industrialisation of Peach Mine

Steel production and iron ore extraction have long been markers of modernisation in industrialising countries (Kotkin 1992; Mollona 2020; Parry 2020) and the steel industry featured prominently in communist China's plans for the future (Nolan 1996). At the beginning of the 20th century, iron ore deposits were discovered in the eastern part of Anhui province. The first extraction of iron ore started shortly afterwards leading to the development of an industrial base for steel production in the area. This base was taken over by the Communist government in 1949, which led to the development of the city of Ma'anshan where since the 1950s a mid-sized integrated steel plant developed. Ma'anshan's location was favourable for steel production because of its proximity to the Yangtze river and the surrounding iron ore mines (MaSteel Gazeteer Editorial Committee 2004). The distance between the city and the mines varies, however, Peach Mine, the mine on which this chapter focuses is located over 100km from Ma'anshan city and on an administrative level is a district of Ma'anshan city. Despite this distance, Peach Mine was part of the steel enterprise production line because of the high quality of the mine's iron ore and its proximity to the Yangtze River, which allowed for easier transportation of the ore to Ma'anshan.

In Peach Mine, the intensification of iron ore mining and steel production since the 1950s resulted in an influx of workers and their families. By 1959, the area housed 2,500 workers engaged in extracting and processing iron ore (MaSteel Gazeteer Editorial Committee 2004). Like Old Wu, the Xu brothers had grown up in Peach Mine, in the 1970s and 1980s, during what they remembered as its most vibrant days. They were the children of the first migrants who moved to work in the iron ore mines. Their parents were recruited by the state-owned enterprise in 1953 from a rural village that was located not too far from Ma'anshan city to work in Peach Mine. Their migration from the poverty-stricken countryside to the rural, but state-owned mine opened up a new future centred around the *danwei*, which came with promises of a better life through permanent employment, housing, and health care.

As children of SOE employees, it followed that Er Shu, San Shu, and their eldest brother, Xu Shushu, would enter the SOE workforce as well. Although only one son was able to take over their father's post when he retired,³ the demand for workers was high up until the early 1990s and children of steel workers could get positions by passing a basic exam. However, work in the mines was very dangerous and difficult, especially in the early years, and having seen their parents' hardship, the three brothers were hoping to get less dangerous posts. Xu Shushu, the first born, got a post in a mine which is only 20 km away from the main production lines of the integrated steel plant. He worked on the freight trains that transported the iron ore from the mine to the steel plant down by the river and was therefore able to visit the city regularly. Er Shu was less lucky. In his first three years at work, he was assigned a post in Peach Mine's oldest and very dangerous underground mine.

However, he was hoping he could follow his elder brother to work closer to the city. On completion of his second exam, he was assigned an even more dangerous job handling freight trains, albeit in the city. This time his parents forced him to reject the job, and he finally managed to get another less risky post back at Peach Mine. For this reason, Er Shu settled in Peach Mine, where he got married and his daughter was born in 1997. San Shu, the third brother, worked in Peach Mine for the first few years, but in the early 2000s transferred to a limestone mine, another important ingredient in the steel making process. This mine was even further away from Ma'anshan than Peach Mine but was adjacent to a small city and thus was not as isolated.

As in urban China, prior to the reforms the *danwei* structured people's lives in significant ways. It not only provided full employment and permanent job tenure, but also secure housing, a wide social circle and access to essential infrastructure and services such as schools, hospitals and shops (Bray 2005). This meant that Peach Mine, although located in the countryside and surrounded by villages, had urban attributes although it was never big enough to be considered a town. The *danwei* provided workers and their families with services and infrastructure mirroring developments in the city. Among other things, the *danwei* built a school, a public bath house (*zaotang*), a canteen, a swimming pool, a badminton court, and a cinema. The construction of this infrastructure carried future-oriented aspirations of what the state considered to be a good life and were built in an urban style that was part of a communist promise of modernity and a utopian future (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018).

3 This was possible because of the national *dingti* (replacement) policy, where a child was able to 'inherit' the position of a retiring parent, allowing for the continuity of permanent SOE employment within one family.

The *danwei* through its infrastructure is therefore a site of political ideology, which shapes the material and social relations intertwined with it (Humphrey 2005) and influences the way pre-reform perceptions of the good life are remembered (Lee 2007; Schwenkel 2013).

For example, workers' housing, which was built by the *danwei* and allocated to worker families, was similar to urban architecture and differentiated Peach Mine as a district from the neighbouring villages. While Er Shu and his brothers grew up in the one-story workers' housing built in the 1960s and 70s, by the 1980s the *danwei* had built several rows of housing blocks that looked just like the older workers' housing found in many industrial Chinese cities. When Er Shu and his wife got married, the *danwei* allocated them an apartment in one of the newly built housing blocks. Er Shu's apartment contained a small living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a private bathroom, offering more privacy to the nuclear family than the one-story housing where kitchens and bathrooms were shared with other residents. Being on the fifth floor of the apartment complex also brought relief from the damp winters in the single-story houses. Therefore, moving from the one-story housing to an apartment brought some of the comfort of modern housing that Lan Wei describes in her chapter in this volume. Although workers' apartments built in the 80s were much smaller (Er Shu's apartment was 55m² in size) than the villagers' newbuilt houses in Lan Wei's ethnography and built under very different ideological and political circumstances, they share the aspiration of a modernity of their respective time.

More importantly, state-sector employment came with the same benefits as the workers' urban counterparts, thus despite living and working in a rural location workers had an urban *hukou* because Peach Mine was officially an urban district of Ma'anshan, through its affiliation to the state-owned steel enterprise. This was particularly important during the Maoist era, when the distinction between rural and urban *hukou* defined people's movements and access to public services. At the same time, it is important to note that the urban *hukou* has since the economic reforms and the subsequent urbanisation policy lost some of its significance, especially in smaller cities like Ma'anshan (Davin 1999; Kipnis 2016). Even in the context of Nanjing, a provincial capital city, Zavoretti (2017) has argued that the role of the *hukou* has diminished and Chen and Fan (2016) have highlighted the recent phenomenon of migrants with rural *hukou* being less enthusiastic about changing their *hukou* to urban status. Nevertheless, for Peach Mine workers, urban state-sector employment and the worker identity that came with this, shaped expectations and aspirations of a socialist good life promoted through the *danwei*. As the next section will explore, following nationwide *danwei* reforms in the late 1990s the affiliation to the city played an important role for workers' livelihoods and plans for

the future as they witnessed the diverging development of Peach Mine and Ma'anshan.

3 Peach Mine after the Reforms

The nationwide *danwei* reforms of the 1990s led to a watershed for workers' status and privileges across China and profoundly changed Chinese workers' livelihoods (Lee 2007; Liu 2007). The reform replaced workers' entitlements, previously allocated through the *danwei*, with a range of social insurance policies and welfare provisions, shifting the budgetary burden from the state on to the employers and employees (Lee 2007). Additionally, the reforms and privatisation of SOEs in the 1990s resulted in the closure of many factories and led to millions of redundancies (Cho 2013; Lee 2007).

However, not all places were affected by the reforms in the same way. As a core national industry, the steel enterprise continued operations in Ma'anshan and its connected mines, and workers' wages rose significantly in subsequent years. Therefore, in comparison to the de-industrialisation of Chinese rust-belt cities in the 1990s and 2000s, these workers did not experience the same level of disruption as industrial workers in the north of China and the *danwei* reform of the 1990s did not translate into significant job losses in the SOE. That said, there were privatisation and subsequent lay-offs in collectively owned enterprises (*jiti qiye*) that had previously been linked to the main SOE. As in other cities, this overwhelmingly affected women (Cho 2013).

The contrast of the effects of the *danwei* reforms between Ma'anshan city and Peach Mine is particularly stark. Ma'anshan, which by the 1980s had already over 360,000 inhabitants, developed into a lively industrial city (Ma'anshan Gazeteer Editorial Committee 2009: 99–102). The market reforms encouraged the development of a wide range of consumer options in entertainment, services, and restaurants. By the time of my fieldwork in 2019–2020, industrial salaries ranged from 4500 to 6000 Yuan (640 to 855 Euros) a month. While this salary level did not make one wealthy, it was higher than the income of temporary workers, or people in the service industry, where salaries ranged from 1500 to 3500 Yuan (215 to 500 Euros) a month. Adding to that, most older steel workers employed in the city had been able to buy their allocated apartments from the *danwei* in the 1990s at low prices and by 2020 had been mortgage free homeowners for many years. Peach Mine workers' situation stands in stark contrast to the experiences of their urban counterparts. Although their salaries rose, the *danwei* reform affected workers' lives significantly. In the city many of the services that were previously provided by the *danwei* were

either taken over by the city administration (for example the schools, hospitals, and public parks) and private investors and entrepreneurs developed the city's entertainment sector (for example cinemas, swimming pools and karaoke bars). By contrast, in Peach Mine the services and infrastructure were abandoned or de-serviced and its remote location did not attract any private investment.

The retreat of the *danwei* was accompanied by a gradual deindustrialisation of Peach Mine, which was part of a larger policy shift in mining and environmental protection. Er Shu explained that for several years now most of the SOE's mines had been phased out as they replaced their main source of iron ore with imports from Australia and Brazil. On the one hand this was because the iron content of the iron ore from Australia and Brazil was higher than most of the local mines, but according to Er Shu more important was environmental protection (*huanbao*). By the beginning of 2020 the local iron ore mine had shut down completely and Er Shu was now working at the neighbouring limestone mine. Er Shu estimated that even this mine would probably close soon because no new workers had joined their team in many years. By the time he and his colleagues retired, there would be no-one left to do the work. Besides, there were rumours that the already closed iron ore mine was going to become a tourist site, as its history told an important story about China's economic development but also resistance to the Japanese invasion. "But who would come and visit this tourist site?" Er Shu asked rhetorically, doubtful anyone would want to visit this far off place.

