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EPILOGUE

Making the Case for Studying Late Socialist Countrysides

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In their introduction to this special issue, the editors argue for the significance of the collection on two grounds. First, that rural spaces and their populations have been relatively under-research compared to urban areas and populations. Every month, it seems, another centre of urban studies is inaugurated. In January 2024, for instance, the Singapore Management University launched its SMU Urban Institute (UI) to research the 'unprecedented challenges' facing urban Asia from climate change to migration. The Institute was said to be a "response to megatrends that underscore the critical need to prioritise urban research".[2] It seems that the truly important research gaps and policy questions all lie in urban areas. This collection is a corrective to such claims. The second justification for the special issue is that studies of agrarian change rarely address the distinctive ways in which rural transformations are operating – and working out – in the late socialist countrysides of China, Laos and Vietnam.

Both these are research 'gaps' of a geographical nature, but they are underpinned by processual questions: How are rural areas transitioning under the forces of globalisation? What are the distinctive characteristics of late socialist rural transitions? How do agrarian transitions speak to – and challenge – narratives of urban transition?

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2 https://www.prnewswire.com/apac/news-releases/smu-launches-urban-institute-focused-on-the-study-of-asian-cities-302037953.html. See: Straits Times 2024 and https://news.smu.edu.sg/news/2024/01/18/singapore-launches-urban-institute-address-complex-issues-faced-cities-asia.

In their focus on three late socialist countries, the papers also address another set of questions that speak to the particular characteristics of this group of countries: What future does the state in each of these countries envisage for the countryside? What policies have been enacted to achieve this future? Have these policies been successful in realising their aims? And what marks do they leave in the countryside, intended and unintended? Finally, there is the challenge of seeing rural areas not as passive receivers of policies and processes enacted and conducted from outside, but as spaces with populations that contribute to national development. In other words, national development looks the way it does, in no small part, because of rural people and processes.

Normative Agrarian Futures

States often have very clear ideas of what the countryside *should* look like, what the people who inhabit this countryside *should* become, and the policies that *should* support those processes of geographical and social change. The rub is in the obligatory, 'should'. Vietnam's New Rural Development policies, China's Rural Revitalisation and New Socialist Countryside programs and rural e-commerce ambitions, and the educational policies pertaining to rural Laos can all be read as aspirational. But just as individuals may find their aspirations denied, curtailed or twisted, so too do states. Time-and-again across these papers and the contexts they describe and analyse, policies are both more and less than they seem. 'More', in the sense that their impacts may go beyond their original intent; and 'less', to the degree that they do not meet their ambitions.

This failure either to deliver what has been planned, or to deliver something rather different from that planned is surprising because these countries – China and Vietnam in particular – are developmental, where the state is in the vanguard of development, shaping and making futures. This extends from the policies to drive growth, and those that seek to 'improve' populations in quite particular ways. This improvement agenda has been noted in other contexts, notably by Tania Li (2007) in Indonesia, Stacy Pigg (1992) in Nepal, and Thongchai Winichakul (2000) in Thailand. Improvement is a statement of where development should be headed but also where it has – or is thought to have – come from: primitive to civilised; traditional to modern; backward to advanced; and deficient to endowed. Huijsmans (Huijsmans 2024: 75) writes of how district level officials in Laos often use the expression '*long pai baan*', or 'descending to the village' to refer to the metaphorical journey "down the power hierarchy of the Lao political system from district to village".

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Winichakul, in a post-script in his paper on *siwilai* (civilisation) in Thailand, writes of a Thai play, *The Good Citizen* (*Phonlamuangdi*), written in 1916. An abridged version was adopted as a Thai primary school text, with the title *From Mr. Jungle to Mr. City* (*Nai thuan pen nai muang*). Winichakul writes:

> *In this story, a boy named Thuan, a synonym of pa [jungle], came to the city after his father had died in the dangerous jungle, to live with his uncle who was a bureaucrat. He was trained and taught various subjects, including good manners such as gentility. The boy, who was initially seen by the city dwellers as 'ancient boy' (dek boran) changed his identity completely from head to toe, inside and out, then changed his name from Thuan to Muang (town or city). The boy grew up to become a policeman, loyally serving the nation, the religion, and the monarchy. (Winichakul 2000:546).*

Thuan, the backward and uncivilised peasant, is transformed into a civilised Siamese. His geographical translation from rural to urban permits this transformation. More than a century later, albeit in less crass ways, governments are still in the business of civilising the rural.

