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Mobility and Stability in a Tai Vat Village (Laos)

Pierre Petit

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This article explores how Tai highlanders experience mobility. The Tai Vat living in Houaphan Province, Laos, first fled Vietnam at the end of the nineteenth century, and again during the First Indochina War. They presently engage in migrations to rural areas of the Mekong Plain as well as to Vientiane, the destination favoured by Tai youth. They relate their current mobilities to their past experiences, and also to issues of 'development'. Though migrants are driven by a pioneer ethos, this does not preclude attachment to their village, as exemplified by the stability of the lak man*, the ritual post at the centre of collective ritual activity. Local conceptions of mobility and stability are central to understanding these Tai highlanders' sense of history and identity, as well as the interactions they have with the lowlands and the national space at large.*

Keywords: Highland/Lowland Relations; Oral History; Mobility; Migration; Stability; Tai

Introduction

Mobility in the Southeast Asian highlands is rarely addressed from a long-term perspective. Migration studies often treat migrants' departure time as the very beginning of their mobility, as though they had no notion or experience of it before. In contrast, discussions of past migrations do not consider sufficiently links with current situations, as illustrated by James Scott's groundbreaking work *The Art of Not Being Governed*. His central argument is that highland societies have historically evolved from a process of *marronnage*: their populations mostly consist of 'runaways from state-making projects in the valleys' (2009, 127) who have taken advantage of the 'friction of terrain' to resist inclusion into the state. But instead of investigating possible continuities with the present, Scott (2009, xii, 40–63) describes the situation as coming to an end in the middle of the twentieth century with the rise of 'distance-demolishing technologies' developed by modern states. This explanation is frustrating

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for the reader who wonders how the patterns that shaped highland societies for centuries could simply disappear after 'the last great enclosure'. The present article will try to better link these two periods: it can be read as a critical comment on such historical dichotomies, as well as on the related great divide Scott draws between state and anti-state societies. Scott's paradigm extends beyond the monographic frame often adopted to discuss history, mobility and political structures. While his work has motivated far-reaching research, and indeed has inspired this article, Scott's argument is too dichotomist: viewed from my own fieldwork, the situation appears much more nuanced. Mobility and stability, highlands and lowlands, states and frontiers are much more entangled than in Scott's presentation of dualities in 'Zomia'.

My second and indissociable objective is to bring to the fore local discourses and representations of mobility and stability, which are seldom addressed in current debates. Despite drawing on a wide body of evidence, Scott's book lacks significant highlander input on that point for the period he considers. A similar concern has been expressed regarding scholarship on the present resettlement issue in Laos. Since the 1990s, highlanders have been profoundly affected by government policies that entail their displacement to the lowlands. High (2008) criticised the way researchers tend to focus on the state's authoritarian measures without taking into account highlander aspirations for migration. Baird et al. (2009) mentioned in a reply that her ethnographic evidence related mainly to the lowlands where migration is less influenced by coercion than resettlement is in the highlands. The present article can also be read as a contribution to this debate, for it highlights how Tai populations affected by such policies make sense of them based on their own ideas and moral evaluations, triggering new practices and tropes of mobility.

Sahlins (1985, 149–152) upheld that events are always apprehended through an '*a priori* system of interpretation', but also elicit a 'reevaluation of signs', for if the past is 'inescapable', the present is 'irreducible'. My position is similar: grasping Tai highlanders' practical experience of mobility means addressing their oral traditions on the topic; their memories of displacement; the rituals related to their villages; and of course their everyday statements on migration. Historical events inevitably engage dynamics of transformation, as I shall show, but such processes cannot be naively addressed as though they were taking place in a sociocultural vacuum devoid of subjectivities.

