

### Avertissement aux auteurs

Ce document est un tiré à part, au format PDF, d'un article paru dans l'édition papier de la REMI.

L'auteur s'engage à ne pas le mettre en ligne pendant la durée de commercialisation sur le site Cairn.info, soit 12 mois.

### Warning to authors

This document is a PDF offprint of an article published in a paper edition of REMI.

The author commits him/herself not to put it online during commercial exploitation on the Cairn.info site, i.e. 12 months.

### Avertencia a los autores

Este documento es una tirada aparte, en formato PDF, de un artículo publicado en la edición en papel de la REMI.

El autor se compromete a no ponerlo en línea mientras dure la comercialización en el portal Cairn.info, es decir 12 meses.

## Research Note

# French Lao and their transnational humanitarian activities in Laos: between illusions and disillusionment

Isabelle Wilhelm<sup>1</sup>

In recent decades, the development of transportation and communication technologies has intensified transnational activities (Newland *et al.*, 2010; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). Since the 1990s, the concepts of “transnationalism” (Basch *et al.*, 1994) and “transnational social spaces” (Faist, 1998) have opened the way to a new conception of migrants as actors in areas encompassing two or more states (Brettell, 2000; Portes, 1997). Based on this transnational approach, many scholars have been interested in remittance practices. However, their studies have more often focused on family-related practices (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla, 2018; Parreñas, 2008) than on remittances collectively sent to fund “development” (in the sense of Olivier de Sardan, 1995) projects in the migrants’ country of origin. Furthermore, they mainly examine labor migration and not forced migration, as Newland (2011) and De Haas (2010) pointed out.

The present paper examines this latter form of transnational activity, sometimes referred to as “collective remittances” (Goldring, 2004). These remittances are invested by associations of migrants in projects intended to support the population of their country of origin. The literature on this theme tends to focus either on the country of origin or on the country of destination. Research examines the associations’ internal structure (Copeland, 2007; Delcroix and Bertaux, 2012; Martiniello and Busetta, 2008; Opiniano, 2005), the profile and motivations of the actors involved (Lücke *et al.*, 2012), and the factors that influence the intensity of transnational activities (Fibbi and D’Amato, 2008; Lacroix, 2012; Lafleur, 2005). Other studies focus on the role of migrants’ associations in international development (Orozco and Garcia-Zanello, 2009; Portes, 2003) and on

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD candidate in social and cultural anthropology., Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC), Université libre de Bruxelles (Belgium) & Laboratory of European Dynamics (DynamE), Université de Strasbourg (France), Member of the Research Centre “East Asian Studies” (EASt) of the Université Libre de Bruxelles and fellow of the “Institut Convergences Migrations” (Paris), LAMC – Institute of Sociology, Université libre de Bruxelles, 44 avenue Jeanne, 1050 Brussels – CP 124, Belgium; [isabelle.wilhelm@ulb.ac.be](mailto:isabelle.wilhelm@ulb.ac.be)

The author would like to thank Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot, FNRS researcher at the University of Brussels (ULB/LAMC), for her constructive comments and her support. The author is also grateful to the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC, Thailand) for funding her fieldworks in Laos in 2016 and 2017. Furthermore, this article received support from the Maison Interuniversitaire des Sciences de l’Homme d’Alsace (MISHA) and the Excellence Initiative of the University of Strasbourg.

the political impact of migrants' involvement in their country of origin (Fox and Bada, 2008). Despite the diversity of approaches, this literature has revealed that such activities, far from undermining migrants' integration in their country of destination (Levitt, 2009), tend to reinforce it (Daum, 1998; De Haas, 2010; Portes, 2003). Other authors go even further in stating, as Lacroix (2013) does, that what motivates such investments is a desire for double integration, here and there; a quest for an identity balance between who migrants were prior to moving and who they have become after years of living abroad. Within this process, development initiatives "renew an allegiance towards the place of origin but they also transform migrants into agents of modernization" (Lacroix, 2013: 1032). However, the desire to maintain links with the country of origin often puts migrants into situations filled with frustrations and conflicts (Sayad, 2004). These situations stem from the gap between the differing perspectives of migrants and non-migrants; a gap that increases in time (Levitt and Lamba, 2013). Carling (2008) analyses these complex relationships through the concept of "asymmetries". He considers that the geographical distance between migrants and non-migrants leads to inequalities that can be a source of frustration for both sides and influence the "shifting balance of conflict and cooperation in micro-level transnational relationships" (Carling, 2008: 1474). Asymmetries occur in three spheres of transnational life: transnational moralities, information and imagination in transnational relations and transnational resource inequalities (Carling, 2008: 1453).

Drawing from these scholarly works, the present paper explores the case of Lao humanitarian associations in France. During my fieldwork, I observed that when French Lao<sup>2</sup> present their associations and explain their motivations for getting involved in the development of Laos, they stress idealized views about how their projects should be accepted by the villagers and by the Lao authorities. But then, when they describe the concrete implementation of their projects, discrepancies appear between their views and the reactions of the local population. In this paper, I intend to analyze this gap by examining the discourses of various social actors and the ethnographic fieldnotes I have accumulated over the last four years in France and Laos. To do so, I first present the historical context of the creation of Lao associations and examine the elements that shaped the idealized views of the associations' founders. Then, I investigate the perceptions and receptions of their development activities in Laos. This will highlight the differing expectations and perspectives of the actors involved and the way these differences create a gap between what is ideally imagined by the French Lao and the reality they face in the field.

