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EDITORIAL

Rural Futures in Late Socialist Asia: The Countryside in a Globalising World

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Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed global movements and flows of labour, capital, goods, and technologies into and out of the countryside in the Global South. This special issue discusses how globalisation, increasing urbanisation, and state policies shape rural lives across China, Vietnam and Laos, and how rural people imagine their futures amid the risks and uncertainties generated at the juncture between political, economic, and ecological forces. It unsettles the urban/rural divide while showing that such polarized construction will persist as long as clear benefits for the state and market remain in constructing the countryside as in dire need of development and catching up with the city.

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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed global movements and flows of labour, capital, goods, and technologies into and out of the countryside in the Global South, with profound implications for rural production, consumption, and reproduction. Rural areas have become truly global, and yet there has been far less concerted effort in understanding the multiple ramifications of globalisation in the countryside than that directed at processes taking place in urban areas. With so much attention focused on the urban, what then of its assumed opposite in a world so often divided into neat, but apparently polarised, categories of urban and rural? What do these very global changes mean in local places, for rural populations and rural identities, who are often typified as 'left-behind' people or places in need of development and modernisation? We suggest that the polarisation of the rural and the urban into opposing categories is used frequently as a means of domination and control, and it glosses over the multiple ways in which they are entangled with and connected to each other and the global world.

Late socialist Laos, China, and Vietnam are the few Asian countries whose economy has been increasingly globalized under the political rule of the Communist party state since their respective market reforms.[4] While rural labour and resources have been instrumental for the social and economic transformations that have been taking place through industrialisation, urbanisation and privatisation, rural people and places have also been significantly transformed through these processes (Bouté and Pholsena 2017; Stolz and Tappe 2021; Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021; Yeh 2013). The continuing construction of the rural and rural people as the backwater of modernity, however, has legitimised national development centring on the use of cheap and unprotected rural labour, much of which has turned into migrant labour in service of global production and capital expansion, especially in China and Vietnam, and the commodification of rural land and natural resources, especially in Laos (Chuang 2015; Kenney-Lazar 2021). Late socialism also produces particular trajectories of rural and agrarian transformations in which pressing questions emerge regarding the role of the state and market actors, the relationship between policies and local realities, and between rural people's aspirations and state-sponsored discourses of development and progress (Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021). Rather than a rural-urban divide, what we are witnessing in these trajectories are increases in pre-existing

4 We consciously choose the term 'late-socialism' instead of 'post-socialism' given the continuing presence of socialist politics and institutions in economic and cultural lives across China, Vietnam and Laos (see also High 2021; Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021). Across the three countries, as this special issue indicates, the one party-state plays a central role in facilitating marketisation, for example through the commodification of rural land and the promotion of agribusinesses.

inequalities between members of rural communities and the convergence of rural and urban population groups into emerging social classes (Nguyen and Locke 2014).

Building rural futures is a highly politicised project in late-socialist Asia, not only because of the one-party states' dominant role in shaping these processes, but also because future-making of the countryside is a highly contested subject which is shaped by complex negotiations by different actors (Herberg, Seeliger, and Moller 2023). In these contested processes, however, the visions of the future premised on a hegemonic notion of modernity and civility often prevail over others. What sets late socialist countryside apart from rural places elsewhere is these politics between differing kinds of futures and between ordinary people and the state in a context where the Communist party seeks to legitimise its power not only as the patron of a particular social order but also as the bearer of modernity and progress (Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024). Here the 'fictional expectations' of capitalism, namely a broad-based belief in the upward trajectories of private accumulation and wealth despite evidence of otherwise (Beckert 2013), emerge in great tension with the socialist vision of a collective future, which continues to be propagated in state policies and rhetoric (Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021). The coexistence between these visions of the future underscores politics of aspiration that shapes both rural people's 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2013) and the notions of the good life pursued by these late socialist states in their rural development agendas (Lutz 2021; Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024).

Our special issue reveals the specific ways in which these politics unfold in the everyday life of rural people and places. We make the following arguments: 1) The construction of the countryside as both problematic and romanticised, and as a distinct category opposed to the urban, continues to justify the state's developmental interventions, which maintain a social order premised on the very inequalities its development programs claim to address; 2) Moving beyond the rural-urban polarisation allows us to better comprehend how the countryside is changing rapidly amid the forces of industrialisation, globalisation, and digitalisation, as well as the new forms of exclusion and inclusion that these processes entail; 3) the deepening marketisation of the countryside is entangled in the same processes taking place in urban areas that are facilitated by the party states. These contradictions and entanglements highlight competing imaginaries arising from the uneasy combination of socialist vision of a collective future with private accumulation, and how it helps to generate new forms of social inequality. While a state-sponsored hegemonic notion of civility and the good continue to dominate the imaginaries of a rural future, rural agency manifests in multifaceted and creative forms.

