Special Section Article

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Controlled experiments: ethnographic notes on the intergenerational dynamics of aspirational migration and agrarian change in upland Laos

This article provides ethnographic insights into the Southeast Asian peasantry's engagements with agrarian change. It speaks both to Southeast Asian studies' longstanding interest in the dynamics of socio-economic transformation, and to anthropology's burgeoning focus on how future-oriented aspirations are produced, negotiated and enacted under specific socio-political, material and historical conditions. Drawing on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in an ethnic Khmu hamlet in northern Laos, I show upland peasants on the cusp of agrarian transition engaging aspirational migration through 'controlled experiments': pioneering pursuits of betterment, crucially buttressed by multiple, locally specific factors. These factors include a still largely intact peasant natural economy, historically endowed intimacy with the modernising state and, not least, a precariously persistent 'intergenerational contract' in which youthful mobility and parental stability remain ambiguously yet irreducibly intertwined. Notably, whereas much research on Laos has focused on communities (adversely) impacted by transition, this article discusses a community that is both politically connected and, concomitantly, still relatively unscathed by the (transitory) detriments of commodification, enclosure and dispossession. In sum, this article confirms that while striving for a better future is probably a basic aspect of the human condition, definitions and pursuits of such futures are contextually contingent, not least along generational lines.

Key words aspirational migration, agrarian change, intergenerational dynamics, peasant household economics, Laos

Introduction

> There was a couple with many children, they couldn't raise them! Whatever they had, their children ate, the parents were always hungry … One day, while the family was out weeding their swidden, the children fell asleep in the field hut … the parents wanted to eat their fill … so they steamed rice, quietly, secretly … but the children awoke! 'Give us rice!' they cried … the parents grabbed spoons and hit them on the head! The children turned into monkeys and ran to the forest … finally, the parents could eat! Then came the harvest, and the parents missed their children … so they slaughtered a pig, steamed rice, and called to the forest: 'come, eat!' 'Cannot!' the children replied, 'we're monkeys now, we no longer eat rice; we eat rose apples!'

The story of the monkey children was told to me in Sanjing, an ethnic Khmu hamlet in Phongsali province, northern Laos.[1] It succinctly captures the role children play in Sanjing's peasant economy, which is still largely swiddening- and household-based. In the absence of technology, labour is a key local bottleneck. Households with enough able hands are considered 'comfortable' and 'ready for anything'. Households lacking such hands are considered 'suffering' and 'always afraid'. Unsurprisingly, villagers have long been concerned with maintaining favourable household worker–consumer ratios (Chayanov 1986). Everyone is expected to contribute to the best of their ability.[2] The young help in the swiddens and gardens, and go fishing, hunting and foraging. The old and frail steam rice, feed poultry, sweep floors etc. As a local idiom proclaims: 'no matter how rich, without people, you have nothing … !'

The importance of household labour resonates in villagers' views on children. To be sure, Sanjing's Khmu love their children dearly. At the same time, and like the parents in the story of the monkey children, villagers' views on children's *economic* value oscillates. Too young to work, children are economic burdens. As they grow older, children increasingly become assets. At the same time, their ageing parents revert back to being net consumers and become dependent on their children. In short, Sanjing's peasant households are sustained through an 'intergenerational contract' (Huijsmans 2014, citing Whitehead 2007) in which nurturing children is a future-oriented investment.In the story of the monkey children, it is the denial of intergenerational nurture that severs this contract, irreparably.

Until recently, Sanjing's householders sought to turn their children into net household contributors as quickly as possible. This view is, however, being challenged. Fuelled by the murky mix of opportunities and threats engendered by Laos' rapid socio-economic transformation, Sanjing's Khmu are recalibrating the spatio-temporal horizons of their investments in children.

This article sheds ethnographic light on these recalibrations. Drawing on 12 months of fieldwork conducted in 2017–18 and early 2020, I provide an intimate account of how aspirational migration and agrarian change are (re)shaping the intergenerational contracts that have long sustained Sanjing's peasant households.[3] Notably, whereas much research on these dynamics in Laos has focused on communities (adversely) impacted by transition (e.g. Barney 2012; McAllister 2015; Sentíes Portilla 2017), this article focuses on a community historically close to the Lao state and, concomitantly (cf. Dwyer 2012), still relatively unscathed by the (transitory) detriments of commodification, enclosure and dispossession.

I begin by briefly introducing Phongsali and Sanjing's Khmu. I then sketch the historical context prompting villagers to pursue mobility, and thus reconfigure their investments in children. This is followed by an up-close account of one household's effort to build a post-peasant future in the lowlands. Here I focus in particular on intergenerational divergences over how to envision and pursue the proverbial 'good life'. In my discussion, I posit Sanjing's engagements with mobility as 'controlled experiments': pioneering pursuits of betterment, driven by both angst and aspiration, and crucially shaped by locally specific and ever-shifting historical and material factors.

[1] 'Sanjing' is a pseudonym.

[2] To be sure, intra-village labour exchange, wage labour and adoption are also practised in Sanjing.

[3] My fieldwork involved immersive participant observation. The resulting PhD thesis (Lutz 2021) provides a 'once-removed' ethnographic history of the impact of political revolution and socio-economic development on Sanjing's village politics, ritual practices and local cosmology.

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Phongsali, Khmu, Sanjing

Wedged between China and Vietnam, Phongsali is the northernmost of Laos' 17 provinces. Much of Phongsali is mountainous and forested, though little of it primary due to widespread swiddening. Less than 10% of the province is suitable for wet-rice cultivation (LSB 2015: 105).

