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EDITORIAL

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

Jingyu Mao[1], Minh T.N. Nguyen[2] and Phill Wilcox[3]

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

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[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.

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 Cẩm 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 countryside’ 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-à-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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RESEARCH

The Politics of Modernization: Shifting Construction of the Peasant, Mobility Trajectories and Rural Revitalisation in Post-reform China and Vietnam

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Abstract

Based on a comparative study of two villages with distinct translocal and transnational migrant economic networks, this article examines the ideological underpinnings of China and Vietnam's rural development programs in relation to rural people's actions and strategies. Central to these programs are enduring modernizing agendas that seek to reform rural people and transform rural places according to state-defined criteria moulded on class-based notions of civility and population categories that construct rural people as backward and in need of reform. Our ethnographic research finds that villagers undertake multidirectional mobility trajectories to generate social and economic values that defy such constructions. Yet, these are often incorporated by the said state agendas, which maintain a social order based on the rural-urban hierarchy that is crucial for legitimating the political power of their party states. We underscore a complex politics in which rural people contest the imposition of the categories with their actions and at the same time view the said modernising agendas as a social space for value creation.

Keywords: rural development, new countryside, modernisation, mobility, China, Vietnam

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Introduction

In recent decades, the talk of revitalizing and renewing the countryside has been prominent in policy discussions in both China and Vietnam, two formerly state socialist countries that have been pursuing the political economic model so-called market socialism since their respective market reforms several decades ago. In China, the New Socialist Countryside program was put into place in 2006 and a Vietnamese program roughly under the same name in 2009. Both these national programs are underscored by the goals of modernizing the countryside through improving rural infrastructure, integrating rural and urban development while maintaining the rural society's cultural identity as well as its political and social order. In China, the program's goal was "to build a new socialist countryside according to the requirement of advanced production, improved livelihood, a civilized social atmosphere, clean and tidy villages and democratic administration"[4]. According to the Vietnamese government decision that approved the program in 2009[5], its aim was to modernize the entire rural mode of production and improving rural life according to socialist orientation:

> *To build a new countryside with a gradually modernised socio-economic infrastructure, appropriate economic and productive structure; linking agriculture with rapidly developing industries and services; linking rural development to planned urbanisation, maintaining a rural society that is democratic, stable, and rich in the nation's cultural identity; protecting the environment, maintaining security and social order; steadily improving the people's material and spiritual life under socialist orientation.*

More recently, there seems to be intensification of these modernising goals in what the governments of both countries refer to as a new direction in rural development.

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[4] China daily website on the review of the New Socialist Countryside within the 5-year plan period of 2006-2010: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-10/20/content_11436582.htm

[5] Prime Minister Decision No 800/QĐ-TTg, dated 4 June 2010 on Approving the National Target Program of Building the New Countryside between 2010-2020, available on the government's portal http://www.chinhphu.vn/, accessed on 26 August 2016.

In 2017, the Xi Jinping government put forward The Rural Revitalisation program, following the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2017 at which the president announced that modernization of agriculture and rural area was one of the core tasks aimed at achievingthe Chinese dream of "national rejuvenation" and achieving a "moderately prosperous society":

> *To build rural areas with thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity, we need to put in place sound systems, mechanisms, and policies for promoting integrated urban-rural development, and speed up the modernization of agriculture and rural areas.*[6]

Since then, the rural revitalisation drive has been in full swing in China, both in terms of government discourses and local government actions; in 2021, the National People's Congress approved the 'Rural Revitalization Promotion Law' which further emphasized the significance of rural development. In Vietnam, too, the results of the first 10 years of its new countryside program are considered one of the most important achievements of the party state, which even makes claims about having initiated an open-ended revolution[7]. A new plan for further advancing the course of rural modernisation has been laid for the next decade – aiming for so-called "exemplary countryside" (*nông thôn kiểu mẫu*) – which, like the Chinese rural revitalisation program, also places stronger emphasis on integrated rural-urban development, industrialisation of the countryside and greater market integration[8].

