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Handling mountain minorities in China, Vietnam and Laos: from history to current concerns

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This paper is an overview of issues pertaining to highland minorities in the three socialist countries sharing portions of the Southeast Asian Massif, namely China, Vietnam and Laos. It presents the historical complexity of highland minority policy in these countries. The paper thus depicts prevalent state strategies that aimed, and largely still aim, to handle highland minorities in the most effective and economical way, to ensure that the nation will progress steadily forward. The six current issues of borders and transnationality, taxonomy, indigenous peoples' status, customary land tenure, tourism and environmental issues are then explored critically.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Massif; minority policy; China; Vietnam; Laos

One could argue that China, Vietnam and Laos have little in common beyond physical proximity and a multiethnic blend compounded by the worn out veneer of socialist regimes. While China and Vietnam share similar percentages of highland minority populations, Laos is of a distinct fabric with nearly half its population belonging to different ethnicities than the Lao majority. Faltering socialist regimes have, over the past three decades, gradually departed from Marxist orthodoxy and opted to open up to the market economy instead: China in 1978, Vietnam and Laos in 1986. Indeed, to post-communism scholars working on the ex-Soviet block, what is happening now in socialist Asia has little to do with true socialism. Yet, oblivious to scholarly debates, post-socialist Asia soldiers on.

The aim of this paper is to examine critically the historical complexity found in the relationships between highland minorities and the state, while highlighting the similarities and differences among these three socialist countries that share about 75% of the Southeast Asian Massif's territory. These state strategies aimed – and largely still aim – to 'handle' highland minorities in the most effective and economical way, to ensure that these nations progressed steadily forward, notwithstanding these 'little brothers' and their distinct identities, aspirations and particular needs.

The question of interest here is: How did state policies addressing the ethnic minority question adapt to demographic distinctions and changes of regimes from imperial times to recent economic renovations? Country-based studies detailing the evolution of policies towards ethnic minorities within the national borders of these three countries have been conducted by a number of scholars. Nicholas Tapp has shown that, in China, the Soviet

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model, based on Josef Stalin's 1913 considerations on the 'nation',[1] and the policies they eventually entailed, served as a template for the 1930s strategies of alliance between the Communist Party of China and minority groups whose support was essential to ensure victory over republican forces.[2] In Vietnam, the political strategy that linked the *Viet Minh*'s revolutionary regime with the highland minorities followed the Chinese model.[3] Laos, on the other hand, is comparatively under-studied, the history of the political considerations of highland groups by the revolutionary regime still waiting to be completed. A notable exception, Yves Goudineau[4] has shown that the USSR–China–Vietnam chain of ideologies triggered standardized responses to the ethnic minority question in Laos, akin to those in China and Vietnam.

Indeed, what China, Vietnam and Laos have in common regarding how the minority question has been approached is of great interest. Many authors acknowledge that the various national communist revolutions in these locales could not have been successful without strategic, war-time alliances with minority groups on the margins.[5] To attach these upland partners firmly to the cause, assurances of future political autonomy were included in early drafts of national constitutions. In this way, minorities willing to accommodate the communist projects could logically hope for future political rewards.[6]

Once communist victories were achieved, however, the new socialist states cunningly backtracked: war-time promises of autonomy for 'minority nationalities' could not reasonably be carried out without endangering the socialist agenda and the very existence of the new socialist nation. Early commitments were thus toned down, diluted or plainly forgotten. In clear contradiction to all the promises previously made, the state took the stance instead that highland margins and their populations could only be given token autonomy. Indeed, these margins needed to be ever more firmly attached to the central state and to the socialist project, against their will if necessary. Ironically, an important tool to achieve this forced marriage involved a decoy strategy, that is, the setting up of showcase, powerless autonomous territories where sizeable numbers of minorities were dwelling (one of Stalin's original precepts). In China's south-western upland borderlands, this practice became policy shortly after the communist victory of 1949. Not long after, in 1955, this came into existence in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam).

Although one core proposition of this paper is the need to depart from a strictly country-based consideration of highland groups in the socialist segment of the Southeast Asian Massif,[7] a country-based approach to state policies through time towards 'minorities' is unavoidable. Policies are country specific, their development linked to a given country's history of state development. Thus, this paper next briefly narrates the evolution in China, Vietnam and Laos of the state's position regarding minority issues, paying particular attention to the highlands. First, the situation prior to the communist takeovers is clarified, and then the main course of events under communist rule is

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[1]Stalin, 'Marxism and the National Question'.
[2]Tapp, *The Hmong of China*.
[3]McAlister, 'Mountain Minorities and the Vietminh'; Michaud, 'The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975'.
[4]Goudineau, 'Ethnicité et déterritorialisation dans la péninsule indochinoise'.
[5]Kunstadter, *South-East Asian Tribes*.
[6]McAlister, 'Mountain Minorities and the Vietminh'; Connor, *The National Question in Marxist–Leninist Theory and Strategy*; Goudineau 'Ethnicité et déterritorialisation dans la péninsule indochinoise'; Michaud 'The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975'; MacKerras, 'Ethnic Minorities in China'.
[7]As in McKinnon and Michaud, 'Montagnard Domain in the South-East Asian Massif'.

examined. The picture is completed by focusing upon the current post-socialist period, stressing six key concerns that cross state borders and are of relevance for the highlanders living in these countries today: namely, borders and transnationality, strategic taxonomy, minority and indigenous status, customary land tenure, tourism and environmental issues.

The Southeast Asian Massif

China, Vietnam and Laos share the greatest portion of what the author calls the Southeast Asian Massif,[8] the highland social space where the minority groups being studied here dwell. This area encompasses a large portion of what van Schendel has arguably named *Zomia* and equates roughly to what Scott, following van Schendel, terms eastern *Zomia*.[9] These highlands spread over a transnational domain that, most of the time, are situated above 500 metres elevation, over a surface of approximately 2.5 million square kilometres. Stretching from the temperate Yangtze River system which roughly demarcates its northern boundary, it encompasses the high ranges extending southeast from the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau, and all the monsoon high country drained by the lower Brahmaputra, the Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Mekong and Red Rivers and their tributaries.[10]

Intellectual limitations embedded in the automatic association of people and specific territory have long been pinpointed by anthropologists and other social scientists alike. The point here is not to be dogmatic about altitude separating peoples. It is instead to use this factor as one among others, but one of importance in Southeast Asia and Southwest China, while keeping in mind that, obviously, scores of highland minority people now reside in lowlands and urban areas in and around the Massif. Concurrently, each of the countries sharing the Massif have promoted at one time or the other – and many still do – a relocation policy for lowland dwellers to move into the highlands where demographic pressure on the land is below the national average. However, around booming upland cities, the countryside is still where the majority of the upland population lives and works, an area much less frequently reached by lowland migration, be it of people, technologies or ideas. As a consequence, in terms of human concentrations, highland zones remain ethnically distinct from the lowlands, yielding a cultural mosaic with contrasting colours rather than an integrated picture in harmonized shades. When observed from the necessary distance, that mosaic becomes a distinctive picture – that is, a change in scale opens doors to different intellectual considerations of the region and its inhabitants.[11] While I do not intend to expand on this point in this paper, it is very likely that particular characteristics of the Massif help account for patterns of state-making, state-maintenance and economic development that further detail the picture beyond the distinct political leaning of particular states.[12]