Oral Traditions on Origins

My research took place in Houay Yong, a Tai Dam village in Muang Et District, in the mountainous province of Houaphan, Laos, about 20 km south of the border with Vietnam.[1] It is located in a small valley on a tributary of the Nam Ma River. A mountain track links the village to the provincial road 5 km away. Nearly all of the inhabitants are farmers and practice both wet rice cultivation and slash-and-burn agriculture. With 600 inhabitants, Houay Yong is slightly larger than neighbouring villages, and is the home of some sub-regional leaders.

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The inhabitants of Houay Yong usually present themselves as Tai Dam (Black Tai), a well-known ethnic label in Laos. However, in more intimate contexts, they always specify that they are Tai Vat—that is, originating from Muang Vat, or Èm Chau (Yen Chau), 50 km north in Vietnam. Only seven villages in Houaphan share this ethnic label, making it unfamiliar for most Laotians. The ethnonym originates from the Nam Vat river which flows in Yen Chau district, but Houay Yong elders provide a folk etymology: when their ancestors in Vietnam were asked by other inhabitants of their valley of origin about their intention to stay, they answered '*tam vat*', meaning 'in an uncertain, non-definitive way'. They did not know how long they would settle there before possibly continuing on their way. This popular and quaint Highlander explanation of unsettledness would certainly please James Scott.

References to their Vietnamese origin also appear in the foundation stories narrated by elders. I present here a summary of this history as narrated by two elders, Tha Boun, from Houay Yong, and Kong Ban, from Houay Lôm, another Tai Vat village two or three kilometres east in the adjacent valley:

> (1) Their ancestors departed from Muang Vat due to Chinese (*Han Chin*) invasions. At the time, four brothers lived together in Chièng San village: three left the place, while the fourth stayed in the village. The first two are ancestors of the present inhabitants of Houay Yong, and the third is the ancestor of those living in Houay Lôm. When the Tai Vat came to settle, Tai Soi Buddhists were living in Houay Yong; they progressively returned to their region of origin, leaving only Tai Vat in the place.
>
> (2) Kong Ban's great-grandfather, Èng, fled from Èm Chau due to fighting with the Yellow Flags (Han Kheu Luang). Five families of refugees stayed for some time in Na Hit, close to Muang Van, and made rice fields there. But they had a problem with a female spirit (*phi*) whose husband had been killed by Èng. The local lord (*phania*) of Muang Van advised them to stay in the valley of Houay Lôm, then uninhabited, where they would be hidden by the surrounding dense forest. He told them that if they stayed there, they must respect and be loyal to him.

These two accounts must be seen in a broader regional context. As explained by Oliver Tappe in this volume, the area of Houaphan was under the influence of various polities from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The local polity controlling the present area of Houay Yong was the *muang* of Xieng Kho. Along with other *muang* in the north of Houaphan, it constituted a buffer zone between the areas of influence of Louang Prabang and the court of Hue, and had to pay tribute to both kingdoms during the nineteenth century (Tappe 2015). Interestingly, no references were made to these large polities in the historical accounts elicited during my fieldwork: oral history is selective in its recollection of the past.

The accounts clearly evoke the unrest incited by invading Chinese troops that led to migration. The defeat of the Tai Ping Rebellion in southern China precipitated a period of regional warfare. The defeated soldiers—the Hô, subdivided under flags like the Yellow Flags previously mentioned—plundered Sipsong Chau Tai and Houaphan from the end of the 1860s until the enforcement of French rule in the 1890s (Proschan 1998; Le Failler 2014). This turmoil triggered wars and displacements, and

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the two historical accounts above, along with many others, testify to how vividly this time is still remembered. Besides the migration of Tai Vat from Yen Chau, another element linked to that period of disruption is the presence of Tai Soi in the valley. It is possible that these Tai Soi were Lao refugees from Muang Soi, a polity in the west of Houaphan severely hit by local wars at the time (Proschan 1998, 190–199; see also Tappe 2015).

