

that is resilient but flexible in the face of changing circumstances makes this work indispensable to anyone interested in understanding Khmer-Vietnamese social relations, and an important contribution to the literature on state minorities in the Southeast Asia region.

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Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands

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By choosing to work on the livelihoods of one ethnic group, the Hmong, on both sides of the international Sino-Vietnamese border, this study focuses on how these people make and negotiate livelihood decisions in their complicated geographic, socioeconomic, and political contexts. The study provides a vivid description of a myriad of activities in the everyday lives of Hmong on the fringes as they make their living in the sectors of agriculture, livestock transactions, locally distilled alcohol, cardamom, and the textile trade. These livelihoods have been shaped by various integrations and negotiations between their own background of environment, culture, local knowledge, and identities, and agents and institutions of the state.

In the first two chapters, “Upland Alternative: An Introduction” and “Frontier Dynamics: Borders and the Hmong,” the authors clarify the borderlands as a “third space” and suggest a theoretical framework to approach and facilitate a more comprehensive insight into how the Hmong people are “making a living and trying to maintain their cultures and identity” (p. 15). This “third space” is the area on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border, Yunnan in China and upland northern Vietnam, which has been attracting a range of development schemes and policies issued on both sides in the name of speeding up the economic development of this undeveloped region. Tracing other associated political reasons, the authors view these state efforts as part of an “internal colonization scheme” (p. 27) that has an effect, direct or indirect, on Hmong livelihood decision making. On the other hand, using a bottom-up approach, the authors offer a “locally adapted, nuanced analysis of livelihoods” (p. 7) with the Hmong people passively acting as a local agency to “navigate, rework, contest and appropriate specific facets of identity, modernity, market integration, and nation-state building as they go about creating resilient life-worlds and everyday livelihood” (p. 7).

Chapter 3, “Borderland Livelihoods: Everyday Decisions and Agrarian Change,” focuses on the most important livelihood activity of Hmong on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border, the agricultural sector. This sector has changed a lot under the effect of state development schemes,

especially through sedentarization programs that aim to reduce the use of “slash and burn” methods—a traditional agricultural practice among the Hmong—in favor of intensification agriculture, even though this agrarian change significantly affects Hmong lives and livelihoods. Hybrid seeds were introduced and quickly adopted in this area thanks to their heterosis as well as the pressure on limited land and concerns over food security. This unavoidable situation placed Hmong people in a vulnerable financial situation: due to the additional costs of buying new seeds every planting season, fertilizers, pesticides, and investing in more stable irrigation, they are more dependent on the government’s subsidies and development programs. However, local people still maintain their old practice of swidden agriculture in some places where governments cannot exercise control; they persist in planting traditional rice on available land and try to avoid over-reliance on the state by buying seed from private traders rather than waiting for subsidized bureaus. These active responses on the part of Hmong people are “the best, most resilient tactic” (p. 58) and “forms of everyday covert resistance and small acts of reinterpretation that take place in the context of a marginalized group” (p. 11).

The next four chapters provide interesting insights on non-agricultural livelihood activities of Hmong people in the borderlands: “Livestock Transactions: Buffalo Traversing the Borderlands,” “Locally Distilled Alcohol: Commodifying an Upland Tradition,” “Farming under the Trees: Old Skills and New Markets,” “Weaving Livelihoods: Local and Global Hmong Textile Trades.” The authors show that these sectors are not totally new consequences of the need for cash in the context of new market expansion but are shaped by combining the existence of small-scale barter and trade when and where needed for generations of Hmong people with new constraints of cash income and economic opportunities. Putting Hmong into the center of analysis and treating them as key actors, these chapters clearly show how they use their economic, social, and cultural capital to gain benefits from the marketplace and actively make their own decisions over when and where to engage or disengage from the market economy. On the other hand, the authors also show how in some cases Hmong people have to deal with challenges and vulnerability, for instance, “distillers in Vietnam appear to reap the least economic benefit relative to other actors in these commodity chains” (p. 103).

The position of Hmong people in this matrix of livelihood activities is discussed further in the last chapter, “The Challenge: Making a Living on the Margins.” However, according to the authors, going beyond all their struggles and difficulties in making a living in the marketplace, Hmong people use their agency as best they can and “do things their own way” (p. 153), as their habitus, to maintain their own identity. From the authors’ point of view, even though Hmong people adopt hybrids, they prefer to cultivate traditional Hmong varieties because they dislike the taste of hybrids and find the taste of traditional rice superior. They continue planting indigenous varieties to keep them alive, to let cultivation knowledge survive, and to maintain their culture (pp. 53, 154). For cash-earning activities, Hmong people are alert to outside opportunities but “with a careful

eye on the household labor available and the risks entailed vis-à-vis agricultural needs and responsibilities” (p. 164). In that way, Hmong people can create their own “life project” and “make livelihood decisions that are entirely rational while rooted in their cultural context” (p. 170).

Despite a slight imbalance in research between the two sides of the border, with a greater focus on the Vietnamese side than the Chinese, this study remains an academic achievement and makes a significant contribution to anthropological studies on the livelihoods of people on the frontiers of the Southeast Asian Massif. The research embraces an actor-oriented livelihood approach and strongly confirms the active agency of Hmong people in dealing with and making the best of an adverse situation. This is a representative case of “indigenization of modernity” (Sahlins 1999). The study also raises several research ideas, such as questions on ethnic minority: “The mere fact that the Hmong in Asia number roughly the same as the whole population of Laos should prompt critical thinking on the very notions of nation and minority” (p. 16). Tourism and hiking in Lao Cai, on the Vietnamese side—emerging livelihood activities that have an influence on Hmong society—need to be further investigated.

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References

Sahlins, Marshall. 1999. What Is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28: i–xxiii.

Keeping Cool in Southeast Asia: Energy Consumption and Urban Air-Conditioning

MARLYNE SAHAKIAN

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, x–xviii + 229p.

This book offers insights into some critical areas of social and environmental aspects of the sustainable development paradigm. While being focused on south-east Asia (SEA), and in particular on the Philippines, the book has relevance to other areas of the world where growing urbanization, economic development, and the current and potentially-exacerbated effects of climate change are likely to have cumulative non-linear effects on energy consumption (the impact of which will not be equivalent to the sum of the individual components of change).

The book is largely based on interviews with a variety of general and institutional stakeholders, which lends a personal touch to the case studies. Quantitative statistics and evaluation are not widely used. There are sections including good precis of historical developments leading to