Before socialist rule

Many non-Han minority groups of China are certainly as ancient, if not older than the Han majority.[13] Not much is known though, about their exact identities and demographic

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[8]Michaud, *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples*; *Historical Dictionary*.
[9]van Schendel, 'Geographies of Knowing'; Scott, 'State Evasion, State Prevention'.
[10]Michaud, 'As a Social Space'.
[11]See Scott, 'State Evasion, State Prevention'.
[12]See van Schendel, 'Geographies of Knowing' for a broad discussion.
[13]Lemoine, 'L'Asie orientale'; Peters, 'Ethnicity along China's Southwestern Frontier'.

importance before the 20th century, when the first formal national censuses were conducted.[14] In effect, before that, Imperial China did not believe it needed to know much about the non-Han people dwelling on the south-western fringes of its domain – with the possible exception of Tibet. All that was considered necessary to know was what could prevent peripheral groups from causing trouble for the core population and its economic performance. Also of use, regarding the more politically formalized minorities, was how profitable trade could be conducted with these groups, or military or tributary alliances could be made when necessary.[15]

In the first half of the 20th century, with the toppling of the Imperial regime and the emergence of the Republic in 1911, the Chinese State's interest in its minorities took a clear political turn.[16] By 1920, Sun Yat Sen was concerned with the integration of the nation's frontiers into the national body.[17] While remaining moderately interested in the indigenous inhabitants of the frontier themselves, he thought it wise to acknowledge the existence of four non-Han minorities in the Republic, namely the Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans and Tatars. Together, these groups were believed to total 10 million or 2.5% of the national population. Such ethnic and demographic inaccuracy by today's standards (from what we know now, this was off the mark by several per cent) was at least in part a reflection of a political will to ignore or downplay the importance of multiethnicity in the Republic. The meagre amount of early ethnographic research on non-Han minorities sponsored by the state was both a cause for this misguided view and the consequence of a lack of official interest.

The near constant state of combat over the next 20 years in China did nothing to alleviate this official indifference. During the civil war that pitched the communists and the republicans against each other, the tactic on both warring sides became geared towards securing political and military alliances with ethnic minorities in as many strategic areas as possible. Article 14 of the 1931 Jiangsi Soviet Constitution, drafted by the communists, gave minority areas the right of complete secession from China once the Revolution was over. On the republican side, the right to self-determination was guaranteed by the *Kuomintang* to Xinjiang, Tibet and Mongolia, should the communists be defeated.[18]

During imperial times in Vietnam, until the French conquest began in the mid-19th century, little was known about the territory's highlanders. Studies of Vietnamese and Chinese archives show few traces of these marginal people except relatively vague mentions when addressing ad hoc administrative or trade problems. With few indigenous written records, what is left of the early history of highlanders in Vietnam is scarce. For incoming French observers and scholars, it was chiefly through early European testimonies that the existence of mountain tribes in the Indochina portion of the Southeast Asian Massif began to be acknowledged.[19] The process of securing the borders then put French troops, officers and administrators face to face with these highlanders, with the consequence of raising the colonists' interest in learning more about these unfamiliar 'sauvages'.

Soon after, in the mountain regions within Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, a colonial divide-and-rule policy was applied. This aimed to protect metropolitan economic interests and keep the highlands and their populations under somewhat loose but steady control. Of particular interest to the colonial administration was how to make

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[14]Olson, *An Ethnohistorical Dictionary of China*; Wiens, *China's March toward the Tropics*.
[15]Moseley, *The Consolidation of the South China Frontier*.
[16]Lary, 'A Zone of Nebulous Menace'.
[17]Cheung, 'Miao Identities'.
[18]MacKerras, 'Ethnic Minorities in China'.
[19]Michaud, '*Incidental' Ethnographers*.

circumstances favourable for the growing of poppies and the production and trade of opium. In 1891, large portions of Vietnam's highlands were placed under military administration, separate from the civilian system in the rest of the country.[20] A similar strategy was later implemented in the south when dealing with the *montagnards* in the *hauts-plateaux*. This line of action was in large part guided by the fact that the nationalist and communist factions in Indochina had started promoting their own projects among these highland populations.[21]

In Laos, prior to the beginnings of French colonization in the 1890s, local lowland monarchs paid little attention to highland minorities at the periphery of their kingdoms.[22] Then, during French rule, a modern policy of strict control of national territory within secured borders was implemented. Consequently, minorities were thus approached, accounted for, and alliances were made with a number of them. Civil disorder then raged in Laos for three decades following the Second World War. The political situation was first aggravated by France's determination to regain power over its Indochina domain after the war, until its military downfall in Vietnam and the Geneva Agreements of 1954. Civil unrest was then further compounded by the royalist struggle against the revolutionary surge of the *Pathet Lao* during the Second Indochina War (1954–75) and the active implication of the US, a time during which the development of a sound state policy on minority issues in Laos was not a practicable option. Or more pragmatically, it could be suggested that minority issues were a matter of ad hoc military alliances following the fluctuations of the frontlines and the priorities of military objectives. Both the *Pathet Lao* forces on the one side, and the Royal/Neutralist Lao Governments' forces on the other tried to draw local mountain peoples to their cause. Such strategic alliances proved crucial for occupying the highland terrain that formed most of the Lao territory. Thus, until the communist takeover of 1975, minorities in mid- and upland Laos were not subject to clear national policies but, instead, faced more immediate pressures and dangers. They could not realistically 'opt out' of the war effort, taking sides being not so much a matter of choice as a necessity to merely survive.

The core socialist period

The story of the birth of the communist notion of 'nationality' and eventually, of 'minority nationality' in the USSR has been researched by a number of authors.[23] The spread of this ideology from the USSR to friendly communist regimes has been documented for China by Diao, Hsieh, Heberer, Wu and Tapp among others, for Vietnam by McAlister, and Michaud, and for Laos by Osborn, and Goudineau.[24] Not quite as Josef Stalin had originally conceived in the early days of the Russian Revolution, the two notions of nation (*natsiya*) and nationality (*narodnost*) were reinterpreted when passed on to friendly Asian communist regimes fighting colonial and/or reactionary powers. The Chinese term *minzu*

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[20]Michaud, 'The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975'.
[21]Salemink, 'Primitive Partisans'; *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*.
[22]Evans, *A Short History of Laos*.
[23]Connor, *The National Question in Marxist–Leninist Theory and Strategy*; Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*.
[24]Diao, 'The National Minorities in China'; Hsieh, 'China's Nationalities Policy'; Heberer, *China and its National Minorities*; Wu, 'Chinese Minority Policy'; Tapp, 'Minority Nationality in China'; McAlister, 'Mountain Minorities and the Vietminh'; Michaud, 'The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975'; Osborn, 'Government and the Hill Tribes of Laos'; Goudineau, 'Ethnicité et déterritorialisation dans la péninsule indochinoise'.

thus translated as 'nationality,' while *dân tộc* in Vietnamese and *sonsaat* in Lao both translated as 'nation'. Thus, the initial distinction made by the Soviet thinkers that nationalities were lesser forms of nations, vanished in the process.