The properly historical content of these oral traditions is not the main point of interest here. They are local narratives of foundation by pioneers, showing a clear mythical-ideological dimension: mobility is a central concern in the group's self-definition. However, while the first account casts history along a genealogical grid with a story perfectly matching present socio-political relations between the villages of the valley, the second story brings to the fore the local *phi* spirits and a political figure who mediates the resettlement of the refugees. The *phania* of Muang Van acts as both a military and religious protector and as a broker for land in exchange for the refugees' political allegiance. This story does not fit James Scott's general pattern, according to which refugees tend to keep a maximum distance from the state.[2] On the contrary, this account is a moral story valuing inclusion into the local polity, reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, wherein people subject themselves to a sovereign authority in exchange for the protection of their life and their goods. Joining a political structure is not denounced here as alienating but as a way to generate security and ritual protection.

The *lak man*: Stability and Authority

Such foundation lore is not only displayed through narrative. Another central element for Tai Vat identity and sense of origin is found in the Western part of the village, at the foot of the nearest mountain. Twenty metres above the path's last houses, one finds the ritual post of the village, the *lak man*, or 'strong post'. It is a wooden post, cemented in 2010 for the purpose of reinforcement to 'make it enduring like the Lao do [with their own posts] in their pagodas'. It is surrounded by smaller posts and by an elevated wooden plank where offerings are laid during ceremonies. This whole circular structure lies under the shadow of a sacred (*saksit*) tree.

An interview with Tha Bun, the local historian previously mentioned, and the village chief (*nai ban*), reveals the values Tai Vat elders associate with the *lak man*:

> [Amphone—my research assistant] What's the *lak man* useful for?
>
> [Tha Bun] *Lak man* is a very strong post; it has to do with stability. People do not move away from the village: it's a feeling deep in the heart of the population. It is here for so many years now, and we are still here, we are confident.
>
> [Nai ban] The post is appreciated by the population for through it, they feel sure and confident about the place. If it is not strong, the people will scatter to different places. *Lak man* is something deep inside the heart of the villagers.

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> [Amphone] How about the posts?
>
> [Tha Bun] They protect the one in the middle. For example, this one [he shows the *nai ban*] is the father of the village and I am deputy-chief; then around come the village militiamen, the population.
>
> [Naai Baan] There are mass organisations (*kanchattang thoukphaksouan*) around the authorities. […]
>
> [Amphone] Why can't the *lak man* be moved to another place?
>
> [Naai Baan] If you move the *lak man*, people will not be confident any more, they will want to scatter. The *lak man* cannot be moved away. The people don't have to go away. That's why we have to find a good place to settle the *lak man*, for it must be conserved for a long time. We have to be sure. After one hundred years, the *lak man* is still in the same place.

The *lak man* possesses a power that must be respected for it maintains stability and permanence in the village.[3] The word *lak man* diverges from the more common expressions used by Tai-Lao people to describe similar ritual posts such as *lak muang* (the post of the polity) and *lak ban* (the post of the village).[4] Rather, the post is described as strong and stable (*man*). This quality is manifest in the prohibition on moving or changing the *lak man*, and equally applies to the heir of the founder of the village (the *chao sua*, or 'master of the shirt'; see Cam 2004, 233). I was told stories, based on events that happened a few years ago, that elaborate how the act of settling elsewhere may result in the death of the *chao sua*. The two elders mentioned above explained that the *lak man*, if as strong as expected, makes villagers want to stay. They stress that *lak man* is something deep inside the heart of the people. Gathering people from the inside, *lak man* protects them from external dangers like hostile people and wild animals. It acts both as a magnet and a shell.

The elders' discourse displays a commitment to stability—a Zomian heterodoxy if we believe Scott, especially since it is linked to a political hierarchy. The concentric structure of the shrine parallels the political institutions in the village, showing how conceptions of the Lao state also permeate the highlands. In a rather structuralist way, the two elders compare the relationship between the *lak man* and its surrounding posts with the relationship between, on the one hand, the village chief and, on the other hand, the forces of law and order, mass organisations and the population. The political structure projects itself onto the invisible world.