Phongsali was long considered among the most deprived regions of Laos.[4] French colonialists described the area as 'the poor child of Laos … with no possibility for economic development' (Aymé 1930: 131–3). Yet Phongsali has long been part of wider economic circuits. Until recently, the Nam Ou river – which runs through the province north-to-south – was one of Laos' few fully navigable waterways. Supplementing the Nam Ou, mule-tracks once traversed the province (Aymé 1930: Annexe III, C.4). Tea, sticklac, cardamom, benzoin and opium have long linked locals to regional and global markets.

Since the early 2000s, the Lao government has become increasingly adept at harnessing global capital to its goal of intensifying commodified production. Today, Laos is both one of the world's fastest growing economies and largest recipients of foreign aid and investment (Evans 2012: 227ff.). Under slogans like 'turning land into capital' or 'becoming the battery of Asia', Lao leaders have granted long-term concessions in the hydropower, mining and agro-forestry sectors to foreign companies, above all from Thailand, Vietnam and, increasingly, China. At the same time, Laos has been experiencing rapid urbanisation (Bouté 2017, 2018b).

Due not least to its strategic location, Phongsali too has been affected by these dynamics. Jockeying for influence, historical rivals Vietnam and China have invested in infrastructure, agriculture and the resource sector. Of the seven hydropower dams completed or under construction on the Nam Ou, four are in Phongsali. Buoyed by these investments – and a concomitant influx of migrants – once sleepy roadside villages are mushrooming into minor boomtowns. Between 2005 and 2015, the province's official poverty rate fell almost 50% (LSB 2015). At the same time, development-induced disjuncture has led to (muted) resentment and – in some cases – new forms of poverty. Villagers in Sanjing and elsewhere agree: what is now upon them amounts to something more profound and jarring than 'normal' societal change (Rigg 2005: 15).

Phongsali is ethnically diverse. Roughly half the province's population of just under 180,000 are Sino-Tibetan speakers (UNODC 2010: 58). At less than 20% of the population, the national majority Tai-Lao are a local minority (Schlemmer 2012).

Approximately 36,000 of Phongsali's inhabitants identify as ethnic Khmu.[5] In the district where Sanjing is located, nearly 50% of villages are fully or predominantly Khmu. The Khmu are Mon-Khmer speakers autochthonous to northern Laos. They are Laos' second-largest ethnicity, comprising about 11% of that country's population of roughly 7.5 million. Customarily, most Khmu live(d) in the mid-level uplands, where they le(a)d semi-nomadic lives based on hunting, gathering and rotational

[4] Laos' 2005–10 National Socio-Economic Development Plan identified three of Phongsali's seven districts as among the country's poorest. In 2005, two-thirds of provincial villages lacked road access (UNODC 2010: 5). In 2006, per capita GDP lay at US$283 (national average: US$485). Phongsali still has one of the lowest rates of literacy and highest rates of malnutrition in the country (LSB 2015: 63; GoL 2018).

[5] The 2015 Lao Census does not disaggregate ethnicities by province (a fact in itself revealing). These figures are based on my observations and extrapolations from research done by Schlemmer (2012).

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swiddening (Suksavang 2003; Tayanin & Lindell 2012). Khmu cosmology may be described as a variant of 'hierarchical animism' (Århem and Sprenger 2016). In many places, Khmu have long stood in an ambiguously subordinate relationship to the valley-dwelling Tai-Lao (Évrard 2019; Lutz 2021).

Sanjing is a hamlet of roughly two dozen households. An agglomeration of two Khmu homesteads, Sanjing has recently become subject to ethnic Akha in-migration (Akha now make up a third of the local population; Lutz 2021). Notwithstanding recent cash-crop booms, local livelihoods remain grounded in subsistence-oriented hunting, gathering and swiddening. With its low population and abundant land, Sanjing enjoys fallow periods of 12–15 years – an increasing rarity in Laos. Rice yields are comparatively stable and high. Local forests and rivers continue to provide relatively plentiful sources of sustenance. At the time of writing, Sanjing still lacks grid electricity, paved road access and reliable mobile internet coverage.

Sanjing's Khmu have long engaged the wider economy. Older villagers recall arduous treks to southern China, bartering wild cardamom and other forest products for salt, tools and textiles. Local histories tell of labour sojourns to teak plantations in Siam/Thailand and (British) Burma (Lebar 1965: 11ff.; Évrard 2016; Lutz 2021).[6] These long-standing ventures were halted by Laos' Civil War (roughly 1950–75), and socialist autarky following the 1975 founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). While temporarily restricting their physical movement, the founding of the modernist, multi-ethnic LPDR endowed Sanjing's Khmu with an unprecedented degree of social mobility. Having overwhelmingly sided with the triumphant leftists, villagers were able to translate their wartime allegiance into post-war social and political capital (Lutz 2021). Notwithstanding the post-Cold War resurgence of ethnic Tai-Lao chauvinism, Sanjing's Khmu still enjoy more political representation and influence than under Laos' old royalist regime. Sanjing is routinely prioritised for state- and donor-funded development projects. Pictures of those who have 'made it' in the LPDR occupy pride of place in local houses. Most villagers have relatives at various levels of the bureaucracy. Some are themselves state agents. As Uncle Sit – former village chief and now a senior staffer in the local district administration – proudly proclaimed: 'I'm not just a villager, I am the government!' This (sense of) intimacy with LPDR power has crucially buttressed local engagements with the wider economy.