Contributions in this special issue discuss how rural people continue their lives and imagine their futures in the midst of the risks and uncertainties generated at the juncture between political, economic, and ecological forces. Following this introduction, Minh Nguyen, Ly T. C. Vo, and Lan Wei demonstrate how modernising agendas serve as ideological underpinnings of China and Vietnam's rural development programmes, through which rural people are supposed to be transformed according to state-sponsored categories of civility and progress. While rural people's diverse mobility trajectories in the post-reform economies challenge this static construction, the construction of the peasant as in need of improvement, no less also partaken in by ordinary people, persists to reinforce a social and moral order premised on the rural-urban distinction that works in favour of legitimizing the state's modernizing mission. The construction of the 'deficient subject' out of rural people for that modernization project also underpins Cầm Hoàng's analysis of the implementation of Vietnam's New Rural Development Programme (NRD thereafter) and its impact on local lives. Attending to the program's ideological underpinnings, Hoàng demonstrates how it aims to reform this deficient subject through a stringent set of state-defined criteria that prescribes how local people should behave and conduct their private and communal lives. A deficit perspective is similarly exposed by Roy Huijsmanns' contribution, which he challenges by underscoring the diverse mobilities across rural and urban spaces that comprise and sustain rural schools in Laos. In another vein, Michael Kleinod's article shows how the much-hailed ecotourism premises on a fetishized notion of 'authenticity' based on the 'untouchedness' of rural nature in Laos, which further leads to the augmentation of the rural/urban divide and the exclusion of local villagers despite the appearance of inclusion. Weijing Wang's contribution highlights how the Chinese rural revitalisation project paves the way for capitalist expansion through promiting e-commerce via digital platforms provided by high-tech corporations. E-commerce, she shows, gives villagers the appearance of flexibility while subjecting them to the rigid temporal control and monitoring of platform-based governance. Tuan Anh Nguyen and Jonathan Rigg's article highlights the mutual dependency of rural and urban livelihoods as well as the intergenerational and gendered dynamics of multi-stranded livelihood arrangements against the backdrop of the same Vietnamese NRD Program that seeks to improve the countryside by standardization and homogenization that Hoàng's article analyses.

Through examining these different aspects and realities of rural life, articles in this special issue unsettle the urban/rural divide while showing that such polarized construction will persist as long as clear benefits for the state and the market remain in constructing the countryside as in dire need of development and catching up with the city. In what follows, we tease out three interrelated themes that tie our authors' different discussions together, namely 1) the concurrent construction

of the countryside as problematic and its romanticisation, 2) how this construction disguises the entanglement between the transformations of the city and the countryside, and 3) emerging forms of social differentiation across the city and the countryside driven by state-facilitated marketization. These highlight the competing visions of the rural futures at work, whereby the state-sponsored hegemonic notion of the good by no means forecloses rural people's agency in situating their life projects and aspirations across different value frameworks (Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024).

Problematizing and Romanticizing the Countryside

Across China, Laos and Vietnam, rural people play a crucial and active role in their respective revolutions in the pre- and early socialist periods, and are often hailed as vanguards of the socialist revolution. Peasants used to be seen as a political force with potential to reform society, especially for Maoism, which, unlike Marxism, had invested the peasantry rather than the urban working class with revolutionary character. However, in the wake of the market reform, Chinese intellectual elites associate rural China with backwardness, superstition, and feudalism, which represents an 'old society' that is urgently in need of reforming (Cohen 1993). Moreover, a development mode that privileges the urban while treating the rural as reservoir of resources and cheap labour leads to the highly uneven development between the rural and the urban, especially following the adoption of the market economy. As a global trend, the marginalisation of the rural through globalizing processes is not unique to these countries (Day 2008). In late socialist countries, however, different formalised and institutionalised rules lead to the segregation of the rural and urban in ways that solidify the rural-urban division. For example, in China and Vietnam, the household registration systems (*hukou* in China and *hộ khẩu* in Vietnam) create and maintain the differential treatment between rural and urban residents in terms of social citizenship and rights. Even though their respective reforms since the 2010s narrowed the gap, they continue to maintain urban privileges through mechanisms such as the point-based system, which include the elite groups of migrants while excluding the poorer and less well-educated from top-tier urban centres – thus de facto maintaining the rural-urban distinction in more subtle forms (Dong and Goodburn 2019; Lin and Mao 2022). In Laos, rural areas were subjected to the dramatic disruptions of war, state-initiated resettlement, and the constant enclosure of resources for capital accumulation (Dwyer 2017; Evrard and Baird 2017). Despite the fact that rural people are increasingly mobile, the stigmatisation of rural highland people persists, which leads to the various challenges rural migrants encounter when they seek to settle in urban areas (Bouté 2017; Molland 2017).