Let us resume with our visit to the village's ritual places. A small path snakes up from the *lak man* into a forest. After a two-minute walk, one comes to the *tiang seun*, a cleared area of maybe ten metres by five. Gatherings are organised here, notably after each New Year festival (*kinchiang*, corresponding to the Vietnamese New Year of *Têt*) or whenever emergencies, such as drought, endanger the village. Three small huts on cemented stilts have been erected at this site. The two elders describe them as the abodes of the spirits looking after the village. On the left side is the hut for the family of the *chao sua*, the descendant of the founding ancestor. He and his relatives are the *chao kok chao lao*, the first inhabitants of the place. In the middle is the hut

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for the state employees (*khalatsakan*), that is, the authorities of the village. After their death, these authorities retain their function. In the conversation, the *nai ban* turned over the valley, raised his arms in the direction of the village and explained that these departed spirits still look after the village and the polity. As for the hut on the right, it is the shelter of Lankham, presented by the two elders as the ancestral spirit of all Tai Vat; it was 'invited' from Vietnam by the first migrants to come from Muang Vat and settle in this new village.

In Houay Yong, every house contains a small shrine dedicated to the late parents of the household's chief; the hut on the left of the *tiang seun*, dedicated to the spirits of the founding ancestors, has a similar role for the village as a corporate unit. The deceased administrative authorities of the village occupy the central hut, a position that enables them to oversee the population. The gestures of the village chief towards the village—invoking power—reveals how state institutions cannot be dissociated from the world of spirits. The building on the right, dedicated to Lankham, links the present settlement with the inhabitants' place of origin. The foundation of a new village is a re-creation more than an absolute beginning. This logic of telescoping successive places of living through the transfer of a palladium or a spirit from a former settlement is an 'old trick' of human society. This makes the *tiang seun* a good example of heterotopia, to borrow Foucault's (1984) concept, in the sense that it superposes different spaces and different times in a ritual enclave which is at once separated from everyday life and linked to all the different places of the village. It is also, as with most heterotopias, a heterochrony, juxtaposing the living and the dead, successive generations, the time of origins and the present.

A full discussion of Tai Vat senses of stability would also require a discussion of death rites, which is beyond the scope of this article. Funeral songs performed during mourning describe the voyage of the soul through different places, eventually reaching Chieng Dong, an old *muang* in Muang Vat. There, a few kilometres from the sacred hot and cold springs where a Tai Vat king was foretold to be born,[5] the soul takes its last step on a mountain with a small lake bordered by a mysterious stone building for the spirits. It then proceeds to its final destination, heaven. A sense of stability, or even of immutability, is brought to the fore by this Tai Vat lore. The people are symbolically anchored to a place that invokes political power—even though the anticipated birth of the Tai Vat king did not in fact take place.

Let us relate these elements of ethnography with our general concern about mobility. Mobility is not valued independently in the oral history—which explains mobility as a consequence of warfare—nor in the elders' commentaries about the shrines. Nor is it remembered as trauma, and the ethnonym Tai Vat is linked to a condition of unsettledness, as though mobility was fated for that group. In contrast, valuation of stability is evident: in the centripetal character of the *lak man* which makes the people feel confident about their place; in the prohibition on descendants of the first settlers moving away; in the presence of the departed 'here' in the village; and in the passage of all Tai Vat through Chieng Dong before ascending to heaven. Mobility is thus only one half of the story.

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Intermediate Social Spaces

Before turning to present-day migrations, I would like to discuss Scott's model of highland societies as actively resisting incorporation into the state in the context of the observations above. The initial migration was motivated not by a desire to escape state structures, but by instability in Muang Vat; it ended with the voluntary inclusion into a new *muang*. We shall see further that present migrations have nothing to do with state evasion, either. The shrines of the village—ideal models of the local world and its hierarchies—interweave the semantics of kinship, precedence and present state structures. The state itself is most conspicuous in the discourses that capture the socio-geographic ontology of village elders.