China

As mentioned above, despite promises made before the Maoist victory in China in 1949, the Communist Party wanted to steer clear of the peril of multiple secessions. It immediately promulgated a new policy towards minorities, one based on the notion of China being a multinational (that is, multiethnic) unitary state, not a group of federated republics like the model set up earlier in the USSR.[25] Yet, Autonomous Regions (AR) that heralded minorities' token rights to self-rule were set up throughout the 1950s. Five province-size entities were classified as AR (*zizhiqu*), all located on the frontiers of China, two of which were in the south-west mountainous area: the Guangxi Zhuang AR and the Xizang (Tibet) AR. Smaller ethnically labelled administrative divisions, Autonomous Prefectures (*zizhizhou*) and Autonomous Counties (*zizhixian*), further subdivided these two AR as well as parts of neighbouring provinces such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Hunan. On the ground meanwhile, collectives were being implemented in the whole country from 1953 onwards.[26]

In the early 1950s, to gain a better understanding of its poorly known non-Han minorities and to speed up their integration into the socialist nation, the PRC launched a massive ethnographic research programme with the active guidance and supervision of ethnologists from the USSR. No one at the time could agree on just how many minority groups there were precisely, and what their exact identities were. The explicit objectives of the ethnographic project were thus to list and classify the various non-Han groups living within the national borders. The political intention, however, was clearly one of classification, standardization and control. This classification project (*minzu shibie*) sponsored surveys that first focused on linguistics. These had the explicit intention of developing an understanding of non-Han languages, designing adapted writing systems (chiefly in Roman script), and ultimately training language cadres and installing them as intermediaries and mediators devoted to the Party.

In a Central Government Directive of 1951, terminology was redressed so that exonyms once considered derogatory such as *Lolo, Man* or *Yeren*, were replaced with more palatable ones such as *Yi, Yao* and *Jingpo*. Pejorative ideograms using the dog, worm or reptile radicals for names of minority peoples were purged from the Chinese writing system. In 1953, the first post-revolution national census announced that 6% of the population, that is, over 35 million people, belonged to non-Han ethnicities. This constituted clear progress towards a more realistic picture compared with the 2.5% noted in the 1920 exercise mentioned earlier. By 1959, the *shaoshu minzu* were officially classified into 51 groups occupying 64% of the national territory. This number of minority groups was pushed to 53 in 1963, before stabilizing at 55 in 1981. Since then, the authorized list of 55 *shaoshu minzu*, plus the Han, has served as the basis for all official research and publications on nationalities in the PRC.[27]

It was only in 1956 that research on the broader and more complex topic of the social history of minorities began. However, only two years later, this nascent production of

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[25]Deal, 'National Minority Policy in Southwest China'.
[26]Gjessing, 'Chinese Anthropology'; Dreyer, *China's Forty Million.*
[27]Tapp, 'In Defense of the Archaic'; Gladney, 'Representing Nationality in China'.

serious scholarship on minorities was brought to a standstill with the launch of the Great Leap Forward, a massive lull that was to stretch until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. These difficult times in recent Chinese history were less than tolerant towards cultural distinction – the crushing of the Lhasa uprising of 1959 being evidence of this. Global uniformity of all in the People's Republic became a top priority. Official nationality policies from earlier years that insisted on special treatment for minorities on the basis of their distinctiveness were put on hold. Massive Han migration from the overpopulated coastal regions and lowlands into the highlands was promoted and sustained by the national collectivization scheme. Radical changes to local economies were also pushed forward, often with disastrous results.[28] The Cultural Revolution in particular launched forceful attacks on religious expressions. The 'Four Old Things' – old thinking, old culture, old customs and old habits – were actively targeted for deletion, and assimilation as a state policy was rampant. As long as Mao Zedong was alive, it did not seem that a different approach to minority questions could even be thinkable.[29]

Vietnam

After their 1954 victory in the north, the socialist state in the (then) Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam) maintained the division between highlands and lowlands initiated by the French for a few more years by setting up Chinese-style autonomous regions in the north where colonial military administration had existed before. The concept of politically sovereign AR had initially been promised as early as the 1930s by the fighting nationalist and communist forces alike to entice non-Kinh (non-lowlander) ethnic groups to enter the struggle for independence. Here too, following victory, watered-down versions of these promises led to the creation in the north in 1955 of the Viet Bac AR and the Tay Bac AR.[30] However, as soon as the reunification war was won in 1975, the AR policy was made obsolete. Meanwhile, in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam), minorities in the Central Highlands, generically called the Montagnards by American advisers and troops, were tragically entangled in the turmoil of the Second Indochina War (1954–75). With the network of the Ho Chi Minh trails reaching the south through these high plateaus, these highlands became the stage for fierce political and military confrontations. The RVN government tried to thwart communist insurgents by forcing large numbers of peasants to relocate in strategic hamlets.[31] Later, in 1975, when the communist North prevailed, the nation became united under a socialist regime, and economic and political measures enforced in the north since the 1950s were exported to the south, including collectivization and migration from the lowlands to the highlands, thanks to the New Economic Zones scheme.[32]

In an emerging country where the collective project had to be popular, national and scientific, little room was left for the ways of the past.[33] In the communist rhetoric, highlanders in Vietnam were considered to be at the lowest stage of economic development and in dire need of assistance, while the Kinh enlightened majority was entering socialism,

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[28]Swain, 'Commoditizing Ethnicity in Southwest China'.
[29]Chi, 'The Minority of Groups of Yunnan'; Solinger, 'Minority Nationalities in China's Yunnan Province'; Chiao and Tapp, *Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups in China*; Sullivan, *Historical Dictionary of the People's Republic of China*.
[30]De Harting, 'Indépendance et dépendance'.
[31]Hickey, *Free in the Forest*; Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*.
[32]Hardy, *Red Hills*.
[33]See Nguyen, 'Mountain Regions and National Minorities'.

the highest possible point. The least 'socialist man' could do for 'traditional man' – in the words of Vietnamese ethnologists – was to help him relinquish his simplicity and reach the superior levels of lowland civilization as quickly as possible.[34] Vigorous plans for sedentarization, collectivization and industrialization were implemented against an ideological background prioritizing the undividable unity of country and nation with active promotion of Kinh culture.[35] Concurrently, following the Chinese example yet again, ethnological studies of the national minorities gravitated almost obsessively around the issue of classification.[36] The first exhaustive list of minorities in the DRVN had been proposed in 1959 which included 64 ethnic groups. A second one followed in 1973, with 59. By 1979, under the leadership of *Tày* state ethnologist Be Viet Dang, the official total of 54 nationalities (*dân tộc* – including the Kinh nationality) was finally established. Much as is the case in China and for comparable reasons, this quasi-sacred figure has not changed since.[37]

Having made national unity a priority at the time of reunification, post-1975 Socialist Vietnam needed a specific strategy to overcome the problem of integrating the minorities into the Vietnamese nation. This strategy came to be called 'selective cultural preservation', as explained in 1978 by Vietnamese ethnologist Nong Quoc Chan in his article 'Selective Preservation of Ethnic Minorities Cultural Tradition'. As stated in the Constitution, national minorities (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) have a right to maintain their traditions, but only as long as they do not pose a threat to the socialist progress of the country.[38] As a consequence, 'counter-productive' and 'superstitious' practices such as shamanism (branded sorcery), animal sacrifice, lavish funerals, bride-price or even swiddening, were deemed 'backwards' and targeted for 'eradication'. Politically reprehensible 'bad habits' such as crossing borders unchecked or owning prohibited firearms, were also banned. On the contrary, other cultural activities, chiefly benign and aesthetic ones, were encouraged, including wearing colourful attire, singing, dancing and playing traditional music. The selective cultural preservation policy in Vietnam has never been revoked, and quite conveniently today, it has allowed the survival of precisely what is needed to ensure that minorities will still be attractive to the growing national and international tourist crowds.