4 Visiting Peach Mine

When I went to visit Peach Mine with Er Shu's nephew, Xu Bai, in June 2020, it did not resemble what Xu Bai remembered to be a lively place. The trip to Peach Mine from Ma'anshan, which used to take three to four hours, now only involved a 37-minute train ride on the highspeed railway that had been built in 2015, followed by a bus ride from the rail station to Peach Mine. The bus was full of older people who got off at the several stops for villages adjacent to the main road that we followed into the hilly countryside. After 45 minutes on the bus, we got off at the stop next to Peach Mine square and Xu Bai tried to reorient himself. It was his first time back to Peach Mine in almost twenty years. He had spent his early childhood here, and after entering school in the city he spent the school holidays here under the watchful eyes of his grandparents. We entered the square lined by a gate entitled Peach Mine, District of Ma'anshan. Xu Bai pointed towards an empty looking building: "That's the cinema, or at least

where it used to be. I used to hide on the roof when my granddad was looking for me.” The pond that he remembered was gone as well, and the main square was deserted. I was struck by how much Peach Mine had the feeling of a sleepy village, far from Xu Bai’s memories of growing up in a lively (*renao*) place. As we were walking from the square up the five consecutive housing blocks to the final one on the hill where Er Shu lived, we passed two other closed-down buildings, the bath house and the canteen.

This theme continued as Er Shu gave us a tour of Peach Mine and it became clear that all the places Xu Bai had told me about had closed many years before. A constant back and forth between Er Shu and his nephew accompanied our walk:

“Down there is the badminton court”

“That’s closed down”

“Over there is the swimming pool”

“That hasn’t opened in years”

The buildings were part of a past utopia, a socialist future, where the *danwei* provided workers with places of leisure, infrastructure, and services. They were still present, not quite as ruins, but as closed and abandoned buildings marking the history of a future oriented project of the past (Pelkmans 2013; Wodz and Gnieciak 2017). This became particularly obvious as we approached the overgrown gate of the local school, which Er Shu’s daughter had attended before the school closed in 2007. Peeking through the gate, trees and weeds had taken over the school playground.

The closure of the local school ended an era of steel worker families in Peach Mine, because it terminated the possibility of social reproduction. When the local school closed, Er Shu’s daughter had only just turned ten and had not finished primary school. This placed the family in a difficult situation because without a school, their daughter had no future in Peach Mine. However, for ordinary workers like Er Shu and his wife, it was out of the question to leave their formal employment to accompany their daughter to the city. Formal employment at the steel enterprise had been considered a good job during the Maoist era and was still sought after as market reforms brought about rising wages from the mid 1990s onwards.

At the same time, Er Shu’s daughter had to go to school, and having a Ma’anshan *hukou* entitled his daughter to attend school in Ma’anshan. This situation left little choice but to make arrangements to send her to Ma’anshan with her maternal grandmother. As Luong has pointed out in his contribution to this volume, separation of parents from their children due to migration has been

observed in many countries, although usually the migrants are the parents, while grandparents and children stay behind. Nevertheless, like in Luong's chapter, Peach Mine families' strategies to maintain the family rely on the labour of the grandparents, making family life a project that is broader than the nuclear family. For Er Shu and his wife this meant putting their daughter into the care of her grandmother, who during the school term lived with their daughter in a small apartment in Ma'anshan that the parents bought with their Housing Provident Fund.⁴ From that time onwards the family would only be united during the holidays, and on special occasion when one of the parents could make the long trip to Ma'anshan on their days off.

The closure of the school and the abandonment of other *danwei* infrastructure highlighted the decline of a socialist future. But unlike post-Soviet examples of abandoned mines and socialist infrastructure (Pelkmans 2013; Pine 2014; Wodz and Gnieciak 2017) the opportunities in the city overshadowed the abandonment and neglect of Peach Mine. Although Er Shu fondly remembered the time when his daughter was still living with him and his wife, looking back he just shrugged. He preferred to highlight the opportunities the city offered. Ma'anshan was at the time one of the fastest growing cities in the province and more developed than Wuhu, the prefecture-level city that was much closer to Peach Mine. Therefore, Er Shu was convinced that going to school in Ma'anshan had offered a better future to his daughter. This hope for a better future in the city reflects broader changes in what is deemed a successful life in China's market economy. It also reflects experiences and expectations of a once accessible socialist good life for Er Shu and his family. Thus Peach Mine workers' hopes and plans for migration are both future oriented and at the same time informed by the experiences of the past (Pine 2014).

This section of the chapter has explored the de-industrialisation of Peach Mine and the abandonment of workers and their families by the *danwei*. The considerations for their futures were mediated by the experiences of having had access to aspects of a good life, such as housing, schools as well as spaces of leisure. The *danwei* reforms meant that access to a socialist good life was lost in the rural mine, while the market reforms opened new up new possibilities

4 The Housing Provident Fund (*zhufang gongjijin*) was established in the 1990s following the reform of the *danwei* as a replacement for the housing provisions previously made by the *danwei*. The Housing Provident Fund is part of the social insurance package that comes with formal employment. Both the employer and the employee contribute to the fund monthly. The employee can use the money to buy and renovate/decorate housing or can withdraw it after their retirement. There is an option to take a mortgage through the employer, with the mortgage payments being directly paid from the monthly Housing Provident Fund contributions (Cho 2013:63; MaSteel Gazeteer Editorial Committee 2004).

of a good life in the city. As a result, the reforms reoriented Peach Mine families' futures and aspirations for a good life towards the city. Therefore, planning for the future involved different temporal and spatial considerations for the SOE workers in Peach Mine than for their colleagues and family members who were employed in the city. In what follows I will explore how the reorientation towards the city affects workers' retirement strategies and how this figures in their hopes and expectations of a good life.

5 Retiring for a Good Life in the City

The retirement age for workers at state-owned enterprises in China depends on the type of work and on workers' gender. Women usually retire at 50 or 55 years, while men retire at 55 or 60 years, depending on the amount of physical and dangerous work their job demands. In terms of planning for the future after retirement, this means that, as long as one is in good health, retired workers can expect to spend a considerable amount of time in the city in old age.

Buying an apartment in the city is the most concrete way that Peach Mine workers prepare and plan for retirement. Both Er Shu and San Shu bought apartments in the city well before they reached retirement age. As mentioned, for Er Shu and his family this was a necessity as his daughter's school closed in 2007. During his daughter's school years, she lived there with her grandmother and Er Shu and his wife stayed with them whenever they were able to visit. After his daughter finished school and went to university, the apartment was empty for a while, but when Er Shu had time for a trip to the city and during Chinese New Year, he would host a family dinner at his home. Despite Er Shu spending most of his time in Peach Mine, the apartment in Ma'anshan had already become a home, where the family gathered during holidays, and Er Shu planned to move there after his retirement.

While it was necessary for Er Shu and his family to buy an apartment in Ma'anshan, this was also a good investment in the late 2000s, as Ma'anshan's housing prices rose fast between 2010 and 2020. In contrast, the apartment Er Shu had bought in Peach Mine in the early 1990s for 40'000 Yuan (5700 Euros) was only worth around 25'000 Yuan (3600 Euros) by 2019. "But I was able to give it back to the *danwei* a few years ago and they returned the money" he said when he showed me around. He added "now I rent it from them for 40 Yuan (5.7 Euros) a month, and I pay 30–40 Yuan for water and electricity." The apartment had traces of the family life when his daughter still lived in Peach Mine. Her room was now piled up with things, but her bed was still there including the stickers and posters that she as a young child must have hung on

the walls. Despite Er Shu having lived in the apartment for many years it felt like a place where he was passing through because it had long ceased to be the family home. It was as if both Er Shu and the *danwei* agreed: This was not a place for the future, Er Shu no longer wanted to invest in this apartment, and the *danwei* agreed allowing workers to return their apartment and get their initial investment back.

Most of the apartments in Er Shu's block had long been empty as people had moved away, but Er Shu stressed that most people who had left were either still employed by the SOE and had been reassigned (*fenliu*) to another site, or they had moved away after their retirement. Like him, they had not given up their formal employment at one of the area's most profitable state-owned enterprises,⁵ because working until retirement in a stable formal job in the steel industry was something valuable.⁶ Importantly, state sector employment not only meant stable wages, and pension but also good contributions to the Housing Provident Fund. In addition, alongside rising wages pensions had also risen and workers in their 50s were expecting a 6000 Yuan to 7000 Yuan (860 to 1000 Euros) monthly pension payments after retirement.

Thus, both working in Peach Mine and buying an apartment in the city are future-oriented strategies which inform each other. Working for the SOE promises a sizeable retirement package and allows workers to purchase an apartment in Ma'anshan through the Housing Provident Fund. This legitimises the waiting for a good life in the city. At the same time, buying an apartment in the city makes the hopes and dreams of a good life in the city concrete. Therefore, workers exchange waiting for a good life in the city in return for a stable job that gives them access to the city, to urban real estate, and the security of a good pension.