With the expansion of market reforms in the mid-1980s, Sanjing's Khmu again ventured out, this time with bolstered confidence. Whereas previous migrations were largely temporary and aimed at acquiring outside wealth in pursuit of prestige within Sanjing, the current exodus is driven by new desires to build 'modern' lives in the lowlands. Since the early 1990s, over half of Sanjing's households have migrated to lowland towns. Like many villages in upland Laos, Sanjing is infused with a palpable 'atmosphere of departure' (Stolz 2019: 2; Bouté 2017).

Initially, most of Sanjing's emigrants left to join the army or civil service, or in the hope of becoming better peasants (e.g. seeking flat land for wet-rice cultivation; Bouté 2018b: 27; Sentíes Portilla 2017: 1255–6). Many have since joined Laos' rapidly expanding private sector, starting small businesses (restaurants, dormitories, petty trading) in burgeoning towns like Oudomxay or Luang Prabang. Meanwhile, those remaining in

6 As Évrard (2016: 43) notes, these engagements contradict the still-prevalent image of the Khmu as marginalised, apathetic and 'haphazard' jobseekers. Sanjing's Khmu do not claim deep historical cross-border kinship ties.

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Sanjing have significantly expanded cash-crop cultivation, particularly cardamom for export to neighbouring China. The income thus generated is invested almost entirely into building new lowland lives. While Sanjing's wooden houses are slowly dilapidating, many villagers are, quite literally, making their aspirations concrete elsewhere (cf. Stolz 2019).

In short, Sanjing's Khmu have been beneficiaries of the LPDR's historical redistribution of 'societal hope' (Kleist and Jansen 2016: 382–3, citing Hage 2003). Buoyed by their state connections, most villagers consider themselves better off and more empowered today than at any point in living memory. At the same time, the local peasant natural economy remains largely intact. Sanjing is subject to outmigration not because it is a place of penury, but because it is *relatively* prosperous economically and well-positioned politically. Here, rural exodus is driven not by destitution, but by a historically endowed 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2013) to the future promised by the developmentalist state. Even within Sanjing, it is not the poorest who migrate, but those with the means to invest in a new life and, perhaps more importantly, with sufficient security to take the risk. These historically and socio-economically contingent aspirations are prompting Sanjing's Khmu to reconfigure the 'intergenerational contracts' that have long sustained their peasant households.

Shifting calculations

> Nowadays, if you don't have children, you don't have labour, if you have children, you don't have money! (Sister Nui)

Drawing not least on their intimacy with the state, villagers have long considered civil service the most secure and promising form of off-farm work (Singh 2011). In the words of Widow Gam: 'four jobs will always be needed: nurse/doctor, teacher, soldier and police(wo)man … and they're all government jobs!' (cf. Ansell et al. 2020: 27–8). At the same time, most of Sanjing's adults completed only a few years of school. Some didn't go at all. As Grandmother Mai noted, 'before, all we knew was finding food and growing rice, that's all we *needed* to know … !' Brother Aen – now in his 40s – recalled his youth as follows:

> Every morning I'd sweat over the rice pounder while my older brother went to school … I had to help my parents find food, take care of the house, of my younger siblings … that's why I can't read … that's why my wife and I are in the cardamom gardens all day, working till we drop! To make money, so our kids can study and get good jobs!

As highlighted in Aen's statement, Sanjing's Khmu view their lack of schooling with a touching blend of shame and bitterness. Villagers are acutely aware of the importance of modern education (if not knowledge) for getting ahead in today's Laos – including, not least, for securing much-coveted government jobs. Driven by a potent mix of embarrassment and aspiration, local parents are investing heavily in educating their offspring, significantly prolonging the period in which their children are net consumers to their households.

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Sanjing has a small, ramshackle primary school. To attend high school, village youths must board in the valley district centre. During school-term weeks, they and their labour are thoroughly missed. The Friday afternoon crescendo of motorbikes roaring up the mountain is a delight to the ears of Sanjing's parents, just as Sunday afternoons are marked by sorrow and quarrel over allowances:

> We've packed you rice for the week, and two squirrels! What do you need money for? 50,000 kip is enough!
>
> But mum, I need more, for soap and toothpaste!

Such exchanges reveal the frustrations engendered as parental efforts brush up against children's own increasingly asserted aspirations. The household of Uncle Sit and his wife Deng provides one example. Sit and Deng have two children: their son Thong is in his mid-20s, their daughter Tess in her late teens. Following high school, Thong joined an NGO in a neighbouring district. By all accounts, he was poised for a successful career there. Nevertheless, Sit insisted Thong quit and find government work closer to home. 'We want him around', Deng explained, 'we're getting old, who'll take care of us? Besides, it's better to work for the government, to have a face with the party-state.' Thong now holds a desk job in the local district administration. Despite Sit being a senior administrator, securing this job cost Sit a substantial sum in 'deposits' (the local euphemism for bribes). Somewhat grudgingly, Thong has accepted the move, 'because I love my parents'.

Sit and Deng made similar efforts for their daughter Tess to study teaching in a neighbouring province. Their plan was for Tess to become the resident teacher in Sanjing's village primary school. These efforts were foiled however when Tess fell pregnant to a methamphetamine user from the valley. 'If at least he'd been a civil servant, or a good student!' Sit vexed, 'now Tess can't go, all because of that bastard!' In early 2020, and against her parents' wishes, a tearful Tess left behind her young daughter and headed to Vientiane, 'to look for money'.[7]

In the following, I unpack these intergenerational dynamics in greater detail, through the story of one household's efforts to build a post-peasant lowland future by investing in their children.

Baa and Hak: a household on the move

> Before, work looked for people … now, people look for work. (Local idiom)

'This year, we're growing less rice than last … next year, we'll grow even less!' It is a sticky day in July 2017. Aunt Baa, her husband Hak and I are moving hunchbacked through their swidden, weeding. 'All our children are gone, studying or working', Baa continues, 'mostly, we're alone, we only need rice for two.' Hak nods; 'we're focusing on cardamom instead … we don't lack rice, we lack money!'

