

Conducting fieldwork with Tarieng communities in southern Laos: Negotiating discursive spaces between neoliberal dogmas and Lao socialist ideology

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Abstract: *Based on research with ethnic minorities in Laos aimed at understanding how they cope with and negotiate political and economic 'double domination', this article examines the experiences of prolonged fieldwork in a remote Tarieng area in the Annam Range, southern Laos. After briefly reviewing Lao ethnographical policy and practice regarding ethnic minorities, I introduce the Tarieng people. I detail how I initially gained access to these local communities via long-term engagement with a range of development project initiatives. Then, after eight years of conducting such fieldwork in a Tarieng area 'below the radar of the state', I managed to obtain official authorisations to continue research as a graduate student. In this new position, I accessed the field via different negotiations with central, provincial and local official bureaucracies. After detailing this process, back in the field I reveal my strategies to create a discursive space that has allowed me to access dissident Tarieng voices and agency. Finally, I highlight four central elements that have continued to shape my field research: language proficiency, working with research assistants, awareness of political relations and cultural sensitivity, and ethical concerns. These have emerged while the possibilities and constraints of political engagement with the Tarieng people are explored.*

Keywords: *agency, ethnic minority, Laos, resistance*

Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (*Sathalanalath Pasatipatai Pasason Lao*) is located in the heart of the Southeast Asian massif, bordered by Burma and China on the northeast, Vietnam on the east, Cambodia on the south and Thailand on the west. In 1975, a socialist revolution put an end to a variety of ruling models including colonialism and occupation and set up an authoritarian state. The new state has a political structure divided by the vertical line of 'the Party' and the horizontal line of mass organisations, reflecting the Lao proverb '*Pak sin am, lat nam pha, pasason pen chao*' [the Party leads the path, the government rules and the people are the master]. In the late 1980s the Lao government lost its chief supplier of economic goods and services, the USSR, and turned increasingly to multilateral

institutions for support. So began the Lao path to economic liberalisation following the 'New Economic Mechanisms', Laos's version of the Soviet *Perestroika* and Vietnam's *Đổi mới*. After decades of isolation during which Laos had been regarded as a buffer zone between various rival states (Taillard, 1989), Laos became a crucial 'crossroads state' for growing regional markets (Jerndal and Rigg, 1999). This climate of economic liberalisation and foreign investment is increasingly facilitating access to natural resources located in ethnic minority areas. Yet, like Vietnam and China, Laos remains a single-party state. This monopoly of political power has not been softened by economic liberalisation, and the Lao Revolutionary Party has become the guardian of the country's traditions, using Buddhism's legitimising symbolism to domesticate socialism (Evans, 1998).

Seventy per cent of Laos is mountainous, and 40% of its relatively small 236 000-km² land area is covered by forest. The country is sparsely populated with only 6 million people compared with 85 million in Vietnam and 64 million in Thailand. In terms of human development, Laos is classified as a 'least developed country' (ranked 133rd out of 182 countries in 2007; United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2006) and has become one of the region's chief recipients of foreign aid and assistance per capita. Ethnic Lao make up about half of the population in Laos and are both culturally and politically dominant, reflected in the official designation of all citizens as 'Lao' (Ovesen, 2004).

The other half of the population are usually called 'ethnic minorities' and are subject to multiple forces of marginalisation: they have limited economic opportunities and are considered by the state as an obstacle to development. Furthermore, they are 'pathologised' in state discourse as deviant, backward (*alang*) and superstitious (Scott, 1990). Many ethnic groups living in Laos are in fact transnational minorities that are also found in neighbouring countries. This is the case for the Tarieng in southern Laos (see Fig. 1), where I conducted my fieldwork, and also for the ethnic Lao majority (there are more than 20 million ethnic Lao living in north-eastern Thailand compared with 3 million in Laos).