San Shu's situation was different from Er Shu's because he had been reassigned (*fenliu*) to another mine in 2003. Nonetheless, Ma'anshan figured equally importantly in his long-term plan for retirement. After the transfer, San Shu lived with his family in the nearby town. Unlike at Peach Mine, this mine was located close to a small town with a high school where his daughter went to school, which meant the family was able to live together. After finishing high school, San Shu's daughter went on to university. That was when the

5 While the mining branch of the SOE de-industrialised and steel production today relies mainly on Australian and Brazilian imports, the core business of the steel enterprise in Ma'anshan city expanded since the 2000s. In 2019 the SOE merged with China's biggest centrally owned steel producer (World Steel Association 2020).

6 This has also been observed in the steel industry of other countries such as India (Parry 2013; Strümpell 2018) and Brazil (Mollona 2020).

family decided to sell their apartment in the small town so they could buy a second-hand apartment (*ershōu fāng*) in Ma'anshan, where they were planning to move to after retirement. San Shu's wife was particularly keen on making the purchase in Ma'anshan, because in the long term she wanted to reunite with her elderly mother who had moved there after her late father had retired from the steel enterprise many years earlier. Therefore, although in San Shu's case the nuclear family had managed to stay together, moving to Ma'anshan was still important for the whole family.

San Shu felt more emotional than his wife about selling the apartment: "It was sad, after all it was our home (*bijing shi jia*). But it makes sense, why would we retire here?" After his daughter left for university in another part of the province, the town they had lived in for many years had become just any other town. In fact, San Shu and his family were already the odd ones out from his colleagues and their families, because they had decided to live close to the mine together as a family, rather than for San Shu's wife who was not an SOE worker and his daughter to live in Ma'anshan. This was common amongst the workers in this mine, because of the work shift arrangements of San Shu's *danwei*. The work schedule was seven days off, seven days on, with twelve-hour workdays and a weekly, dedicated bus service from the mine to Ma'anshan each Monday morning. Most of San Shu's colleagues spent their days off work at their family homes in Ma'anshan and lived in the workers' dormitories during their seven-day shifts. Again, not only did workers want to retire in the city, but this was also encouraged by the SOE which acknowledged that these steel workers, despite working far away from the city, belonged to Ma'anshan.

As we have seen, the Xu brothers made it clear in our conversations, that although Peach Mine was where they had grown up in, they did not for a moment consider retiring there. This was shaped by their employment as steel workers at an urban state-owned enterprise. Given that the city was built around the steel enterprise, Peach Mine workers had, despite the distance to the city, always belonged to Ma'anshan through their employment. The worker identity and the biography that comes with this employment was shaped by legacy of the socialist *danwei* which produced a collective worker identity (Bray 2005), in turn creating a strong bond to the city going beyond the administrative 'right to the city' through the urban *hukou*. Peach Mine workers not only had a Ma'anshan *hukou* but retiring in the city was to the workers an obvious and ultimately unavoidable step, especially after the *danwei* reforms had shifted the good life to the city.

Moving to Ma'anshan after retirement therefore consolidates their identity as steel workers and reinforces their claims for the kind of good life that steel

workers and pensioners can have in the post-Mao era. For Peach Mine workers, the good life in the city is not just based on imagination of the possibilities of a modern city, but on the experiences they have of the city during the holidays and as they visit family and friends. Mine workers have a clear understanding of what living in the city means, which includes: access to better health care, family, community, as well as a wide range of consumption and recreational opportunities that are not available in Peach Mine. Therefore, many of the ways in which mine workers imagine their life after retirement are oriented on SOE workers' experiences in the city. Retirement from a state sector job with a stable pension first and foremost creates more time. Imagining how to use this time was something that not only concerned Peach Mine workers but most people nearing retirement or considering a severance deal.⁷

Working a temporary job for a few years in the private sector is something most people consider a good use of their time after retirement, especially until their labour is needed in the family to look after grandchildren. The additional income coming from these jobs is less than a third of retired workers' monthly pension payments, but since the retirement age was between 50 to 60 years, many felt that they were still able to continue working, but at their own pace and choice. This sentiment relates to workers' socialist experiences, where human value and social identities were made through labour and the *danwei* (Bray 2005; Pine 2017). A common choice is to work part-time as a security guard (*baogan*), a job considered "not that hard" (*meiyou name xinku*). Er Shu himself imagined something a bit more entrepreneurial, although he was not very clear, he imagined that he would start a business or "do something" (*zuo yidian shiqing*) with a retired colleague. This aspiration reflected mine workers' perception of the city, which in contrast to Peach Mine, seemed to be full of opportunities to develop the enterprising self and has shaped urban perceptions of success (Kleinman et al. 2011). However, this did not correspond with the choices that city workers made, who more often chose to work in waged employment or low risk self-employment, such as working as a swimming or driving instructor.

7 During my fieldwork the SOE was in the process of reducing its workforce as part of the restructuring of the steel sector as highlighted in the 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2016–2020). One of the main measures to reduce the workforce was offering severance deals to workers who were more than two years away from retirement. A hiring-stop and a reorganisation of the structure of the SOE were also part of the measures. During my fieldwork this had not resulted in lay-offs per se, however, the pressure on older workers to consider severance deals was high.

Finally, having more time after retiring of course also creates more time for socialising and leisure. This could include developing and expanding hobbies, meeting with friends to play cards or Mahjong and enjoying the freedom to drink alcohol without being restrained by the rotating work schedule. Overwhelmingly, however, talking about their futures after retirement steel workers highlighted their families. For example, looking after their grandchildren and elderly parents, as well as helping sons purchase or furnish an apartment before they got married. For workers who bridged the distance between city and mine like Er Shu and San Shu, the consolidation of the family and the community was significant.

Workers' retirement strategies highlight that postponing the good life until retirement is related to state sector employment and policy choices the state has made. With the *danwei* and market reforms the status of workers has changed as the value of industrial labour has changed. Pine (2014) has highlighted the importance of the continuation of the family, in people's decision to migrate for work. She argues that undervalued, hard work is endured for the benefit of the family back home, highlighting the hope for a better future. Peach Mine workers instead of migrating, had to stay put and wait for retirement, while part of their family moved to the city for a better life. Er Shu and his colleagues referred to this waiting as a form of *hao shijian* (wasting time or getting through time). Although the term seems to resonate with Indian conceptions of *time pass* which is common among lower middle-class young men who are waiting for their lives to start (Jeffrey 2010), there is a distinctive difference because Peach Mine workers are fully aware that there is a clear limit to their waiting, while the future of the young Indian university students is much more uncertain. Even though it is because of the *danwei* and thus the state's abandonment of Peach Mine as a viable place to make a life, the waiting is not powerless. Instead, it resembles what Galam (2019) describes about young Filipino utility men, who work unpaid for several years in servitude to agencies, until they are eventually hired as seafarers, a job that will vastly improve their livelihoods. Rather than this free labour being a passive act, the utility men see this as an active form of waiting for a better life. This wait can be prolonged by agencies for sometimes the smallest mistakes, meaning that utility men are confronted with uncertainties regarding the start of their future, but being accepted into servitude gives their waiting, hope and imagination a purpose (Galam 2019:590). Er Shu's and his colleagues' waiting in Peach Mine comes with a clear end to the waiting, and during the wait provisions and plans are made. Like the Filipino utility men, they actively wait to start a new stage in their life which is underpinned by dreams and hopes about a better life.

6 The Tragedy of Old Wu's Death

In this context, Old Wu's death is important because it demonstrates people put huge amounts of resources and patience into planning their retirement, despite there being no certainty that this will work out. Although both Er Shu and San Shu have their future figured out and planned for, Old Wu's story shows to them a potential future that unsettles the certainty of their plans (D'Onofrio 2017). Thus, plans for the future are despite their seemingly concrete nature, always also about hopes and horizons that remain fuzzy and for some unattainable (Crapanzano 2004). And these hopes are also disrupted by moments which highlight the unpredictability of the future (Auyero 2011) and the extent to which Peach Mine workers have to wait for the good life.

Although overall conversations about retirement and the future were optimistic and workers always highlighted how much life had improved and work had become less dangerous, a cynical comment by a worker a few months after Old Wu passing away reflected gently on the state's role in Peach Mine workers' lives: "*Guojia zhong jiangle* (the state has won the lottery)". The implication being that the pension Old Wu had worked for all his life was lost to him and at least in part to his family. Instead, it was gained by the state, for which Old Wu had worked hard for and because of which he had endured the waiting for a life in the city. This highlights Peach Mine workers' and their families' abandonment by the *danwei* and the state, as well as the ruins of a socialist future that have once been part of their hard work. In that way, the optimism and planning for the future after retirement resemble the cruel optimism Berlant (2011) draws our attention to as a result of neoliberal economic policies. It also makes questions regarding decisions to take or not take a severance deal highly relevant. If Old Wu had taken a severance deal earlier, he might not have had the motorbike accident, which, because of the lack of medical attention in Peach Mine, subsequently led to his heart attack many months later.

Old Wu's death was also not an individual fate, after Er Shu's initial shock he talked about how this affected Old Wu's family. "His wife doesn't have a good job, she's been working temporary jobs (*dagong*) as a cleaner. She doesn't earn a lot." As Er Shu recounted on the way to Old Wu's wake, Old Wu and his family had made plans, which they expected to see through after his retirement. This involved helping his son to buy an apartment, an important step towards the prospects of marriage for young working class men in the city (Zavoretti 2016). Without his pension this would be much more difficult now. As everybody who knew him seemed to repeat again and again, he had not managed to receive even a single month's pension payment and his early death rendered the waiting for a better life in the city void.