## Methodology

The data presented in this paper originate from an ethnographic study conducted in a multi-sited field between 2013 and 2017 (eight months in Laos, divided into five fieldworks between 2014 and 2017, and an uninterrupted fieldwork in France between 2013 and 2017) among Lao humanitarian associations. I specifically

---

<sup>2</sup>To distinguish French people of Lao origin from those of French origin, I use here the term "French Lao" for the former and "French" for the latter. However, it is important to note that all my French Lao informants possess single (French) nationality.

adopted the “follow the people” approach (Markus, 1995): I followed the same group of actors in their activities in France and in Laos. My study relied on participant observations as well as on informal and semi-structured interviews with the various actors involved in the projects: presidents and members of associations, local intermediaries, beneficiaries, Lao authorities in France (embassy, consulate), and in Laos (village chiefs and one employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

For this study, I focused on the first eight associations I encountered. Although there are more than twenty Lao humanitarian associations in France, I decided to carry out a long-term investigation with these eight associations not only because they share common characteristics (which I will describe later on), but also because limiting my study in this manner allowed for “thick” ethnography. I was able to deepen my fieldwork with each of them through regular meetings in France and in Laos. My fieldwork in Laos took the form of several stays with the following objectives: to accompany associations in the implantation of their projects, to meet local collaborators, and to observe how authorities and villagers received the projects. This latter objective obliged me to be present on the field before the associations’ representatives arrived and after they left. By doing so, I was able to observe how the villagers prepared and how they reacted to the projects. To facilitate my fieldwork, I used a mix of Lao and French languages to communicate with my informants.

In total, I followed eight key actors in the target associations. I chose them for two reasons: they are the founders of these associations (most of them are the current presidents) and they go to Laos more regularly than the other members to manage projects. I met them through snowballing and direct contact by phone after finding their numbers on the association’s websites. They are all ethnic Lao<sup>3</sup> born in Laos, which suggests that other ethnic groups from Laos have not yet created any associations in France. They were aged between forty-eight and seventy-two (almost sixty on average) at the time of my fieldwork. In terms of gender, four are men and four are women. Concerning their migration background, four of them came to France as refugees, three arrived as students before 1975 through a French scholarship program, and one entered the country in the 1980s to join her parents. In Laos, three of the informants came from a privileged background (members of former royal families, relatives of high-ranking officials, etc.), two belonged to middle-class families living in villages close to a city where their children were able to access secondary education, and three had modest origins (rice farmers’ families living in remote villages). Although the social backgrounds of the informants are diverse, I observed that all of them developed social networks with French people at an early point. Accruing social capital (in the Bourdieusian sense) among French people appears fundamental for the French Lao to confront the reluctance of their compatriots who often consider them as “traitors”. The participation of French people in Lao associations thus provides a significant help in their activities and in their administrative tasks.<sup>4</sup> However, since these associations were all created

---

<sup>3</sup> Lao people are politically and economically dominant in Laos where many other ethnic groups live.

<sup>4</sup> These French members were not part of the main interlocutors I followed as my research focused on the French Lao members.

and are still managed by French Lao who remain the main decision-makers, I call them "Lao associations", as all members do.

In this paper, I preserve the anonymity of my informants. Some of them requested it due to their feeling of insecurity linked to the persisting tensions not only between Lao people (whether residing in France or in Laos) and the Lao government, but also within the Lao community in France. Therefore, I will also not mention the name of their associations. However, I can indicate that these associations are located in different cities in France (there is no concentration in the area of Paris), and their projects are mostly implemented in the Lao-populated lowlands of Laos.

## **"I Have to Help my Country to Evolve": The Origin of the Illusions of French Lao**

The French Lao started to create humanitarian associations around twenty years ago after leaving their country of origin. A short historical presentation is necessary to understand the context in which this became possible and to determine the difficulties these French Lao encountered as well as the consequences of such challenges on the characteristics of the Lao humanitarian associations. This will allow us to grasp the construction of the motivations/objectives of the associations' founders and to evidence the origin of their illusions about the projects' reception in Laos. Sayad (2004) defines "illusions" as the idealized views in the context of emigration, and I use the same term in this paper in the context of return to the country of origin. Like the Algerian migrants' "illusions" in Sayad's work, French Lao's illusions are also shattered by disappointments, as I will show later.

### **The Birth of Associations in a Hostile Context**

In Laos, the *Pathet Lao* political party overthrew the monarchy in 1975. It established a communist program, which led to the exile of ten per cent of the country's population. At the beginning, this outflow of people was mainly directed to Thailand. Given the magnitude of the flow, countries such as the United States, France, Australia, and Canada later on decided to resettle some refugees in their territories. It is in this context that France ended up hosting more than 35,000 of them (Hassoun, 1997), whereas Lao presence had been limited to roughly one thousand students until then (Choron-Baix, 1993). In 1986, following the failure of its policy, the Lao communist regime adopted the "New Economic Mechanism" (Stuart-Fox, 1997) policy, embracing therefore a market economy approach. In the years that followed, the relative openness of the country enabled Lao exiles and/or their children to return, visit, or settle there. Thus, in the 1990s, many refugees decided to go back to Laos to visit their family members with whom they had limited contacts since their departure. This offered them an opportunity to rediscover their country and their village after twenty years of absence, and to realize the big gap between the living conditions to which they had become accustomed in their receiving country and those prevailing in their native village. Their acquired consciousness led some of them

to create associations that they describe as “humanitarian”<sup>5</sup> and that operate in various fields such as education, health, access to water, and so on.