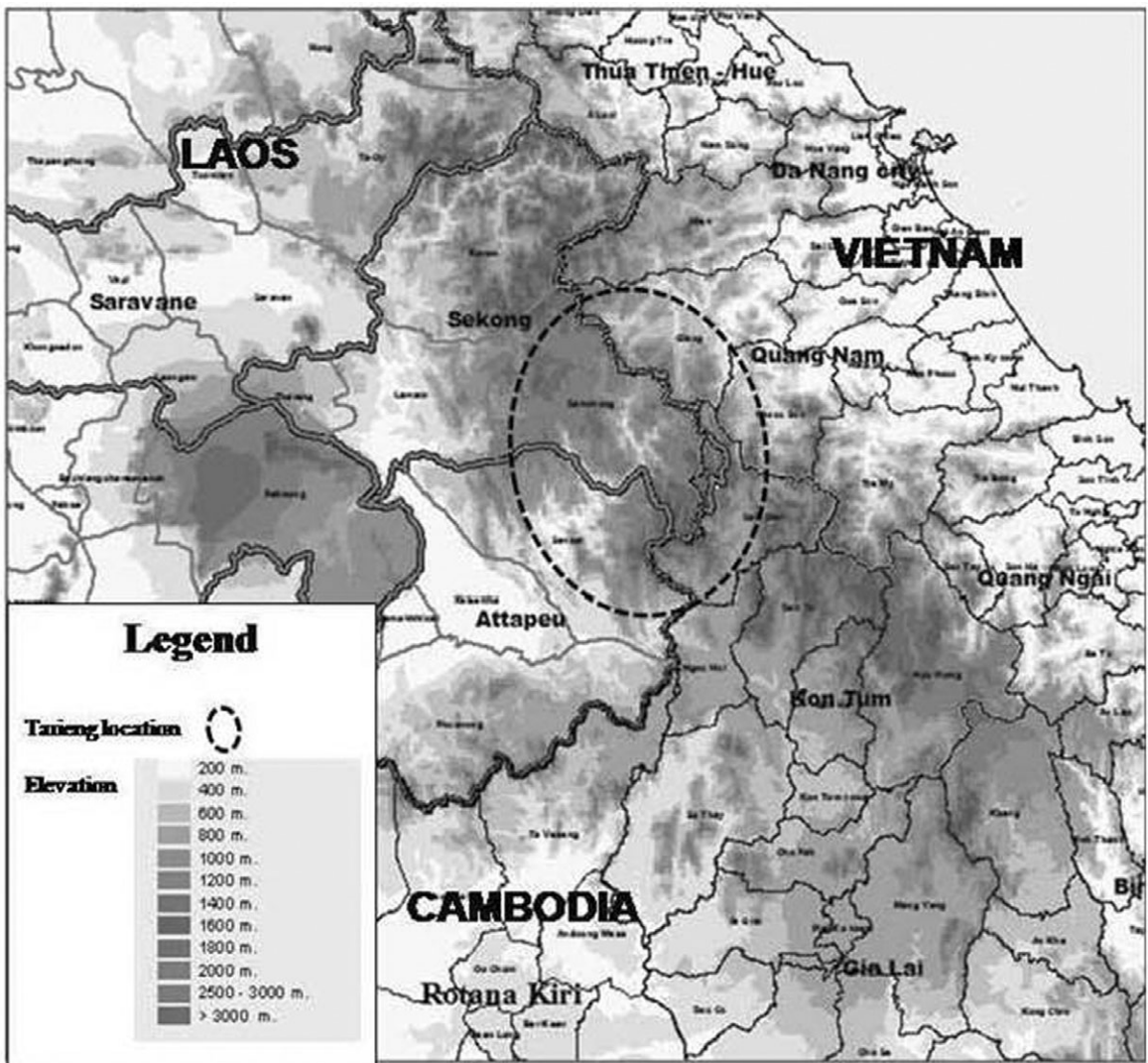


Figure 1. Area where the Tarieng reside in the Annam Range, southern Laos

Mostly relying on shifting cultivation, ethnic minorities in Laos have been made scapegoats for the deforestation of the coveted space in the country, and a chief state objective is to relocate them. Resettlement from isolated areas to roadsides and towns is presented as a strategy for social and economic development and is justified by modernisation ideology. I would argue instead, as do many other academics (see, for instance, Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Baird and Shoemaker, 2005), that it is an effective mechanism of surveillance and control of non-Lao people and forces their integration into the Lao nation. This state integrationist agenda is masked within policies of modernisation and poverty eradication slogans, in turn both directly supported by international development actors. The fate of minority populations is thus decided by the hegemonic discourses of a socialist regime that, while remaining tightly in control, has begun to welcome the neoliberal dogma of multilateral institutions advocating a transition from a subsistence economy to global market integration.

In this context, my current doctoral research aims to understand the impacts on the ethnic minority Tarieng of a 'double domination': state political domination aiming to 'modernise' the Tarieng, and regional and global economic market integration. In the context of these dominant political and economic forces (and dominant discourses) I wish to better understand Tarieng people's agency, coping mechanisms, livelihood diversification strategies and infra-politics (Scott, 1990). This article details how methodologically I have worked towards this aim. First, I briefly review Lao ethnographical policy and practice regarding ethnic minorities, before introducing the Tarieng people and their local environment. I then explain how I first gained access to these local communities via a long-term research engagement with numerous development project initiatives, demonstrating the importance of such connections for field access. Then, I detail how, after eight years conducting research in the Tarieng area 'below the radar of the state', I managed to obtain official research authorisations to continue research with, perhaps ironically, slightly fewer political constraints over what I would produce in my findings. I then head back to the field, this time as a state-sanctioned graduate student, and

describe how I accessed the field after negotiations with the central, provincial and local official bureaucracies. At the local level I also reveal my strategies to better understand Tarieng dissident decisions and views. Finally, I highlight four core elements that have continuously shaped my field research and which I believe are relevant for all researchers wanting to work with ethnic minorities in Laos: language proficiency, relations with research assistants, awareness of local politics and cultural sensitivity, and ethical concerns. These have all emerged while the possibilities and constraints of political engagement are explored in the course of my fieldwork with the Tarieng people.

Lao ethnographical policy and practice

Social science research conditions in the Lao PDR are difficult, relying on strong tributary relationships with key individuals. Access to do fieldwork was virtually impossible for foreign researchers from non-communist regimes from 1975 to the beginning of the 1990s; and before 1975, field inquiries were not favoured because of the First and Second Indochina Wars (1946–1975). Indeed, the ethnography of the ethnic minority Green Hmong, published in 1972 by Jacques Lemoine (1972), was based on fieldwork conducted in the late 1960s, and the French anthropologist reached the field by travelling on American war supply airplanes (pers. comm., 2004). Since the end of the 1990s, the political climate has softened, but foreign researchers must be equipped with the appropriate research authorisations and accompanied by government counterparts and/or research assistants. Field sites are also often vetted by the Lao authorities.