[7] Unfortunately, I cannot here go into detail regarding gender aspects (cf. Huijsmans 2014; Barney 2012).

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We return home at dusk, exhausted. Baa and Hak run Sanjing's only shop – a stall at the far-end of their kitchen features beer, toothpaste, soymilk, soap and more. Baa grabs a tin of sardines. 'If only our kids were around to find food', she sighs, 'dinner would be waiting when we get home … now we must eat this … '.

Like most village houses, Baa and Hak's needs renovation. Hak has considered building a new house altogether; wooden planks lie ready near their outhouse. 'But we've decided better sell the planks', Hak says, 'in five years, when our youngest daughter Yom graduates, we're leaving … until then, we'll stay, endure, and look for money here'.

Baa and Hak have five children, which they consider 'far too many' for this day and age. Their eldest daughter Tou moved to Luang Prabang shortly after high school. There, Tou found work at a state-run printing press and married a fellow Khmu named Boun. Boun drives a minivan for one of Luang Prabang's many hotels. The hotel is owned by Lao Airlines, Laos' national carrier. To Baa and Hak, this makes Boun a state employee – something of which they wholeheartedly approve.

Baa and Hak's eldest son Dan is studying land management in Vientiane. Dan wants to be a driver, 'like Boun'. Baa and Hak, however, want Dan to join the government; 'here in our district … as a local staffer, like Thong!'

Baa and Hak's second son Phet is in his final year of school. Like his siblings before him, Phet spends school-term weekdays in the valley. Fridays, Phet returns to Sanjing, his motorbike laden with supplies for his parents' shop. Sundays, Phet returns to the valley, often hauling gallons of his mother's moonshine, for sale in the district centre.

Phet's older sister Kai has just graduated. She wants to be a nurse. Hoping to get Kai into nursing school, Baa and Hak have 'deposited' the bulk of this year's cardamom revenue with a well-positioned relative. Kai remains anxious: 'nursing school is for bigshots only, people with money … people like me go from school straight back to the swiddens [cf. Huijsmans *et al*. 2021: 5–6] … but if I don't get in, I'll go look for money in town!'

In early September, Kai sits the nursing school entrance exams. As expected, she doesn't get in. Baa receives the news while counting a wafer-thin stack of low-denomination kip bills, this month's meagre shop revenue. 'Then stay and help us … ', Baa notes to Kai, stoically; 'next year we'll try again'.

The following morning, with Kai out, Baa shares her frustration: 'truthfully, we'd sleep better if our kids just stayed … instead of applying here, depositing there … I don't know who to trust anymore … the party-state eats with us, everyday [an allusion to corruption, cf. High 2014: 24ff.], but only the children of bigshots get work … how are things in your country?' 'No need to pay', I reply, 'if you're good, you have every chance.' 'That's not right either', Baa responds, to my surprise; 'you should deposit *something* … if you don't, what will others do for you? We just want things to be fair!' Kai returns and proclaims: 'I'm going to Luang Prabang! I'll stay with Tou and find money!' Baa and Hak agree to let Kai go, *after* the rice harvest.

Two months later, I am waiting at a roadside stall in one of Luang Prabang's sprawling suburbs. A young lady arrives. Her face is cream-whitened. Her hairdo, blouse and shoes are new and shiny. Is this the dark-skinned girl who, just weeks ago, threshed rice with me? Kai ushers me up an unpaved alley. Climbing over balustrades, we reach a dingy dormitory. Inside, Kai's sister Tou is cooking. On the floor behind her, watching cartoons on an old television, is Tou and Boun's two-year-old son. 'What's his

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name?' I shout over the blaring TV. Tou blushes: 'Padtanaa' (Lao for 'development'). Over soup and beer, Tou recalls how she quit work when Padtanaa was born:

> The foreigners Boun drives around are super-rich, sometimes he gets 100 dollars tip! Boun works, I raise our child … we still lack money though, for the house we're building nearby … once the roof and walls are done we'll move there … this dorm is cramped and expensive …

Kai has started a bookkeeping course at a private college. 'I want to quit already', she sighs, 'the other students are all civil servants, urbanites … I'm the only country bumpkin … the others bring their laptops … I come with paper and pen … I'm so ashamed!' 'Mum said Kai should come home and try for teachers college next year', Tou adds. 'Or I could stay!', Kai interrupts, 'work at [a newly opened Chinese mall] and study English'. Tou agrees: 'Yes, don't go back! There's nothing in Sanjing!'

In January, Kai returns to Sanjing for a visit. She has brought a large bag of clothing. 'I've started a business', Kai explains, 'selling clothes via WhatsApp.'[8] Baa and I join Kai and go back to Luang Prabang. There, Tou and Boun invite me for dinner in their dorm. Generous servings of Sanjing rice and squirrel lead into a discussion over government vs private-sector work. Baa berates Kai, 'private college? Nothing will come of that! Come back, we'll find work for you!' 'Finding government work is difficult!', Kai retorts. 'Dan will!', Baa asserts, 'but studying at private college means no work!' 'That's not true', Tou interjects, 'you can work for companies, they pay twice what government pays, for the same job!' Baa takes a moment to reel from her daughters' rebukes. 'That's not *real* work', she replies, sullenly, 'what can companies do for you? You may get money, but you don't have a face with the party-state!' Boun rushes to drown the debate in another round of beer.