The highly unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities between the rural and the urban areas leads to the social and cultural construction of the countryside as problematic: it is often regarded as backward, unchanging, stagnant, and immune to the forces of globalisation, in contrast to the cities that are seen as the embodiment of modern, progress and civility. Such construction of the rural and the urban as opposing categories forms an ideological underpinning for the state's developmental interventions, and justifies a particular mode of development through which the rural are supposed to 'catch up' and are subject to different 'civilising projects' (Harrell 1995) to get rid of its backwardness and deficiency (Hoàng 2024).

The eagerness to move out of a backward state has been closely tied to the socialist modernisation projects in these countries, especially following their struggles to achieve national liberation under the shadow of imperialist and colonial domination (Liu 1996). In the socialist market economy, modernisation remains a consistent goal, and quasi the *raison d'être,* of their party states, which increasingly are confronted with the tension and ambivalence between the vision of a socialist future and deeper entrenchment into global capitalism (Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024; Ong 2003). Unpacking what they refer to as 'the politics of modernisation', Nguyen, Vo and Wei's (2024) comparison of the local dynamics of rural revitalisation in a Chinese and a Vietnamese village elucidates how the construction of rural and urban as distinct categories legitimise state power and the subjection of rural people to its modernizing scheme. Underlying this distinction is the shifting meanings of the category 'the peasant' both in social discourses and state policies over different historical periods. Post-reform developmental discourse, they argue, robs the peasantry of its political agency through the market-oriented value system around the so-called 'human quality' (*suzhi*) in China and '*dân trí'* in Vietnam, which measures individuals in human capitals and cultural competencies by which peasants are seen as failing. Both the Chinese and the Vietnamese villagers, however, have long taken on multidirectional trajectories of mobility, both internally (as in the case of China) and internationally (from Vietnam to Europe). While they confront risks, indebtedness, and personal sacrifices, their cosmopolitan mobilities and personal transformations are anything but fitting the characterization of themselves as stagnant and passive. Their actions, the authors show, have visibly transformed local economies and societies, outcomes that, however, feed into the party states' rural development agendas, which continue to use rural backwardness and the construction of the rural as 'low quality' as the legitimation for their interventions.

Hoàng's (2024) analysis dwells further into this construction of the rural as backward, peripheral and lagging behind underpinning the Vietnam's NRD. The program provides for a set of 19 national criteria aimed at inducing rural changes in material

and infrastructural terms (e.g., building concrete houses and separate toilets) and in local people's 'modes of thinking', thereby implying a causal link between their implied deficiency and backwardness. While these detailed criteria are meant to govern all aspects of village social and cultural lives, villagers are expected to meet them through individual resources and efforts. For example, they had to take loans to rebuild houses in order to meet the 'three hard' criteria (hard floor, hard frame, hard roof), which leads to increasing household indebtedness. Through this program, Hoàng shows, the construction of deficient subjects aligns with social and discursive mechanisms to activate 'will to improve' in the governance of rural lives (Li 2007) by villagers and government alike. These complementary interventions work together to produce a profound impact on the lives of ordinary people, homogenizing local ways of life and socio-cultural practices. Rural people's participation in the program is supposed to be voluntary, yet in practice, those who lag behind in implementing the standards will face consequences, including public humiliation, shame and fines. This program, according to Hoàng, 'reinforces the evolutionary thinking and understanding of development and civilisation', which urge rural people to internalise a hegemonic definition of civility and 'the good'.

Both Nguyen, Vo, and Wei's (2024) and Hoàng's (2024) articles demonstrate how state-sponsored rural development projects often premised on a hegemonic notion of progress and civility. Writing about the ethnic frontiers in Southwest China, Harrell (1995:8) shows how the civilising projects require a hegemonic definition that 'the peoples in question are indeed inferior, and thus in need of civilization, and a certification that they can in fact be improved, civilised, if they are subject to the project'. Such a hegemonic notion of civility, progress, and 'the good' has been consistently critiqued and problematised by existing scholarship as being founded on violence or exclusion (Harms 2016; Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024). Writing about the urban demolition for the construction of a luxurious housing compound in Vietnam, Eric Harms (2016), for example, convincingly demonstrates how the civility and progress it symbolizes are achieved through ruthless dispossession of local people of their land. Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin's (2024) analysis of the late socialist good life exposes a notion of 'the good' that privileges those who are better positioned to reap the gains in living standards produced by marketization at the cost of those who are exploited or disposed in the same process. The construction of rurality as inferior and backward thus helps to both maintain a social order ruled over by the party states and enable the expansion of the frontiers of accumulation by market actors.