The Lao ethnographic tradition subscribes to an evolutionist view of social structures that defines certain cultural practices as backward and/or superstitious and in need of removal, in favour of an essentialist preservation of accepted customs and cultural practices. Lao ethnographical practice, as a science, serves Lao nationalism and de facto is directly subjected to state control and censorship. Local ethnographers have limited freedom, with their discipline trapped in a socialist ideological strait-jacket. Two ethnographers, from ethnic minorities themselves, have produced material

on minority groups: Mr Khamleuan Sulavan on the Katu (recording more than 300 oral histories), but who has yet to receive authorisation from the relevant authorities to publish, and Khambay Nyudalath on the Tarieng, who finally received official publishing permission after a long wait, in early 2010.

A new generation of Lao social scientists is now emerging, as many locally trained master's graduates are in the process of gaining their doctorates from foreign universities. Some are affiliated with research institutions such as the National Academy of Social Sciences (NASS) and the National University of Laos (NUOL). This new class of researchers has been able to break away from former ideological thinking to a certain extent. The main restrictions they now face are obtaining authorisations to conduct their own research projects while being required to teach at the NUOL, or implement the national agenda (such as inventories of ethnic groups and religious diversity) at the NASS. For all of them, finding the funds to conduct their own research projects remains an additional challenge, and those who do conduct research are often working for research projects initiated by foreign institutions.¹

My research focus: Introducing the Tarieng people

The Tarieng are a lineage society of animist and rotational shifting cultivators, primarily involved in subsistence farming, animal husbandry, forest food gathering, fishing and hunting, and barter. The Tarieng population, numbering approximately 60 000 people,² is equally distributed across the Lao–Vietnamese border in the Xay Phou Louang or Annam Range, living in Sekong and Attapeu provinces in Laos, as well as in the Phước Sơn and Đăk Glei districts in Quảng Nam and Kon Tum provinces in Vietnam (see Fig. 1). In these environments, the Tarieng have managed to preserve a high level of autonomy. In terms of food security, every community is still self-sufficient and relies on forest food in periods of rice shortage; bartering and exchange of natural products still prevails and the use of money for transactions remains rare. Land and forest allocation has been abandoned after a short trial, and customary land tenure systems are still operational, as are customary

laws and practices. As Tarieng people often say, looking towards the lowlands in the west, 'Laos is down there; we are here in the Tarieng area'.

A fascinating characteristic of this population, which underlines its selection for my research, is that Tarieng society and culture seem capable of maintaining themselves in a perennial way, despite the violence of Indochina's history during the 20th century. For instance, one can still observe customary architecture and magnificent sacrifice rituals described by explorers, administrators and missionaries from the late 1890s to the early 1930s, that vanished a long time ago elsewhere in the region (Guilleminet, 1931). In the locales populated by Tarieng, space is highly ritualised and all activities are codified. The Tarieng can be considered a '*société intercalaire*' between larger Hinduised and Sinicised societies on the plains (Coedes, 1948). The Tarieng people have always been catalogued by observers as belligerent, masters of terrestrial forces and controllers of civilised space's margins. As a Mon-Khmer group, they are believed to be in charge of the spirits of the land. Tarieng are renowned among their neighbours for holding supernatural powers and are famous for being ritually lethal.³

The Tarieng people have managed to survive against all odds during a succession of political regimes. Initially, they resisted the French civilising mission and its attempt to pacify them. This resulted in them being labelled a '*tribu insoumise*', a defiant tribe. Southern Laos was a keystone in the military history of the Indochina peninsula, and, as such, the Tarieng area changed from being politically marginal to central. It was crossed by several sections of the Ho Chi Min Trail and played a determining role in the 'liberation' of southern Vietnam and in the success of the revolution there. Appropriately, the Liberation Area of Lower Laos was officially founded on 1 March 1949 in Dakcheung (Engelbert, 2004), and from the late 1940s onwards, Vietnamese advisors and Viet Minh representatives were based in Dakcheung. Many members of the Lao Politburo were based in Chavan, a Tarieng village where I have conducted fieldwork, including former president Khamtay Siphandone and the former chairman of the National Assembly Samane Vignaket.

Compared with northern Laos, where an influx of foreign tourists has occurred since the

early 2000s, southern Laos and especially the Annam Range where the Tarieng live remains quiet and fairly secluded. The few valiant travellers who venture into these hills are seen in the dry season when rivers have dissipated, allowing ford crossings; they generally stay one night and then head back to the lowlands. Apart from such occasional visitors, other foreigners seen in the region include staff belonging to international development projects or foreign investment schemes. No matter their status or origin, all outsiders are promptly inspected by the local state military. This political climate prevails today and, as we shall see later, has an important impact on fieldwork.

