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Interface of the Local and Global: Reframing Understanding of the Hmong


The past 10 years have seen tremendous changes in the upland landscapes and livelihoods of mainland Southeast Asia. The transformations occurring across the region highlight the dynamism, creativity and adaptability of the populations that live there. Nonetheless, like many groups in upland mainland Southeast Asia, our understanding of the Hmong has been developed largely in the contexts of the opium economy and the politics of national integration.

Government efforts to deal with the “minority problem” (such as the panha chao khao in Thailand) led researchers concerned with social justice to respond with studies of the customary practices, local knowledge and adaptation mechanisms of these groups. While government policy trumpeted the negative impacts of these marginal communities on national interest, a community of researchers has struggled to understand and articulate the implications of government intervention on cultural integrity, economic well-being and the political relevance of the upland areas.

The Hmong have been given a central position in these discourses. This is particularly so in Thailand, where much work on the Hmong and their responses to development interventions has been conducted. Three recent studies concerning the Hmong provide an interesting view on the contemporary intersection between minority and majority worlds, and the adaptations and challenges coexisting in that space. Three important points emerge from these publications.

First, observing the social agency of minority groups as they interact with dominant society underscores a high degree of dynamism and fluidity. In the past, minority has more often than not meant marginal and monolithic. But this ignores the efforts of groups to adapt, adopt and resist influences, while providing a useful framework for observing the dynamic tensions involved with the integration processes brought on by globalized world systems.

Second, the upland minorities of the region have long been understood to be transboundary, in that their original geographic distribution and history of mobility have ignored the boundaries of the nation state. Approaches to research on transboundary groups have been challenged by the diversity of socio-political contexts across the region. New work is showing the value of a robust understanding of local adaptation to regional and global forces emerging from a diversity of disciplinary approaches based in the field.

Third, the dominance of outside observers in analysis of upland society is coming to an end. The role of ethnic minority scholars is gaining prominence. These researchers, observing social phenomena from a dual insider/outsider perspective, provide not only valuable insights, but have begun to give new political meaning and relevance to their analysis.
In *The Hmong of China* (2003), Nicholas Tapp explores “context, agency and the imaginary” in the world of the Chinese Hmong. Starting his work with the Hmong in Thailand in the 1980s, Tapp was initially struck by the tension between “China as a cultural source” and “China as an oppressor” within expressions of Hmong ethnicity. “Returning” to the original cultural context of Hmong culture, Tapp gives us the first ethnographic study of the Hmong (as opposed to other groups classified with the Hmong in the Chinese nationality term Miao) in China. Tapp presents richly detailed analysis of Hmong livelihoods, kinship structures and relations, ritual practice and relations with other sectors of Han society. Contemporary Hmong life in China demonstrates an articulation, reminiscent of his earlier account from Thailand, of the dynamic and creative tension between the reliance on Han culture as a source of cultural innovation and the homogenizing pressures of the dominant Han. Tapp uses “texts” — songs, legends and the language of rituals — as a window for interpreting the “imaginary” reality of contemporary village life.

One of Tapp’s thought-provoking arguments is that the Han-Hmong cultural relationship creates an inter-ethnic space characterized by creative “re-workings and re-fashionings,” where the critical agency of the Hmong is located. For example, the efforts of one local clan group to record its genealogy and preserve it in a Han-style ancestral hall and utilize social networks linking local and overseas Hmong, show how the Hmong wield influence over the dominant external social forces. Thus, in this analysis agency refers not to the ability of the Hmong to observe and evaluate the cultural discourse of their own “Hmong” identity, but emphasizes rather the processes through which Hmong social agency itself functions within the context of a larger and more powerful “rhetoric of civility” associated with the Chinese state. Indeed, Tapp concludes that agency is best understood as a continual resignification of culture within new contexts. Such a framework is helpful within the evolving contexts of a globalized world, because it recognizes the importance of social relations across ethnic borders and the resulting tension between local power to decide and global power to impose.

*Hmong/Miao in Asia* (2004) is a commendably explicit effort to address contemporary upland minority social issues in the context of an evolving transnational identity. To do this, the editors and authors have had to work past the flawed ethnic categories imposed by state authorities. The people known throughout Southeast Asia as the Hmong are one of three groups included in the Miao category used in China. As the editors explain in the introduction, the study of the Hmong and Miao has typically ignored the transboundary nature of these people, relying instead on single country, and more generally, nation-state based approaches.