In both countries, the intent to modernize the countryside is further accentuated in these master policy narratives about rural people and the countryside within which the "three rural problems" (*sannong/tam nông*) – namely the countryside, agriculture and peasants – are to be tackled. Between the lines of party state rhetoric about turning rural people into the subjects of national development and "rejuvenation", as we discuss below, is an underlying construction of the countryside, including its mode of production and its people, as problematic and in need of improvement in order to justify interventions by the state and the political elites (see also

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[6] Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm, accessed on 06/12/2022.

[7] See government news at: https://baochinhphu.vn/cuoc-cach-mang-khong-dung-lai-102262820.htm (The non-stop revolution), accessed on 08/12/2022

[8] Resolution 19 of the Vietnamese Communist Party on agriculture, peasants, and the countryside until 2030, available at: https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van-ban/van-ban-cua-dang/nghi-quyet-so-19-nqtw-ngay-1662022-hoi-nghi-lan-thu-nam-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xiii-ve-nong-nghiep-nong-dan-nong-8629, accessed on 6/12/2022.

Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). While the party states have consistently sought to reform the countryside through their varying rural development schemes since the founding of these socialist republics, we suggest that there is a shift in the problematisation of the countryside in the market economy, namely in the ideological status of the peasantry from being a revolutionary force under high socialism to a population category to be improved upon. This market-oriented problematization of the countryside and rural people for the state to realise its “will to improve” (Rose and Miller 1992; Li 2007) not only serves to mask the consequences of state-led development on social and cultural lives but also the increasing level of self-responsibilization by rural people in ensuring livelihoods and wellbeing (Nguyen 2017; Hoàng 2024; Wang 2024). Conversely, our ethnographic material from rural China and Vietnam suggest complex trajectories of social and spatial mobilities whose translocal and transnational character transcends any kind of rural-urban distinctions to produce social outcomes that challenge the very conception of rural people as passive and resistant to change. Rural people, however, continue to serve as the trope of the defi-cient subject (see Harwood 2013; Hoàng 2024) for the state’s work of improving. This logic is familiar to varying modernization projects in history, including the colonial-izing mission, which consistently deny coevalness, namely the experience of living in the same era, to certain groups people (Kipnis 1995; Fabian 2014). They are seen as “embodying a mode of production and a way of thinking felt to be antithetical to both socialist and capitalist development” (Kaneff 2001:6). Such denial relegates the peasantry to bygone and unmodern times, thus building them up to be the ones to be catching up with and improved upon by dominant groups and the state. The last several post-reform decades have shown the material implications of this modernisation agenda for rural labour, land and environment in both countries, with the countryside increasingly becoming the frontiers of commodification, financialization and capital accumulation (Lin and Nguyen 2021; Cole and Ingalls 2020; Chuang 2020).

In this article, we will first take a look at the changing ways in which rural people and the countryside are problematized in post-reform rural development discourses in China and Vietnam viz-a-viz their national development orientation in the new economy. What follow are two ethnographic case studies from rural China and Vietnam that link the local implementation of the national rural development strategy to local mobility trajectories. The China site has a mobile network of trading that specialises in operating convenience stores catering to migrant workers in different parts of the country, and the Vietnam case is home to a network of transnational labour migration to Europe.