However, in most cases many years passed between the desire to help and the concrete foundation of an association. The regime in Laos has changed little in forty years, and tensions remain palpable between French Lao and Lao authorities. Most Lao refugees chose to take French nationality and consequently lost their Lao nationality and the rights attached to it. Nowadays, negotiations towards the establishment of dual citizenship and the right to property in Laos are at a stalemate, leading French Lao to think that they are not yet welcome in their country of origin. This reinforces their criticisms of the Lao government. Consequently, some members of the Lao community in France accuse French Lao involved in Lao development projects of being Communist supporters. This part of the community refuses to take part to the associations’ activities or to support them financially. As a result, associations’ founders have often chosen French people as privileged partners. French people not only participate in the activities and support them financially, they also help them for the administrative tasks and make them feel safer when they go to Laos.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the associations do not bring together members from a same village/district as is often the case in associations from other communities. Their members usually include some Lao from various regions and a large number of French. In addition, the persistent tensions between French Lao and the Lao government lead to the lack of genuine cooperation between them. Unlike other countries where part of the population moved and settled abroad a long time ago (Fox and Bada, 2008; Opiniano, 2005; Vigne, 2012), the Lao government seems to be uninterested in making a sincere effort to promote and facilitate development aid by overseas Lao. Some of them have nevertheless decided to mobilize and pursue projects to help people in their country of origin.

### **The First Return and its Consequences on the Construction of Illusions**

*“We always come back to our roots; even animals return to their origins.”*

*“We create an association because we consider that Laos is our home country! So, we just wanted... we feel a bit obliged... well, not really, but we feel some sort of duty to this country, because we were born there, and we grew up there.”*

Aside from the eight informants in my study, all the members involved in Lao associations were born in Laos. The feeling of belonging to the country of their “roots”<sup>7</sup> alimnts these people’s strong feeling of “duty” to help the Lao population. Some of my informants used the term “duty” as akin to “moral obligation” (see Martiniello and Bousetta, 2008 for the case of the Chinese in Belgium) and “loyalty to the country of origin” (see Fibbi and D’Amato, 2008 for the case of Moroccans in Belgium and Turks in Switzerland). This feeling of duty is not based

---

<sup>5</sup> French Lao prefer to use this term than “development” for a number of ideological and political reasons: it allows them to distinguish their activities from the Lao state’s development projects and to highlight the “human” aspects of their actions. That is why I keep the term used by my informants in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> This last point was especially true during the first years following the associations’ birth. The fears of the French Lao have faded over time.

on family ties but is rather related to being born in Laos. One of my informants said that "*Laos is [her] village*" to explain that she did not plan to help her family but her country. Furthermore, my informants' discourses also reveal that their feeling of duty is strongly linked to their first return to Laos. Indeed, the first time they came back to Laos, they realized the real gap between their living conditions in France and those of their compatriots in Laos, which consequently provoked a "shock":

*"When I went back to the country, I thought: 'I'd like to see my village again'. It was in... 1997, I went back. I was shocked when I saw the state of the school I had frequented. Even a waste storage area in France looks ten times better. [...] I saw that these children, they're not asking for anything, but the system puts them in this situation! If my father hadn't been able to take me with him, I would be like them, my children would be like them! Some of them don't even know how to read or write! We would have worked in rice fields and lived like them!"*

Such shocks have triggered transnational involvement in the development of Laos. This is not specific to French Lao: similar processes have been described by other scholars like Daum (1998) in his research among French Malians, and Waldinger *et al.* (2007) in their work on Salvadorian migrants in the United States. These observations confirm the hypothesis formulated by Delcroix and Bertaux (2012): the greater the gap between the level of human development in the countries of origin and the countries of installation, the more likely this kind of transnational activity is to occur.

French Lao were led to consider that the local population live miserably, in particular the self-sufficient rice farmers. Consequently, they feel that they are "lucky" to have lived in France because if not, "*[they] would have become like them! [They] would have worked in the rice fields and [they] would have lived like them!*" This made them realize the value of the knowledge and the skills they acquired in exile. They usually contrast the lack of education of Lao from Laos, "some of whom cannot even write and read" with the access to "the quality of education" they "luckily" had in France. Through what they sometimes call "self-giving", they have strived to share their "luck" with the Lao population in Laos. The intensity of their investments in terms of time, energy, and sometimes money, is evident and indisputably real. Since the creation of their associations, the French Lao in France have organized parties and various events to collect funds, reach out to local authorities or companies for funding, arrange travel logistics for groups of young volunteers with ongoing projects, update their websites, attract potential donors, and foster good relationships with elected officials who can also be supporters of their projects. French Lao make these efforts because they consider that the Lao population must "evolve" to face new realities. Indeed, they recognize that during their childhood, people could live from rice growing, fishing, hunting, and gathering, but at present, this is no longer possible. They advance two reasons for this stance: they consider this way of life as "archaic" compared to theirs in France, and they are concerned about the "catastrophic" influence on Laos of its neighboring countries, especially China.

### **“Preparing the Future of the Country” while Expecting Massive Collaboration**

The goals set by the founders of humanitarian associations stem from their observations and experiences during their first visit to Laos. The poor and crumbling structure of the village school, the poverty, and the country's general sanitary conditions particularly shocked them. It is therefore important for them to “help the villagers”; “upgrade people's lives”; “give them more comfort”; and so on. Their ideas are encapsulated by the general goal conveyed by one of my informants: “to prepare the future of the country”.

To achieve this goal, the attention of associations is most often focused on Lao children, who represent “the future of the country”. Indeed, they mainly initiate projects in the fields of education and health. By providing children access to better healthcare and schooling, the French Lao seek to contribute to building the future of the country. In the field of education, their projects consist in building, rebuilding or adding extensions to school buildings (mainly kindergartens and primary schools). They usually add toilets and a water tower near schools. Indeed, the French Lao attach great importance to hygiene which, in their view, is “sorely lacking” in Laos. The associations also provide school materials and, if necessary, build boarding schools, and canteens to accommodate students living far away. Some associations offer school sponsorships to help the poorest children. French Lao generally consider the (re)construction of schools as a means for “raising the level of education” and of “promoting access to salaried work and regular income”. For some informants, this also serves as a bulwark against the emigration of young people to Thailand, where they are exposed to the dangers of drugs and prostitution.

In the field of health, some projects focus on children's access to care: building clinics, sending French dentists to villages, treating specific diseases in hospitals, providing basic information on daily hygiene, and supplying medical equipment. The adult population is also targeted by such projects. More infrequently, projects aim at improving the water supply, constructing dams, promoting organic farming, tea plantations, etc.