The Tai Vat of Houay Yong therefore seem to be positioned closer to lowland political cultures than state-repellent societies. Scott is well aware that upland Tai societies do not fit into his dichotomy. He classifies them as 'hill peoples' and as 'hill allies' of the Lao (2009, 273), but also calls them 'the exception that proves the rule' (19) along with other highland groups with a high level of political integration. He acknowledges the 'state-making' character that 'distinguished many (but not all) of the Tai from most other Zomia people' (141). Unfortunately, he never really comes to terms with this exceptional status. He provides culturalist explanations: societies of the Tai-Lao linguistic family are usually state-making people, hence the upland Tai exception (141, 223, 341).

This unconvincing categorisation is a product of the dichotomy Scott sketches. On the one hand, there are lowland state societies, and on the other, highland 'state-repellent' societies, whose 'jellyfish' social structures are designed to resist or avoid inclusion into the state. Tai societies simply do not fit into Scott's pattern. Kopytoff's (1987) work on pre-colonial Africa, briefly referred to by Scott (2009, 72–73), is helpful in breaking away from this dichotomy. Kopytoff emphasises, as Scott does, the role of fluxes across frontiers in the processes of state building. But the model he proposes is much more dynamic than dichotomic, and hence more helpful to understanding the 'intermediate social spaces' (Condominas 2006, 264) of the Tai. Instead of crediting people who move outside the core areas of states with an ethos of resistance, Kopytoff shows that the logic of scattering has nothing to do *per se* with a rejection of the state's structures. Instead, he stresses the political creativity of buffer zones peopled by refugees, which are generative places for small-scale polities that can eventually transform into bigger states. In short, Kopytoff demonstrates how state patterns can replicate and flourish thanks to the mobility of pioneers, while Scott primarily views mobility as the key element in evading and resisting state patterns. Scott's hypothesis is all the more unlikely given the age-old links between lowlands and highlands that he underscores: objects, practices and representations related to the state have been circulating in the highlands for a great deal of time. The hypothesis that highlanders have systematically avoided integrating state influence into their social systems is highly implausible. Here, Scott has overemphasised the mechanisms of resistance so pervasive in his previous writings.

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The Story Goes On: Migrations in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

Let us resume with the thread of history. Once the French imposed their control on the region, the families in Houay Yong took up trading with their relatives in Vietnam; some came to settle with the migrants in Laos, often motivated by heavy taxation in Vietnam. The First Indochina War (1946–54) catalysed a significant new wave of Tai Vat migration to Laos. The first to come were young men escaping conscription, followed by families endangered by the conflict. The influx of refugees was intense between 1951 and 1954, and the population of Houay Yong doubled after the settlement of about thirty families. After the end of the conflict, few families went back to Yen Chao, despite an invitation by Vietnamese authorities. The refugees were welcomed by their relatives in Laos; they were provided with plots to cultivate in the communal paddy fields, and they rapidly assumed important positions in the village.

Though this wave of migration ended with the First Indochina War, the Tai Vat were soon on the road again. During and following the Second Indochina War (1955–75), the province experienced intense conscription campaigns by the Pathet Lao authorities. Soldiers were barracked in various places, especially Vientiane after the revolution of 1975. Some of these Tai soldiers became the bridgeheads for future migrants to the capital city.

In 1989, a national policy was promulgated which officially aimed to promote the development of highland areas by reducing shifting cultivation. It resulted in the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of highlanders to the plains. Much has been written about this policy, notably the forceful way in which it was implemented (High 2008; Baird et al. 2009). It seems that Houay Yong did not experience this policy as forceful, although some villagers recalled cases of imprisonment for trespassing. The policy prompted the first major migration away from Houay Yong: in 1998, ten families resettled in Nam Mo village, in what is now Xaisomboun Province. This resettlement was supported and managed by the government, which considered the region of Nam Mo under-populated and insecure at the time. A former *nai ban* of Houay Yong was part of this pioneer group.