Laos

With the war over in Laos in 1975, and the communists in power, promises of political autonomy that were made to certain minority allies in the heat of the action were drastically toned down.[39] Turning to the setting up of semi-autonomous regions for minorities, the then secretary general of the Communist Party of Laos, Kaysone Phomvihane, preferred espousing a different programme. He made it clear early on in his exceptionally long tenure, from 1955 to his death in 1992, that the indissoluble unity of the Laotian people was the foremost national priority. Thus, the AR strategy followed by China and Vietnam could never take off in Laos due in large part to the highly diversified ethnic fabric in the country. Local customs of ethnically distinct minorities could still be practised, but any thought of ethno-nationalism or regional autonomy were deemed

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[34]See Viet, 'National Minorities and National Policy in the DRV'.
[35]Kahin, 'Minorities in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam'.
[36]Evans, 'Vietnamese Communist Anthropology'; Koh, 'Perception and Portrayal of Minorities'.
[37]Khong, *Population and Ethno-Demography in Vietnam*; Dang *et al.*, *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*.
[38]Anonymous, *Constitutions of Vietnam 1946–1959–1980–1992*.
[39]Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*.

undesirable. The Lao–Tai identity was actively promoted as the national cultural norm, and presented as the cement that would bond together the multiple ethnicities in communist Laos. More strongly than in any other of its brother socialist states, Laos enforced the usage of Lao as the national language and made next to no effort to devise scripts for its non-literate, non-Lao minorities.[40]

Under the influence of Vietnamese ethnologists called in for scientific guidance, priority was given here again to the establishment of a definitive classification of ethnic groups.[41] The first informal classification made by the new regime adopted the figure of 68 'ethnicities' (*sonphao*). The three-tiered division of the population according to the altitude of their usual dwellings (*Lao Loum*, *Lao Theung*, *Lao Soung*) also dates from this period. A somewhat artificial consensus was eventually reached in 1992 around the figure of 47 official ethnicities in Laos, in time for the 1995 census in which these *sonphao* were used. Predictably, the state then formally associated architectural traditions, costumes, rituals and beliefs to each minority group, so that it could make public the high regard in which the Lao authorities held its minority cultures.[42]

A dominant feature of the Lao government's policy towards its highland minorities has been the focus on their resettlement via what has been called the relocation policy.[43] Back in the 1960s, the Royal and Neutralist Lao governments had initiated an early form of relocation policy in an official effort to enhance the living conditions of the non-Lao groups. That decision could barely hide a political strategy that aimed, in reality, at pulling the rug from under the communist insurgents' feet by emptying rebel regions of their civilian populations. At the same time and until 1975, during years of war and civil unrest, the official communist revolutionary strategy was to bring economic development to the highlands. This was undertaken by providing uplanders who were receptive to the revolutionary project with goods essential for their survival, for their maintenance in the highlands, and for their active support of insurgent actions. Concurrently, however, in zones seized by communist forces prior to 1975, minorities who had supported the *Pathet Lao* were often rewarded with pieces of land located in the lowlands, thus initiating a *de facto* relocation movement.[44]

The victorious communists in Laos amplified this movement after 1975 and brought many isolated populations closer to the country's road infrastructure, particularly in areas prone to persistent armed resistance to the regime.[45] Further complicating the picture, during the period 1977–85, some Tai–Lao groups from the mountain slopes – officially *Lao Theung* domain – who had fled their homes during the war, returned and demanded that their former land – that had often been allocated since to deserving relocated highlanders – be given back to them. The state frequently answered their demands favourably, setting in motion yet again further population movements.[46]

China, Vietnam and Laos have also implemented major land or agricultural reforms aiming to curtail or terminate the privileges of the landlord class and at collectivizing agriculture and produce ownership. This process lasted from 1949 to 1978 in China, from 1954 in the north of Vietnam and 1975 in the south until 1986, and from 1975 to 1986 for

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[40]Batson, 'After the Revolution'.
[41]Evans, 'Apprentice Ethnographers'.
[42]Goudineau, *Ethnicité et déterritorialisation*.
[43]Evrard and Goudineau, 'Planned Resettlement'.
[44]Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*.
[45]Lee, 'National Minority Policies and the Hmong'; 'Ethnic Minorities and National-Building in Laos'; Évrard and Goudineau, 'Planned Resettlement'.
[46]Mayouri, 'Tribal Politics in Laos'; Ovesen, 'All Lao?'; Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*.

Laos. In most cases, and prominently in China and Vietnam, land was appropriated by the socialist state, large landlords were dispossessed, and all former peasants were turned into rural workers in agricultural, labour or industrial collectives. Such reforms, however, were most effectively implemented in populated lowlands. On the periphery, its intensity faltered.

In the 'post-socialist' era

Between 1978 and 1986, rulers in China, Vietnam and Laos initiated a course of action unheard of in the evolution of communist countries by opening up to the market economy, while keeping a socialist regime firmly in charge of the state. Does this novel course fit the generally accepted labels of 'post-socialism' or 'post-communism' defined largely in relation to the ex-Soviet block and Eastern Europe? Should one instead address it as 'late-socialism'? Or something else again? The debates are still raging, but one thing is already clear: this testing combination has had a major impact on every sector of social life in these three countries – including the highlands.

With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the advent of Deng Xiaoping, a certain liberalism towards cultural diversity could flourish again in China. The Four Modernizations were implemented in 1978, followed by the Open Door policy one year later. The rights for minority nationalities to express and maintain their culture were recognized, or re-stated, in official texts such as the 1982 Constitution (Art. 3, 36, 112–20), including the right of self-government in AR and Prefectures – albeit with all minority cadres having to be vetted by the Party. In the 1980s, a revival of interest in minorities occurred through the activities of the Central Institute of National Minorities, founded years earlier but silenced for two decades. Also, a Center for Nationalities Research was established in 1977 at the Academy of Social Sciences. Politically speaking, a number of privileges in the form of positive discrimination were granted to the *shaoshu minzu*, such as the exemption from laws prohibiting sumptuary expenditures (at funerals for instance), preferential treatment for admission to universities, and the exemption from the national rule of one child per family.