The research was conducted as part of a long-standing comparative anthropological study of rural mobility and welfare in China and Vietnam led by the first author since 2018, with the research assistance of the second author in Vietnam and the third author in China. During the first two years, we made three visits about two to four weeks in each site where we conducted participant observation, interviews with local people and government officials, including some officials at the district level in Vietnam and the county level in China. During 2020-2022, two team field trips were conducted in Vietnam, and because of pandemic restrictions on cross-border mobility later on, the second and the third authors made further stays in the villages on their own, in close consultation with the first author. During this period, the first author also met villagers from Vietnam who have migrated to Germany through multiple short field trips to Berlin, where many of them live and work. In both villages, the researchers stayed with a host family and participated in their daily life and kinship events, also extending visits to their relatives and friends. Our main informants were villagers, both those based in the village and those living and working in other cities in China and in Europe (in the case of people from Blue Mountain), with many of whom we shared meals, tea table conversations and pleasantries. These case studies indicate how rural people take part in the said politics of modernization with their mobilities and aspirations, simultaneously challenging hegemonic discourses about peasant backwardness and using state-led development goals as spaces for value creation. The comparison between China and Vietnam is productive for considering the varying manners in which this politics of modernization unfolds in the two countries with similar polities yet relatively different historical experiences and trajectories.

The Backward Other: Peasants, Rural Life and Agriculture

The notion of the Chinese peasant, according to anthropologist Myron Cohen (1993), is an invention at the turn of the 20th century. With it, the Chinese elites, including Maoist and communist intellectuals, consistently constructed the old social order as worth eradicating for the sake of modernising China; for them, “the physical, political and economic liberation of the peasantry required its cultural destruction” (Cohen 1993:155). The Chinese adoption of the Japanese term *nongmin* then is, according to him, “a conceptual transformation of the rural populations from farmers into peasants” (ibid.), the latter referring to subsistence-oriented agriculturalists of pre-modern society and the former market-oriented producers. This conceptual transformation went in the opposite direction as that of the European modernizing project of turning peasants into farmers. China in the late imperial era had been in fact notable for the cultural, social, political and economic interconnections between the city and the countryside. As well, there was much greater variety in the rural economy of China and Vietnam than the then rural-urban distinction allowed. In both countries, rural people had been actively involved in small market trade and commercial disposal of their crops, with small-holding farms often acting as mini-enterprises managing their kin-based human resources and property (Endres and Leshkowich 2018; Cohen 1993; Goody 1996). In Vietnam, as in China, villages had commonly been the locus of industrial and commercial activities alongside with small-holding agriculture (Gourou 1955) – a feature that explains people's relatively easy movements between subsistence agriculture and market trade in the two villages we study. The communist governments' characterisation of the peasant was not unlike that of the earlier European representation of Asian societies as uncivilised and resistant to change that served as the moral justification for colonial civilizing missions (Tappe and Nguyen 2019). In the same way, it denies the dynamism that had led to flourishing commerce and technological advances in agriculture responsible for the high productivity of the limited arable land area serving large populations over centuries (Bray 1986; Goody 1996). Despite complex mobility trajectories and diverse forms of productive enterprises that rural people have been engaging since the reform, they continue to be "held by definition to be incapable of creative and autonomous participation" in the project of national reconstruction (Cohen 1993:154).

More than a pure cultural category, however, the invented peasant has highly political underpinnings. It first served as the basis for these communist governments' classification of the populations into different kinds and classes of persons, before turning the invented peasant into "statutory peasants" (Cohen 1993) through legal provisions that later came to be solidified in both countries' household registration systems (*hukou/hộ khẩu*). Installed in the 50s, the household registration system ties provision of social services and citizen rights to one's place of registration, and one's household registration status is transmitted to the next generation. To varying extents, these systems regulated the spatial and social mobility of the Vietnamese and Chinese populations and formed the structure of resource distribution during state socialism. As part of this system, the small proportion of urban residents and industrial workers enjoyed employment and welfare privileges unavailable to most rural people for decades, if even these privileges were modest compared to current living standards. Rural people, meanwhile, had access to collectively owned agricultural land as a source of subsistence and basic welfare organised through the agricultural production units (Nguyen and Chen 2017). As Kipnis (1995) suggests, what had started as a construction to emphasise the revolutionary potentials of the peasants as an exploited class and description of a social order to be overcome as strategic basis for building coalition turned into a highly discriminatory social classification after 1949 in China (see also Solinger 1999). To a lesser degree, the same can be said of Vietnam after 1954 in the north and after 1975 in the whole country following the end of the second Indochina war. This took place despite the major role of the rural populations in sustaining the socialist central planning system in both countries and in contributing to the eventual power of the Vietnamese Communist government in unified Vietnam after 1975 (Kerkvliet 1995).