Baa and I head back north. Squeezed into a recklessly speeding Vietnamese minivan, Baa reflects on city life: 'it's good Hak and I don't live in Luang Prabang yet, our kids aren't ready … and we don't know how to find money there, all we know is our forest, our swiddens … if we go now, we'll be destitute … '

We return to Sanjing to learn that we've just missed a team of recruiters from a Chinese rubber plantation. Brother Kam (Sanjing's village chief) shows me the ad they left behind. It calls on 'healthy, strong people' to 'manage 1200 rubber trees per person'. The advertised salary: 2 million kip per month.[9] No sooner have I finished reading than Kam's teenage son Sorn grabs the ad and starts making excited calculations on how many months work would buy him a Kawasaki motorbike. Kam laughs:

> You wouldn't last 3 weeks! At these plantations, there are seedy restaurants, you'll save nothing! You'll become a [methamphetamine] addict! You'll be in debt! Or in jail! 2 million a month … ha! We make more selling cardamom, and here we're our own bosses … only people with no choice hire out!

'Then why is everyone leaving?', I ask. Kam smiles, in annoyance: 'because we're anxious, because we have foresight!' Nobody goes to tap rubber for the Chinese.

[8] Kai uploads sample photos of clothing, allowing friends and their parents to select colours and styles. She then gets the items delivered to Sanjing via relatives.

[9] 2 million kip ≈ 190 Euros.

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A few weeks later, rumours spread of government plans to seize Sanjing's fallows and create a 'conservation and tourism area'. The village ignites in apprehension. I join the irate crowd gathering in the village square. 'Where will we grow rice? How will we eat!?', villagers shout.

> They'll give our land to the Chinese, for coffee! We'll be forced to hire out, on our own land!
>
> The government hasn't developed anything here! No proper road, no companies! They want our forest? Give us development first!
>
> I still have kids in school! If the party-state takes my land without giving me development, I'll become a bandit!

Uneasy smiles dart in my direction. Seeking to calm the crowd, Kam declares: 'fear not! The government won't outdo us!' That weekend, Kam has Sorn write a letter to the district governor.[10] The letter turns out rather short and timid. It doesn't even mention the rumour, stating merely that 'in the context of clearing swiddens, the people of Sanjing kindly request technical advice regarding coffee or galangal, as appropriate'. Resistance rendered technical (cf. Scott 1985; Ferguson 1990), I smile to myself as I head over to Uncle Sit's house. 'We want to stop swiddening', Sit confirms,

> but we want to be ready … we're still preparing, we need our land, our own places of production, to pay for our children's schooling … nowadays, the rich grow richer, the poor grow poorer … we don't want to end up poor, we don't want to hire out!

Nobody comes to seize Sanjing's fallows. Before long, the rumour has dissipated. I head to Luang Prabang and drop in on Tou and Kai. A whiteboard is propped behind their dormitory door. It reads: 'How are you?' 'Fine, thanks.' Tou and Kai are learning English. In addition to her studies and WhatsApp business, Kai now works at a Chinese shop selling toys and knock-off sports apparel. She proudly shows me her new second-hand laptop.

I travel on to Vientiane. There, I meet up with Dan. Dan has just graduated. Baa and Hak have secured him an internship in Sanjing's district administration. 'If they hire me, I'll stay', Dan says,

> but I have friends who've been there for years, they're still [unpaid] volunteers! Mum and dad want me to work in our district and take care of our cardamom gardens. There's lots of money growing there, I could sell it all and move back to the city! [Dan laughs]

In April 2018, Dan starts his internship. As predicted, he spends his weekdays loitering in a district office and his weekends weeding cardamom in Sanjing. Baa and Hak meanwhile have a change of heart. They now support Dan's wish to return to town. 'We've been trying to get paid work for Dan here, but it's so difficult', Baa sighs, 'yes,

[10] Kam completed only three grades of school. His literacy is limited. His official correspondence is largely read and written by his children.

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government work gives you face … but in this era, what does that mean if you don't get paid?'

Soon thereafter, my year in Sanjing ends. Tou, Kai, Dan and I have stayed in touch. Following his internship, Dan went to Luang Prabang and found work as a hotel driver. Kai continued her salesgirl job and completed her bookkeeping course. Phet too moved to Luang Prabang, to study English and work as a water delivery boy. By December 2018, all five of Baa and Hak's children were living in Tou and Boun's still unfinished house.[11] In early 2019, Tou put Padtanaa into daycare and became a chambermaid in the same hotel as Dan. A few months later, I received a WhatsApp message: a picture of Dan holding a document, handing cash to a lady. The caption, a single word: 'proud'. 'What's this?', I asked. Dan's reply: 'I just bought land, we'll build a house, for mum and dad ☺'.

Discussion

The story of Baa and Hak's children highlights the 'pioneering ethos' (Petit 2015) with which Sanjing's Khmu are engaging Laos' rapidly changing economy. Despite setbacks and detours, the overwhelming majority of Sanjing's youth *do* end up fulfilling their part of the 'intergenerational contract' and securing remunerative off-farm work – albeit in places and ways that may differ from their (parents') initial aspirations. Far from being the linear process envisioned by the developmentalist state, rural exodus and agrarian change in contemporary Sanjing is unfolding on multiple, locally specific and constantly shifting trajectories. In this section, I unpack the ethnographic material shared above and discuss the contingencies framing these trajectories.