7 Different Generations, Different Good Lives

What bridges the spaces where Old Wu, Er Shu and San Shu live, work, retire and die - the city and the rural mine - is the state-owned steel enterprise, which has shaped in important ways how workers think about what a good life is, and has opened and closed avenues to fulfil this. The policy changes that have happened on the level of the state, market and the industry since the start of China's economic reforms have influenced how different generations relate to ideas and visions of the good life (Zavoretti 2017). For older steel workers their socialist worker biographies are central in their plans and imaginations for the future. As we have seen the family and its different generations play an important role in the way that workers have imagined, organised, and planned for their children's and their own future. This final part of the chapter suggests that the structural changes workers experienced are reflected at the level of the family and generations, such as in Er Shu and San Shu's negotiations with their children around what a good life worth living is.

One of the conversations that brought out generational frictions most clearly was about Er Shu and San Shu's expectations that their daughters should settle and get married in Ma'anshan. San Shu and his wife were very vocal about wanting their daughter to look for a job in Ma'anshan after graduating from university, rather than looking for a job in a bigger city. Their daughter, however, did not feel excited about the prospects of settling in Ma'anshan. She felt having gone to university, she should try her luck in a big city. Her mother however, protested vehemently. Although other cities might have offered more opportunities and wages tended to be higher, she did not want her daughter to go far away and "in any case", she said, "a young girl (*xiao nühai*) doesn't need to earn much, 2000–3000 Yuan is just enough". Instead, her daughter should find a stable job and then start dating, get married and have a child. She had already made plans that when she retired at 50 next year, she would move to Ma'anshan with her daughter, and San Shu would start living in the workers' dormitory, and join them during his week off. Whenever her parents brought up the topic, however, their daughter insisted she would rather go to a bigger city, where she would be able to earn more money away from her parents' overbearing hopes and desires for her future.

San Shu's daughter had not grown up in Ma'anshan and had gone to university in another city in Anhui province. She did not feel the same attachment and excitement as her parents about settling there. In comparison to her cousin, who had moved from Peach Mine to Ma'anshan when she was younger, she did not have a memory of being a steel worker's daughter, something Er Shu's daughter remembered clearly when she came to Ma'anshan as

prestigious (*gei mianzi*). The identity of the steel worker that had been shaped by the SOE did not travel as far as the town where her father's mine was close to and she had grown up.

In addition, steel workers had stable jobs as state employees, and this had influenced workers' choices to continue to work in the rural mines despite the *danwei* reforms because it was part of a certain idea of the good life that centred around the *danwei* and more importantly around the family. However, for San Shu's daughter, finding a dull state-sector white collar job was a lot less inspiring than trying her luck at some big firms in provincial capital cities in the country and at 21 she was not thinking about having her own family.

Er Shu did not have the same conflicts with his daughter about where she would settle. Although she had spent some of her university years away from Ma'anshan, she had grown up and had made friends there, so for her finding a job in Ma'anshan was something she wanted. Nevertheless, the father and daughter felt that they did not understand each other, and this resulted in many conflicts. Growing up in the city had in Er Shu's eyes decisively changed his daughter's attitudes to money, something he had not been able to teach her because he was working in Peach Mine. For example, he felt that she was not thrifty enough as he talked about how she had enrolled in a preparation course for the provincial *shiye danwei*⁸ exams in Hefei, the provincial capital of Anhui. During her two-week stay there, her and her friends stayed at a hotel, which was much more expensive than Er Shu had expected. At a family dinner he wondered out loud, why they had not been able to stay in a dormitory location and make their stay more economical. Er Shu felt that he had worked hard for his daughter to have a better life, but he hoped she would be as careful with money as he was. This suggestion was out of the question for his daughter however, staying in a dormitory like a migrant worker did not fit her urban identity and in many ways her father's request emphasized how much of a country bumpkin (*tu*) she thought he was. In his daughter's eyes Er Shu, despite being an urban homeowner and having an urban *hukou*, did not meet her understanding of urbanity and she expressed that he could not teach her anything, because he did not understand anything about her life, so she tried to ignore him whenever possible.

The generational gaps of understanding each other were also very present in family conversations about Xu Bai's continued bachelorhood. At some point

8 *Shiye danwei* jobs were popular with young university graduates in the city, they are white-collar jobs in government agencies, like banks, hospitals and utilities and offer the same kind of benefits as government jobs, but often higher salaries than purely administrative government units (Kipnis 2016: 203).

during our visit to Peach Mine, Er Shu sat his nephew down to tell him that at his age (approaching 30) he needed to focus. Er Shu stressed life was about having your feet solidly (*tatashishi*) on the ground. His nephew's concern with sports and entertainment were distractions for him, the importance of which he could not and did not want to understand. He reiterated that there are certain things you should do at certain stages of your life, playing and enjoying yourself should come after or alongside these things, but cannot be the main purpose. Instead, he should be working hard, so that he would be able to buy an apartment and get married soon.

From Xu Bai's perspective however, the life stages his family expected him to follow were not achievable. In contrast to his two cousins, he had not gone to university, and had tried his luck in many different sales and manual labour jobs. By the time he realised that he was not going to "make it" in the private sector it was impossible to get a formal job with a technical middle school certificate. Many of the elements of a socialist good life his father and uncles valued, such as stability, homeownership, and a pension, were unlikely for him to achieve. On his low salary and precarious contract, for Xu Bai, playing sports and occasionally spending money on equipment and workout clothes was a way to participate in an urban lifestyle that highlighted health and fitness.

At the same time Xu Bai was also not immune to his family's wishes for him to get married; he thought of marriage and having a child as something he would do at some point. However, the outlook of having a family was linked to immense financial pressures, and he could not imagine the hard work this required would be enjoyable. This was a different attitude to his uncles, whose understanding of a good life was importantly centred on providing a future and building a successful family, which linked with ideas of working hard (Kipnis 2016:161). Meanwhile, Xu Bai nearing his 30s had started to regret some of the choices he made as a young man and he would often point out instances where if he had chosen differently, he would probably have a formal job, bought a house, and had a wife and child by now.

The concerns and quarrels that the two generations endured come out of the different ideas of a good life and shine a light on the generational gaps which reflect the changing relationships between people, the state, and the market (Zavoretti 2017). While the Xu brothers have experienced stable employment at a state-owned enterprise and value the stability and continuity of the workplace and the family, their children have come of age in an expanding market economy. Individual desires, consumerism and possibilities of well-paid white-collar work are part of their aspirations of the future (Kipnis 2016). When white collar work and a good income are not available, like in Xu Bai's case, alternative ways to carve out a good life in China's market economy

are found. In the fast-paced changes that China's cities and countryside have undergone, older generations find it hard to grapple with the ideas and lifestyles of their children. Thus, what is deemed a good life is not the same for everyone while at the same time the aspirations and hopes of a good life might also change over a person's lifetime.

8 Conclusion

Although what people dream of and hope for might not always be achievable, the Xu brothers' experiences suggest the good life they planned for and worked towards is mediated by their experiences of a socialist good life and the possibilities the city has offered state-sector workers since China's market reforms. Peach Mine workers have had to contend with changing circumstances that result from decisions taken within the SOE and at the national level. These changes have shifted workers' status and identity, and shifted the services and opportunities available to them, both as workers and as urban citizens. Generational differences reflect changes in these circumstances and individual decisions and desires arise in a context of changing conditions of life and work.

For those workers who experienced life in Peach Mine through the pre-reform *danwei* of an urban SOE, the *danwei* reforms and de-industrialisation of Peach Mine resulted in their abandonment by the state and the SOE and a temporary downgrading of quality of life. While Er Shu stressed that life in Peach Mine is not all bad – the air was clean and in their free time workers could go fishing nearby and enjoy the slow life of the countryside – it lacked the possibilities of the city and, more importantly, it lacked the possibilities for family life, which takes an important place in workers' retirement strategies.

In this context, Old Wu passing away so shortly after retirement brings home the full extent of the tragedy of his death. Not only was he denied a good life by the state and the enterprise while he was alive, but because of his early death he was unable to support his son in seeing him through a significant stage of adulthood, marriage, and his own children. Although both Er Shu and San Shu carefully planned for the future, Old Wu's story reveals that there are important things that cannot be anticipated. Thus, retirement plans are, despite their seemingly concrete nature, always also about hopes and dreams. These hopes are influenced by past experiences and the moral discourses of the state and the market that influence the idea of what a full urban life looks like. Disrupted by moments of uncertainty, these hopes highlight Peach Mine workers' expectations and wait for the good life.

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Tradition, Habitat, and Well-Being: Polygamous Marriage in a Tibetan Village

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Abstract

The Tibetans, who live among the valleys and mountains of the Jinsha River region on the south eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, still retains a considerable number of polygamous marriages. Through fieldwork in a Tibetan village, the authors discovered polygamous marriage is a rational choice that is compatible with its traditional culture and natural environment for Tibetans, which can improve family well-being and lead to a good life. Our findings provide new fieldwork materials to support theories of cultural relativism advocated by the Boas school, which emphasizes that the environment greatly affects culture, and Malinowski's functionalism which stresses that culture has been created to satisfy people's practical needs.