Today, in a generally more tolerant political atmosphere, although the grip of the party is still firm, members of the *shaoshu minzu* can often attend primary school in their home region and listen to radio broadcasts in their own languages, albeit with strict surveillance, and sometimes active intervention regarding the information they receive in these ways.[47] Primary education may be available with local cultural flavours, but a pan-China curriculum is still implemented. Whoever wishes to pursue studies to the next level is made well aware that higher education in China today, as well as career success, requires mastering Mandarin and gaining an intimate understanding of Han Chinese society. Such necessities act as powerful incentives for cultural integration of the younger generations into Han society. Indeed, official recognition only partly masks a national policy of slow but steady cultural integration.[48]

In more ways than one, much the same can be said about Vietnam. The Economic Renovation (*Đổi Mới*) that took place following the decisions of the 6th Congress of the Communist Party in 1986 has contributed to somewhat reducing the intensity of state

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[47]Litzinger, *Other Chinas*; Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*; Woodside, 'The Centre and the Borderlands'.
[48]Gladney, 'Ethnic Identity in China'; Henders, *Democratization and Identity*.

authoritarianism throughout the country, including in the highlands. A generally more moderate attitude regarding trade, religion, education and cultural expression has, however, failed to dissolve completely the state's worries regarding highland security issues such as Christian agitation in the Central Highlands, allegedly encouraged by outside agents. Preserving distinct cultural identities still comes low on the national agenda. The policy of selective cultural preservation among the national minorities is still implemented, in which the state decides unilaterally which aspects of a culture are sufficiently valuable – and politically acceptable – to be retained, and which ones should be actively discouraged. In Laos in the meantime, after the launch of the New Economic Mechanisms liberalizing the economy in 1986, the relocation policy initiated earlier during the war gained momentum and, along with a general agenda of national progress and economic modernization, still forms the core of the state's policy towards the highland non-Lao population.[49]

Current concerns across borders

Numerous publications in the fields of politics and development studies in particular, have addressed an array of current concerns for these countries, such as issues relating to education, health, economic development, minority policy and more. Yet, a different selection based on recent developments in minority studies in the Southeast Asian Massif is proposed here. These keep in mind the viewpoints of the subjects themselves on their own predicament in the rapid modernization process. While emphasizing a concern for trans-border issues and a focus on socialist regimes in transition, six key matters are examined that the author considers important, neglected or addressed in ways that pay too modest attention to local factors and agency. These are: borders and transnationality, strategic taxonomy, minority and indigenous status, customary land tenure, tourism, and environmental concerns. These are briefly analysed, the point being not to attempt an exhaustive coverage but instead, to bring to the stage the chief concerns some social scientists are currently engaging with, regarding how and why national and global influences are impacting on highland groups in the region, including prospective thoughts on how these issues may evolve in the near future.

Borders and transnationality

The advent of modern borders in peninsula Southeast Asia during the 19th century, in connection with European colonization, had a dramatic impact on highland populations. In south-west China and mainland Southeast Asia, modern borders essentially confirmed the dominance of historically established national majorities – in this case, the Han, the Kinh and the Lao – and created national political entities centred on the nation. In the process of defining national territories with bureaucratic precision, these borders cut through a number of ancient feudal states and cultural areas.

In this way, modern borders slice through ethnic groups and aggregate a number of peripheral ethnicities to these core nations, thus relegating these often weakened groups to the role of 'national minorities'. Previously confined by regional kingdoms and empires to act as buffer zones between powerful neighbours, modern borders have turned margins into internal peripheries to be controlled, secured, colonized and exploited. Their

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[49]Kossikov, 'Nationalities Policy in Modern Laos'; Évrard and Goudineau, 'Planned Resettlement'; Formoso, 'Les montagnards et l'État en Asie du Sud-Est continentale'.

populations had to be submitted and normalized along national lines through integration or assimilation.[50]

Casting permanent borders has thus been a fundamental factor in fragmenting and segregating highland ethnic groups between China, Vietnam and Laos and turning them into 'minorities'. Some groups have been totally enclosed within one country and have had to come to terms with the majority's definition of the national identity. More often than not, ethnic groups have instead been split between adjacent countries.

The adaptation of minorities to this complex political situation varies from one group to the next, depending on factors such as cultural resilience, economic activities,[51] and political organization, in addition to location, demographics, languages, religion, history and cultural proximity to lowland majorities.[52] A key distinction can be made here, however. On the one hand, groups with a flexible lineage-based, non-territorial social organization have been able to cope with geographical distance and separation, such as the Hmong, Yao, Hani, Lisu or Lolo, all groups for whom national borders have a less fundamental impact. On the other hand are deeply territorial groups for whom the land they inhabit is part of their core cultural identity, such as most Austronesian and Tai speakers. For the latter, a division or the plain political disappearance of their customary domain has been, and still is, traumatic.[53]

Strategic taxonomy

From official numbers of 56 in China, 54 in Vietnam, and 49 in Laos, if the array of local names and language variations within each group is taken into account, the figure of possible distinct ethnic groups in these three countries' highlands can rocket to over one thousand.[54] Such is the linguistic and cultural variety in these mountains that combined with the incompleteness of ethnological and linguistic knowledge about them, no authoritative figure can be reached regarding how many distinct groups there are – that is, if the project of a definitive account is itself to be considered a realistic one, which in all likelihood it is not. As we have seen above when reviewing the process of ethnic classification in socialist China, Vietnam and Laos, official national listings have answered less to science than to political strategy: security, control and taxation.[55] These listings also entail certain privileges for the subjects, worth vying for, and virtually all the sizeable minority groups of China and Vietnam include factions willing to part with their official ethnic label and become a 'new' official 'national minority' for the right rewards. In China, for instance, the official Miao group actually consists of four linguistically distinct subgroups, of which the most numerous is the Hmong;[56] likewise, the Zhuang group consists of those with mutually unintelligible northern and southern dialects.[57] Indeed, many more examples could be listed.[58]

The problem here lies with the fact that, across time, countries and political regimes, unanimity has never been reached as to which ethnonyms should be assigned to most

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[50]Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

[51]Schoenberger and Turner, 'Negotiating Remote Borderland Access'.

[52]McKinnon, *Convergence or Divergence*?

[53]McKinnon and Michaud, 'Montagnard Domain in the South-East Asian Massif'.

[54]Lebar *et al.*, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*; Michaud, *Historical Dictionary*.

[55]Keyes, 'The Peoples of Asia'.

[56]Schein, *Minority Rules*.

[57]Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang*.