However limited the resettlement in Nam Mo (with currently no more than twenty households from Houay Yong), this policy-induced displacement triggered a wide movement not anticipated by the state. People in Houay Yong began to think about the constraints they would face in the years to come. Some, inspired by the local pioneer ethos, embarked on migration initiatives that seemed to lead to a better future, effectively recasting the trope of 'escaping poverty' so pervasive in the regime's lexicon.

The second wave of migration began in 2000 and took the form of voluntary movement towards Thongnamy, in central Laos (Petit 2006, 2008). Compared with Houay Yong or Nam Mo, Thongnamy is presented by the Tai Vat as a 'developed' place, for it is on the plain, is supplied with water and electricity and lies alongside National Road 13, the main communication axis of Laos. About sixty families from Houay Yong live there.

The capital city Vientiane—a traditional destination for travellers and especially soldiers from Houay Yong—is the destination for a third wave of migrants. Presently, most migrants from Houay Yong in Vientiane are teenagers and young adults living and working in the capital's suburbs. Most of the young men work in ice factories, while young women tend to work in garment factories.

Discourses on the Past and on Development

This brief presentation of recent migrations shows that Tai Vat honour the folk etymology of their ethnonym—a 'half-settled' people. We come now to the way they address their recent history.

With the exception of the small-scale resettlement to Nam Mo in 1998, these movements have not been instigated or implemented by state authorities, nor have they been directed to remote zones. The very idea of settling in a faraway place to maximise 'spatial friction' and avoid being reached by state agents, educators or cooperation projects would surprise the inhabitants of Houay Yong, who have lobbied for a link to the main road and the electricity network, as well as for the first 'cultural village' title in the area. It is precisely because Nam Mo is quite remote—by comparison with Thongnamy and Vientiane—that it is now neglected as a possible destination for migrants. It appears that instead of evading the state by fleeing to remote areas, these highlanders are increasingly moving to areas which constitute a hub for such facilities as education, communications, markets, hospitals and other state institutions. This seemingly banal observation becomes interesting when juxtaposed with the fundamental idea advanced by Scott on the state evasions of yesteryear.

When questioning Tai Vat about their motivations for migration, they invariably mention how poverty and isolation in the mountains contrasts with opportunities to earn money, access services and travel. This rationale is expressed by Mè Chèt, an elderly lady living in Thongnamy:

> After long living in Houay Yong, my children told me that there was a good place to settle in Bolikhamxay province. In this place, it is easy to earn money. It is a plain, so it's easy to cultivate. So we moved to Thongnamy. When we arrived, we built a small house. Young people, like my children, go where they can earn money. Some of them send remittances to their parents for building a new house.
>
> Presently, there are many families of Tai Dam living in Thongnamy. We show solidarity, we love each other, and we don't care about our differences. We are sixty families but like one single family. Since coming here, we have also shown solidarity with the other ethnic groups. […] All the Tai Dam families are in the process of development.

Of course, her discourse is couched in language that reflects state rhetoric, but as far as the content is concerned, it is very similar to what may be heard in more casual contexts. Mè Chèt articulates community values and solidarity inside the group, as well as with other ethnic groups, which are recurrent tropes of the regime. Similarly, she links the development of households with moving into the plains and with

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inclusion into the market economy through labour. Such statements need not be analysed as a servile reproduction of state rhetoric. Rather, Mè Chèt uses a national idiom to address an imagined audience, and to stress the adherence of Tai Vat to modern and positive values.

Apart from narratives presenting migration through state rhetoric on development, Tai Vat sometimes also compare the present migration with their past. Mè Chèt continued:

> The migration from Vietnam to Houay Yong [in the 1950s] is similar to the one from Houay Yong to Thongnamy. At first, only a few people came to Houay Yong. Then, more and more relatives came. It is the same for Thongnamy: at first, there were only five families; then, their relatives progressively came. For example, if two married people came from Èm Chao to Houay Yong, they were followed afterwards by their sisters, brothers, and cousins. The same applied to people moving from Houay Yong to Thongnamy.