Long-term engagement with the Tarieng: Conducting research as an international development agent

My first trip to the uplands of Dakcheung district, Sekong province, was in the rainy season of 2001. I had been hired as a Canadian University Services Overseas volunteer for the 'Sustainable Integrated Agriculture and Forestry Project' supporting capacity building in Sekong province. During that rainy season, Dakcheung district was accessible by four days' walk via one segment of the Ho Chi Minh Trail leading from the Sekong provincial capital to the district capital, or by carrying a motorbike on one's shoulders across five rivers (there were no bridges at the time). Needless to say, there were tremendous risks involved in reaching the district capital. My presence there was appreciated by both the local Tarieng political elite and villagers, who acknowledged my commitment to the area and its people because I was the only outsider they had ever seen during this period. In remote communities, the last 'falang'⁴ they had met were either soldiers from the French garrison during the First Indochina War or US soldiers from the Second Indochina War, both of which were engaged in armed conflict and on the other side of enemy lines.

On many occasions during my initial fieldwork in this region I would abandon my role as development volunteer and the daily orchestrated plan, and participate in hunting parties and rituals such as funerals, weddings and buffalo sacrifices. During these activities I would meet local government officials, former

army soldiers, local elites, women and youths coming back from the provincial capital and occasionally from Vientiane, and local villagers.

Villagers learned that at my home in Vientiane I raised my own chickens, ducks and fish. Indeed, the *neo hom* (village representative from the Lao Front for National Construction) in Tok Saming village deduced the first time we met that I worked in my own garden by looking at my roughened hands. While clearly a Western outsider, and a tall one at that, having lived in Laos for many years, my clothing, backpack and shoes were all locally purchased. My years in Laos had also resulted in me adopting local ways; I used a knife like villagers when peeling fruit; ate rice with my hands; cooked the same food as they do; and took part in fishing and hunting parties. Such acts helped me to develop personal relationships with many people from the local communities and at the district and provincial levels. Such acceptance of local norms and behaviours had an important positive influence on the way I was perceived by the diverse actors that I interacted with in the course of my long-term presence in the area.

Since I was enjoying people's hospitality while in the field, people from there whom I knew would often sleep in my own house when visiting Sekong provincial capital, when they came down to purchase materials, sell forest products and so on. They would bring vegetables, wild game and fish that we would cook and eat together while discussing diverse issues. As noted by Baxter and Eyles (1997), one approach to developing rigorous research involves spending sufficient time in the field to build trust and rapport with respondents, learning the culture of the relevant group and investigating possible distortions introduced by the researcher or respondents. In my case, this long-term engagement with the Tarieng allowed me to build my capital in terms of trust and confidence, and develop relationships based on reciprocity.

I initially spent two years working in the area (2001–2002) and since then have returned to Dakcheung annually. I researched resettlement issues for *Action Contre la Faim* (2004, 2005), coordinated a fact finding mission for Norwegian People's Aid (2005), assessed the new administrative unit supported by the United Nations Development Program for the United

Nations Volunteer-UNDP (2006), and implemented a baseline study on behalf of CARE International (2008). All these contracts have allowed me to maintain contact and develop trusted relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds in several communities – both traditional and resettled – before obtaining formal research authorisations for the first time under a new scheme linking the National University of Laos with Laval University in 2008.

From 2001 to 2008 the terms of my presence in the Tarieng area were directly framed by my involvement with these international development agencies. My fieldwork aimed to gather evidence regarding the impact of government policies on Tarieng livelihoods to inform the policies of these agencies. This work raised awareness among international actors involved in the area and attempted to provide development alternatives based on community priorities, for instance, on local communities' understandings of, and concerns regarding, the resettlement of their villages.

Tarieng strategies to get their voices heard

Two specific instances stick in my mind as examples of how Tarieng worked their agency in subtle ways to have their voices heard during this period (Ortner, 2006). One instance occurred while I was working with a non-governmental organisation (NGO), and the other with the United Nations (UN).

In January 2004, I was conducting an investigation in a Tarieng area into the perceptions of local community members regarding their state resettlement that had occurred two years earlier. I visited about 25 Tarieng settlements during five weeks and spent a night in Chavan village. This village had been resettled on 17 January 2002 at 9 AM – the official deadline given to start moving out of the old settlement. Villagers remembered it well; 28 households (140 people) grouped together for resettlement, while four households left for another upland village. Those who had accepted resettlement squatted for two months in abandoned district administrative facilities while building their houses; a construction process that competed with their swidden cultivation timetable. Their traditional houses that they had left behind were dismantled and stolen by Dak Pok Mai villagers

(another Tarieng village) that had remained in the uplands. Those who had moved had been promised a paddy field, a *mai ketsana* (eaglewood tree) nursery, rice and so on but were only given 20 kg of salt per household. Three years after being 'resettled', Chavan village still did not have a territory and villagers were still squatting in a former military post. The promised paddy fields had also been claimed back by yet another Tarieng village as being on their traditional land.

During my visit to where Chavan villagers were squatting, I was accompanied by a Tarieng doctor from the district office. During the night, the villagers waited until the doctor fell asleep and dragged me out of my mosquito net, to bring me to the jar,⁵ where villagers spoke without inhibition about their frustrations and suffering following their move. They insisted that the NGO I was commissioned by, the French Humanitarian NGO *Action Contre la Faim*, should work directly with the community and avoid handing resources or budgets over to the provincial/district authorities, fearing that civil servants would take all the benefits for themselves.