[58]See Barnes and Kingsbury, *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*; Harrell, *Cultural Encounters*.

highland groups, in particular those found in more than one country.[59] The truth of the matter is that most names used officially are exonyms, names groups are given by their neighbours, regardless of what they themselves might prefer to be called. Studies have shown that exonyms are often terms of marginalization and, as such, they tell us more about the preconceptions and political intentions of the group(s) assigning names, rather than anything useful about the peoples being named. Not surprisingly, such names are often misleading.[60] Even if a certain proportion of exonyms can be considered appropriate, some are outright derogatory or offensive, others purely strategic. Other exonyms are simply faulty, too broad or applied to the wrong people.[61]

Minority and indigenous status

All official ethnic groups of the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif are explicitly listed as minorities. However, some comparative demographics can help challenge this political minimization. For instance, nine 'minorities' of China are each more numerous than the entire population of Laos. One alone, the Zhuang with 16 million (in 2000), roughly matches the combined population of Laos and Cambodia. With Asia's sheer demography, this kind of comparative arithmetic can also be played on a larger scale: the Hui are roughly as numerous as the Greek, the Yi match the population of Switzerland, and the Miao and Tujia together represent four times the population of Norway. The concept of ethnic minority thus needs to be approached in a critical light, becoming not so much a demographic, positive reality, but a construct serving political, economic and strategic purposes. In the Massif, most of these purposes concur to minimize the importance of minorities and to emphasize the cultural and historical prevalence of each of the national majorities over these minorities.

Although widely used in the literature when referring to populations in the Southeast Asian Massif, the notion of indigenous peoples is not wholly appropriate to discuss their situation, as many highland groups are not actually indigenous to the region where they dwell today. Indeed, a large number are relatively recent migrants to the land where they are currently settled. Nevertheless, applying the notion of indigenous peoples to the Massif's populations can offer useful tools for conducting political analyses. For lack of a better or clearer term, it serves to highlight the uneven distribution of land and resources. It also emphasizes the discrepancies in the sharing of political power within the borders of a sovereign state, between dominant lowland majorities and subjugated highland minorities. This latter point can explain why no organizations from China, Vietnam or Laos are found on the list of members of the UN Forum on the World's Indigenous People. This absence points to a reluctance by heavily centralized states to label their minorities in this way. Everyone in the socialist state, it is stated, is equal and no special rights or recognition can be given to a particular subgroup. The setting up of AR, prefectures and counties in China and in socialist Vietnam between 1955 and 1976 was said by the governments to answer best all the needs of 'minority nationalities'. By the same token, this position cut short potential surges of unwarranted ethnonationalist demands.

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[59]Gros, 'The Politics of Names'.
[60]Proschan, *We Are all Kmhmu*.
[61]Lebar, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*; Michaud, *Historical Dictionary*.

Customary land tenure

Land tenure in the socialist highlands of the Southeast Asian Massif has followed various models depending on place and time. First, the pre-feudal Austronesian and some among the Mon-Khmer groups, possibly the oldest inhabitants of the Peninsula's highlands, have established a long, collective and primordial link to the land that has translated into important rituals addressing the spirits of the soil and specific property rights. By contrast, for mobile societies such as other Mon-Khmer groups, all Miao-Yao speakers and many within the Tibeto-Burman family, land itself was not strictly speaking subject to ownership. There were instead rights for growers to use the land that they and their family had cleared, while earning the privilege to dispose privately of its produce. Consequently, in these societies, the management of land rights was collective within one lineage or household, and religious ties with the soil were less specific than for the more ancient groups. When and where feudal systems came to prosper, however, such as among most Tai-Kadai speakers and some among the Tibeto-Burman language family in southern China, land tenure became a crucial economic and political element of power, with the soil belonging to an elite that allowed landless peasants to farm it for rent, the exact form of which varied considerably through space and time.

With the establishment of European colonial powers in Vietnam and Laos and the advent of the republic in China, feudal privileges were severely curtailed, and private ownership of the land following the capitalist mode was promoted until it reached – with some appreciable difficulty – highland customary land tenure systems. This novelty caused a syncretic reaction by which a local community would still abide by the ancient rules (communal, feudal or other) but would deal with the colonial state following the new ones.[62] When socialism and the subsequent collectivization of all land took place in the second half of the 20th century in China, Vietnam and Laos, large and most small landowners were dispossessed and the land appropriated by the People – that is, the state. Today, in these three countries, land is still nominally owned by the socialist state, but over the last 25 years or so liberalization and decollectivization have allowed for local communities to take back, if not individual ownership, at least local responsibility for the management of communal land.[63]

Tourism

The highland societies of the Mainland Southeast Asian Massif offer so much cultural originality that they have become prized targets for the national and international industry of ethnic tourism. This is a relatively new economic lifeline that may prove crucial to the preservation of their distinct identities. This is especially so in the face of persistent pressures towards national cultural integration and the standardizing imperatives of the market economy.

In China, numerous highland destinations harbouring exotic minority cultures in colourful attire with original architectural heritages have been actively promoted over the last two decades as highly desirable national destinations for the fast-growing Chinese middle class for which leisure-oriented consumption becomes both feasible and desirable.[64] The Chinese state has designed a highland development strategy tapping a

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[62]Mellac, 'Des forêts sans partage'.
[63]Sturgeon, *Border Landscapes*.
[64]Oakes, *Tourism and Modernity in China;* Lew *et al., Tourism in China.*

demand among the Han majority for 'authentic' highland sites, that is to say, the surviving locales of ancient – genuine or alleged – Han or pre-Han societies. Following this strategy, in the Han psyche the south-west highlands have become the recipient of pockets of preserved Chinese antiquity, standing in sharp contrast with, and protected from, the furious modernization of lowland and coastal China. The town of Lijiang, situated in north-western Yunnan, is exemplary in this regard.[65] In 1986, the old town centre was placed on the list of National Treasures by Beijing to acknowledge the historical, artistic and cultural value of this maze of canals and wooden shop houses reminiscent of what was perceived as a vanishing traditional China. The beginnings were relatively slow, but a tourist boom was triggered by Lijiang's recognition in 1997 as a World Heritage site by UNESCO. This head town of the Naxi Autonomous County now offers hordes of national tourists a chance to see enshrined ancient architecture, exotic Naxi minorities in their natural setting, stunning landscape and an environment relatively sheltered from industrial degradation rampant elsewhere in China.

Similarly in Vietnam, where an emerging middle class is also the chief cause of a sudden increase in tourist demand, the ancient hill station of Sa Pa, in a predominantly Hmong and Yao district, has developed since 1993 into a major tourist destination for national as well as international tourism.[66] Much the same can be said of the other important Vietnamese hill station, Dalat, in the Central Highlands.[67] Recently, Laos, which badly needed new ways of bringing in hard currencies, has opened the door of its highlands to eco-tourism and trekking. Formerly remote and barely accessible provinces such as Luangnamtha and Phongsaly are now on the tourist circuit and actively sought after by an eager crowd of young backpackers excited by popular guidebooks and tales of adventures off the beaten track.[68]

In all cases in the socialist segments of the Massif where highland tourist demand has exploded thanks to the attractive exoticism of colourful highland minorities, the economic and political reins of this industry are held by outsiders, mostly representatives of the lowland majorities or historically dominant midland groups. These groups are better acquainted with the complexities of this volatile industry, and they benefit from extensive networks developed in the lowlands, where the bulk of national tourists come from, and where the most powerful economic actors of the tourist scene are based. For the highland minorities, economic benefits are nevertheless real in terms of accelerated local economic development, the completion of transport infrastructure, increased trade opportunities and a general raise in employment opportunities. The costs for these minority hosts, as many observers have also showed, have to be calculated in terms of cultural dilution to fit the formats of tourist demand, an invasion of exogenous economic actors, major disruptions to the local tranquillity, stress on local resources, multiple causes of damage to the environment, and a disturbing influence on local youth.[69]