In post-reform China and Vietnam, meanwhile, the notion of the peasantry as problematic continues to hold sway despite increasing co-residence of people formally classified as rural and urban through internal migration, urbanisation and growing transnational mobility (Chu 2010; Guldin 2001; Harwood 2013; Oakes and Schein 2005; Nguyen and Locke 2014). But something has changed in the very problematization of the peasantry since their respective reforms at the end of the 1970s and in mid-1980s, ushering in the era of market socialism, i.e. marketization under Communist party rule. If before and during state socialism, the peasantry, having been constructed as part of the feudal social order, was imbued with historical agency as revolutionary subjects, it came to be seen more and more as the obstacle to growth-based national development with its backwardness (Day 2008; Kipnis 1995; Truong and Vo 1974). Along with the revaluation of labour according its differential quality, in contrast to the more egalitarian mode of valuing labour under high socialism, arose the understanding of the peasants as “needing liberation to develop their capitalist tendencies and transform themselves into entrepreneurial farmers” (Day 2008:55). The economistic understanding of the peasantry under market socialism thus disregards its once central political agency that had helped the party states to power in both countries. Originating from the notion of population quality/quality of labour at the beginning of the countries’ respective reforms, it implies that the low quality of the (then) majority peasantry led to economic stagnation and should be addressed by investing in training and education and developing commodity production (Schneider 2015; Kipnis 2007).

Over the last few decades since the reform, the technocratic notion of “quality of labour” has morphed into the moralistic notions of “human quality” in China (*suzhi*) and “people’s intellectual level” in Vietnam (*dân trí*). These notions refer to a shifting range of desirable citizen qualities such as being educated, law-abiding, technologically aware, and possessing cultural skills and consumption knowledge (Anagnost 2004; Nguyen and Locke 2014). The moral construction of the peasantry as lacking in such qualities serves to further underplay its political agency by “displacing class as a way to understand social inequality and peasant agency” for a dichotomy between those are of low and high qualities (Day 2008:65), qualities that are assumed to originate in urban centres to be acquired by peasants to improve themselves in their image (Harwood 2013). The current framework of rural revitalisation and modernisation heavily promotes agro-industrialisation and commodity farming in both countries[9]. In it, one could detect the underlying connection between the said problematisation of the peasantry as a social form and of small-holding as an agricultural form, forms that are known to be responsible for centuries of sustainably high level of production in these agrarian societies (Bray 1986; Schneider 2015). Casting peasants and their small-scale production as problems turns them into targets of the ongoing capitalist transformations directed by the party state seeking to integrate them into its market-oriented modernizing project, sometimes leading to their dispossession and dislocation (Harwood 2013, Schneider 2015, Nguyen and Locke 2014, Lin and Nguyen 2021). As Wang (2024)'s contribution to this special issue indicates, the expansion of the platform economy and e-commerce in rural areas is being promoted as key to rural revitalisation in some Chinese provinces. Its operation, she shows, valorises the visibility of a small number of rurally based e-commerce entrepreneurs who are able to take advantage of market-based solutions to sell rural produce online while rendering rural producers and their labour invisible, eventually helping to reinforce the dominant construction of the backward peasants as a whole. The invisibilization and thus devaluation of the labour of marginalized rural populations are also highlighted in Nguyen T. A. and Nguyen T. N. M. (forthcoming)'s analysis of contract farming for global agro-businesses in Northern Vietnam, where migrants of ethnic minority background are employed to live in complete isolation on the farm for disease protection of the animals.