This reference to a cyclical, generational pattern of migrations appears also in an interview with Thongsôm, an elder from Houay Yong. He mentioned all of the difficulties people of his generation have endured, like the harsh work in the mountain fields and the obstacles to accessing education. He went on to say: 'We are already old; we have to find the best places for the next generation'. He reported that he had surveyed the villages of Nam Mo and Thongnamy, as though he was the initiator of migration. In the interview, he mixed this self-presentation as a pioneer with references to his status as guardian of the ritual traditions. After making preparations to settle in Thongnamy, he fell critically ill. Eventually, after organising a ceremony involving the sacrifice of a buffalo which included making a public commitment to remaining in Houay Yong, Thongsôm recovered.

Thongsôm's account displays a tension between the urge to move and the obligation to stay that pervades the whole of Tai Vat society. On the one hand, elders must seek out new living spaces for the new generation. On the other hand, Thongsôm explains how he was stopped by the spirits when he was about to leave. In short, elders are both required to perpetuate emigration to better places for the sake of the new generation, and compelled to remain in the place where they have been living.

Pioneers in the City

Most people express a similar view about mobility based on the elder/youth divide, but without necessarily referring to rituals or prohibitions. Young people enjoy modernity, large cities, earning money and having fun, while elders feel stressed or bored when they come to the city and yearn for their former ways of living. All the teenagers and young adults I interviewed expressed—without exception—a strong desire at least to go and see the city. This option is popular now, thanks to the introduction of mobile phones, buses and banks. Furthermore, the consolidation of a network of people working in the capital helps newcomers to find jobs. This trend has

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noticeable consequences. Of twenty households surveyed in Houay Yong, most listed one or more children or siblings who had settled (permanently or not) in Vientiane.

Here again, a univocal view of youth mobility would miss the point. Certainly young men and women say they would like to go to the city to quickly earn money—different from the annual income they can derive from seasonal harvests—and go to parties and clubs. They share with other villagers common stereotypes of how those who spend time in the city are transformed: they are more intelligent (*salat*), less naive (*ngômngai*), more attractive and more eloquent. These expectations of modernity and development (*chaleun*) are central in the representations of the city and the lowlands. The way Houay Yong residents phrased these transformations recalls comments reported by Mills ([1999] 2003) and High (2009).

However, the city is also considered a place where one has few relatives and must work hard to earn little money, and where those who do not work cannot eat. The Vientianese are sometimes represented as people who cannot be trusted and who lack respectful attitudes (*laleui*). Vientiane is a place fraught with dangers, for some city-dwellers abuse young women from the countryside. Some girls also shift from factory work to various forms of prostitution, usually outside Vientiane. Though not uncommon, people are discreet on this point, justifying its occurrence in terms of economic necessity: earning money to help a poor family. The issue of controlling young women's sexuality is not as central an issue among upland Tai as it is for the Lao or the Isan (Mills [1999] 2003). Virginity before marriage is not a main concern in this society as courtship is an approved practice for teenagers. Indeed, the adventurous life of girls who 'serve beer' in faraway places, usually in the south of the country, might be related to the pioneering ethos mentioned throughout this article. By way of contrast, horror stories circulate in the village about the fate of girls who ended up in Bangkok brothels, imprisoned in Thailand or addicted to amphetamines.

The act of migration generates tensions over kinship order. Usually, departure ought to be accepted by one's parents, despite there being cases of children simply leaving without their parents' permission. Youth working in the city are expected to help their parents in the village through remittances. This applies mainly to girls: few parents expect boys to remit money, and they laugh as they explain how young men drink and go to parties. The main point of friction occurs when ageing parents would like their son or daughter to return to marry in the village and take care of them. Most youth interviewed claimed that they would obey their parents, but many try to delay their return by proposing alternative solutions like continuing remittances or bringing their parents to live with them in the city (see my film, Petit [2014] on this topic).