It is important to note that of the 20 con-
tributing authors, 5 are Hmong researchers themselves—3 Lao Hmong based in the west, 1 Thai Hmong and 1 Vietnamese Hmong. It is also interesting that this publication foreshadows the emergence of a talented community of young Hmong/Miao researchers who have grown up in the Southeast Asian region, largely in the post-Cold War world. This book has set the stage for the growth of influential Hmong/Miao commentary on the challenges and opportunities faced by minority groups.

The potential of a new generation of Hmong researchers is demonstrated by Lilao Bouapao in *Rural Development in Lao PDR* (2005). This work follows in a tradition of examining Hmong adaptation and response to development interventions, mostly in context of crop replacement and consolidation of the Thai nation-state’s control over upland areas and peoples. Lilao has focused his attention on national and international development interventions in a village, his own native village, in Laos. The analysis focuses on four development interventions and their impacts on the livelihoods and environment of the local Hmong. He finds that there is an acute lack of environmental and social considerations in the management of development projects. Lilao identifies and elaborates the gap between past field-level experiences of development intervention and the current practices of development. Especially important in his account is the lack of understanding of local history and social processes among agents of rural development, and the failure to recognize local people as the holders of valuable knowledge regarding development options. Lilao presents national and multilateral development policy makers with conclusions about the importance of local participation and consultation within the decision making processes of rural development.

Representation of Hmong throughout the levels of the Lao government is far better than in other countries in the region, and the Hmong also comprise a larger proportion of the total Lao national population than in neighboring countries. Nonetheless, the situation of the Hmong within Laos is still made tense by the history of conflict and the strength of Hmong kinship linkages with overseas Hmong. This makes the critique of development by a Hmong scholar all the more interesting and important. This book is a valuable contribution to the literature on development in Laos, and provides recommendations that should be heeded by development agencies. This work may also be a significant step in the development of a research community with strong linkages to, and stakes in, the reality of the local-national-global interface in social development.

These three recent publications represent three different types of scholarship. All three are welcome contributions to their fields. In addition to the information and insights that they each provide, considered together they suggest positive and creative new directions with relevance for not only scholars interested in Hmong and minority issues, but also those struggling to understand and explain the tensions, contradictions and creations in a world of intensifying interlinkages.

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Catholics comprise 3% of the Indonesian population, forming the third largest religious community after Muslims (87%) and Protestants (6%). In post-colonial Indonesia, Catholics, have wielded influence out of proportion to their modest numbers. In great part, this is thanks to
Catholic institutions (like their Protestant counterparts) having pioneered the introduction of modern education not just to the Christian minority but also to the non-Christian majority. Karel Steenbrink’s Catholics in Indonesia offers a rich portrait of the roots of a community (or, better, a far-flung network of diverse communities) that has played an important role in the making of modern Indonesia.

In researching Indonesian Catholic history, Steenbrink, a major authority on Indonesian Islam and for many years coordinator of cooperation between Leiden University and Islamic institutes of higher learning in Indonesia, is returning in a sense to his own academic roots: he wrote his master’s thesis for the Catholic University of Nijmegen on the Chinese Catholics of Bangka. A former seminarian, he is in some sense an “insider” to the world of the Catholic clergy who provide the bulk of his data, while at the same time his study of Islam and collaboration with Muslim intellectuals give him a wider perspective.

Although not himself seeking to offer any “grand theory” on the historical phenomenon of conversion to world religions or on the evolution of history in general, Steenbrink does hope that his study of the growth of Catholicism in late colonial Indonesia will offer insights useful to those inquiries. His own background enables him to spot weaknesses in generalizations such as Lamin Sanneh’s thesis (p. 230) that differences between Christian and Islamic missionizing are attributable to the two religions’ different attitudes to the translatability of scripture. Steenbrink queries (though more gently than in my paraphrase) whether Sanneh misses the fact that understandings of the person of Christ are more central to defining Christianity than is its scriptural tradition per se (and so Islam’s attitude to the Qur’an is more properly to be compared to Christianity’s attitude to Christ rather than to the Bible).