Since their market reforms, the double-layered construction of peasants and smallholding agriculture as problematic underpins the mass mobility of labour from rural areas into industrial and urban centres to support industrialization and tertiarization, seen by policy makers as a way for rural people to move out of subsistence agriculture. While both states have promoted this mobility of labour, they have made sure that the reproduction of the labour largely rests with the countryside through the household registration systems that deny crucial social services and welfare access to rural migrants for decades (Wang 2005; Nguyen and Locke 2014). Recent reforms to the household registration in Vietnam make it easier for rural migrants to obtain urban household registration while solidifying them through digitalisation, rendering *hộ khẩu*-related transactions and claims more easily traceable for the sake of citizen control. In China, rural and urban hukou is now being integrated, making it possible for migrants to get registered in cities of up to five million (relatively modest size for the country). However, hukou access in megacities, the preferred destinations for rural migrants from poorer provinces because of their large labour markets, has become highly selective through a strict point-based system that favours elite migrants with higher-education credential and skills and continue to exclude labour migrants from poorer provinces (Lin and Mao 2022). These household registration reforms thus have practically transformed the rural-urban distinction from one based on modes of production to one premised on *suzhi* (human quality) though statutory classifications that continue to treat rural people as the backward Other, even as their labour mobility is instrumentalised for the state project of modernizing the countryside. The social order thus is sustained through the modified statutory classifications feeding into the dominant discourse of the "uncivilized peasants" that does not recede even in former villages that have now been absorbed into urban centres in China (Du 2021; Nguyen and Wei 2024).

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[9] See coverage and documentation on the internet portal of the Chinese Rural Revitalisation Program: http://p.china.org.cn/ and the Vietnamese New Countryside program: http://nongthonmoi.gov.vn/Pages/Trang-chu.aspx

The problematization of the peasantry and its mode of production, despite the changing terms just discussed, is underpinned by a form of high modernism akin to what was adopted by authoritarian states throughout the last century that James Scott (2020) identifies in *Seeing Like a State*. While Scott (2020) points out the social engineering imposed on local conditions as a means to make populations legible to the state and the planned social order, we underscore the imposition of moral and cultural categories on population groups to justify state interventions in their communal and private lives. As the other articles in this special issue, especially Hoàng (2024) and Wang (2024), show, the legibility of the rural populations in China and Vietnam today are mapped onto moral scales premised on capacities for market participation and marketized notions of the good reified by the New/Beautiful Countryside Program. Emblematic of market-induced homogenization, these scales are endorsed by states that continue to orchestrate social interventions through the use of socialist structures and institutions. Contra Scott's predictions of such schemes' ultimate failure on account of the standardization that denies or even suppresses the existence of local diversity and knowledge, however, we suggest that these rural development schemes are sustained as a primary public space for value creation by ordinary people (see also Hoàng 2024; Nguyen 2017, 2018). Even when they take actions that are not endorsed by the state (Chau 2019) or contest the devaluation of their labour and personhood given rise to by these categories, rural people in China and Vietnam today tend to map their or their children's personal transformations in the terms of *suzhi* and *dân trí,* and thus the party states' vision of modernity (Chu 2010; Harwood 2013; Nguyen and Wei 2024). This form of subjectivation has incorporated governing techniques deriving from earlier periods of socialist mobilisation and the use of moral exemplars in contexts that Bakken (2000) refers to as "the exemplary society" in combination with certain elements of neoliberal governmentality (Kipnis 2007).