In order to achieve these objectives, the associations' presidents rely on the villagers to participate in implementing the projects: “*We provide the material, and then, they provide the workforce*”. The French Lao expect massive participation from “all of the villagers”. This takes various forms according to the associations. Some require financial contributions. Others consider physical labor sufficient as people are too poor to pay anything. A few others leave villagers a choice between the two alternatives, depending on their financial means.

The observations above demonstrate that the illusions of French Lao informants originate from the “shock” that they experienced during their first visit in Laos, as they suddenly became aware of the “asymmetry of resources” (Carling, 2008) between them and the villagers. This asymmetry pertains to money but also education and knowledge; some French Lao consider that the villagers are “*so simple that they are not able to talk with [them] because they know nothing*”. The fifteen years that separated their departure from the country and their first return amplified the shock, with two consequences. Firstly, this led French Lao to

consider that they are “lucky” to have escaped the miserable situation of the Lao population in Laos. Secondly, French Lao believe that the “quality education” they received during their lives as immigrants in an economically developed country allowed them to determine and to fulfil the needs of the local population. This evaluation of the situation leads them to seek to improve the villagers’ access to education, in order to help lift them out of their “archaic” way of life. They assume that all villagers will be willing to “make efforts” and to collaborate with them to improve their economic situation. In the following part, I show how French Lao’s illusions gradually crumble down, creating disillusionment.

### **“I’m tired because it’s Hard to Work with Lao People”: The Reasons of the French Lao’s Increasing Disillusionment**

The French Lao’s idea that they would be able to fulfill the needs of villagers, who would participate in the improvement of their lives, came up against a more complex reality. In the following, I attempt to identify the origin of the disappointments experienced by the associations in the field and the way in which those disappointments have caused disillusionment. The term disillusionment characterizes here, in Sayad’s sense (2004: 138), the dissipation of “all the illusions that had helped to give meaning to the situation” that the French Lao were preparing to encounter.

#### **The Ambivalent Welcome of the “*Lao Falang*” in Laos**

Among the Lao from Laos, perceptions of the returnees echo feelings that have been widely observed in various parts of the world (see, among others Legrand, 2006, Levitt, 1998, or Mariani, 2013), combining distrust, jealousy, and admiration. The French Lao are generally warmly welcomed in their native village initially, but, as Sisombat-Souvannavong (2000) observes, after a while, differences in mentality may lead family members who stayed in Laos to adopt avoidance behaviors. The returning Lao are no longer the same and called “*Lao tang pathet*” (overseas Lao) by the local population. The country of settlement is sometimes specified through expressions such as “*Lao Falang*” (“French” Lao),<sup>7</sup> “*Lao Americ*” (“American” Lao), and so on. Some French Lao also report being called “*Falang khi nok*” (“Occidental” bird poop) or “*Falang khi kouay*” (“Occidental” buffalo poop). Sisombat-Souvannavong (2000) adds the nickname “banana” to the list, a reference to the idea that the overseas Lao are “yellow outside but white inside”.

Likewise, French Lao sometimes distinguish themselves from Lao living in Laos, especially when comparing their lifestyles. However, at the same time, their discourses reveal frustration about the consequences of this distinction. Lao from Laos perceive them as “lucky people” who have had access to education and employment. They overestimate the French Lao’s income and underestimate their working hours. The usual questions they asked me about France and their

---

<sup>7</sup>The origin of the term “*Falang*” is subject to debate. My Lao informants define it as “an individual with white skin and long nose”, characteristics that distinguish for example Europeans and Americans from Koreans or Chinese people.

difficulty in understanding my answers reflect a deep-seated idealization of life in France. They assume that the French Lao's jobs are so well-paid that their salaries are high enough to finance development projects that even the state cannot support. At every celebration and inauguration held in the village, French Lao have to constantly repeat to villagers that they do not personally pay for the projects, and that funding is secured thanks to long-term efforts by all the members of their association. For example, they tell about the hours spent in the cold, selling cakes during the Christmas market to raise money for projects. But the villagers cannot imagine the harshness of the winter temperatures in France and do not appreciate the efforts made to bring the projects to a successful conclusion.

Moreover, the villagers appear to consider that the French Lao's moral obligation to provide support extends equally to their families and to the broader village community. But while the majority of French Lao have helped their families financially as soon as they were able to do so, few of them are involved in development projects.<sup>8</sup> When they do, although they often see this effort as a duty, they still expect villagers to contribute and to be grateful for their help. This divergence of perception about the French Lao's development aid sparks tensions that are even more palpable when the projects are carried out in the village of origin. One of my informants chose to diversify her areas of action. She finally accepted her home village's request for school funding but told me that this was her "worst experience." One day, after complaining to villagers about the slow progress on the school building site, they answered: "*This is your project, you should finish it by yourself!*"

The expectation of generosity is a phenomenon commonly experienced by migrants from Southern countries (for example, see Sayad's study of French Algerians in 2004). In Laos, the strong social hierarchy probably reinforces such expectations. This hierarchy, observable throughout Southeast Asia, codifies social relations. Formoso (1990: 76) describes its resulting mutual obligations: the "junior" has the obligation to respect and obey his or her "senior" to preserve the latter's honor, and in return the "senior" has to protect and help the "junior." Age is not the only basis of this seniority principle, as power, level of education, gender, and wealth also determine individual's social status (junior or senior).

In the case of French Lao in my study, their older age, wealth, and education strongly shape their status. Based on my observations, from the perspective of some villagers, this surely strengthens French Lao's obligation to help them.