Keywords

Yunnan – Tibetan – polygamous marriage – traditional culture

Tibet constitutes the classical example of polyandry (the marriage custom in which a wife is shared by two or more brothers) but even Tibetan society is by no means immune from the effects of culture change. To what extent is polyandry still practised at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and what factors either promote or hinder its continuation? What attitudes do Tibetans have towards this aspect of their traditional culture? Do they regard it as desirable or not? How do men within a polyandrous marriage view the sharing of a wife between brothers? These and other questions are ones which we have sought to answer through ethnographic fieldwork among Tibetans living within the People's Republic of China.

Polygamous marriage in this chapter refers to a marriage relationship with multiple spouses, which includes polyandry and polygyny. Polyandry refers to a marriage in which a woman keeps husband and wife relationship with

several men at the same time, these men are usually brothers. In contrast, polygyny refers to a form of marriage in which a man has two or more women as spouses, and these women are generally sisters. In this chapter, we will focus more on polyandrous marriage.

Our results are also very significant within China itself in terms of the ongoing influence of Marxist thought regarding polyandry as a remnant of a more 'primitive' stage of marriage which would eventually be replaced by other forms of marriage. However, our materials indicate that this rather over-simplistic view is inadequate to explain the persistence of polyandry today. Tibetans who choose to practise polyandry in the twenty-first century do so not because it is a relic of the past but as a reasoned response to social, economic and environmental factors at work in the present. These factors will be elucidated in the following pages.

In January 2008, we conducted research fieldwork in Benzilan Township of Deqin County, Diqing Prefecture, Yunnan Province, which is a traditional Tibetan area. As far as we are aware, there had been no previous studies of polyandry in this area apart from the paper by Yin Lun (2006) entitled *On Polyandry from the Perspective of Space - Taking Jiabi Village as a Case Study*. He proposed that the role of the environment - that is, local people's compartmentalization and utilization of environmental space, especially the living space - should be recognized as having a close connection with modes of marriage. According to the field data we obtained at the time, and we also continue to pay attention to its changes in the later period, our own research has taken this insight further with reference to the wider economic and ecological context of polyandry and of other marriage patterns.

In the course of our investigations, we discovered that there still are three modes of marriage among the Tibetans in this region: monogamous marriage, polyandry and polygyny. According to the 2007 statistics provided by the Family Planning Committee of Diqing Prefecture, there are 728 polygamous families in Deqin County, the population of which is less than 60,000.¹ Using anthropological participant-observation methods, we investigated polygamous families in the village of Benzilan and obtained a large quantity of first-hand materials for our special study, which provide more reliable fieldwork data on which to base research on the Tibetan polygamous families of Diqing, Yunnan. Interviews were conducted with several polygamous families, and the marriage modes of different generations were categorized. Our investigations have shown that there are a great number of families in the Tibetan area of Yunnan sustaining polygamous marriage. This phenomenon is closely

1 Data supplied by Liu Qun, Vice Director of the People's Congress of Diqing Prefecture.

related to the Tibetan people's cultural traditions and the natural environment of the area.

1 Theoretical Implications of This Material

For almost a century, research by Chinese scholars on polygamous families in Tibet has been hampered either by a shortage of empirical data or by attempts to fit the data into preconceived Marxist evolutionary models of society. In the 1920s and 1930s “the scholars Hong Di-chen, Xu Yi-tang, Tang Ying-hua, etc. researched polygamous families in Tibet at different levels. These researches gave many reasons for it, but the materials are scattered and few, and the opinions are also short of detailed proof. For example, Xu Yi-tang believed polyandry had nothing to do with the economy but rather with religion, chasing after an ideal life and an extremely weak sense of lineage. His opinion, however, lacks fieldwork data.” (Zhang 2002).

Chinese scholarship since 1946 has been blinkered in its research on polyandry by attempts to fit it into a Marxist framework, particularly the categories which ultimately derive from the evolutionary ideas proposed in the nineteenth century by the British pre-historian John McLennan and by the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan. Through their influence on Engels and Marx, they have continued to influence Chinese scholarly thinking a century or more later. In the words of the Chinese scholar Li Zhonglin and Zhu Guangliang, ‘Since authors of Marxist classics accorded great importance to Morgan’s *Ancient Society*, especially the theory of the evolution of marriage systems, Morgan’s theory had been widely accepted by the academic circles of our country and regarded as the formulation of a normal theory’ (Li and Zhu 2002). Even though Chinese scholars did conduct a huge amount of social and historical investigation in Tibet from the late 1950s to early 1960s, and some scattered investigations from the 1970s to early 1990s, they continued to be blinkered in their interpretations by the evolutionism of the Marxist classics, especially the theory of unilinear cultural evolution. Hence their ‘conclusions’ about the Tibetan polygamous family were somewhat predictable, as illustrated by the following quotations:

“It was a transition state between the matriarchal and patriarchal families” (Renzhenluose 1984);

“These are the remains of primitive group marriage” (Song 1981);

“They are the result of serfdom, which was based on a backward and underdeveloped economy, and are consequences of the decadent effects of serfdom in Tibet” (Zhang 1988);

“They are some extremely backward modes of marriage and are closely related to the extremely low productivity, backward cultural level and sense of stagnation of the local people, in particular directly related to clannism and serfdom” (Lv 1999).

However, with the development of anthropological research, Chinese anthropologists have increasingly called into question and criticized the kinds of theories and research methods that had taken social and cultural differences created by different environments and history as constituting different social and cultural historical development phases. “From the mid-1980s onwards, some experts in sociology, demography and anthropology conducted considerable research on the society and population of Tibet. Although they had an interest in polygamous families and provided many new materials on polygamous families in Tibet, most of their research was not specifically on polygamy itself, so their materials on this topic were not so systematic or deep.” (Zhang 2002) In his paper *On the Polyandrous Marriage of the Tibetans*, Mr. Ma Rong expounded his new thinking on Tibetan polyandry, especially trying to analyse the reasons behind polyandrous marriage and its effects, and considering factors such as marriage taboos and the social status of Tibetan women (Ma 2000). Despite raising some issues to consider in further research, his work was based on research documents in Chinese and foreign languages and he himself did not go to a Tibetan area to do any actual first-hand fieldwork on polyandrous marriage.

In the past ten years, research on polygamous marriage has gradually increased in China, and different scholars have studied it from the perspectives of anthropology, law, and economics. For example, Cirenzhuma made such a point that: at this stage, the law reform of Tibetan polygamous marriages should be based on the recognition of polygamous marriages, combined with the actual situation in Tibet to make specific, clear, and operational legal regulations (Cirenzhuma 2013). Similar studies include Zhang Qiwei's (2010) *On Tibetan Polygamy and the Adjustment of State Law*, Ban Jue's (2002) *Anthropological Study of Typical Marriage in Tibetan Agricultural Areas* and Zhang Guangyu's (2013) *Study on Polygamy in Tibetan Areas*. However, many studies are limited to discussing the character of polygamy and seeing it as a remnant of primitive marriage. They have ignored the phenomenon of polygamy phenomenon as a part of the Tibetan cultural system, which is based on cultural and social support factors and has unique function and structure.

Outside of China, evolutionism has been replaced by other views, such as that of the functionalist C. Staniland Wake, who believed the principal factor behind polygamy was not a lack of females, but population pressure. Yin Lun

(2006), working on materials within China, takes a similar view, stating that in many places where living conditions were bad, resources were short and the living style was 'backward', people usually needed to control the increase of population. As the number of children procreated by several husbands with one wife is much fewer than those by each of the men marrying a wife, polyandry serves to limit population increase. A similar kind of approach was taken in the early 1900's, when Edward A. Westermarck's research on marriage and the family related polygamous families to a number of factors, including there being more women than men, collective land and family possessions. More recently, American anthropologist Nancy Levine (1988) has pointed out in her work *The Dynamics of Polyandry: Kinship, Domesticity and Population on the Tibetan Border* (written after she did her field work in the 1970s and 1980s among a Nepalese Tibetan community living in the area where the Indian and Tibetan cultures meet each other), that polyandry originated from people's need of living conditions. A desire to accumulate wealth promoted a plural style of marriage, as polyandry not only avoids family possessions from being dispersed in the sub-division of a family but also limits the growth of population.

Therefore, theoretical approaches towards polyandry have shifted in their focus, no longer seeing it as a vestige of a 'primitive' form of marriage (perhaps resulting from practices such as female infanticide) but instead viewing it as a rational choice made in the light of economic factors. However, to a large extent the focus still tends to be on the economic factors within the family – *e.g.*, a desire to preserve resources from being dissipated by the sub-dividing of a family – rather than examining the wider ecological environment in which polyandry is practised. The value of our empirical data is that it shows the links between polyandry and higher-altitude ranching villages where some of the men have to be absent for long periods while taking care of livestock in distant pastures. The practice may also occur in cases where one of the husbands may work for extended periods in urban contexts elsewhere in China but where there is still a spatial separation of economic roles.

In a specific living space, the Tibetans in Benzilan choose a marriage system that adapts to the local natural environment and traditional culture. People keep their cultural forms and habitats in an interactive state by constantly adjusting their relationship with the environment. To a certain extent, the ecological environment affects the economic mode, and the economic mode affects their lifestyle; when a certain lifestyle is fixed as a custom, it reflects the rational choice based on the habitat. So based on our fieldwork of Tibetans in Benzilan, we want to show that such form of marriage is closely related to the local ecological conditions, social environment and culture; it is

a rational choice in the context of tradition and habitat. We hope our research can enrich the case studies of polygamy.