As such, the politics of modernisation here refers to both people's contestations at the level of actions and their alignments at the level of value creation vis-à-vis the state's modernizing agenda. Anthropologists have shown how modernisation as a teleological trajectory of an onward march towards a future in which the possibilities of a good life are guaranteed is a myth that consistently does not hold up to realities but that which has important social functions (Brenner 1998; Ferguson 1999). This myth does not only legitimize state interventions such as the New/Beautiful Countryside Program and its construction of rural people as in need of improving, but also "gives form to an understanding of the world, providing a set of categories and premises that continue to shape people's experiences and interpretations of their lives" (Ferguson 1999:16). In the context of market socialism, this myth helps the state to offer market-based aspirational possibilities for its citizens while backtracking on socialist promises of shared prosperity and universal care (Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024). In the following, we present the cases of two villages that are formally recognised as exemplary models of rural revitalisation in each country. The dynamism and the possibilities for social change unleashed by their mobility trajectories indicate both their capacity to take actions that deviate from or even defy the agenda of the party states (see also Chau 2019, Nguyen, and Rigg 2024) and their identification with the state's narrative of modernisation that deems them as inferior according to the benchmarks of *suzhi* and *dân trí*. We suggest that both their actions and identification with state categories indicate the agency of reflexive subjects that challenge the said constructions of rural people and places. The party states, meanwhile, are shown to be appropriating the values created by the very rural people they deem backward and deficient for their claims to be the only legitimate arbitrator of modernity and progress.

Lianqi (China) and Blue Mountain (Vietnam)[10]: Exemplars of Rural Modernisation

In their respective countries, both Lianqi and Blue Mountain have been lauded as models for the modernization of the countryside. Given that they were still considered relatively remote locations by the end of the last century, the two villages today boast a visibly well-built infrastructure and standards of living that are seen as enviable for other rural regions. But more than any state-initiated improvement measures that both states credit themselves with, our ethnographic records indicate that these are connected to rising land prices, partly due to state strategies of converting agricultural into urban residential land for revenue generation (Lin and Mao 2022) and local people's self-driven trajectories of mobilities that had started before their respective reforms. Given the policy intentions of directing agricultural labour to the factories and urban services, these mobilities follow their own goals and moral logics, even as they are driven by certain hegemonic desires and aspirations (Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021).

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[10] Lianqi is called an administrative village, which in China combines a number of former natural villages. Administratively, Blue Mountain is called a "commune", which in Vietnam also grew out of putting together smaller former villages. The two thus are relatively comparable, and we sometimes refer to both of them as villages for the sake of simplification.

The Local Implementation of Rural Revitalisation as National Strategy

Lanqi (China)

Lanqi is located in a semi-mountainous region of Lishui city, southwest of Zhejiang province. It is within the vicinity of the township and a big industrial zone of the city, with good transport connections. The village is composed of seven natural villages, 18 village groups (*cunmin xiaozu*), with a total population of 1703 in 2020. As agricultural producers, villagers shifted from paddy rice to vegetables around the 1990s, which continue to be the main crops until now, and the village's initiative to set up of two vegetable markets in the 2000s facilitated the sales of vegetables grown here to regional cities, a factor that made it a model village under the Chinese Socialist New Village programme in 2006. The village authorities started with selling residential land to village outsiders, usually urban middle-class people yearning for a rustic life or those born in the village but whose *hukou* was no longer registered there. In the words of the former party secretary of the village, the New Chinese Socialist Village programme started here "with nothing but only the title of model village". The local government had not provided any funds except a promise to improve the road conditions of the village. Therefore, the village leadership decided to attract wealthy 'outsiders' to buy land and build new houses in the village, while encouraging villagers to sell unused residential land to them. According to the land law, however, all the land of the village is collectively owned and cannot be transferred to village outsiders. Thus, the built houses under these village-initiated transactions had been considered illegal until 2016 when under a pilot project, owners were allowed to pay a fine to get their properties legalised. The fines for the more than 100 houses built under this initiative fetched a large sum of 60 million RMB, part of which can be used to finance infrastructure projects.