Even as it is constructed as deficit places in need of interventions, the countryside tends to be romanticised and idealised. It is often imagined as pure, close to nature, and somehow more authentic than cities – a form of exoticization often done by

those in power to those who are deemed undeveloped and primitive (see also Mao 2023; Schein 2000). In China, customers patronise the *Nongjiale* (delights in farm guesthouse) restaurants with a nostalgic sentiment to re-experience the rustic, primitive and homely countryside through consuming rustic and authentic food and interacting with rural hosts (Park 2014). These romanticised forms of rurality also manifest themselves in other culture spheres, for example through media production and circulation. Li Ziqi, the most popular Chinese rural influencer with more than 42 million subscribers on Chinese and overseas-based social media platforms, won her popularity through making food and lifestyle videos portraying an idealised pastoral life. Notably, Li Ziqi not only gained market success but also state endorsement (e.g., the state has named her a representative of China's rural rejuvenation project), as the state positions itself as 'an integrative force that bridges the urban-rural gap' (Liang 2022:36).

The countryside is often idealised as the place where traditions, originality and authenticity are preserved and displayed in highly selective manner. The heritage preservation and display in the countryside reveal how they become tools to further develop and modernise the rural, and to improve the 'quality' of the 'backward' population (Oakes 2013). Rippa (2020) aptly uses the concept of 'curation' to understand the Chinese state's effort to modernise the Drung – an ethnic minority group – in a Dulong Valley in Yunnan province through the state project of 'building a new socialist countryside'. Curation, according to him, is a healing process through which the state seeks to eradicate the Drung's backward past as if it were a disease; and construct an imagined future through which the beautiful Dulong valley showcases the benevolence of the state and displays its loyalty to the state as an ethnic minority group. It is also a process in which the Drung grew an increasing dependency on the state, since only the state's version of development is regarded as legitimate, and the Drung who lost their land due to the resettlement project had to heavily rely on state subsidies. The state's curational intervention is always underpinned by disciplinary objectives through which minority subjectivities are being disciplined, cultivated, and remade. Similar dynamics of selecting certain aspects of the culture to preserve are also highlighted by Hoàng's (2024) contribution on the new rural program in Vietnam, which prescribes the ethnic cultural rituals to be preserved and performed (and even enhanced for the sake of tourism) and those to be abolished. The highly contested terrain of culture preservation, abolition, and display is underpinning by socially constructed notions and imaginaries regarding what constitutes the rural and the ethnic (Chio 2017; Mao 2024), as well as the cultural authority of the state in imposing a developmental agenda within culture preservation (Nyiri 2010; Oakes 2013).

Such dynamics of selecting certain aspects of culture to preserve while eradicating others are also evident in the context of Laos. For instance, Luang Prabang is often constructed as being timeless, i.e., untouched by time but also able to withstand any pressures of time (Wilcox 2020). This feeds into notions of nostalgia for people who consume such areas (e.g., tourists), while also fetishizing a sense of untouchedness, as captured by Kleinod's (2024) contribution on ecotourism in Laos. Reconciling the seemingly contradictory goals of capitalist development and resource conservation, ecotourism is hailed by policy makers and conservationists as a perfect solution to achieve both of these goals, and to increase villagers' income and reduce opium consumption and wildlife hunting. Kleinod shows how ecotourism is premised on a fetishized notion of authenticity which actively mobilises the rural-urban division, while depicting the rural as authentic and untouched. Such fetishization of 'authenticity', he argues, leads to further exclusion of local villagers. Yet it is a subtle form of exclusion that appears to include, as aptly captured by the term 'participatory exclusion' (Agarwal 2001), which Kleinod takes it as 'a form of excluding certain populations from access to resources by way of including them into certain participatory schemes'. When the countryside is viewed as 'a preserved place of the past, and a reference point for how far development…has come' (Wilcox 2020:318), it is contradictory to expect the rural to keep developing and remain unchanging at the same time.