### **Divergences in Perception and their Impacts on Interpersonal Relations**

One of the associations' presidents explained to me that he chooses where to implement the next project by identifying villages that "make him cry and those whose leaders are the most sincere and cooperative." French Lao's discourses often mix empathy and authority. During preliminary talks, they present their

---

<sup>8</sup> As I have mentioned earlier, one of the brakes to French Lao's commitment in the development of Laos comes from their historical relations with the Lao government. Those who decided to get involved in projects have been able to put aside their resentments.

association's objectives and functioning to the village authorities. They explain that collecting the funds has been a long and difficult process. Then, they emphasize the importance of the massive participation of the villagers and of their engagement in the project until its completion. They mention that these conditions are not negotiable; if they are turned down, the associations may renounce to help them.

Villagers mostly agree to the conditions and commit to complying with them in principle. However, this does not guarantee that they will actually comply, which often causes significant disillusionment to my informants. On the one hand, the motivation of the villagers often fades over time. Indeed, the duration of the work generally ranges from a few months to one or two years, sometimes more. On the other hand, the villagers' participation may be less massive than expected. They also sometimes demand something in return when they contribute to the projects. Oral expressions of gratitude appear insufficient to satisfy their expectations. Some of them require material gifts as a condition for collaborating.

The French Lao, who are initially firm and authoritarian, often end up showing flexibility when the project does not proceed as planned and they must try to find solutions. For example, they pay workers or rely on French volunteers to advance the work.

How can we explain the villagers' attitudes? Some associations "chose" beneficiary villages that did not in fact ask for their support. Some associations' presidents say that they select the location of their next project by travelling all over the country in search of crumbling schools. Once they find one, they stop in the village and meet its chief to offer help. During their discussion, they present the aforementioned conditions regarding villagers' participation in their project. In such cases, the mobilization of the village population can be expected to be lower than that in the villages which have requested support or already found financial means to start the work.

Nonetheless, being offered a "beautiful" (*ngam*) school is an opportunity that no one could turn down. One day, a villager showed me her childhood school, telling me that she would like an association to rebuild it so that her native village would have a "beautiful" school. My informant's school was built in 2003 by a German organization and was not as dilapidated as the other schools usually chosen by associations. The use of the word "*ngam*" reveals a gap between what a new school building represents for the French Lao and what it represents for the villagers. The French Lao and the Lao from Laos share a common perception that a new building offers better learning conditions. Nevertheless, the latter also consider that a new school lends prestige to the village. As High (2014) remarks, the concepts of "beauty" and "abundance" are interlinked in Laos and in the core of people's discourses in rural areas. Poverty, which relates to the scarcity of resources, is experienced as an insufficiency of "beauty" (High, 2014: 73). A new school could be a form of abundance and prestige because it shows that villagers were able to find a way to obtain the equipment for its construction.

Other villagers perceive the help provided by French Lao as the advent of "civilization". According to a deputy mayor of one of the beneficiary villages, rural Laos is "not yet civilized" (*sivilay*), unlike, for example, neighboring Thailand.

For him, the computers offered by the French Lao represent a first step towards civilization. I observed, indeed, that computers are always received enthusiastically even though only a few villagers know how to use them and no Internet access is available.

In addition to the villagers' lack of participation in development projects, another source of disillusionment for French Lao concerns the management of the funds and the maintenance of infrastructures. My informants expect the villagers to take care of the infrastructures by cleaning and repairing them regularly. However, they often notice that this does not happen. Some openly criticize the staff in charge (teachers and principals for primary schools) or even threaten them to discontinue their support. The same goes for waste treatment at school. In one of the villages, an association made garbage cans available to the school, but they were not used and disappeared in a few months. Even if the villagers welcome the projects, it seems that they resist some ideas brought in by the French Lao. This appears to contradict Levitt (1998), who argues that "social remittances" are more easily "accepted" when they come from countries perceived as rich and modern. However, the French Lao's case adds a nuance to this argument: although there is acceptance and understanding of the French Lao's ideas among the villagers, this does not necessarily translate into a change of behavior, which frustrates the associations.

Concerning money issues, "widespread corruption" is something that French Lao never fail to mention. They speak rather harshly of the authorities but are more lenient when it comes to villagers, who they say "do not know how to manage" money and could be victims of "temptation". Accordingly, the French Lao seek to find ways to ensure sound financial management. There are two ways to proceed. The first is to manage the money themselves. They assess the work in progress, list the construction materials needed, and buy them in the nearest city. Once the materials are delivered, they check if they match the order and observe the progress of construction, making especially sure that the materials are not used for other purposes. The other way to proceed is to find a "reliable person" in the field. This person is often a family member living in Laos but may also be a school principal or teacher. He or she receives the money by hand or through the bank, buys construction materials, and forwards the bills to the associations. This person does not necessarily live in the village targeted by the project, but monitors the progress of construction works, identifies material needs, requests quotes, and relays all necessary information to the French Lao. They are also present when association members visit the villages.

Nevertheless, these precautions do not always prevent disappointment. An association president told me that it took years for him to understand that the villagers were "taking advantage" and stealing construction materials. Another said that he was "very disappointed" by the village inhabitants who "wanted to take everything for themselves".

As mentioned above, according to Sayad, such disappointments shatter "all the illusions that had help to give meaning to a situation which, when reduced to its naked truth, was neither intelligible nor tolerable" (Sayad, 2004: 138). Unable to resolve the contradiction between their illusions and reality, people can only conceal it. This is probably the reason why French Lao's disillusionment, in partic-

ular about the lack of the villagers' mobilization, gives rise to a critical discourse on the villagers, which they use to explain reality. For instance, laziness is a defect of which the villagers are often accused. The French Lao consider that if they were more "hardworking", as the Vietnamese are, they would be able to improve their living conditions by themselves.