This case clearly illustrates the community's strategy to create space for speaking out, in a political and physical environment where there is seldom a person to listen; indeed, this community was resettled in a deserted area. This case also reflects the expectations that communities place on the researcher's shoulders. In this regard, I agree with them; we have the responsibility to make their voices heard. Indeed their voices were recorded and presented in documentation to the NGO and to the Humanitarian Office of the European Community, which funded the mission. A project was then designed in collaboration with another NGO engaged in the province to support development alternatives for the remaining upland communities *in situ*.⁶

Another case of engagement, this time in the context of a UNDP project on governance, further illustrates not only the responsibilities of, but also the opportunities for, advocacy and researcher's engagement. On this occasion I was asked by the UNV (United Nations Volunteer)–UNDP (as a pro bono contract) to produce an internal report on the realities of a new administrative level, the Village Development Cluster

(VDC), implemented by the national government. The objective was to inform the UNDP and UNV of the main constraints and risks in supporting the VDC in Dakcheung district.

The report I produced clearly revealed that, although presented as a new strategy for socio-economic development, the VDC strategy was in fact a new tool of state power that aimed to resettle 50% of the district population to within 14 VDCs. I organised informal debriefing sessions to UNDP representatives and the response was initially promising. Nevertheless, the UNDP ignored the findings and decided to officially support the Lao VDC in Dakcheung district.

These two cases, one with an NGO and the other with the UN, testify to the benefits and frustrations of long-term engagement, which allowed me to make the voices of communities and individuals heard within international NGO and multilateral governance projects, albeit in the latter case, not as well as I had hoped. I was able to advocate on behalf of the Tarieng for their rights in the process of development; a process characterised by foreign investment and state control over their resources and land.

The involvement during fieldwork of such an infrapolitics of covert, undercover recording of people's grievances and complaints involves risks for both informants and researcher in this context (see Scott, 1990). Yet this approach to conducting fieldwork resonates with the precepts of 'the engaged observer' (Sanford and Angel-Ajani, 2006), who remains closely involved in the field and aspires to reduce social inequalities and human rights violations. Nevertheless, at the same time, I increasingly came to realise that such politically sensitive research made it almost impossible to declare the authorship of my fieldwork findings that informed interventions. Likewise, it was difficult to brief policy-makers without jeopardising my access to the field or even risking becoming *persona non grata* in Laos. Since I have made my home in Laos with my family and two children, the spectre of this perspective remains a constant threat, unlike other Western researchers who leave 'the field'. Therefore, I decided that one approach forward was to try to negotiate obtaining official research permission as an anthropology graduate student. The next section

discusses this process of manoeuvring to obtain official research authorisations in the Lao PDR.

Formalities at the central level: Finding a host institution

Generally speaking, the context for social science research in Lao PDR is similar to that in Vietnam, where the transition to a market economy has opened the research culture to independent foreign social scientists. However, this is still a relatively new process in Laos (see Scott *et al.*, 2006). At the institutional level, research involving ethnic minorities is subject to the researcher's relationship with Lao authorities and the latter's acceptance of one's research objectives and field site. Walking around and asking questions is definitely not an option for foreign researchers, who must, prior to going to the field, obtain letters of authorisation (with a red stamp, much like in Vietnam) and be accompanied in the field by a Lao counterpart from one of the relevant institutions.

Before 2005, foreign researchers could obtain research authorisations through the Institute for Cultural Research and conduct fieldwork in rural areas accompanied by representatives from that institute. Then, for two years, research authorisations were impossible to obtain while the National Academy of Social Sciences (NASS) was being established. Opened in 2007, the NASS is the Lao version of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Science and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The director of the Academy is a famous Party hardliner directly connected to the Prime Minister's Office and was nominated by the Central Committee of the Lao Revolutionary Party. Moreover, the current director of the Department of Anthropology and Religion was previously in charge of the repression of foreign cultural expressions, mostly foreign music in nightclubs in Vientiane.

While in both Vietnam and China these research institutional structures are fully operational, in Laos very few foreign researchers have been allowed to conduct research under this newly established body; indeed, none before I applied. Although Laos follows the Chinese and Vietnamese models of political ideology and economic liberalisation, conducting fieldwork remains by comparison extremely difficult in

Laos. In my case, personal connections with NASS staff initially led me to be optimistic about gaining research access, but senior decision-makers there redirected my research to the Faculty of Social Sciences of the NUOL. The main reason provided was the lack of human resources to assist me with fieldwork, as the NASS Department of Anthropology and Religion has only five staff (including its director), and the mandate to write two books; the first on Laos's 49 officially recognised ethnic groups, and the second on religious diversity – both to be written according to the Party line.