As Wang (2024) also shows, such romantic and idealised construction of rural villages turns into a tool for the e-commerce entrepreneurs in rural China, who are encouraged by the Chinese state's rural revitalisation project to participate in e-commerce as a way to improve livelihoods and alleviate poverty. Under increasingly stringent platform control, e-commerce entrepreneurs become skilful in packing and selling an idealised image of the countryside when selling rural products online, for example by filming tranquil village scenes and tagging rural products as organic and healthy. This strategic use of essentialism has also been observed among Vietnamese women market traders in Ho Chi Minh City, who evoke an essentialised notion of gender and femininity to secure advantage in the marketplace amid the politically volatile context of market socialism (Leshkowich 2014). As demonstrated by West's (2012) work on coffee production in Papua New Guinea, meanwhile, certain imaginaries of poverty and primitivity serve to add value to commodity coffee. The image of the country as primitive and exotic while infused with poverty, backwardness and decline was actively used in the promotion of specialty coffee to middle-class Western consumers who are willing to pay higher prices for fair-trade coffee and for the sense that they are helping poor Papua New Guinean farmers. Wang contributes new insights by adding the digital dimension to this value production process that feeds off an infusion of ethical consumption with the fetishization of authenticity

under capitalism today. According to her, that process benefits the already well-connected rural elites, while further marginalising the rural labour that sustains this line of production, who earns little comparing to the e-commerce entrepreneurs, leading to the further differentiation within the countryside. Similar to the other contributions, Wang's work demonstrates how this value production process heavily relies on a construction of the rural as a distinct category opposed to the urban. As discussed below, our authors challenge this construction by highlighting the entangled transformation of the rural and the urban under the same broader processes of urbanisation, digitalisation, and globalisation.

Beyond the Rural-Urban Polarisation: The Changing Countryside and Entangled Development

Research has long challenged the rural-urban polarisation into opposing categories by pointing out the entangled development and connections between the two (e.g., (Alpermann 2020; Rigg 2014). The 'rural' and 'urban' was never clear-cut categories since there are long traditions of the interdependence of farm work and nonfarm work in Southeast Asia which demonstrates a multidimensional blurring of these two worlds (Rigg 1998; Rigg 2014). Such 'multi-stranded livelihoods', i.e., combining farm work with non-farm work (Rigg et al. 2016:129), are especially important when rural people seek to maximise their security amid the precarity of industrial labour. Research in Laos demonstrate a generational dimension of such multi-stranded livelihoods, namely what Lutz (2021) calls 'intergenerational contract' under which young people are driven by migration to achieve their aspirations while their parents remain to farm the rural land despite agrarian change and increasing land loss. Indeed, migration to the city does not necessarily pose challenges to existing familial arrangements and hierarchies, as they are sometimes strengthened and consolidated despite increasing mobility (Petit 2015). Similar dynamics of intergenerational arrangement of mobility and stability is also evident in China and Vietnam, where the care for the so-called 'left-behind children' is often shouldered by grandparents, while young parents migrate to cities to work (Luong 2021; Murphy 2020; Nguyen and Locke 2014).

While such entangled livelihoods arrangement is nothing new, as shown by the aforementioned literature, Nguyen and Rigg's article further reveals the precarity and unsustainable nature of such arrangement, especially when it is further exacerbated by the state's interventions, in this case Vietnam's NRD. They reveal that what is often promoted by public media as its positive achievements, for example boosting incomes or diversifying the rural economy, relies on an unequal and unsustainable intergenerational division of labour. To be more specific, while NRD fails to modernise farming as it promises to do, the low return of farm work pushes young

people to take up factory work in the outskirt of Hanoi, while their aging parents remain to farm the rural land and doing reproductive work such as taking care of their grandchildren. While this helps to raise household income, both generations were trapped in this inter-locking livelihood arrangement that combines marginal farming with precarious non-farm work, and it is not sustainable considering the increasingly abandoned land and a rapidly aging labour force. In a sense, land and labour restructuring through the NRD further prepares the ground for the commodification of rural labour that will be supplied to the industrial centres emerging around these formerly farming communities. The state program, while promising to revitalise the countryside, further subjects the countryside to increasing industrialising forces and turn rural labour into a cheap commodity in service of global capital. Such development trajectory again challenges the construction of the rural and the urban as opposing categories, even as the discursive framing of rural stagnation continues to be the justification for state and market interventions.