2 Basic Description of the Fieldwork Location

Benzilan Village is located on Hongji Cliff on the west bank of the Jinsha River, in the heartland of the world natural heritage site, the “Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas”. It is eighty-one km. away from the town of Shangri-la and 103 km. away from Deqin. From time immemorial, Benzilan has been the gateway into Tibet from Yunnan and Sichuan, and was a key transshipment station on the “Tea-horse Road”. The village is the centre for the Benzilan Township Government and the village committee, making it the political, economic and cultural centre of the township; national highway 214 passes through it. On the opposite site of the Jinsha River is Derong County of Sichuan Province. The village is composed of twenty-two sub-villages, including Hacong, Zhenggu, Gelangshui, Zhuigu, Zangui, Nijia, Shuoge, etc. In all, there are 550 families and 3,109 villagers, of whom Tibetans constitute over 99% of the whole population, the others being of other ethnic groups. The range of altitude is from 2,108 meters at the lowest point to 3,400 meters at the highest point, with the average air temperature being 16.2 degrees Centigrade and the annual precipitation 299.7 millimetres. All these reflect its climate - dry and hot in the valleys and frigid on the high mountains. In this area, the valleys are deep and the mountains are high, with scanty vegetation on the mountain slopes, which are almost completely covered with rocks. The riverbed is narrow and the cultivable land is very limited.

Since the absolute range of altitude is large, the twenty-two sub-villages of Benzilan Village can be categorized according to two living styles: semi-ranching and agricultural. Villages scattered along the western bank of the Jinsha River have lower altitude. So the villagers plant crops such as wheat, highland barley, corn and so on biannually, relying mainly on agriculture and the collection of wild mushrooms (mainly Matsutake). However, the villages located at an altitude of about 3000 meters are short of arable land, the villagers are mainly engaged in animal husbandry production, the collection of wild mushrooms and a small amount of agricultural production.

3 The Distribution of Polygamous Families

During fieldwork, we conducted statistics on the polygamous marriage family modes in different villages in Benzilan. Among the 550 families of the



MAP 11.1 Location of Benzilan.

twenty-two sub-villages of Benzilan village, fifty-three families preserve polygamy – that is, around 10% of the total. Main modes of production of these families are semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral, agriculture and trade. Due to different geographical environments and production methods, the proportion of polygamous marriage in different villages is also different; in order to make it easier to be understood, we call villages where polygamy accounts for more than 10% of total number of marriages “villages with a high incidence of polygamous families”, the rests call “villages with a low incidence of polygamous families”.

Judging from the family model of polygamy, all of the fifty-three families consist of two brothers who had married a joint wife, or else of two sisters who have both married a common husband; we have not yet found a case of more than two brothers marrying a wife or more than two sisters marrying a husband. Among the fifty-three families, forty-nine have polyandry (92% of the total) but four of the fifty-three families have polygyny (8% of the total). Four of the fifty-three families form two polygynous circles within one main trunk of their family trees. Just as in most other Tibetan areas, in Benzilan there is no case of more than one polygamous marriage in one generation in one family. Among the forty-nine polyandrous families, the husbands of four of the families are cadres of the government or workers of state-owned enterprises.

4 Historical Memories of Polygamous Families

Traditionally, Tibetans believe that brothers born to the same parents should be born and grow up together and that it is a blessing to stay together. As the Tibetan proverb says: if a big household is divided into two small households, it is like digging two holes in a Zanba (a kind of Tibetan traditional food made from barley flour) bag. This provides an ideological basis for polyandry. Our investigation shows that polygamous families have a long history in Deqin County of Diqing Prefecture, Yunnan Province. A typical example of this marriage mode is the head of Shuoge village, KG, who is male, fifty years of age and with primary school education.

KG recalled the marriage and family of four generations of his family. He said, "In my village, the labour force is small and there are not many fields. If we adopted monogamy, on the one hand, we would be too busy; on the other hand, we would fail to support the family. At the time of the Kuomintang, it was very common to see several brothers married to a common wife in my village, even with cases of over ten brothers being married to a shared wife. Now, the generation of three or four brothers marrying a joint wife has already passed away. Now there are only cases in which two brothers share a wife."

He also told us his family's marital status from his grandma to his children. His grandma married four brothers of the village and had three daughters. According to the Tibetan tradition that the elder child should stay with her natal family; so, her elder daughter, that is KG's mother, stayed at home supporting the elderly parents. The second daughter was married off to three brothers and the third became a nun. KG has a brother and three sisters; he and his elder brother married a wife and had three sons and a daughter. The elder son and the second son married a wife and they now have two daughters; the other son became a monk.

There are not just a few cases like the village head KG's family, in which polyandrous marriages existed for several generations from traceable historical memory. In this remote and poor small village, three families have maintained polyandrous marriages in two generations among the existing villagers. The oldest is seventy-eight years of age and the youngest twenty-two. We learned some new information that in Shuoge Village the villagers have strictly kept to the principle of single marriage - that is, an only son should marry a wife or wives and an only daughter should marry a husband or husbands. If there are several brothers in a family, usually the brothers will marry a wife together to form a polyandrous family. If one or more brothers are married to another village(s) or home(s), or to be a monk, then the one who stay at home will marry a wife to form a monogamous family. If there are only daughters in a

family, then the eldest will stay at home supporting the home and the others will marry off.

If there are sons and daughters in a family, then the eldest will stay at home to do his (or her) duty of supporting the families, no matter whether the eldest is a son or a daughter.

5 Family Relationships in Polygamous Families

In a polyandrous wedding, some families arrange for both of the brothers to receive their wife; the younger brother follows after his elder brother in the bride-receiving procession. Some families arrange for the elder brother to receive the bride, while the younger brother stays at home waiting. As for the issue of cohabitation, the wife and brothers have their own rooms respectively. The husbands cohabit alternatively with the wife, usually according to the order from the eldest to the youngest. Materials from the past normally recorded that the husband wanting to sleep with the wife would place a mark at his door, and then the others will naturally leave them alone. However, according to our investigation, most of the husbands said it is unnecessary to make any mark; they merely put their shoes outside their wife's door, and then the others will keep clear. This may be because three or four brothers shared a wife in the past whereas nowadays it is more usual for only two brothers to share a wife and the privities between the two brothers and the implications of the wife's actions are enough to avoid any conflicts. Actually, there are few records on this account. The children usually call the elder brother "Dad" and the younger brother uncle, no matter which child is the actually whose flesh and blood. If the elder brother died, then the children may call the younger "Dad". The wife follows her children's usage in how she refers to her husbands. Usually, the older husband's name is filled in on the marriage certificate and the school registration forms. As for the division of family labour, the wife looks after their children and the old people and does some easy housework and farm work like weeding and looking for domestic fowl's food. The husbands divide up their work according to their talents and cooperate with each other. Usually, one of them leaves the family to go to work or to pasture the animals while the other stays at home to farm their family land and help their wife look after the home. The home-stay husband lives together with their wife, so when his brother (the other husband) comes back home the home-stay husband will on his own initiative leave them to themselves. The polygamous families in Benzilan normally run harmoniously, with the family members silently keeping the family members in balance so as to protect their home. The villagers

told us that few families failed to maintain harmony. A typical case is AZ's family in Xiashe sub-village.

There are four people in AZ's family. The elder brother, AY, is forty-five years of age and primary school educated. AZ is thirty-nine, senior middle school educated. Their wife, GR, is thirty-one and illiterate. Their son, WZ, is twelve this year and he is a fourth-grade pupil. In 1994, the elder brother, AY, and AZ married GR of Yunling Township, Deqin County as their wife and later gave birth to their son. The elder brother, AY, is disabled: he is blind in one eye, and suffers from nephropathy, so he lost his fertility. Of course, the son is in fact the flesh and blood of AZ, but the son still calls AY "Dad" and AZ "Uncle" according to the Tibetan polyandrous family tradition. The wife calls her husbands according to her son's terminology. Most of the time AZ leaves home to go to work and has been to Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Xi'an, Chengdu and elsewhere. AY stays at home most of the time helping their wife to do farm work and look after their family. It may be for this reason that the son, WZ, told me that he loves his dad better because he stays with his father most of the time and receives unlimited love from his father. The wife, GR, comments on her husbands that AZ is an able man and AY a caring man. AY also said, "My wife and younger brother are very good to me. My wife does not favour my brother because of my blindness and disease and my brother's ability to earn more money. Both of us brothers trust our wife and all the money of our family is handled by her."

6 The Social Value of Polygamous Families

Polygamous families are widely recognised in the Benzilan region, especially in the remote high mountain areas. However, people have different social value between polyandrous marriages and polygynous marriages. As the saying goes in Benzilan, "A hundred men with one woman - the woman will be very blessed; a hundred women with one man - the man will suffer greatly."

6.1 *The Social Value of Polyandrous Families*

Villagers normally believe that a family is not stable if in it there are two or more marriage units, or if two or more brothers marry different women but without breaking the family up. Moreover, the sub-dividing of the family and the sharing out of property after a marriage are regarded as the main causes of disharmony in a kin group and of their falling into penury. The way that several brothers share one wife not only prevents family processions from being dispersed but also help the family become richer because of having sufficient

labour: some can pasture the animals and some do the farming. In addition, if the brothers live together it helps to promote unity and family harmony. This of course is the best situation.

In thinking about a marriage partner, Tibetans – both men and women – believe polyandry is a much better condition than monogamy because a polyandrous family has more labour force and family possessions will not be dispersed by sub-dividing the family. Hence polyandrous families are always richer than monogamous families. The marriage story of 38-year-old villager CL and his elder brother, 42-year-old DW, is an excellent example.