As a result, the infrastructure of the village had been significantly improved before the Rural Revitalisation program, with which the local government focused more on improving the 'aesthetic effect' of the village (see also Wei 2021). For example, the village committee spent three million RMB in decorating a road by the riverside where village cadres and wealthy settlers are concentrated, replacing apricots with more expensive trees and the former cement road with asphalt road and supporting families by the roadside to build brick fences on their front yard. In term of industrial development, the municipal government expropriated a large tract of agricultural land to build a new township that includes a 'High-tech Town' (*kechuang xiaozhen*), the kind of development that Wang (2024) describes in her contribution to this special issue. The main strategy to implement these programmes is to expropriate land from the village at low cost before selling it to the enterprises at high price and using the profit from land sale to finance the public infrastructure construction. With the implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the population of Lianqi has been increasing through the arrival of construction workers recruited by real estate companies, factory workers, and those who moved in having bought houses in the village, although many newly built properties remain vacant. As we see below, however, many villagers have long been migrating all over China as part of a rural network specialised in operating household-based convenient stores and, their migrant livelihoods have brought about major changes to household economy. As with the migrant networks originating from the Vietnamese village, these changes are equally significant to those brought about by the expropriation of land as a way to finance their infrastructural development and spending.

Blue Mountain (Vietnam)

Divided into eight hamlets, Blue Mountain commune has a population of more than eight thousand persons, including many who were born and are living overseas and yet still registered in the village. It used to be a rice-farming village in a semi-mountainous terrain, which allows some parts of the local population to have access to forest land and products while endowing local people with limited farming areas. Both oral histories and official accounts suggested that due to the shortage of land and the ravages of the American war (carpet bombing had destroyed much of the land and infrastructure), the commune used to have high level of poverty until the 1990s, which prompted an increasing number of local people to leave for Europe in search of livelihoods opportunities when this became possible.

Unlike in Lianqi, where the recent local implementation of rural revitalisation has come to depend heavily on the expropriation of agricultural land for sale to private developers, Blue Mountain follows the approach of "the state and the people jointly carry out the work" (*nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm*). Promoted by the Vietnamese government, who can less afford to openly antagonize the rural populations because of its earlier dependence on the latter's support during the two independence wars (Kerkvliet 1995), this approach involves a gentler degree of rural land expropriation combined with a greater level of mobilization of contributions by local people. This basically translates into the local government financing a number of major projects of the communes with the funds generated from land auction and making available some construction material (mostly cement) for village-based infrastructural items whose costs are to a large extent covered by local contributions, both mandatory contributions and voluntary donations. As for Lianqi, a large part of the resources for local infrastructure project has been made available thanks to the emergence of a rural land market (see Chuang 2020 for broader dynamics shaping this). In China, however, this involves the local government's expropriation of agricultural land at low costs for sale to private developers at higher prices, whereas in Vietnam, the communal land put up for sale through auction to villagers and outsiders has been made available from previous land consolidation. Land consolidation (*dồn điền đổi thửa*) was a national activity of the New Countryside Program through which a certain percentage of agricultural land was taken from local households to release land for communal projects such as irrigation and to generate funds for local construction project. As elsewhere, the Blue Mountain government can keep 40% the funds generated through the auctions (around 12 billion VND – 500 thousand EUR in 2021) and the rest are transferred upwards to higher levels of administration.

Apart from the ample funds from the land auctions (whose sales are boosted by the great interest of transnational migrants with high purchasing power), the commune has been able to reach the 19 criteria set by the New Countryside program (see Hoàng 2024) thanks to the high level of mobilization of local resources through the so-called socialisation policy (Nguyen 2018). While local officials often present these as achievements of the local party and government, they cannot help noting in informal conversations that it is the high incomes from transnational migration have made it possible for both the resource mobilization and the change in the local economic structure, with remittance being invested in commodity production of agricultural produce, construction material and others. In both Lianqi and Blue Mountain, as we show below, villagers' mobilities do not just breathe new economic energies to their villages, but also usher in social changes in ways that reveal the dynamism and agency often denied to rural people by national discourses that cast them as backward and anaemic to changes.