The book is part of a projected two-volume survey of the history of Catholicism in the Netherlands East Indies covering the years 1808–1942. After two centuries when the VOC had prohibited Catholic clergy from entering its territories, it was the arrival of the Enlightenment in the form of Louis Bonaparte’s Governor General Herman Willem Daendels that—under the principle of freedom of religion—re-opened the colony to Catholic priests (Daendels was himself a Catholic, a fact noted by Steenbrink but not commonly encountered in conventional histories). The inauguration of the Ethical Policy in 1901 marks the break between the two volumes. To help achieve its new goal of educating the indigenous, the colonial government sponsored a massive expansion of Christian missionary activity, resulting in an explosion in the indigenous Christian population (in the case of Catholics, a near 18-fold jump from 27,000 in 1900 to 480,000 in 1940). The communities established, often tenuously, in the nineteenth century would develop under greatly transformed circumstances during the twentieth century.

In Volume One, after briefly discussing the issue of Indonesian conversions to world religions in general, Steenbrink takes the reader on a tour of the archipelago: Java (Europeans and Eurasians)—Bangka (Chinese)—Borneo (Chinese and Dayaks)—Sumatra (Bataks)—Flores (a chapter each on the east and the center of the island)—Sumba—West Timor—Kendari and the Kai Islands—Minahasa—the Moluccas—Java (Javanese converts).

He begins with the Church’s attempts to cater to the spiritual needs of the European and Eurasian Catholics in the cities and towns of Java (a large proportion consisted of soldiers in the colonial army) as well as the material ones of such marginal groups as mixed-race orphans. He documents the hierarchy’s conflicts with a state
from which it welcomed money (priests received government salaries) but not interference. However, his focus does not remain long on the Europeans and Eurasians, for the dynamic sector of the Church and its future belonged to the indigenous population. Indeed, the European-Eurasian population did not exhibit the intensified religiosity that characterized both the colony’s indigenous peoples, whether Muslim, Protestant, or Catholic, and (from 1870 to 1940) metropolitan Dutch society.

Steenbrink highlights the key roles played by laypersons in promoting Catholicism in the archipelago. This is no mere attempt to bring to light an “underground” history but rather recognizes the plain reality that lay leaders took initiative because clergy and other religious were very thin on the ground. This lay vanguard, as it were, of Catholicization included a wide range of characters: a Scottish-Malay clerk in Semarang who without Church authorization dispensed the sacraments from a house chapel; a Chinese physician from British Penang who founded a Catholic community among his countrymen in Bangka; a German (and Protestant!) entrepreneur on Kai Kecil who asked the bishop of Batavia to send priests to evangelize the local population.

The most successful lay leaders were the local rulers in Flores (who admittedly were rulers and were not starting from scratch, building on an indigenized Catholicism with Portuguese roots). Perhaps the most fascinating chapters in the book for the general reader are the two drama-filled ones on Flores: court intrigue; petty warfare; the spectacles of Ibero-Florinese piety; pagan highlanders coming to attend Catholic feasts; Catholic rulers maintaining traditional shrines for the pagan highlanders; and even a prophetess who inspired the supreme pagan priest in Larantuka to convert. The history Steenbrink presents here might well be fruitfully compared with that of the Catholicized royal elite of early modern Kongo (northern Angola) studied by John K. Thornton (The Kongolese Saint Anthony). The Florinese rajas were allying with the European Catholic hierarchy not only to increase their power over their own subjects but also to preserve as much autonomy as possible in the face of an increasingly intrusive Dutch colonial regime.

Catholics in Indonesia rests on a massive body of archival research; Steenbrink exploited the resources of five ecclesiastical archives, including that of the Jesuit Provincial in Semarang. Half of the volume consists of a selection of documents (in the original Dutch or in a few cases Latin or French, but each helpfully prefaced by a short English description). In many cases, a reader can go directly via a footnote from a point in Steenbrink’s text to an excerpt of the source, although the compilation includes more than just material relevant to his narrative (for instance, we find two Malay catechisms, one in the dialect of Malay local to eastern Flores).

Furtherting its utility as a reference, Steenbrink adds appendices, one giving statistics for Catholic schools in the colony in 1903, others listing priests, Jesuit brothers, nuns, and Protestant clergy mentioned in the text accompanied with information on their career trajectories.