*"I offered the neighbors to pay them to work in my garden. They said yes but didn't come. They prefer to stay in their conditions, to go to the river to fish every day and get the rest of their food in the surroundings. Not long ago, they didn't even have a toilet. They live like twenty years ago. [...] When I visit schools, I sometimes see children covered in dust. Dirty. [...] When I ask teachers to show me their hands, they are dirty so necessarily the children's hands are too. They do not know running water!"*

The usual objects of French Lao's criticisms about their country's population pertain to their inability/unwillingness to work but also, and more generally, their low educational attainment, their lack of hygiene, and their archaic beliefs.

Eventually, I observed that French Lao generally end up overcoming the disillusionment engendered by the reality on the ground to guarantee their projects' completion. But disillusionment also appears in their relations with the authorities.

### **Managing Relations with the Authorities: Between Expectations and Avoidance**

As Newland (2010) points out, diasporas from poorly governed developing countries do not trust the institutions and are more likely to deal with individuals they are personally close to. Nevertheless, a certain level of collaboration with the authorities is required to carry out projects in Laos, even if some French Lao are reluctant to recognize it. For the associations, this collaboration can take many forms, depending on the hierarchical level of civil servants.

Laos is divided into provinces; each province is itself subdivided into districts comprising towns and villages. In France, the Lao authorities have an embassy and a consulate in the same Parisian building. Each of these administrations is a potential point of contact for associations but the intermediaries of choice are the village chiefs. They are obviously essential to lead the projects, and considered as the most reliable people because, in principle, they act directly in the villagers' interest. However, they are not the only preferred intermediaries in the villages. For example, for school constructions, associations work closely with school principals, teachers, and parents' representatives. The latter are sometimes more involved in the projects' implementation than the municipal team.

Concerning the higher levels of the administrative hierarchy (districts, provinces, ministries), the French Lao appear divided into two groups: those who try to work with the authorities and those who distrust them. Few associations seek close collaboration with the highest authorities. I have encountered only one that works with five-year agreements with a ministry. Another maintains ad hoc relationships with a Vientiane ministry official. The other associations tend to limit their relations to more or less regular meetings with the district authorities. Provincial authorities are rarely contacted, except for exceptionally large-scale projects.

The associations sometimes contact the Lao Embassy (and Consulate) of Paris, but mainly for logistical purposes. Association presidents negotiate free Lao visas for their departing members as well as exemption of customs taxes when they send containers filled with goods to distribute. When associations do not need any kind of exemption, they do not make themselves known to the embassy. As a result, the embassy cannot draw up a complete list of Lao associations in France. During my latest visit, in late 2016, the person I interviewed showed a lack of knowledge about registered associations although he had their contact details. He could not distinguish those created by French Lao from those created by French. He showed no particular interest in working on a comprehensive list of French Lao involved in the development of Laos.

French Lao and Lao authorities maintain a certain distance because of the tensions linked to lingering political oppositions. French Lao regularly criticize government policies: for example, the government's alleged lack of interest in schooling children. In fact, people who travel in rural areas of Laos are often surprised by the number of schools built by foreigners. Plates indicate support from countries such as Japan, Australia, or Germany. Lao associations consider that they help to mitigate the lack of state involvement in this area.

For their part, the Lao authorities seem to be suspicious of the French Lao's intentions and tend to remind them that they are the ones in control. When the associations' members go to Laos, the local authorities sometimes ask them to hand over a schedule of activities and a list of their co-members. They also make regular visits in the villages to observe the associations' activities. However, they act sometimes in more surprising ways. For instance, I witnessed the impromptu visit of district officials to a village, following a container delivery to a house. The association that had sent it planned to arrive from France a few days later. The officials wanted to interview the family who stored the goods, although a list of contents had been provided to their superiors. Tension was palpable when it came to decide who should answer the questions and what was acceptable to tell and to show them. The event was immediately recounted by telephone to the president of the association.

This incident exemplifies the kind of power display from the authorities that French Lao's associations have to face from time to time. The French Lao, who hoped for a better welcome because of the help they provide to the country, express surprise and disappointment at the lack of improvements.

In this part, I have aimed to explain how the gap between the associations' projections and the reality of the field appears. On the one hand, the local population idealizes the way of life in France. Consequently, they do not perceive the determination required to collect the funds and to implement the projects. On the other hand, beyond the projects they carry out, the French Lao would like to transmit their knowledge and skills acquired in France as well as the new ideas that they have absorbed during the years spent abroad. They hope that the Lao from Laos will heed their advice on hygiene, infrastructure maintenance and waste processing. They see them as beneficial to the local population, which lacks access to Western "modernity". However, they observe that the beneficiaries do not show the expected enthusiasm for these "social remittances" (Levitt, 1998). Furthermore, the lack of villagers' mobilization on the construction sites

disappoints them, and they even often fear theft of materials. Lastly, they find that their humanitarian activities do not improve their relationships with the authorities.

## Conclusion

This study on the development projects of French Lao in Laos has evidenced the origins of the gaps between the illusions motivating the actors' transnational activities and their disillusionment arising from the reality encountered in Laos. These gaps are reminiscent of what Carling (2008) calls "asymmetries", present in the three spheres of transnational life: morality, information and imagination, and resources. These asymmetries lead to divergent perspectives between migrants and non-migrants and cause disillusionment among French Lao. Indeed, they have several consequences on interpersonal relationships in the context of the implementation of transnational development activities.

Firstly, the diverging perspectives between the French Lao interviewed and the local population interfere with expected perceptions of the former's generosity. The French Lao say that their decision to help the Lao population originates from a feeling of "duty" toward their country of origin. Based on the narratives I collected, it is also obvious that my informants' decision results from a comparison between the living conditions in their country of origin and those in their receiving country. They were able to do this comparison thanks to their geographical mobility between the two countries, which would be difficult to do for most Lao in Laos. The Lao in Laos share with the French Lao the idea that the latter "have to" help them, but they are basing this "duty" on a partly fantasized conception of the reality of life in France. The new media are not enough to break the asymmetry of access to information between them and those who are spatially mobile. This asymmetry is also at the core of the question of the beneficiaries' participation in development projects. The French Lao consider that the efforts they make to provide help to the local population deserve something in return such as participation and recognition. But some of the beneficiaries do not realize the reality of these efforts and do not respond to this demand as expected. Rather, they consider that the French Lao do not see the harshness of their own daily work and they feel that their participation also deserves a compensation.