National minority 'cultural days' are also part of this tourist rumble. Such politically motivated events promoted by the state typically involve tidy choreographed proceedings held in the capital cities and main towns under the gaze of the Party elite assembled for the occasion, while in the uplands, rural local authorities set up singing and dancing contests in traditional attire. These days aim to show publicly – to the world – that protecting and

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[65]McKhann, 'Tourisme de masse et identité'.
[66]Michaud and Turner, 'Contending Visions of a Hill-Station in Vietnam'.
[67]Jennings, 'From Indochine to Indochic'.
[68]Lachapelle, 'Tourisme et changement social'.
[69]Xu, 'Developing China'; Lew *et al.*, *Tourism in China*; Walsh and Swain, 'Creating Modernity by Touring Paradise'.

promoting multiculturalism is a definite socialist priority.[70] Such days have been severely criticized by outside observers as fabricated operations promoting only the benign aesthetic elements of minority cultures. Any more contentious issues in the fields of economics, politics or cultural resistance are carefully kept out of the spotlight. Such national minority cultural days, which take many formats and are held at different times of the year, depending on the national, provincial and local agendas, have also become important tourist attractions, and probably constitute for most tourists, foreign and national alike, the only glimpse they will ever have into highland minority life.

In political terms, the state – as the main director of economic development within the national borders – sees tourist promotion as its prerogative. Its role is to present the promotional image it considers fit for the tourist market to the outside world. The state insists on remaining the sole decision-maker for the elaboration of the most likely successful marketing strategies in a highly competitive regional market for this particular kind of tourist product. Most of the time, the end result is the creation and active promotion, locally and abroad, of a sketchy, distorted imagery of sanitized, exoticized, ever smiling highland minorities encapsulated in timeless traditions. Often, such depictions also include the eroticization of highland women by lowland men, exemplified by the Mosuo's 'Free Women' of Lugu Lake in north-western Yunnan,[71] or the Yao's 'Love Market' in northern Vietnam.[72]

Environmental concerns

Over the past 20 years, despite their numbers being extremely small compared with the national majorities – with the notable exception of Laos – highlanders in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif have been persistently blamed by their respective governments for most, if not all, deforestation, land erosion and chemical poisoning of land and waterways that affect virtually every watershed. Highlanders' agricultural behaviour, especially swiddening, is publicly decried by state officials everywhere as highly detrimental to the environment.[73] To discourage swiddening, isolated populations are relocated along national road networks, and crop substitution programmes are implemented to enforce sedentarization and commercial agriculture.[74] In several areas in the Massif nowadays, increased demography, decreased availability of forested land and the spreading of sedentarized cash cropping with the concomitant use of chemicals all contribute to reducing the duration of fallows to a level where natural regeneration becomes severely impaired.

Here again, national settings impose conflicting policies. In China, owing to the country's sheer scale of population movements, highland minorities are probably the least systematically accused by the state of having a harmful impact on the environment.[75] In Vietnam, in contrast, the most hotly debated issues regarding the highlands are now linked to environmental protection. The highlanders of Vietnam are systematically held responsible by their government for deforestation while, in fact, in the Central Highlands in particular, the massive in-migration of Kinh from the plains, officially launched under the New Economic Zones scheme in the late 1970s, put immense additional pressure on the

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[70]Mueggler, 'Dancing Fools'.
[71]Walsh and Swain, 'Creating Modernity by Touring Paradise'.
[72]Michaud and Turner, 'Contending Visions of a Hill-station in Vietnam'.
[73]Hill, '"Primitives" to "Peasants"?'; Forsyth and Walker, *Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers*.
[74]Colchester and Erni, *From Principles to Practice*.
[75]Xu, 'Minority Rights and National Development'.

natural resources of the ecosystem.[76] Additionally, in the Central Highlands, economic migration from lowlands to highlands unfolding at the end of the 1980s thanks to *Đổi Mới* was encouraged by crop substitution schemes and extensive plantations such as coffee, tea and rubber aimed at installing ever more lowland farmers to compete on the world market. This policy persists today, further compounded by the in-migration of other minority peoples from the north. This excessive stress on resources has caused social tensions, in turn triggering severe social unrest as well as a deterioration of the environment, most dramatically visible in rapid deforestation, the lowering of ground-water tables, and the increasing severity of annual flooding in the coastal lowlands. In search of a sustainable solution, Vietnamese scholars are now conducting research on issues such as customary law in relation to natural resource management, on indigenous knowledge and indigenous strategies for improved fallow management, and on community-based forest management institutions.

In Laos, thanks inadvertently to the growing impact of an international environmentalist lobby, moving highlanders around can be officially legitimized by arguing that forest and watershed protection must be supported by putting an end to the widespread and allegedly unsustainable practices of both pioneering and rotational swiddening.[77] Scores of highland populations in upland Laos have thus been moved out of the forested hills and brought down to new 'focal zones' set up as development centres. By the same token, this emphasises the two themes that dominate the history of policies directed towards ethnic minorities in Laos since 1975: economic modernization and the establishment of a Lao nation-state.[78] It has been estimated that, by the year 2000, as many as one million peasants in Laos had been relocated, about one-fifth of the total population.[79] Much as in Vietnam and China, local protests against this type of policy are quickly gagged, and news of them still rarely reach the outside world.[80]

Prospects for the near future

In 2009, highlanders in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif still face governments that lack reliable information about their cultural distinctiveness. But more importantly, these governments often lack the interest to learn more about them, with fast-paced post-socialist economic agendas pressing ahead. Instead, vigorous policies of cultural integration and economic standardization are implemented. Education, in principle a tool for emancipation, is geared towards Sinization, Lao-ization or Vietnamization of all within the national borders.[81] Only perhaps in south-western China, where substantial demographic weight is reached by certain groups, can forms of cultural resistance be successful – Tibet currently being the most visible case.

The region's state programmes are now attuned to economic growth and cultural 'progress'. The dominant rhetoric, after decades of applied social evolutionism inherited from strict Marxist ideology, has been swapped for the language of growth and

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[76]Rambo *et al.*, *Challenges of Highland Development in Vietnam*; De Koninck, *Deforestation in Viet Nam*.
[77]Ovesen, 'All Lao?'; Ireson and Ireson, 'Ethnicity and Development in Laos'.
[78]Daviau *et al.*, 'Resettlement in Laos'.
[79]Goudineau, *Resettlement and Social Characteristics of New Villages*; Évrard and Goudineau, 'Planned Resettlement'.
[80]See for instance Anon., 'Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands'.
[81]Potter, 'Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives on the Periphery'; Goudineau, 'Ethnicité et déterritorialisation dans la péninsule indochinoise'.

development. With countless agencies from the affluent world knocking on the door to offer their services – and the loans in hard currency that will help pay for these – the technology of the international development industry is being relentlessly applied to minority health, education and customary agricultural practices. While the general indicators of health and education do show a clear improvement in the highlands, it must be remembered that all these initiatives play directly into the local governments' strategy of integrating minorities into the nation. In the process, cultural dimensions are paid only subsidiary attention, an array of other issues being judged incomparably more urgent.[82]

China clearly has a strong central policy of controlling and integrating its south-western minority nationalities.[83] The region is politically sensitive because it touches several international borders, is rich in natural resources important to national development, provides a substantial portion of the country's diet through intensive agriculture, and is a land of migration for the surplus lowland population.[84] Han immigration to the south-west and Tibet are symptoms of a political desire eventually to outnumber locals and take final political, economic and cultural control over these margins.[85] Whatever organized resistance to this invasion is brewing locally, little news of it is allowed to filter out.