Aspiration, angst and 'controlled experiments'

> If we don't develop ourselves, the party-state will bring in the Chinese. (Brother Kam)

Baa's statement 'this year, we're growing less rice than last … next year, we'll grow even less!' highlights the future's quotidian hold on Sanjing's present. As discussed, Sanjing's capacity to aspire towards this future is crucially buttressed by villagers' long-standing (sense of) intimacy with Laos' current regime. Concomitantly, and to the extent that Sanjing's Khmu resist state efforts to transition into a modularly imagined modernity, they do so not as backward-looking traditionalists, but as future-oriented aspirants.[12] For example, villagers did not simply vex over rumours that the government would seize their fallows. They vexed specifically over alleged state plans

[11] Yom was attending high school in Luang Prabang.

[12] Regarding my use of the term 'modularly imagined modernity', I here draw loosely on Benedict Anderson (1983; cf. Tooker 2004), and note that notwithstanding the palpable growth in confidence triggered by recent achievements, Lao policy-making (and its excesses) remains inflected by a 'pervasive anxiety' over needing to 'catch up' with ostensibly more 'developed' and 'civilised' others (Pholsena 2006: 64–5, 218; Cohen 2013: 189; Baird 2011: 23).

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to seize their fallows *without* delivering ‘development’. Sanjing’s Khmu do not agitate against the modernising state, but *for* a *better*, more equitable, modernising state. As Uncle Sit noted, provided with *superior* alternatives, villagers would happily abandon the drudge of their current swidden-based livelihoods. Local aspirations do not subvert the Lao government’s policies; they are pregnant with the same promise: Sanjing’s Khmu are pursuing post-peasant futures in broad ‘experimental consensus’ (High 2008) with *their* state. At the same time, and as highlighted by villagers’ (non-)reaction to the Chinese rubber plantation ad, comparing their off-farm options and current livelihoods, Sanjing’s Khmu routinely conclude in favour of the latter. Believing themselves in a historically and ecologically endowed position to choose, villagers insist not any job will do; not for them, and certainly not for their children.

Local reactions to the land grab rumour also show that villagers’ engagements are fuelled not only by aspiration, but also by angst (Caouette and Turner 2009). As evinced in Kam and Sit’s talk of ‘preparing’ with ‘foresight’ and ‘anxiety’, Sanjing’s Khmu are acutely aware that the changes sweeping through Laos harbour both opportunities *and* threats. Similarly, and as highlighted in Sit’s vexation over his daughter’s unwanted pregnancy, villagers see the lowlands not only as realms of possibility, but also of danger (Petit 2015: 420). Virtually all Sanjing’s aspiring emigrants echoed Baa’s fears of ending up ‘destitute’ should they (be forced to) move too soon. Like Baa and Hak, most insist on staying put until enough of their children have built viable lowland livelihoods.

Anxious desires for a measured and secure transition into post-peasanthood are also at work in parental efforts to usher their children into local state employment. This was evident in Sit’s decision to move his son Thong out of a promising NGO career, and in Baa and Hak’s erstwhile insistence that their children join the district civil service. It is the (perceived) security offered by proximity to state power that enables Sanjing’s Khmu to see ‘depositing’ a ‘reasonable’ amount of money as legitimate – if cumbersome – investments. As evinced in Baa’s rhetorical question (‘if you give nothing, what will others do for you?’), the same commitment to reciprocal nurture that has traditionally sustained Sanjing’s peasant households is at work in local pursuits of state patronage (Ansell et al. 2020: 32; Bouté 2018b: 41).[13]

By the same token, while villagers have eagerly – even obsessively – taken up cash-crops, they insist on doing so as independent smallholders, in control of their own ‘places of production’ and, ideally, market engagements. Sanjing’s Khmu want to turn their land into convertible capital, but *without* turning themselves into commodified labour (cf. Baird 2011). Thus far, off-farm aspirations have done little to diminish villagers’ valuation of subsistence. If anything, the uncertainties spawned by rapid change have prompted Sanjing’s Khmu to throw their self-reliance into renewed relief (Rigg et al. 2016, 2020: 318–19). Locals have seen cash crops go from boom to bust, repeatedly. Several villagers have returned to Sanjing following (unsuccessful) wage labour sojourns. None are viewed as ‘failures’ (cf. Bouté 2018a: 213, 229). Not one

[13] Of course, Sanjing’s Khmu know bribing is illegal. Nevertheless, villagers feel compelled, practically *and* morally, to ‘deposit’. Strictly legalistic notions of ‘corruption’ thus conflict with local efforts to engage a state that, by self-admission, remains on the road to rule-of-law (Creak and Barney 2018). I write this not in a fatalistic or condoning mode. Corruption *is* a problem in contemporary Laos. However, as an ethnographer, my aim is to ascertain what endows ‘depositing’ with a locally specific sense of *norm*alcy.

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local household has abandoned swiddening. Living off the land continues to provide both the means to shape (children's) experimental engagements with migration and a fall-back option. In 2020, Tou, Dan and Boun all lost their jobs in the COVID19-induced collapse of Luang Prabang's international tourism industry. Lacking the funds to complete his parents' house, Dan returned to weed cardamom in Sanjing. At the time of writing, Dan has left again: this time to Vientiane to sign on with a Chinese company. Baa and Hak meanwhile are having second thoughts about their change-of-heart regarding state vs private-sector work: unlike Dan, Sit's son Thong has kept his government job. All the while, plummeting demand from China has led to an 80% fall in the local farmgate price of cardamom, just as spectres of enclosure and climate change continue to loom on the not-so-distant horizon. In these uncertain times, the local idiom 'no matter how rich, without people, you have nothing … !' rings as true as ever.