Implicit in the characterisation of the rural as backward is the assumption that it was always such (hence *dek boran*) – and that to live for the present rather than in the past, populations have to be levered, by policies of improvement, into the present day. In both China and Vietnam, 'three rural problems' or 'three rural issues' (*Sannongwenti / tam nông*) – namely the problem of the countryside, agriculture and peasants – have to be tackled through such policies. In their paper, Nguyen and colleagues argue that the rural backwardness that policies like China's Rural Revitalisation program and Vietnam's New Rural Development program seek to correct is a condition that previous national policies have, in part, created. The reason why average incomes in urban Shanghai are twelve times higher than they are in rural Gansu (Rozelle and Hell 2020:8) is not just a historical inheritance; it is a policy legacy that can be traced back to grand programs, notably the Great Leap Forward (1959-1961) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and to a multitude of lesser programs and policies.

The Contradictions of the Normative

Notwithstanding the power of civilisational intent, the papers in the collection show that desirable transitions do not occur in part because policies lack the traction to achieve their ends. But, in practice, they are also shown to be often contradictory. In Laos, Kleinod-Freudenberg (2024: 91) reveals how 'model projects' designed to stamp out the old (shifting cultivation, opium cultivation, the hunting of wild animals) and bring in the new (rubber cultivation, ecotourism) undercut ecotourism initiatives

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in which minority hill peoples were marketed as noble and uncorrupted but found themselves portrayed in policy terms as destructive. Tourists visit ecotourism projects to see conservation in action; local people buy into ecotourism projects because they putatively deliver development. Kleinod-Freudenberg writes that 'ecorational instrumentality' is, "designed to address the global ecological predicament in capital-friendly [and] thus contradictory ways" (Kleinod-Freudenberg 2024: 93). Ecotourism plays the Authenticity card, while local people desire development. The inevitable result is 'twisted outcomes' (2024: 93), as the contradictions of ecotourism and development in the guise of eco-capitalism become evident.

Desirable transitions can be regarded at one level as generalised statements of directionality. But policy makers in these late Socialist Asian countries find it hard to resist the temptation to be specific, to attach criteria and targets so that achievement can be measured and assessed, even rewarded or penalised. In so doing, pathways of good intention become increasingly tightly circumscribed and instrumentalised. As Cầm (2024) describes in his paper, Vietnam's New Rural Development Program has 19 assessment criteria and 49 targets. Communes that meet these criteria are recognized as 'New Rural' communities, with the implication that those which do not, remain 'Old'. One ethnic Nùng commune officer in Lạng Sơn said to Cầm: "Before the New Rural, most people here were very backwards, because almost none of the households had a decent toilet and bathroom (2024: 60)."

The rural places that these papers explore are sites of – and for – future-making, although this future is a restatement of a directional desire that is evidently old (as Siam's engagement with *siwilai* demonstrates). What this future might be and (again) should be, is highly political, as Mao, Minh and Wilcox note in their introductory essay: a certain version of the rural future "become[s] dominant, one that is often premised on a hegemonic notion of modernity and civility". Alternative futures become contested futures, where there is space for just one rural future. When projects are driven by targets – and especially when those targets are multiple – there is no space for entertaining other agendas. Everything must focus on the achievement of those targets. Pathways to that end are set by diktat. This creates an incentive to fiddle the books. Officials have to meet their quotas and villagers need to show willing as well. The result, as Cầm argues, is 'data distortion' (Cam 2024: 62). Nothing is quite what it seems.