The NUOL is mandated to authorise research, both for foreign master's and doctorate candidates and for senior academics, under the condition that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) be signed between the foreign university and the NUOL. The MoU must establish clear objectives, a specific duration, a geographical focus and a budget. After almost two years of networking, maintaining good relations and endless meetings, the ratification of an MoU between Université Laval, Canada, and the NUOL was reached, and I finally received research authorisation under the Department of History and Anthropology, in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

To gain authorisation for my fieldwork, I had to rework the title of my research project and its scope. I hence presented a sanitised research proposal deemed more acceptable to Lao state ideology, as well as state 'development' goals (Scott *et al.*, 2006; on modifying research proposals to comply with official expectations in China, see Curran and Cook, 1993; Pieke, 2000). The title of my research became 'Livelihoods and traditional resource management practices: Alternatives for sustainable community resource management policies in the Lao PDR'. This allowed me to focus on customary institutions, access to natural resources and analyse changes in this system brought about by policies and development schemes including hydropower, bauxite mining, land concessions, resettlement and so on.

In gaining my official research permission, my most important asset was that I had been living in Laos for almost 12 years and that I am fluent in the Lao language, which is highly valued by the teachers at the Faculty of Social Science. Having undertaken fieldwork all over

the country, I was also well known by officials at numerous government departments such as Health, Education, Agriculture and Forest, Water and Environment, Ministry of Justice, Lao Front for National Construction, and more. The fact that I am married to a Lao also contributes to my status. I am not simply a foreign researcher but am considered a '*keuy Lao*', or son-in-law. When I meet someone, this title inevitably triggers a series of personal questions resulting in my precise positioning within local social structures.

Other possible channels for gaining fieldwork access

The NUOL is not the only channel through which research authorisations can be obtained. Conducting research in Laos via foreign research institutes registered in Laos, such as the *French Institut de Recherche sur le Développement* is also an option used by French anthropologists and social scientists. In this case, however, personal connections with the Lao-based French intellectual/political elite are vital.

Also, as discussed earlier, development agencies such as multilateral, bilateral or NGOs constitute a potential channel through which fieldwork can be conducted. They offer logistical support but usually also impose constraints as the research agenda, scope and geographical setting are determined to fit the agencies' needs. The type of final product required by NGOs – grey literature – is neither an attractive output to academics, nor does it help an academic student obtain a formal degree. Speaking as an engaged anthropologist with experience with these organisations, I can afford one criticism: that such international actors are oftentimes self-censored, avoiding questioning state policies in the country where they work. In turn, although more engaged NGOs may be ready to respond to voices from the grassroots and take action, most such organisations are constrained by planning and budget deadlines and are afraid or reluctant to engage in advocacy, despite the fact that *local* state representatives may be open to development alternatives.

The positive outcomes of officially conducting fieldwork in Laos are the potential to build capacity among Lao research assistants and the dissemination of research findings to local and

foreign academics and university libraries, which is firmly recommended by the NUOL. However, for the Lao officials involved, more immediate financial incentives have become a reality. One's officially appointed research assistants are entitled to a daily allowance based on the status of the foreign counterpart and according to Lao national standards set by the Ministry of Finance. Foreign researchers are expected to not only pay this per diem, but also to be generous in the field. I was also required to pay 1000 US\$ administrative fees to the NUOL above and beyond paying for a research visa and the per diem for my counterpart accompanying me to the field.⁷ Such an approach has become institutionalised almost to the point when some translate Lao 'P.D.R.' as 'Per Diem Required'.

Formalities at the provincial and district levels

Following the official hierarchical structure to gain fieldwork permissions, having first gained central authority permission, researchers then usually present their research project first to provincial authorities and then to relevant district authorities. This process is usually a formality for research authorisations provided by the NUOL, but a long one. Having finally gained all the required permissions to start fieldwork, I carried with me 17 authorisation letters. Thankfully these 'red stamp' letters are then extremely effective for accessing secondary data from relevant government offices such as policies and provincial strategic development plans, as well as sectoral data on trade, agriculture and education.

As in other socialist countries, there is a matrix – a wishful development plan called a 'Five-Year Plan' – that states the main orientations, themes and strategies planned by the government. During initial discussions with provincial and district leaders, I would constantly refer to the political jargon within these Plans to justify my inquiries. This strategy of reproducing the 'public transcript' (Scott, 1990) by acknowledging the state's stated objectives allowed me to gain legitimacy with local state representatives and power holders while also protecting them, since once presented with a red stamp there is an expectation that they will talk with me.

Conducting research at the community level: Creating discursive spaces for local voices

Beyond official authorisations and 'red stamp' letters, sanctioned field inquiries at the village level require the researcher to always be accompanied by a representative from the host institution (see below) and directed to the village head, who acts as the representative of the state. The *naiban* (village head) is usually elected, but sometimes externally appointed, is literate in Lao language, and is aware of the state's political objectives.

A closer look at the political anatomy of local communities shows that the penetration by mass organisations and Party members into village life leaves little space for the (critical) researcher to manoeuvre. Informants are generally very cautious in their answers and comments, especially when a researcher is accompanied by officials. Researchers cannot expect to find out people's intimate or critical thoughts on controversial political issues such as resettlement during a focus group discussion that is facilitated by a state-provided translator and chaired by representatives of a mass organisation, who will often reproduce the hegemonic discourse of the official Party line.

As highlighted by Scott (1990, 2009), most actions taken by individuals to evade the gaze of the state are extraordinarily subtle and easy to miss. This means that an inexperienced researcher could easily be misled, misinterpret local voices or, for instance, erroneously identify villagers' internalisation of state discourse (Hight, 2008). In turn, ignoring the voices of the oppressed is to continue the imperialist project (Spivak, 1988). Given this context of domination, how can we conduct fieldwork and manage to access dissident voices on the back stage? How can we overcome the monopoly of political power and surveillance by local representatives of the state to penetrate the domain of 'infrapolitics' and discover local 'hidden transcripts' of popular everyday resistance (Scott, 1990)?