In short, Sanjing's Khmu are engaging rural exodus and agrarian change as 'angstful aspirants' (Lutz 2021). Local efforts to 'stay, endure and look for money here' are not foot-dragging, backward-looking acts of 'resistance' – they too are future-oriented and aspirational. Villagers are eager to experiment with the opportunities offered by Laos' expanding economy, but in conditions *they* control. Seeking to limit the variables of their engagements, Sanjing's Khmu draw both on their peasant natural economy and on their historically close relations to government. Villagers resist neither markets nor the state, but the 'element of compulsion' spawned by the erosion of subsistence (Li 2014: 116, 148). As elsewhere in upland Southeast Asia, Sanjing's 'pioneering ethos' rests on an intimate entanglement of mobility and stability (Petit 2015). This entanglement manifests not least in the avant-garde role Sanjing's Khmu assign to their children.

Intergenerational dynamics

> Before, the grandfather taught the grandkids … now the grandkids teach the grandfather. (Local idiom)

As evinced in the case study of Baa and Hak's household, when it comes to navigating the modern world, Sanjing's Khmu feel increasingly compelled to cede to their children. At the same time, many of Sanjing's youth are like Dan: well into their 20s by the time they secure remunerative employment. Sanjing's parents stem the rising cost of schooling their children – both in terms of money and forfeited labour – in the understanding, or *hope*, that educated children are their best chance to master change or, at the very least, avoid becoming landless hirelings. It is here, in hope-fuelled investments in their children, that villagers' angstful aspirations translate into motivations to 'stay, endure and look for money' in Sanjing. Concomitantly, and as highlighted by villagers' vexations over the land grab rumours, few things worry Sanjing's Khmu more than being squeezed off their land before they can reap the rewards of investing its proceeds into their children's future.

Sitting uneasily alongside this faith, villagers routinely complained about today's hedonistic, over-indulgent youth. As highlighted in Kam's rebuking claim that his son Sorn would squander his rubber plantation salary in 'seedy restaurants' and end up 'in debt or in jail', Sanjing's parents see youthful desires for smartphones, fancy clothes and

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Kawasaki motorbikes much like they see enclosure: a further threat to their ability to remain in charge of shaping their household's futures. As Sanjing's Khmu experiment with new markets and mobilities, 'aspirations' are themselves among the variables to be controlled. Repeatedly, villagers spoke of withstanding temptations to 'develop' faster than they know, or *feel*, they should. Here too, 'resistance' is future-oriented. As Kam sighed while heading to the valley to pay interest on his bank loan:

> I wish I'd never borrowed that money … before, money was the highest-hanging fruit … now money hangs low, *too low* … everyday, government staffers come up here, offering loans; 'grow this, sell that' they say … truthfully, we're not ready to do business only, we don't want to be in debt, but the party-state keeps pushing us!

While Sanjing's parents have chosen staying put and investing in their children's education as the primary means of mastering transition, younger generations increasingly see Laos' lowland towns as the vector for realising the 'good life'. As evinced in Tou's claim that 'there's nothing in Sanjing', many youngsters consider their native hamlet a place of 'existential immobility' (Kleist and Jansen 2016: 382–3, citing Hage 2009; cf. Sentíes Portilla 2017). At the same time, and as highlighted by Kai's conviction that only 'bigshots get into nursing school', Sanjing's youth also harbour increasing doubts about their capacity to aspire *with* the modernising state. The erstwhile disjuncture between Baa and Hak's preferences for local civil service and Kai and Dan's desires to 'look for money in town' reveals the intergenerational fault-lines along which the shifting ideals and horizons engendered by Laos' rapid socio-economic development are negotiated (Stolz 2019) – just as Baa and Hak's eventual acquiescence reveals both villagers' eclectic pragmatism and the shifting intergenerational power balances within Sanjing. By successfully engaging in private-sector work, Sanjing's youth are reshaping their parents' very vision of 'progress' (Huijsmans *et al*. 2021: 6).

Placed in broader context, these dynamics highlight the ambiguous impact of neoliberal globalisation on the Lao state's grip on local aspirations. Like developmentalist states elsewhere, the LPDR has thus far been rather successful in outsourcing its governance through hope (Kleist and Jansen 2016: 382–3, citing Hage 2003). As evinced by Kai and Dan, private-sector work crucially contributes to attenuating frustration over failed pursuits of government work, defusing and/or channelling it into paths that ultimately reaffirm the state's project of 'market-Leninist' modernisation (London 2012; Ansell et al. 2020).[14] The long-term ramifications of this outsourcing, however, remain uncertain. It is on this note that I conclude.

Deposits, dividends, divergence

Buoyed by a rapid decline in local birth rates, many of Sanjing's households are now on the verge of reaping the demographic dividend of their anxiously aspirational intergenerational investments. Funded not least by Dan's new job in Vientiane, Baa and

[14] Notable in this context, not a single Sanjing youngster has gone to work in neighbouring Thailand (cf. Barney 2012).

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Hak's new house is nearing completion. Chances are that by the time you read this, Baa and Hak will be living in Luang Prabang.

Similarly, all but one of Uncle Man's seven children have now secured remunerated work. Buoyed by Man's connections as former village chief, three have joined government. Following a Chinese-sponsored educational sojourn to Yunnan, Man's eldest son now works in Phongsali's provincial foreign affairs department. His job: facilitating for Chinese investors. Man's second daughter is a teacher, his third son a policeman. Notably, and unlike Baa and Hak, Man and his wife Orn have chosen to transition their household economy in Sanjing. With their children's remittances paying for the ethnic Akha peons that now work their swidden (cf. Barney 2012), Man and Orn now focus almost exclusively on commercial goat-raising and fish-farming. In 2020, their second son became the first villager to buy a truck. Instead of itinerant Tai-Lao traders, it is now he who buys and delivers Sanjing's cash crops and forest products to market.