In this study, Steenbrink presents evidence that complicates our picture of both the colonial encounter and of religious conversion. Not all Europeans served the interests of the colonial government all the time, and not all Westernization disempowered the indigenous people. Steenbrink’s perspective allows him to portray Dutch colonial officials, partaking of both Catholic and Enlightenment values, as just as much bearers of “complicated religious identities” as syncretistic “natives.”

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青山和佳 『貧困の民族志 - フィリピン・ダバオ市のサマの生活』 東京大学出版会 2006年 414p.

フィリピンのマイノリティ（少数民族）といえば、多様な非キリスト教徒を指す。彼らは人口の1割を占めるにすぎないが、同国を初めて訪れる観光客でも、「バジウ（「サマ」の通称）」は出会うかもしれない。船着場で海に落ちたコインを素戔嗚で拾いあげるパフォーマンスを観せる子どもたち。市場で、やせた身体にボロをまとって物乞いする母・娘。そんな彼らを思い出すような生活の中に、フィリピン人の多元文化を織り交ぜた「バジウ」のものだ。

本書は、周囲から「一番貧しい人たち」という眼差しを受けながら、ダバオという地方都市の『貧困』を生きるサマたちの焦点がとられている。研究目的は、『貧困の実体的・理解』である。1997年8月より、著者は調査地に住み入ったりして彼らの貧困のなかに身をおくうちに、「貧困とは何かに」と考えていた仮説ではとらえにくい分析テーマ——エスニック・アイデンティティがその理解を助ける鍵概念になると思いつついく。

本書のすばらしさは、「このテーマを突き詰めずに、現場の実がを行為と語りで示唆してくれる『世の中の見方』」を手かざして研究を進めたい』（p.2）そう考えた著者が Looseに実施したエスニック調査と、その活動——一次データの集積の suppression。8年間にわたりの調査の結果から、フィリピンのマイノリティ研究や、既存の経済学の「貧困研究」への方法論に貴重な見解がなされている点も目目に値する。その研究内容が評価され、本書は第1回井植記念「アジア太平洋研究賞」を受賞した。

フィリピンの少数民族民は、近代化や西側国家の立、そして経済のグローバリゼーションのなかで、エスニック・アイデンティティの著しい変容を迫られる。ダバオ市のサマの社会変化は他の少数民族と違うのか。著者はまず、フィリピンの少数民族とサマに関する先行研究を参考にし、比較するところから、調査対象となったサマの「エスニック・アイデンティティ」変容の特徴を読み解きにしていく。

移住前からは大きく異なる生活空間で、多数派社会に組み込まれ、固有の生活様式や文化を喪失していく。この点で、サマはEder [1987]が研究対象としたバツックとは同じである。実際、著者も、少数民族が「適応困難」に追われる側面をあたえてEder の考え方に強く共感している。しかし、Ederがバツックの社会を「民族総合の途上にある、と描いたのに対して、著者はサマ社会を「生活様式の変化を迫られる過程でこそ、従来とは異なる民族意識が結びついていわけみると分析する。


著者が対象とした社会では、「バジウ」という主にサマに対する自称——他称であったアイデンティティが、陸上に向かって拡大している。しかし「アイデンティティ・ポリュス」は展開されていない。なぜなのか。先行研究との比較で、著者の視点は「エスニック・アイデンティティ」が動員される内外の条件の違いに向けられる。外部条件としては、現在のサマ社会には、入のような「外部からの注目やエスニック・アイデンティティの覚醒に結びついてるような出来事がなければ、内部条件としては、それの可能性を示す政策のまるっともなければ、指導者もいない。資源は、市場経済の周縁地でわずかな交換を成し立たせるほどしかあらせていない。外的な要因からも内的な要因からも「周縁」への位置づけを余儀なくされながら、絶えず生成変化していなく「エスニック・アイデンティティ」とは何か。

著者はこの実態に向き合いながら、貧困の度合い
こそが、ダバオ市のサマの「エスニック・アイデンティティ」が社会に与える影響を明らかにしようとする重要な研究である。
社会変容をみるときに、時間軸をどう設定するのか。この問題に対しても、著者は自覚的である。本書の随所に、その記述が、著者の観察範囲という時間軸を持つものであるとの断り書きがある。だからこそ、定点観測を他の視点をみせるのかもしれない。このすばらしい研究に、絶対がつまっていいくことを、期待する。

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