Secondly, the diverging perceptions of the actors involved affect the reception of the projects and of the new ideas imported by the associations. The local understanding and practical application of these ideas collide with the villagers' daily routine, leading them to different priorities.

Finally, diverging perceptions generate French Lao's disillusionment regarding their reception by Lao authorities. Their willingness to participate in shaping the future of the country runs up against limitations linked to a context of distrust. According to the French Lao interviewed, their help would warrant a better welcome, but this does not happen due to divergent interpretations of their intentions.

Nonetheless, French Lao respond to this unexpected reality by adopting a strategy: they attribute themselves qualities that they perceive as "absent" in

the local population. The construction of this critical view about the Lao in Laos (authorities included) is a way to deal with frustrating situations and allows (or even justifies) the continuation of their development activities.

The case presented in this paper suggests that the concept of “asymmetries” that Carling introduces and employs to analyze kin relationships could also be relevant in other contexts to understand transnational development activities. Indeed, through my case study, we can observe tensions stemming from moral obligations and inequality of access to information and resources during interpersonal interactions within a large “community”. It would be interesting to find out how the concept of “asymmetries” could be adopted to examine the transnational activities of the “second generation” French Lao. In Laos, these young French Lao are perceived as even more “*Falang*” than their parents, but at the same time, they are also less haunted by the memories of their parents’ exile. This latter characteristic may reduce the mistrust between French Lao and the authorities as well as allow the emergence of a form of collaboration between the Lao State and those it officially considers as its “expatriates”<sup>9</sup>

## References

- Basch Linda, Glick Schiller Nina and Szanton Blanc Cristina** (1994) *Nations Unbound. Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*, New York, Routledge, 344 p.
- Bourdieu Pierre** (1980) Le capital social, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 31, pp. 2-3.
- Brettell Caroline** (2015) Theorizing migration in anthropology: the Social Construction of Networks, Identities, Communities, and Globalscapes, in Caroline Brettell and James Hollifield Eds., *Migration Theory: Talking across disciplines*, New-York, Routledge, pp. 148-197.
- Carling Jorgen** (2008) The human dynamics of migrant transnationalism, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31 (8), pp. 1452-1477.
- Choron-Baix Catherine** (1993) Pratiques religieuses et communautaires lao, *Hommes et migrations*, 1171, pp. 26-29.
- Copeland-Carson Jacqueline** (2010) *Kenyan diaspora philanthropy: Key practices, trends and issues*, USA, Harvard University, 23 p.
- Daum Christophe** (1998) *Les associations de Maliens en France. Migration, développement et citoyenneté*, Paris, Karthala, 253 p.
- De Haas Hein** (2010) Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective, *International Migration Review*, 44 (1), pp. 227-264.
- Delcroix Catherine et Bertaux Daniel** (2012) Les activités transnationales des femmes immigrées. L'exemple d'une association de Marocaines de Bruxelles, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 28 (1), pp. 85-105.

---

<sup>9</sup> According to my contact from the Lao expatriates’ service in Laos, the term “expatriate” refers to “people born in Laos who had or still have the Lao nationality” and to “their children born abroad”. The criteria of place of birth and nationality are therefore not applied to children of overseas Lao.

- Faist Thomas** (1998) Transnational social spaces out of international migration: evolution, significance and future prospects, *European Journal of Sociology*, 30 (2), pp. 213-247.
- Fibbi Rosita et D'Amato Gianni** (2008) Transnationalisme des migrants en Europe : une preuve par les faits, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 24 (2), pp. 7-22.
- Formoso Bernard** (1990) Alliance et séniorité, le cas des Lao du nord-est de la Thaïlande, *L'Homme*, 30 (115), pp. 71-97.
- Fox Jonathan and Xochitl Bada** (2008) Migrant Organization and Hometown Impacts in Rural Mexico, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8 (2-3), pp. 435-461.
- Fresnoza-Flot Asuncion and Merla Laura** (2018) Global householding in mixed families: the case of Thai migrant women in Belgium, in Isabella Crespi, Stefania Giada and Laura Merla Eds., *Making multicultural families in Europe. Gender and generational relations*, Royaume-Uni, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 25-37.
- Goldring Luin** (2004) Family and Collective Remittances to Mexico: a Multi-dimensional Typology, *Development and Change*, 35 (4), pp. 799-840.
- Hassoun Jean-Pierre** (1997) *Hmong du Laos en France, changement social, initiatives et adaptations*, Paris, PUF, 215 p.
- High Holly** (2014) *Fields of desire. Poverty and policy in Laos*, Singapour, NUS Press, 213 p.
- Lacroix Thomas** (2013) Collective Remittances and Integration: North African and North Indian Comparative Perspectives, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39 (6), pp. 1019-1035.
- Lacroix Thomas** (2012) Transnationalisme villageois et développement : Kabyles algériens, Chleuhs marocains en France et Penjabis indiens en Grande-Bretagne, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 28 (1), pp. 71-84.
- Lafleur Jean-Michel** (2005) *Le transnationalisme politique*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia Bruylant, 76 p.
- Legrand Caroline** (2006) Tourisme des racines et confrontations identitaires dans l'Irlande des migrations, *Diasporas, histoire et sociétés*, 8, pp. 162-171.
- Levitt Peggy** (2009) Roots and Routes: Understanding the Lives of the Second Generation Transnationally, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35 (7), pp. 1225-1242.
- Levitt Peggy** (1998) Social remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion, *The International Migration Review*, 32 (4), pp. 926-948.
- Levitt Peggy and Lamba-Nieves Deepak** (2013) Rethinking Social Remittances and the Migration-development Nexus from the Perspective of time, *Migration letters*, 10 (1), pp. 11-22.
- Lücke Matthias, Omar Mahmoud Toman and Peuker Christian** (2012) *Identifying the motives of migrant philanthropy*, Working Paper, Kiel, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 1790, 28 p.
- Mariani Léo** (2013) Phénotype, culture et migration. De l'altérité et de l'identité des Français d'origine cambodgienne à Phnom Penh, *Ethnologie française*, 43 (2), pp. 335-342.