Going to the city does not imply a radical break from familial hierarchies. In fact these are consolidated via travel rituals, for example, before any departure to the city, parents organise a *sou khouan* ceremony where a medium addresses the spirits of the house as well as the 'souls' of the traveller(s). The spirits and souls are asked to: protect the traveller against the uncertainties of the trip and their new living environment; provide for success in the traveller's work; and enable acceptance and

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appreciation of the traveller by others and upon their homecoming. The child becomes the subject of their parents' blessing through the tying of cotton strings around their wrists, as is common throughout Laos. Here again, we see that mobility is not disconnection. The home village remains the seat of this parental power which seeks to invoke fortune for those moving to the city.

This attachment also takes the form of nostalgia. Youth often describe their link with their home and relatives through emotion-filled statements like '*kit hot ban*' ('I miss or think about my village') and '*kit hot pho mè*' ('I miss my parents').[6] While few migrants have settled back in Houay Yong, return visits—especially during the traditional New Year (*kinchiang*)—demonstrate this attachment. Attachment is valued, and even expected, but coming back is usually seen as a failure or a source of shame.

Conclusion

Mobility and stability are central to an understanding of upland societies, notably in their relation with the state. I have tried to show that these concepts provide a grid linking together issues usually addressed separately: oral traditions; elders' memories; village shrines; present-day policies of resettlement; household strategies; kinship relations; discourses about development; moral anxieties and generational relations.

A sense of mobility pervades Houay Yong representations of destiny. It is apparent in how they discuss their ethnonym, draw on links between past and present migrations and conceive of a cycle that should bring young generations to new places under the tutelage of the elders. However, this 'pioneer ethos' also leaves room for a valuation of spatial stability and respect for locally grounded hierarchies, as evidenced in the discussion of the *lak man* and *tiang seun* shrines; references to Chieng Dong as the final stage of the soul on its way to heaven; ritual protective powers parents have over their children before departure; and migrants' nostalgic statements and visits to their home place. Considering mobility and stability together enables a perspective over the longer term and avoids 'chronocentrism' and a univocal 'worldview' of the Tai Vat. The two values are intertwined in this society, as they are elsewhere in the highlands.

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Notes

[1] Houay Yong is the home village of the Tai Vat settled in the lowland village of Thongnamy where I have carried out research since 2003 (Petit 2006, 2008). My knowledge of Houay Yong is based on my field research in Thongnamy, and on five short trips (one to three weeks) to Houay Yong and five week-long visits to the district of Yen Chau, Vietnam, during the period 2009–14.

[2] Scott (2009, 142–145) acknowledges that the displacement of highlanders sometimes led them to more hospitable polities, but this issue is much less developed in his book than the 'exit option'.

[3] People who disrespect the *lak man* risk death. The post-revolutionary period was one of contempt for ritual activity. I was told that some men who urinated on the *lak man* out of bravado subsequently died. In 2010, according to the elder in charge of the *lak man* of Na Khou (a hamlet of Houay Yong), a man died after taking meat from the shrine.

[4] Archaimbault (2014, 198) also used the term *lak man* to describe the city pillar of Louang Phrabang; his translation of man is 'solid, firm'.

[5] Thongsôm (an elder in Houay Yong) relates that long ago a woman was pregnant for twelve months—an extraordinary feat which announced that her child would be a king. The Vietnamese emperor, fearing such a rival, organised the assassination of the mother-to-be. However, Chieng Dong is considered to remain a place full of potentialities for the Tai Vat, as reported by both those living in Vietnam and in Laos.

[6] However personal such expressions might seem, they are also in line with popular songs about the homesickness of young rural migrants that are broadcast throughout the nation.

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