One possible solution lies in the creation of a discursive space (Alcoff, 1991) that allows local people without formal political positions to speak up. This discursive space is likely to first, facilitate access to dissident thoughts; second, acknowledge local solutions to local problems

as opposed to foreign solutions to local problems; and third, recognise the impacts of national policy and foreign driven development programmes on people's livelihoods.

One approach is to try to empower indigenous holders of leadership positions, such as the council of elders (*chao kok chao lao*), heads of clans or ritual specialists, instead of working with state-directed mass organisations. One way to achieve this is by inquiring about local configurations and village histories, which requires elders to be called upon to help fill the gaps in topics such as historical perspectives and customary regulations. In addition, participatory rural appraisal methods (Chambers, 1994; see also McKinnon, this issue), including the following three tools, can effectively facilitate access to different segments of the social space: first, wealth rankings provide the researcher with the communities' own wealth categories and a list of households per category. This enables the researcher to target a diverse range of households from different wealth categories, including the poorest, who usually do not often have access to the discursive space.⁸ Second, gender-separated focus groups (discussions with 6–8 people) allow women's voices to be heard. In addition, different social groups can be targeted (youths, elders, farmers) for specific insight.⁹ Third, participatory mapping (sketch mapping) exercises can provide insights into local categories, customary systems of resource management and indigenous cosmology. This understanding is fundamental to overcoming state-imposed categories of land and forest use, resource access and land use change, and to letting indigenous discourses and values surface.¹⁰ These three tools, among others, have helped me to create discursive spaces, delving beyond official state discourses underpinned by local holders of political authority.

While creating such discursive spaces, it has also become increasingly clear during my fieldwork that one must keep in mind not to oversimplify political structures and the individuals involved in them. For instance, local-level representatives of the state, despite being the political antennae of the Party, sometimes manoeuvre for the benefit of their community and challenge central policies and orders from above. As a researcher, one must navigate between public performances selected for local or international

audiences (Barsegian, 2000), and the most difficult challenge of finding out about locals' honest beliefs. This can only be reached by mutual trust, which in my case I have been building since 2001.

Concerns in the field: Language proficiency, research assistants and ethical dilemmas

Not surprisingly, such long-term research has continued to raise a number of concerns for me, including issues of language proficiency, access to suitable research assistants and a range of ethical dilemmas.

In-depth knowledge of the national language is necessary to access policies towards ethnic minorities, as well as other documents available at different levels of state bureaucracy. If the researcher does not master Lao, double or multiple translations between their mother tongue, Lao and an ethnic minority language may be required. As such, linguistic proficiency greatly facilitates fieldwork.

From a linguistic perspective, all Tarieng living in Dakcheung and Sanxay districts use their vernacular language in their daily transactions. Men can usually understand Lao and even more so Vietnamese; however, it is quite difficult to find women that can understand anything but Tarieng. This considerably increases the challenge to access community/grassroots perspectives, especially women's voices.

In my case, working with Tarieng field assistants helped to avoid interviews and research relationships being impacted upon by the usual patronising attitude of the Lao urban elite towards the Tarieng or other minority groups. Mr Sing, a Tarieng whom I have known since 2001, accompanied me most of the time to my field sites – both when I was working for international agencies and, later, during my doctoral fieldwork – and has been amazingly helpful throughout. He knows the area and government policies, and has relatives in several communities, so discussions would often quickly move to real 'issues' and continue unofficially at night, around the alcohol jar. Mr Sing would provide me with notes he had written about specific issues and emphasise how these may interest me, which they always did. He would also bring back artefacts from the field and call me up when he knew about important rituals or events

being planned. My language skills in Tarieng are enough to understand livelihood-oriented discussions, but to ensure the quality of my interpretations, I would record key interviews, and later Mr Sing would help me translate those into Lao language.

As well as having some degree of proficiency in a local language and the support of research assistants who one hopes will be fit for the task (see also Bonnin; Cornet; Turner, this issue), cultural awareness is a prerequisite for conducting effective and culturally informed field research in Laos. Knowledge of positions of power within local structures is fundamental, as well as an understanding of local seasonal and ritual calendars, gendered divisions of labour, and livelihood characteristics. Respecting the local agrarian calendar and seasonal activities (wage labour, period of community availability or peak labour demand) and planning research activities accordingly is an effective way to plan fieldwork and minimise the inconvenience to villagers.

Yet, regardless of one's cultural sensitivities, field research in Laos is still fraught with ethical dilemmas. Once all official hierarchy levels have contributed their red stamps and the path for the researcher is cleared, local communities helplessly face the researcher. Disturbingly, the sample population is essentially 'presented on a plate' to the authorised researcher, and it is possible to conduct any type of research, on almost any topic, with any division of informants based on gender, age, ethnicity, education level, socio-economic status or even type of house roofing (iron sheets, grass, etc.). In Laos, the norm is definitely far from the concept of academic 'informed consent' forms. Local research institutions impose almost no ethical guidelines or methodologies, and informants can be asked a broad range of questions as long as these do not obviously question the political structure of the country of course. Due to both the political culture and development arena in Laos, communities are frequently called upon, regardless of their seasonal activity, and required to 'participate' in state-sanctioned research projects and provide short-term visitors with any type of data that is required. A whole community can be thoughtlessly asked to remain within the village space with people waiting in their houses in case they are randomly selected for interviews, for

focus group discussions or to accompany 'external data extractors' on transect walks. Needless to say, communities and individuals have long lost any expectation of receiving anything in return (see Cornet; Gros, this issue).