**Markus George E.** (1995) Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 95-117.

**Martiniello Marco et Bousetta Hassan** (2008) Les pratiques transnationales des immigrés chinois et marocains de Belgique, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 24 (2), pp. 45-66.

**Newland Kathleen** (2011) *Migration and Development Policy: What Have We Learned?*, Washington, Migration Policy Institute, 7 p.

**Newland Kathleen, Terrazas Aaron and Munster Roberto** (2010) *Diapora philanthropy: Private giving and public policy*, Washington, Migration Policy Institute, 32 p.

**Opiniano Jeremiaah** (2005) Filipinos doing diaspora philanthropy: The development potential of transnational migration, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 14 (1-2), pp. 225-251.

**Orozco Manuel and Garcia-Zanello Eugenia** (2009) Hometown associations: Transnationalism, philanthropy, and development, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 15 (2), pp. 1-17.

**Parreñas Rhacel Salazar** (2008) Transnational Fathering: Gendered Conflicts, Distant Disciplining and Emotional Gaps, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34, pp. 1057-1072.

**Portes Alejandro** (2003) Conclusion: Theoretical Convergencies and Empirical Evidence in the Study of Immigrant Transnationalism, *International Migration Review*, 37 (3), pp. 874-892.

**Portes Alejandro** (1997) *Globalization from Below: The Rise of Transnational Communities*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 27 p.

**Sayad Abdelmalek** (2004) *The suffering of the immigrants*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 340 p.

**Sayad Abdelmalek** (1999) *La double absence : des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Paris, Seuil, 437 p.

**Si-Ambhaivan Sisombat-Souvannavong** (2000) *Le retour des exilés lao*, PhD diss, Université Paris VIII, 371 p.

**Smith Mickael Peter and Guarnizo Luis Eduardo** (1998) *Transnationalism from below*, New Brunswick, Transaction publishers, 316 p.

**Stuart-Fox Martin** (1997) *A History of Laos*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 253 p.

**Vigne Christophe** (2012) *Mobiliser les Vietnamiens de l'étranger. Enjeux, stratégies et effets d'un nationalisme transnational*, Bangkok (Thaïlande), IRASEC, 98 p.

**Waldinger Roger, Popkin Eric and Aquiles Magana Hector** (2007) Conflict and Contestation in the Cross-Border Community: Hometown Associations Reassessed, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31 (5), pp. 843-870.

**Isabelle Wilhelm**

**French Lao and their Transnational Humanitarian Activities in Laos: Between Illusions and Disillusionment**

The studies on overseas Lao who left Laos after the 1975 political events have generally focused on these migrants' social incorporation in their receiving countries and on the dynamics of their intergenerational transmission. On the contrary, the present article explores the links that these migrants maintain with Laos, by examining the case of French Lao and their transnational humanitarian activities. It is based on a multi-sited ethnography conducted with the associations they created to support the population of Laos. Adopting Carling's concept of "asymmetries" (2008), it analyses the relationships between these "developers" and the "beneficiaries" of the associations' projects. The French Lao' involvement stems from their illusions that run up against the ambivalent welcome they receive in the field. The subsequent misunderstandings between them and the local population generate disillusionment and critical, mutual evaluations.

**Les Lao de France et leurs activités humanitaires transnationales au Laos : des illusions au désenchantement**

Les études sur les Lao installés à l'étranger depuis les événements de 1975 se sont focalisées sur leur intégration dans les sociétés d'installation et sur la transmission intergénérationnelle. Cet article présente la particularité de s'intéresser aux liens qu'ils maintiennent avec leur pays d'origine, à partir de l'étude des activités transnationales de type humanitaire initiées par des Lao de France. Il repose sur une ethnographie multi-située effectuée auprès d'associations qu'ils ont créées afin de soutenir la population du Laos. Fondé sur le concept d'« asymétries » de Carling (2008), cet article propose une analyse des relations entre ces « développeurs » et les « bénéficiaires » des projets des associations. Les motivations et les objectifs des Lao de France impliqués dans les projets se fondent sur des illusions qui se heurtent à un accueil ambigu sur le terrain. Les incompréhensions qui en découlent génèrent un désenchantement et des jugements mutuels.

**Los Lao de Francia y sus actividades humanitarias transnacionales en Laos: entre ilusiones y desilusiones**

Los estudios sobre los Lao establecidos en el extranjero desde los eventos de 1975 se han concentrado en su integración en las sociedades de instalación y la transmisión intergeneracional. Este artículo presenta la particularidad de considerar los vínculos que mantienen con su país de origen a partir del estudio de actividades transnacionales humanitarias iniciadas por los Lao en Francia. Este texto se basa en una etnografía multi-situada realizada dentro de asociaciones creadas para apoyar a la población de Laos. Basado en el concepto de «asimetrías» de Carling (2008), este artículo propone un análisis de las relaciones entre estos «desarrolladores» y los «beneficiarios» de los proyectos de las asociaciones. Las motivaciones y los objetivos de los Lao de Francia implicados en los proyectos se basan en ilusiones que se enfrentan a una acogida ambigua en el campo. Las incomprensiones resultantes generan desilusiones y juicios recíprocos.