CL's parents gave birth to five children: ZM (daughter), BS (eldest son), DW (second son), CL (third son) and NM (fourth son). CL's sister fell in love with FYL, a young man of Han nationality from Changlong County, Sichuan Province. She got married and moved to Sichuan in 1981. In 1983, his eldest brother married CM and later they left the main family to create a new home for themselves. This break-up greatly affected the family economically, so the sister who was already married off had the idea that DW and CL could marry a wife into the family. Therefore, she came back to the village to ask around and to commit others to act as a matchmaker for her brothers. She finally arranged for the two brothers to marry LM of Zangui sub-village even without their having seen each other beforehand or obtaining the permission of her parents.² The sixty-four-year-old village head of Benzilan village, BM – many generations of whose family can be recalled as maintaining polygamous marriages – commented about polyandrous families as follows: "My younger brother and I married a wife and we have two daughters and two sons. My elder daughter was married off to two brothers; my two sons married in a wife. The two sons are both so excellent that I hesitate to have either of them leaved the family, so I finally decided to have them marry in a wife. If only the family be united, it will surely become richer. Whether the family can be united together or not lies in whether or not the wife is wise. Only wise women can handle it well and keep the family being harmonious. There are still a few who are unable to manage family relationships well and such wives are not wise. In families in which there are many conflicts, it is impossible to work well and of course impossible to become rich." The village head of Gelangshui, CL, who is from a

2 Interview from our fieldwork. According to the account given by CL, his elder sister met ZM of her own accord and told her the situation about her two brothers, eventually obtaining ZM's consent but without informing her parents. She and ZM chose the location and an auspicious date for the wedding. On that date, ZM came to the place they had arranged, accompanied by some of her girl friends and CL's elder brother; a friend of his brought the girls back home. This kind of marriage is locally called "marriage by theft".

non-polygamous family, made the following comment about polygamous families: "If the parents are happy and the brothers are united, then they can get rich much faster."

In Benzilan village, various social comments indicate the criteria for suitable polyandrous wives. The principal criteria relate to whether or not a wife could manage well with the clothing, food and sexual lives of her husbands. If she is able to keep the unity of the brothers, be good to the parents and keep harmony in the whole family, then she is a good wife who would be highly prized by the villagers. On the other hand, if there are many conflicts between the brothers and family relationships are bad, it is taken as indicating that the wife is acting unfairly so she would be criticized and scoffed at by other villagers. This idea is so engrained that it is widely accepted. Prior to their weddings, women are warned by their seniors that they should not be unfair and that they should try to maintain family harmony. For example, GR (whose parents and her elder brothers all maintain polyandrous marriages and who was married off from Yunling Township of Deqin County to two brothers of Xixashe sub-village of Benzilan) was warned before her marriage ceremony, "You can get love from two men and it's a blessing if you marry two brothers. You will not have to do hard work if the family has enough workers. So, you should not be unfair to any one of the husbands and you should preserve the unity well." When we interviewed AY, one of her husbands, he said that his wife is very happy, and she has a comparatively leisured life throughout the year because she does housework most of the time. Her husbands do most of the farm work.

As for the children of polyandrous families, it doesn't seem that the husbands deliberately make it clear which children are whose flesh and blood. When CL, the village head of Shuoge, was asked which of the four children are his flesh and bloods, CL answered, "God knows! Anyhow, they are the children of the family. So they are all my children." In such a cultural tradition, villagers refer to the children by their surname, saying that they are children of a family but not of someone in particular.

6.2 *The Social Value of Polygynous Families*

In contrast to polyandrous families, normally, villagers are not in favour of polygynous families, some of them even regarding these marriages as immoral. None of the polygynous families in Benzilan were formed by way of two sisters marrying a husband simultaneously. The most common situation is that one of two sisters could not find a marriage partner or was divorced, after which she ended up cohabiting with her sister's husband to make a practical polygynous family. But usually the relationship between the two sisters is not very harmonious. As for the relationship between the mothers and the children, the

children know who is whose mother. So they differ in appellation and call their own mother “Mon” and the sister of their mother “Suomo” (which means aunt in Tibetan language).

Polygynous families are poorer because there are always more children and the families usually face heavier economic burdens. This situation is the reason why polygynous families are less valued by the villagers. The locals also believe that polygynous families are unstable, because each wife will focus on her own children rather than the whole family, and children born to different mothers will inevitably quarrel because of inheritance rights after they grow up.

7 Development Trend of Polygamous Families

Marriage and family are the basic content and organizational form of social life, and are determined by a certain economic foundation and social system. With the change of society and economic development, the form and number of Tibetan polygamous marriages are also changing. In Benzilan, since we carried out fieldwork in 2008, the number has been decreasing. The reasons for its change are related to the improvement of economic level, the promotion and implementation of policies and the improvement of people's education etc.

First of all, this is affected by economic development and changes in ideas. The popularization of national compulsory education has greatly improved the education level of the local younger generation; they gradually accept the concept of “monogamy” marriage when acquiring knowledge. With the development of media such as film and television, people have gradually accepted monogamous production as the main way of marriage. Also, with the rapid economic development and the improvement of living standards in the Tibetan areas in recent years, it reduces the pressure of survival by relying on the natural resources and fundamentally shakes the economic foundation of polygamous families. In many villages in Benzilan, due to the development of tourism in Deqin, also Benzilan is the only road from Shangri-La to Meili Snow Mountain, now the local catering industry and hotel economy continue to develop and their economic sources have become diverse. Therefore, the situation of relying on increasing labour force for agricultural production to maintain livelihoods has gradually changed, and the local people's demand for polyandrous marriages has also decreased.

Secondly, the implementation and promotion of national policies have also affected the number of polygamous marriages. From a historical perspective, Tibetan polygamous marriage was a historical remnant and once widespread in Tibetan areas; although the national *Marriage Law* which is a national law

that regulates the marriage and family system in China expressly stipulates the implementation of the monogamy system, this marriage model has always existed in Tibetan areas. However, in recent years, with the strengthening of the implementation of the *Marriage Law* of the government, and people also seeing the shortcomings of lack of legal protection under polygamy, more people are willing to accept monogamy. For example, only the name of the elder brother is written on the marriage certificate in polyandrous marriage, so other brothers have lost legal protection and status in the marriage system. Also, the implementation of the family planning policy that encourages a couple to have only one or two children has greatly reduced the possibility of a family having two sons. Although this policy is relatively loose in Tibetan areas, many families have reduced the number of children, in this way it also reduced the possibility of polygamy.

In the book *Marriage, the Market, and State Power in Southeastern China*, Friedman (2006) uses case studies to illustrate how local forms of marriage show the tension and interaction between the state and the locality. There are similar manifestations in Benzilan area, during fieldwork, we learned of situations in which some villagers and government cadres also try to conceal their polyandrous marriages in the current implementation of the monogamous marriage law. For example, NB, the village head of Nongli and headmaster of Benzilan Tibetan written language school, married a wife jointly with his elder brother. They run the school together. NB has studied Tibetan medicine and has a deep understanding of Tibetan culture, so he is a locally famous intellectual. When we saw him for the first time and asked him some questions, he avoided answering the question about his marriage. Once we had got to know one another better, he acknowledged that he himself is part of a polyandrous family. Attempts by some villagers and government cadres to hide the truth about their polyandrous marriages indicate that polyandrous marriage is no longer a very desirable marriage mode for them as the level of knowledge continues to increase.

8 Why Have Polyandrous Families Existed for so Long?

The number of polygamy is declining from the development trend, however, this marriage practice has been developed and continued for a long time, and it has a strong group identity. The existence of polygamous marriage in the Benzilan area is a rational choice that is compatible with its traditional culture and natural environment. There are three main reasons for its long-term existence:

8.1 *The Need for a Labour Force Makes the Polygamous Family Mode a Reasonable Choice in Conditions of Limited Resources and Backward Productivity*

Benzilan is located in the Jinsha River valley. There are very few cultivable lands on the fluvial terraces of the riverbank. The mountains on both banks of the river are of karst landform and rocky so are not favourable for plants. Moreover, the climate here is dry with low precipitation, so there is not even any grass on the mountain slopes but only some drought-resistant thorns.

Polygamous families are closely related to the natural environment – including land, altitude, location, and so on. Those villages with more fertile soil, lower altitude, and better location usually belong to “villages with a low incidence of polygamous families”, vice versa.

Villages like Ximuge, Nijigeshang, Nijigexia, Xiashe, Nongli, etc. are on the fluvial terraces of the Jinsha River valley. Although there are not many cultivable lands, the lands are flat and fertile, so the essential productivity of the area is higher. Moreover, the climate is so hot that these lands could produce a yield twice a year. State highway number 214 goes through the central area of Benzilan township, Benzilan village and the surrounding villages of Nijigeshang, Nijigexia, Xiashe, Nongli, etc. The area is the political, economic and cultural core of Benzilan Township. Many restaurants, hotels and shops are concentrated here. The advantageous conditions of the area, including excellent natural conditions, a developed commercial economy, convenient transportation, and so on, provide the villagers with more ways to make living. To some extent this affects the establishment of new families, so the number of families in the area is smaller and there are fewer polygamous families. Polyandrous families would be even scarcer in the area if we were to disregard situations in which a brother or sister has to choose to marry someone alongside his or her sibling on account of having a disability which would make it difficult to find a ‘normal’ marriage partner.