Indeed, the countryside is never stagnant and immobile as it seems in state development discourses, and rural people have been historically 'on the move', even during the times of heavy mobility restrictions (Bouté 2017; Molland 2017). Huijsmans' (2024) ethnographic study interrogates the various forms of mobilities that comprise and sustain rural schooling, and shows how the rural school actually forms 'a node in various mobilities', and is an active agent in rural change. Critically reflecting on the notion of 'remoteness' (see also Saxer 2022), however, Huijsmans demonstrates how such mobilities are valued differently and are therefore imbued with different power relations. For instance, the state's presence and power were manifested clearly when officials 'descended to the village' and demanded all sorts of special treatment; (inter)national development actors' mobility was closely related to their global social mobility. While mobilities are crucial for teachers' trans-local livelihoods, school children find it hard to realise their aspirations when the need to move around compromises their learning. The view of rural schools, or of the countryside in general, as remote and separated from the urban, thus neglects the existing ties that connect the urban and rural in intimate ways. These connections, as argued in the next section, are shaped by the strong intervention of the late-socialist states that increasingly facilitate marketisation for its goals.

Rural Politics under Late Socialism: Deepening Marketisation and Differentiation within the Countryside

The countryside in late-socialist Asia is constantly subjected to resource expropriation, land dispossession and the resettlement of its people due to various state

development projects (Baird 2021; Chuang 2015; Dao 2016; Kenney-Lazar 2019). The expansion of market forces in rural areas is often dependent on state authoritarianism. For instance, the government of Laos pursued the policy of 'turning Land into Capital' since 2006, which aims to turn rural land into a marketised asset that generates economic profits and governmental revenue (see Kenney-Lazar 2021). The state plays a central role in facilitating land concession for private investors, epitomising a 'merger of a socialist political-economic architecture with an openness to market forces of global capitalism' (Kenney-Lazar 2021:7; Kenney-Lazar 2019). The impact of state-facilitated land concession is devastating, leading to the dispossession of people of their agricultural land, deforestation and pollution, among others (Kenney-Lazar 2012). The increasing expropriation of rural land is also evident in China, which weakens the function of land in absorbing the reproductive costs of migrant households, whose members in turn provide cheap and precarious labour for urban areas (Chuang 2015). As a result, rural villagers experience landlessness and indebtedness to varying extent, which leads to further differentiation and the emergence of 'a new structure of class stratification' within the countryside (Chuang 2015:292).

Besides the struggles over land, rural people in these countries are also heavily impacted by resettlement due to urbanisation and state projects such as dam construction. In Laos, villagers who had been resettled due to a Chinese hydropower project were subjected to food deprivation due to officials' embezzlement of the compensation money and the disruption of communal ties that had been crucial to combat food scarcity (Ponce 2022). In China, resettled rural villagers are found to be engaging in financial speculation by liquidating their compensated assets instead of engaging in productive employment, which leads to moral anxiety and further social marginalisation (Zhan 2021). In Vietnam, dam-induced resettlement disproportionately harms ethnic minorities in the uplands, generating both overt resistance through collective action and everyday resistance through individual acts of defiance and slowness to obey (Dao 2016). In Laos, hydropower dam construction brings both catastrophic results such as the sudden collapse of the dam and slow violence through social and environmental impacts for people living in adjacent villages (Baird 2021). These are just a few of the examples of how late socialist states facilitate the expansion of extractive capitalism into the countryside, often in the name of development, thereby transforming rural spaces and 'coercively resettling, displacing, and dispossessing rural people of their lands, resources, and territories' (Kenney-Lazar 2019:340).

Our authors advance existing discussions by highlighting how the expropriation of rural land, resources and labour was made possible through state development programs aimed at improving rural lives and landscape. These programs carry

such signifying titles as 'rural revitalisation', 'building a new socialist countryside', and 'new countryside programme' (Hoàng 2024; Nguyen and Rigg 2024; Nguyen, Vo, and Wei 2024; Wang 2024). The discourse of rural renewal implied in these titles enables dispossession and expropriation to take place in more subtle forms, such as in the form of development as a 'gift' from the state. In *Taming Tibet*, Emily Yeh (2013) compellingly demonstrates how projects such as 'building a new socialist country-side' subject Tibetans, the beneficiaries, into gratefulness and indebtedness. Despite their deep ambivalence over the gift of development from the state, the Tibetans have little space to reject it. This one-sided "gift", Yeh (2013) argues, territorialises the state, making it a concrete entity with an ontological presence, and a legitimate sovereign over Tibet. Pointing to parallel dynamics in Vietnam, Hoàng (2024) shows how the state forces the gift of development to villagers whose backwardness and deficiency it deems necessary to abolish. Yet, these state-imposed rural development programmes leave rural people further indebted because they need to shoulder a large part of the financial burdens for them, for example by borrowing money to fulfil the housing requirement of the NRD Programme.