The sedentary peasant paradigm holds that before Development, rural populations were contained within rural spaces. They did not get out much. Settlements were largely self-reliant and villagers immobile. Scholars could enter such rural spaces and come to understand rural economies and societies, 'in the round'. To be sure,

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this overlooked and underplayed levels of interaction (see Walker 1999 on Laos), but even so, and increasingly, rural populations are on the move. Huijsmans (2024) writes of 'patchwork mobilities' in the Lao countryside; Wang (2024) notes that in Chengshi County in China almost one third of the population migrated every year and few had no migrant experience; while Nguyen, Vo and Wei in rural China and Vietnam write of complex intersections of mobility, translocality and transnationality that "transcend any kind of rural-urban distinctions (Nguyen et al. 2024: 24)". In this way, rural people, their labour and sensibilities, make their presence felt way beyond their homes, bringing the rural into urban spaces, dissolving boundaries and reconstituting what it means to be rural.

What is perhaps surprising – and in many ways reassuring – in this collection is that notwithstanding attempts to govern the rural and control the countryside, alternatives do work their way through the fissures that pepper every pathway. Indeed, without local people's independent actions, state policies would likely fail, as Nguyen, Vo and Wei (Nguyen et al. 2024) report in their paper covering both Vietnam and China. This is not surprising: governing the market, shaping aspirations and remoulding society are difficult matters – easy to state but hard to achieve – and the relations they forge continually press against and thwart state attempts at their accomplishment. The absence that links these papers is the gap between policies and their realisation.

Viewing the Rural Back-to-Front

Rural spaces and their populations have been relatively under-research compared to urban areas and populations. As noted in the introduction to this epilogue, it is urban sites where the key challenges are thought to lie. Moreover, the countryside is seen as somewhere 'in transition', where urban processes leave their mark, progressively erasing rurality. Civilisational thinking is in the business of making rural people 'urbane'. Rarely is the rural viewed in itself, and on its own merits, with an identity beyond its status as a space on the cusp of becoming something else.

In most scholarship, the countryside becomes a space where development policies operate, shaping people and places. The papers in this collection take this approach. As Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox (Mao et al. 2024) describe in their introduction, the rural is a site of globalisation and future-making. This is the usual approach to agrarian and rural change. The task is to see how policies work. Such policies may reflect a misinterpretation of rural people, conditions and processes but nonetheless the direction of travel is from the urban to the rural, from the metropole to the periphery, from civilised to backward, and from rich to poor. The intention is to narrow these divides,

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and to draw the rural into the mainstream. But what if we see rural populations as contributory architects of the modern, globalised world? Romanticised and idealised, to be sure, but also key components that make the very world that impinges on the rural. Consider what rural places 'do', beyond producing food.

They provide labour, national and international. This labour directly contributes to growth by providing workers in key sectors and indirectly through care work. In Singapore, households depend on domestic 'helpers', paid at less than the cost of their reproduction, to free up Singapore nationals for the high return work that underpins the city state's prosperity and their own comfortable lives (Teo 2019). These migrants are the lowest paid, the least protected and the most vulnerable – and many originate from rural places. In urban centres in Vietnam, such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Danang, rural migrants keep cities ticking over, even while migrants remain emotionally and functionally connected to their rural homes (Phongsiri et al. 2023). They labour on construction sites, carry and deliver goods, and run stalls. Key functions on which these cities' vitality is based are incumbent on the countryside. And while delivering reproductive work for the urban elite, the countryside continues to reproduce the workers of the future, educating and supporting them though complex split households and caring arrangements (Fan 2021). At times of crisis – and there have been more than a few in recent decades, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s – rural areas and villages become places of succour and support (Suhardiman et al. 2021), crash mats when things go awry.

These roles of the rural are not limited just to late socialist Asia, or indeed just to Asia; they are emblematic of countrysides across the rural global South. To paraphrase J.F. Kennedy, if we ask how the rural drives urban, national and global development, and not just how urban, national and global development propels rural change, then a different image of the countryside comes into view. With such a shift in register, the late socialist Asian countryside becomes a rather different place: a force for change rather than a place of change.

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