The divergent paths taken by the household of Baa and Hak on one hand, and that of Man and Orn on the other, speak not only to new forms of stratification within Sanjing. They also highlight the Lao state's continuing sway over villagers' recalibrations of their investments in children. Placing their eldest son at the nexus of Phongsali's engagements with global capital cost Man and Orn dearly, and not only in forfeited household labour. As with Sit, Man's connections did not spare him from the need to 'deposit'. For now, the reciprocal nurture given by the state has sufficed to keep Man, Sit and Sanjing's other Khmu lukewarmly convinced of both the practical necessity and moral value of their unwritten contracts with LPDR power. As Aunt Baa noted: 'We just want things to be fair!'

However, and as Baa also noted, villagers are becoming increasingly frustrated with 'applying here, depositing there' and not knowing 'who to trust anymore' (recall also Sit's statement: 'nowadays, the rich grow richer, the poor grow poorer'). Rightly or wrongly, there is a growing sense among Sanjing's Khmu that their historically endowed clout with LPDR power is waning. Coupled with their children's successful pursuit of private-sector work and rising 'deposits', these sentiments may yet gnaw at villagers' longstanding commitment to aspiring with *their* modernising state (Huijsmans *et al.* 2021: 3–4). To again quote Baa: 'yes, government work gives you face … but in this era, what does that mean if you don't get paid?'

Conclusion

This article has provided ethnographic insights into one Southeast Asian peasant community's engagements with aspirational migration and agrarian change. It has shown the Khmu of Sanjing in northern Laos desiring development, but not at all costs. Buoyed by a favourable political ecology, Sanjing's Khmu demand the time and space *they* deem necessary to control their experimental engagements with mobility and transition. Of course, the fortuitous blend of *locally* specific factors I have outlined here do not (necessarily) apply elsewhere (cf. High *et al.* 2009; Dwyer 2012). Indeed – and as evinced in my juxtaposition of Baa and Hak's household with that of Man and Orn – they do not even apply equally to all Sanjing. Nevertheless, most villagers continue to see their best chance to benefit from Laos' rapidly expanding economy – or, at the very least, avoid falling into 'new poverty' (Rigg 2005) – in 'enduring' as peasants and investing their natural and social capital into building viable futures for

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their children. At least for now, most continue to aspire *with* their modernist state, just as increasing intergenerational divergences over how to define and pursue 'the good life' remain tempered by filial obligations of reciprocal nurture. In Sanjing, youthful pursuits of mobility and parental pursuits of stability remain ambiguously yet irreducibly intertwined: two sides of the same *controlled* experiment.

This article has also lent ethnographic sustenance to anthropology's burgeoning interest in the role of 'the future' in shaping the present (Kleist and Jansen 2016; Bryant and Knight 2019; Huijsmans *et al*. 2021). It has provided intimate insight into how aspirations are produced, negotiated and pursued under specific material, sociopolitical and historical conditions. In contrast to neoliberalist approaches that espouse universalising notions of individual responsibility, I have shown definitions and pursuits of betterment unfolding in social interactions on multiple scales (Kleist and Jansen 2016: 383; Ansell et al. 2020: 20–2; Huijsmans *et al*. 2021: 5). While striving for a better future may well be a basic aspect of the human condition, *what* constitutes a 'better future' – and *how* to best achieve it – is not. Hope, angst and aspiration are indeed never simply individual, but always formed 'in the thick of social life' (Appadurai 2013: 187; Huijsmans *et al*. 2021). They are contingent and ever-shifting, not least along generational lines.

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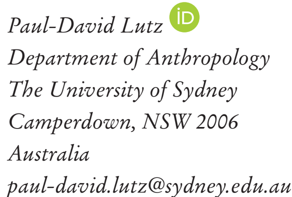

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Expériences contrôlées: migration intergénérationnelle dans les hauts plateaux du Laos – notes sur les aspirations et le changement agraire

Cet article donne un aperçu ethnographique de l'engagement de la paysannerie d'Asie du Sud-Est dans le changement agraire. Il s'inscrit dans le cadre de l'intérêt de longue date des études sur l'Asie du Sud-Est pour la dynamique de la transformation socioéconomique et de l'intérêt croissant de l'anthropologie pour la manière dont les aspirations orientées vers l'avenir sont produites, négociées et mises en oeuvre dans des conditions sociopolitiques, matérielles et historiques spécifiques. S'appuyant sur douze mois de travail sur le terrain dans un hameau de l'ethnie Khmu au nord du Laos, l'essai montre que les paysans des hautes terres, à l'aube de la transition agraire, s'engagent dans une migration aspirationnelle par le biais « d'expériences contrôlées » : des recherches pionnières d'amélioration, façonnées de manière cruciale par de multiples facteurs

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locaux spécifiques. Ces facteurs comprennent une économie naturelle paysanne encore largement intacte, une intimité historique avec l'État en cours de modernisation et, surtout, un « contrat intergénérationnel » persistant et précaire. Dans ce cadre, la mobilité des jeunes et la stabilité parentale restent ambiguës mais irréductiblement liées. Notamment, alors que de nombreuses études sur le Laos se concentrent sur les communautés défavorablement marginalisées par la transition, je révèle une situation contraire – une communauté qui est à la fois politiquement liée et, simultanément, encore relativement indemne des prejudices (transitoires) de la marchandisation, de l'enfermement et de la dépossession. En bref, l'article confirme que si la recherche d'un meilleur avenir est cruciale pour la condition humaine, les définitions et la poursuite d'un tel avenir dépendent du contexte, notamment des générations.

Mots clés migration aspirationnelle, changement agraire, dynamique intergénérationnelle, économie des ménages paysans, Laos

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