Wang's (2024) article article on rural e-commerce highlights how the state's rural development project paved the way for platform capitalism to expand to rural areas as a new frontier of accumulation. Under the banner of 'rural revitalisation', villagers are encouraged to become e-commerce entrepreneurs, selling their rural products on websites such as Taobao. As Nguyen (2023) suggests in an analysis of life insurance sale in Vietnam, the activation of the will to self-enterprise represents a new way for the state to rally people behind its rural development goals, apart from imposing criteria and quotas (Hoàng 2024). Mixing governing with governmentality, rural revitalisation programs mobilise people by facilitating their desires and aspirations, using the notion of 'entrepreneurial self' as an instrument of governance (Millar and Rose 2008). On the ground, many people devote themselves to e-commerce with the hope that they can 'be their own boss'. Aligning with the post-reform emphasis on self-responsibility (Nguyen 2023), such entrepreneurial ethos is particularly strong among the young and the educated (see also Boullenois 2022), who are disenchanted with the realities of precarious and competitive world of paid work and drawn to the allure of freedom and flexibility of platform work. Yet, as Wang (2024) shows, what awaits them is the more stringent labour control of algorithms and digital platforms, which expect them to perform multiple aspects of labour simultaneously, including customer service, packing and selling products. The intense simultaneity allows work to intrude on their personal lives and family relationships. Meanwhile, as the companies enable rural products with tags like 'rural revitalisation' receive more traffic and exposure on the digital platforms, the customers also have a sense that their consumption helps to alleviate poverty – reflecting the prevailing notion that

one can feel better by consuming the right products (West 2012). Here, the state and the market join forces in pushing the countryside's deeper entrenchment in digital capitalism.

Wang (2024) further shows how rural e-commerce benefits a small group of well-connected rural elites while further marginalising a large group of older farmers and rendering their labour cheap and invisible. This echoes existing research which highlights how the Chinese state's 'trickle-down' approach to poverty alleviation, i.e., boosting rural economic growth to help the majority of the villagers out of poverty, has 'strengthened local hierarchies of wealth and power', as it mostly benefits local enterprises, and enables a new rural elite group to emerge (Boullenois 2020:54). Through this process, new bosses and new workers were produced, even though they were originally from the similar social background (Boullenois 2020). As such, the deepening commodification contributes to further differentiation of the countryside. Yet the construction of the countryside as a homogenous entity opposed to the urban continues to exist and justifies a state-championed version of the rural future based on a hegemonic notion of modernity and civility.

Constructing Rural Futures: Competing Visions and Rural Agency

Future matters because the imaginaries of the future shape the present in profound ways. Beckert (2013)'s notion of 'fictional expectations' refers to how the imaginaries of futures can have a real impact on actors' present decisions and actions, and how it is a crucial part of the development of capitalism. The fictional expectation is powerful because it is firmly grounded in the social reality shared by members of the collective, and it in turn, shapes such social reality. While the fictional expectation in capitalism premises on private accumulation and wealth (Beckert 2013), the future imaginaries at work in the context of rural development in late socialism, as articles in this special issue show, are based on contradictory notions of modernity.

State socialism was at heart a modernising project, and a socialist modernisation is supposed to serve the vast majority of the people (Schwenkel 2020). In a paper presented by the Chinese prominent scholar Fei Hsiao-tung (1982), known to be an authoritative statement of official Chinese thinking on the topic of 'Chinese modernisation' at the time, Fei reflected on the devastating effect on landless peasants as a result of industrialisation in the West, and insisted that, China, as a socialist nation, 'would not allow such polarisation of rich and poor to appear in the process of modernisation' (Fei 1982:122). This represents a socialist vision of the rural future-making aimed at achieving collective good while diminishing inequalities. Yet the

shift to market socialism in China, Vietnam and Laos means that such socialist vision of a collective future becomes much less dominant, even though formally adopted (Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024; Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021). The competing visions of the rural future as imagined by socialism and capitalism make it difficult for ordinary people to navigate because of their inherently contradictory expectations: to function as efficient and self-responsible market actors and as contributors to unifying projects that requires devotion to collective goals. The state rural development projects work by projecting collective visions about the future of the countryside that are supposed to benefit the collective and build common goods; yet they expect these goals to be achieved by further turning rural people into 'enterprising subjects' in service of global capitalism (see Hoàng 2024; Nguyen and Rigg 2024; Nguyen, Vo, and Wei 2024; Wang 2024) .