Researchers must be aware of this context of 'forced participation' and avoid monopolising informants' time or disturbing whole community livelihoods and ways of life. One strategy to do so is to let meetings and interviewing that do not have to occur in the village space take place in the rice field, in the forest and so on. A second strategy is via reciprocity, as discussed earlier. A third strategy, more specifically used to address sensitive topics, is to avoid direct questions on the impact of government policies. I have instead attempted to measure such impacts on Tarieng livelihoods, food security, access to land and so on, via indirect questions, wealth rankings and long-term participant observation.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have discussed the challenges one faces as an overseas researcher wishing to understand and analyse Tarieng agency and hidden strategies in the context of a 'double domination' (Scott, 1990): an ethnic minority politically and economically marginalised by the state as 'backwards' in the era of liberalised economic development. In China and Vietnam, land use planning has already been implemented and cash crops have replaced subsistence farming, central regulations, customary laws and leaders in numerous locales. While the vernacular position is currently still observable in the Tarieng area, the goal here is not to fall into a folkloric utopia, but to conduct rigorous, sensitive ethnographic fieldwork; ethnography that is understood here as a mode of engagement (Hörschelmann and Stenning, 2008).

In my case, a period of eight years in the field conducting non-official ethnography allowed me to gather evidence and participate in providing development alternatives to local authorities based on the Tarieng's own choices and in collaboration with engaged NGOs. It also allowed me to communicate the impacts of state policy to international actors such as the UNDP. Now, having shifted to undertake

official academic research, because of my previous experiences, I can take advantage of the social capital gained from long-term engagement during the first period. I hope this academic research will also facilitate the dissemination and institutionalisation of my findings through presentations and conferences in Laos, as agreed upon with the heads of the Faculty of Social Sciences. In fact, I propose to use the 500\$US deposit, another additional cost supposedly to be returned to the research candidate after submission of a copy of his or her thesis (or summary in Lao language), for dissemination of my research findings in Laos.

Nowadays, in reality, both phases of non-official and official fieldwork overlap and I still manoeuvre and slip under the radar when undertaking short-term consultancies, keeping an ear open for local information that informs my doctoral research. Alternatively, when officially in the field undertaking academic research, I continue assisting the Tarieng in voicing their concerns to NGOs or appropriate actors involved in the area, about external 'threats' such as foreign investment, plantations, concessions and resettlement schemes, in order for engaged NGOs and local officials to potentially take action. I find that engagement through cooperation and reciprocity is the only viable ethical position that can ensure sustainable fieldwork on the one hand, while testing the structures of domination, in this case over the Tarieng people, in a transitional context between socialist political ideology and neoliberal economic dogma on the other.

Notes

- 1 Personal communication with senior teachers at the Faculty of Social Sciences, National University of Laos. July 2006.
- 2 According to the Lao Census (National Statistics Center, 2005), there were 29 134 Tarieng in 2005 in that country, while in Vietnam there were 30 243 in 1999 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1999).
- 3 For instance, ethnic Lao individuals constantly warned me not to leave my shoes outside Tarieng huts to avoid been cursed by a malicious sorcerer. The Lao believe that Tarieng could use one's shoe to place a buffalo skin into someone's belly, causing a horrific death.
- 4 This derogatory term, pronounced 'Farang' in Thailand and historically reserved for the French, is now used to refer to all categories of Westerners.
- 5 This jar contains *khao khanieng*, a variety of *miir* only found in Dakcheung and in Nalae district in Laos.

Drunk during rituals linked to agricultural calendar, and also during feasting sessions, buffalo sacrifices, weddings, funerals, visit of officials and other cultural gatherings. The size of the jar is proportional to the importance of the event; for community-level events, each household (*sou* in Tarieng language) is invited to provide a quantity of raw *khanieng* to make a jar of alcohol for the guest and the villagers.

- 6 This specific project aimed at focusing on local development alternatives was, in the end, never funded; partly because a huge rural development project (18 million \$USD) finally targeted the same area.
- 7 For comparative accounts of official research authorisation and hierarchical structures in China, see Hansen (2008), and Cornet (this issue); and for Vietnam see Bonnin (this issue).
- 8 For a discussion of the socio-economic insights gained through wealth ranking exercises, see Adams *et al.* (1997).
- 9 For further discussions of the division of participants in focus groups and the risk of essentialising constructed identities, see Longhurst (1995) and Skop (2006).
- 10 While participatory mapping can effectively canvas local knowledge and development goals, the emerging critical literature on this method discusses risks of appropriation and misrepresentation associated with this method (see, for example, Rambaldi *et al.*, 2006; Sletto, 2009; Wainwright and Bryan, 2009).

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