Vietnam has officially made its peace with its minority nationalities through their final legal recognition in the late 1970s. But in fact, the Vietnamese government still considers that dangerously high levels of political opposition are simmering in the Central Highlands and elsewhere, supported by US-based 'right wing' diasporas.[86] Christian missionary activism is a bone of contention, chiefly in the south, but increasingly in the northern highlands too. Education is seen as a tool for the State to preserve selected benign features of local highland cultures and emphasize the positive impacts of the state on minority culture preservation.[87]

In Laos, as we have seen, a vigorous relocation programme is gradually forcing scores of highland villagers into larger groupings within the Lao state's gaze. Also, a deeply rooted mistrust between old royalist factions among certain highland groups and the socialist state ensured that armed struggles endured long after the revolution was officially over in 1975.[88] Clearly, however, with nearly half its population belonging to one or another of many non-Lao ethnicities, Laos cannot afford to wage an all-out cultural war on its minorities. A degree of negotiation has to prevail.[89]

However, the future is not all bleak. Focusing on the six current concerns discussed above, there are encouraging signs of constructive changes. It is true that the transnationality of highland groups has been grossly neglected by both governments and development planners in the Massif. Typically in the past, and largely still the case in the present, development policies and programmes are country-based and only applied to nationals. The variety of such policies between neighbours in the Massif has been the cause for drastically divergent and poorly coordinated policies applied to any given group

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[82]Duncan, *Civilizing the Margins*.
[83]Baranovitch, 'Between Alterity and Identity'; Harrell, 'Ways of Being Ethnic'; MacKerras, 'China's Minority Cultures at the Turn of the Century'; Unger, 'Not Quite Han'.
[84]Blum, 'Margins and Centers'; Wilkerson, 'Disquiet on the Southwestern Front'.
[85]Harrell, 'The Anthropology of Reform and the Reform of Anthropology'; MacKerras, 'Ethnic Minorities in China'.
[86]Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*.
[87]McElwee, 'Becoming Socialist or Becoming Kinh?'
[88]Pholsena, 'Nation/Representation'; *Post-war Laos*.
[89]Goudineau, *Cultures minoritaires du Laos*.

straddling international borders. More comprehensive consideration of transnational circumstances among highland groups has been urgently needed and recent efforts towards opening up such policies are making progress.[90] Such is the case with the setting up, in the 1990s, of the cluster of Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Development Programme initiatives funded by the Asian Development Bank, a portion of which deals with social change among trans-border groups. International research efforts on a transnational approach to specific groups are also unfolding, such as for the Karen, Hani and the Yao.[91]

Turning to official minority nationality categories, in China several groups number eight million or more, while others total a few thousand individuals only. There, as in Vietnam and Laos, sub-groups could be meaningfully acknowledged, subdivided, and labelled with different, more suitable ethnonyms to reflect reality better and quieten old rancour against the state without taxing the state's resources unduly.[92] Internal discussions along these line are now occurring among national ethnologists, supported by a number of outside ones.[93] The next step will be to convince policy-makers of the relevance of such a change which, in all three countries, involves adjustments to official prose in documents all the way to the national constitutions.

Having long refused to acknowledge the very possibility of having peoples labelled 'indigenous' within their national borders, in September 2007 these three countries finally joined the signatories of the new UN Universal Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[94] This is an encouraging sign, one that suggests that perhaps socialist rhetoric might be more open than ever to official recognition of political rights for minorities.

Regarding land tenure, scrutiny of local practices shows – especially when state officials are looking the other way – that old customary land rights still effectively pervade the management of the soil by villagers and agriculturalists today. Kinship, for instance, as well as customary inheritance rules, debt-settlement practices or simply claiming an ancient right on a given plot, all play a role in decision-making processes at the local level. Thus, policies and development programmes impacting of land ownership and use in the region, if they are to hope to be successful for more than a few years, might soon be able to factor in these customary practices.[95]

The new gold rush in the Massif, tourism brings to the world's attention these exotic minority cultures much sought after by cultural and adventure tourism wholesalers.[96] Yet it is clear that tourism development could play a much more beneficial role for highland minority groups. There is hardly a travel agency in the West today that does not have on display one or several brochures advertising the smile of a colourful highland Asian minority man, woman or child. Even national tourists increasingly crave to see their 'little brothers', with fantasies nurtured by the dominant cultures regarding who these people are and how they behave, rather than for who they really are.[97] Nevertheless, this increased visibility does contribute to curbing the state's enthusiasm for processing its minorities into the national mould as ruthlessly as if there were no witnesses to this project. Beyond participation in the management of tourist operations directly, the active involvement of highlanders in the process of tourism marketing could go a long way towards avoiding

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[90]Michaud, *Historical Dictionary*, 'Introduction'.
[91]Tapp, 'A New Stage in Tai Regional Studies'.
[92]Proschan, 'We Are all Kmhmu, Just the Same'.
[93]Safran, *Nationalism and Ethnoregional Identities in China*.
[94]UN, 'United Nations Adopts Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples'.
[95]Sikor, 'The Politics of Rural Land Registration in Postsocialist Societies'.
[96]Oakes, *Tourism and Modernity in China*.
[97]Blum, *Portraits of Primitives*; Xu, 'Developing China'.

gross misrepresentation of their cultures to the rest of world. Such changes could even ensure a longer life to a very delicate process in which authenticity plays a crucial role.

And finally, the political agenda behind environmental policies in China, Vietnam and Laos – that is, their political ecology[98] – are being scrutinized and adapted for development initiatives linking environmental concerns and indigenous peoples to be conceived and implemented more fairly and efficiently.[99]

Thus, in all three countries, there are serious problems and challenges and, here and there, a ray of hope. One must, however, remain cautious regarding the positive outcomes for local populations. Given the generally weaker position of the highland peoples labelled as 'minorities,' practical consequences of national policies are usually more serious for them than for the lowland majorities. How the current challenges are resolved will greatly impact on this population of 60 million and determine in large part how successfully they can continue to exist.

Acknowledgements

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[98]Forsyth, *Critical Political Ecology*.
[99]Le, 'Culture–Environment Relations'; Rambo *et al.*, *The Challenges of Highland Development in Vietnam*; Hirsch and Warren, *The Politics of the Environment in Southeast Asia*; Tapp *et al.*, *Hmong/Miao in Asia*; Herrschel and Forsyth, 'Constructing a New Understanding'.

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