To envision rural futures, model villages are a great example to see how the 'best-case scenario' of the state-championed rural future looks like. In an ethnography on a Lao socialist model village, High (2021) depicted how life in a cultural village becomes a living example of how to live a good life in late-socialist Laos. Different ways of certification and celebration were used to mark the culture village as a model, with the idea of 'culture' not referring to a lost past but oriented toward a possible future. Here, 'project' is not just a noun which refers to top-down state policy intervention; it is also a verb to highlight how 'one understands oneself as having a future that is open to manipulation through one's own will, agency, and initiative (p 15)'. To be recognised as a model village is also to make a value statement within the countryside and within the social order underpinned by state power.

Our analyses of the different national contexts suggest parallel dynamics through which the state seeks to constructing a version of the rural future through intervening in the present. Despite the strong role the late-socialist states in shaping rural futures in China, Vietnam and Laos, rural people are by no means passive recipients of these state interventions. Our authors recognise how even seemingly marginalised people are the pioneers of social change, and their efforts cannot simply be understood as their passive submission to the overarching discourse of state development (see also Stolz 2021; Stolz and Tappe 2021; Tappe and Nguyen 2019). Indeed, a closer look at the local implementation of rural development projects in China and Vietnam contradicts the party state's claims that they engineered the transformation of the countryside by improving the 'quality' of the rural people. Nguyen, Vo and Wei (2024) demonstrate how rural people, via the strength of their social networks, have identified ways to transform their private and communal lives through mobility trajectories that transcend the boundaries between the city and the countryside and between nation states. The social outcomes of their actions, while playing into state

development goals, clearly have more to do with their resilience and agency than the improving measures intended to effect rural changes through the state development programs. Yet they do so without challenging the overarching discourse of 'quality' which is omnipresent in both China and Vietnam, designating rural people as deficient. This demonstrates how, rural people do see their future in the notion of modernity championed by the state – they just demand their sacrifices and contribution to be recognized in that project as part of a relation of reciprocity between people and the state – a moral demand specific to the ethos of state socialism (see also Harms 2016).

Our authors also show a multifaceted field of politics in which rural people both play along with, be indifferent to, be complicit with or perform resistance to state policies and discourses. Resonating with existing literature (see Dao 2016; Rumsby 2023; Yeh 2013), our contributions recognise how, even under oppressing political environments, rural people have diverse political responses to the ruling state's developmental apparatus, including but not limited to non-compliances with state policy, conflicts, or even just strategizing to maximise one's own benefits. Villagers under the Vietnamese NRP, for example, fake numbers to keep the appearance of meeting the project's goals (Hoàng 2024). In other cases, villagers use state discourses for their own purposes, as can be seen in how rural entrepreneurs in China adopt the state discourse of rural revitalisation to package and sell their products online (Wang 2024). This demonstrates how rural people are active participants in the making of a particular social order in the post-reform economy that will shape the future of the countryside in these late socialist countries.

Conclusion

Our introductory essay has indicated that the countryside in late-socialist Asia is an important site of future-making situated between competing notions of modernity and visions of the future. We have interrogated the construction of the countryside as backward and deficient vis--vis the city and the notion that the countryside is supposed to change to 'catch up' with the city. This construction often justifies the state's heavy-handed interventions through development programmes and projects that entail dispossession of rural people and the homogenization of rural lives. We have also discussed how the countryside is often idealised and romanticised; it is supposed to remain unchanging in certain aspects to preserve its authenticity and culture. Such a notion helps to package rural landscape and resources into sellable commodities in a drive to turn the countryside into a new frontier of capitalist accumulation, a drive that is fully endorsed by these party states. Rather than a rural-urban divide, therefore, what we are witnessing in these trajectories are deepening

inequalities among members of rural communities and new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (see also Alpermann 2020). The construction of the countryside as both problematic and idealised in ways that distinguish it from the city glosses over the social consequences of marketisation and globalisation on rural lives. On account of their deficiency or lack of self-responsibility in how to function as market actors, it also blames the rural people whose lives are affected by these state-facilitated processes for problems not of their making.

Pointing out the entangled development of the rural and the urban, we have also shown how the countryside, as is the city, is increasingly subjected to the same forces of marketisation and globalisation. The late socialist states in China, Vietnam and Laos play a strong role in shaping and curating these rural changes as well as the vision of the rural futures to be strived for. Concurrently, rural agency manifests in diverse ways. In some cases, rural people and communities map their life projects and futures onto the state's overarching discourse of modernisation and progress, thereby helping to maintain a social order in which hierarchies are made out of state-imposed categories of populations and places. In other cases, they proactively pursue their own goals independently of state policies or programs, the pretensions of which they sometimes mock or whose oppression they resent. Nevertheless, a social order based on the rural-urban distinction and hierarchisation is likely to be maintained as long as it continues to serve political and economic purposes of both the state and the market.

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