In contrast, the ratio of polygamous families is highest in the high and frigid farming-pastoral region where most of the landscape is barren and there are few cultivable lands. For example, Shuoge sub-village, where 60% of the families maintain polygamous marriages, is 2,718 meters above sea level and surrounded by snowy mountains, with no motor road having yet been built to connect it with the outside world. The per capita farm land is only 0.42 *mu* and the lands have a crop once a year, so their specific yield is very low. The main family income depends on walnuts, collecting mushrooms and pasturing the livestock. Living on the ridge, the villagers find it hard to find even small pieces of land on which they could build their houses.

In this situation, a family could not rely on agriculture alone; they have to diversify into animal husbandry to keep going. However, in order to find better meadows, the villagers have to pasture their animals behind the mountains in remote valleys and on distant slopes, so the family members who go to look after them must stay in the mountains over half the year. This situation makes it impossible for monogamous families to adopt a semi-ranching way of life because monogamous families lack the workers to do so. In order to avoid the loss of family labor and to diversify and broaden their living space, the best choice is to form families containing more than one able-bodied worker. This is because, in this area, “the social economy has still been a kind of semi-ranching and self-sufficient natural economy. The closeness and self-sufficiency are very obvious. the social division of labour is not between the communities or families, but within the families and between the family members. Each family tries to form a small and complete economic system. The degree of ‘completion’ becomes a key symbol of a self-sufficient economy - and, generally speaking, the higher the degree is, the richer a family is.” (Wang 2000) In such families, “All the economic activities of a family form a labour-dividing and cooperative mechanism to some extent. But the effects of labour division and cooperation are much better than for those families that are lacking in workers, division and scale of family labor.” (Wang 2000)

For example, sixty-two-year-old BM, who has two sons, told us that when the eldest son, CL, was nineteen years old and the youngest son, LB, was ten years old, the eldest son married an eighteen-year-old girl, YZ, who came from another village; after their marriage they had two children. The eldest son and his wife discussed the situation of what would happen when the youngest son grows up because if he were to marry someone else he would leave home, thereby depleting the domestic labour force. At BM's request and with the youngest son's agreement, it was decided that the youngest son would remain at home, making a polygamous family but thereby solving the problem of having nobody in the family to look after the herds. Such a combination of families has been highly praised by the parents. BM boasted to us that they are one of the better-off families in the village. Since the older brother and his wife have two children but the youngest brother cannot afford to have his own birth children, the older brother's two children will take care of the younger brother in his old age, in accordance with polyandrous family tradition. We also found in Shuoge Village that polyandrous families are normally richer than monogamous families. The reason why polygynous families are poorer is mainly that there are always more children in polygynous families and the families usually face heavier economic burdens. This situation is the reason why polyandrous families are appraised more highly, whereas polygynous families are less valued by the villagers.

Although the existence of polygamous families is affected by the cultural attitudes and traditions not only of the villagers but also of outside cultures, and even by some accidental factors, the shortage of resources encourages the Tibetan families to adopt polygamous marriage and congregational forms of work and lifestyle, in order to allow the limited resources be used to the fullest. That is why in the Benzilan area polygamous marriage and its associated family system have become the most effective form of organization to cope with the shortage of resources and to maximize the available living space.

8.2 *Limited Resources Restrict Possibilities for Sub-dividing so as to Form New Families, so That a Polyandrous Marriage Mode Eases the Pressure on Natural Resources Arising from Population Increase. To Some Extent This Helps to Maintain a Better Standard of Living*

If a family separate and regroup into several small families unlimitedly, it will inevitably cause the dispersion and shortage of land resources and the division of family property. In cases of an extreme shortage of the means of production and of making a living, the family breaks up and becomes poorer. The polyandrous marriage pattern that is adopted by the villagers satisfies a physiological drive and their social need for getting married, carrying on the family line and fulfilling their careers, while at the same time making the families avoid a dispersal of the limited means of production and livelihood. At the same time, the decrease in married women and of family units is also helpful in easing the pressure on natural resources caused by an over-increase of population. In a sense, polyandrous marriage is an effective means of maintaining and improving the economic situation of the villagers.

We obtained data on the number of local population and households from 1984 to 2007 from Benzilan village committee, which displayed that there is imbalance in the growth of population and of family numbers among the twenty-two sub-villages of Benzilan village during these 23 years. In villages such as Xiashe, Nijigeshang, Nijigexia, Bairen, Hacong, Zhenggu, Gelangshui, etc., which rely mainly on agriculture and commerce, family numbers have increased and the population has grown faster. By contrast, in villages such as Zhuigu, Zangui, Shuoge, Shiyi, Niding, Zhachongding, etc., which depend more on farming and pastoralism, family numbers have barely changed and the population growth is also slow. Taking Shuoge village as an example, the population has changed from 138 to 144, an increase of only six people – that is, 4.3% over twenty-three years. The number of families has never changed, with constantly just twenty families in this village. Twelve of the twenty families (that is, 60% of them) maintain polyandrous marriages and three of them have maintained polyandrous marriages over two generations.

Although this phenomenon has something to do with medical and sanitary conditions, religion and attitudes towards the birth of children, it also connects closely with polyandrous marriage and family modes. The existence of a large number of polyandrous families is a very important factor that maintains the size of the village and also means that the village population grows less. Polyandrous marriage not only lowers the possibility of family dispersion, avoids family possessions being broken up and a loss of the labour force, but also decreases the number of couples of child-bearing age and controls population growth. It is an effective regulatory mechanism which controls the number of people in order to adjust to the total available resources for production and for maintaining their way of life.

8.3 *An Attachment to Traditional Values – in Terms of Parents Staying in One Place, Brothers and Sisters Standing Together through Thick and Thin, and Having a Concern for One Another*

The form of polygamy in Benzilan is also related to the traditional values of tolerance and forgiveness of Tibetan Buddhism. Faced with the scarcity of labour force and the difficulty of population reproduction caused by the harsh ecological environment, Tibetans have deeply realized the importance of mutual care and cooperation between people, forming the traditional value of recognizing family and brotherhood. In the relationship between the kinship and property inheritance of the Tibetans in Benzilan, the inheritance of the “house” is more important than the inheritance of the property. So the Tibetans do not favour sons more than daughters, it is more important for them to inherit the family house than who inherits it. The brothers in a family live together, marry a wife together, and inherit the family’s house, land, and family real estate together. The Tibetans regard very highly the unity and harmony of the family and fraternity among siblings.

In the Benzilan area, the parents or other relatives of any children with disabilities will arrange for them to become monks or nuns or else arrange a polygamous marriage to solve the problem of the disabled person’s marriage and livelihood. Among the seven polygamous families of Gelangshui Village, there is a disabled husband in three families and a disabled wife in another family. Among the three polyandrous families of Xiashe Village, there is a family with a disabled husband. One husband from a polygamous family told me, “My elder brother is handicapped but he refused to be a monk and wanted to marry. I couldn’t abandon him and leave him alone. So we married a wife together.” Cases in which a disabled person marries someone jointly with his or her sound sibling are common. For example, thirty-four-year-old AS of Gelangshui Village, who is disabled, was married off to someone in Ximuge Village. Several years later she got divorced, after which she and her two children went

back to her village to live with her younger sister. Finally, her elder brother arranged for her to join into her sister's marriage to form a polyandrous family. The methods and mind-set of people who have to deal with the issue of the marriage of disabled brothers and sisters in Tibetan families express their traditional concepts of maintaining the unity and harmony of the family and fraternity between siblings.

9 Conclusions

The theory of cultural relativity originated by Boas, one of the founders of American anthropology, believes that human history evolves multilinearly but not unilinearly: the culture of each nation was created under certain historical conditions. The forming of each culture was affected by biological, geographic, economic and other factors - that is to say, different cultures are the results of different societies. The functionalist theory of the British anthropologist Malinowski believes that culture is created to satisfy people's practical needs. The appearance of this theory helped to free anthropological thinking from the classical concepts of a "primitive remnant" (following Edward Tylor) and to explain some cultural affairs better. "In human society, which sexual relationship and marriage pattern on earth is more moral and advanced? This is a question that could not be judged simply by the traditional criteria of a certain society." (Ma 2000) Each culture is a unique result of certain historical conditions. They each have their own specific features and each has immense value. It is short-sighted and ethnocentric to judge and comment on other nations according to the criteria of one's own culture.

From this investigation into polygamous families of the Benzilan area, polygamous marriage is regarded as an important means to help families improve their quality of life, which can bring potential economic security, wealth and social prestige. The polygamous family can maximize the economic benefits by dividing the adult labour within the family, and can also avoid dividing the family property due to the separation of siblings. So, it can make the family property more abundant and thereby enhancing the family's ability to resist the risk of natural disasters. Especially, the case of brothers marrying a wife together is more popular and appreciated; such marriage mode is very good for maintaining the family inheritance, and is more conducive to family harmony. They have fewer children than polygynous families, not only reducing the economic cost, time and energy of raising children; moreover, they can make full use of the adult labour force to engage in agriculture and other economic activities.

Therefore, polygamous marriage is a rational choice in the context of tradition and habitat for Tibetans in Benzilan area; it can improve family well-being

and lead to a good life. It can be seen that polygamous marriage is a part of Tibetan society and culture in the Benzilan area. The emergence of polygamous marriage in this area is closely related to the local resource situation and cultural ideas, especially the man-land relationship, production methods, residence pattern, the requirements of the labour force and the reproductive potential of the population, etc. This marriage mode plays a very important role in balancing and solving problems of the difficult man-land relationship, the contradiction between production methods and labour force, population growth control, the maintenance of a better living standard and so on.

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