Trajectories of Labour Mobility and Rural People as Drivers of Change

Let us start with the network of translocal mobility in Blue Mountain. In the 1980s, people in north central Vietnam, including Blue Mountain, were sent to Eastern Europe under labour export agreements that the Vietnamese government had with socialist governments then, especially to Eastern Germany, Russia and Poland.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communist states in Eastern Europe, which coincided with the begin of market reforms in Vietnam, some stayed on to become the first generation of the post-reform diaspora. Having grown up in unified Vietnam, their political perspectives differ from those having arrived earlier following the two Indochina wars, often displaying stronger affiliation and association with the discourses and legitimacy of the ruling party state. The fall of the Berlin wall made it possible for many to acquire asylum and residence in the newly unified Germany. Former guest workers served as the first point of contact and social support upon arrival for the people from Blue Mountain in Germany, many of whom came to Germany from the later 1990s and increasingly more so in the 2000s. While some sought immigration status as family members of those who have settled there, others have paid intermediaries to be transported to Germany where they spend long years of their life in transit and fraught struggles around the acquisition of immigration papers, often through marriage or childbirth (Mai 2021). Both the journeys to Europe and legal documents are costly affairs that often require the pooling of major resources by extended family members (from several thousand Euro in the early 2000s to 50-70 thousand 20 years later). The money often comes from the land sales, bank credits and/or private loans that their extended families can mobilize for the sake of the departure of the first member, who, once established with a viable income source would pay the family debts and sponsor other family members to follow in their footsteps.

Within two decades, this mobility trajectory has brought hundreds of people from the village to Europe. By 2022, about 2000 villagers from less than 2000 families, including children born overseas, are residing in different European countries, about a third of whom are in Germany, according to the local government. Until the early 2000, people from the village were mostly employed as hired hands for small businesses or self-employed in open bazaars or Vietnamese markets – some were hawking cigarettes on the street. Nowadays, while many entertain businesses within and around the bustling ethnic markets in Berlin, Warsaw or Prague, others have established themselves as owners of restaurants, nail salons or flower shops within the cities, creating vibrant economies largely powered by the self-employed and hired labour from homeplace networks. In Berlin, the popularisation of Vietnamese food has been partly initiated by people from the north central region of Vietnam where Blue Mountain is located, not a few of whom have come to Germany straight out of their villages. Unlike the earlier mom-and-pop stores selling cheap eats under Chinese or other Asian names, the growing number of the now visibly Vietnamese restaurants carrying Vietnamese names operated by Blue Mountain villagers offer Vietnamese food as dining experiences for professional and middle-class Germans. A few operators have managed to upscale their businesses into well-known chains occupying frequented urban spaces of major cities. Needless to say, this mobility trajectory is by no means smooth, and often requires a high level of risk assumption, sometimes innumerable sacrifices for both the migrants and their families, even the possibility of death is taken for granted as one of the risks of the migration (Nguyen 2021).

Yet, the growing number of villagers who are economically active in Europe has brought about major changes in the village in terms of wealth accumulation and incomes as well as lifestyle. The high level of remittance makes it possible for many families to increase their living standards and everyday consumption. Often the first priority for families once the remittance starts to be sent back and the debts are settled, many of the recently built houses in the village are large professionally-designed European style buildings, even villas, that are equipped with modern facilities. Although the houses throughout the year are mostly occupied by elderly people and the children of the migrants, the new houses stand as proof of the families' achievements (see similar dynamics of translocal mobility within Vietnam in Nguyen 2018). If improved housing standard is one of the first criteria for a locality to achieve the new countryside status (see Hoàng 2024), Blue Mountain government hardly needs to do much for the housing and infrastructure that are the subject of envy by people in other localities. As well, for a community whose oral histories are full of anecdotes about the "hungry" and dirt-poor period decades ago that had prompted people to leave Vietnam to improve their lives, it is important for people that their village as a whole has gone up in the world and that they contribute to the improved image of their homeplace. In Blue Mountain, families with members living and working in Europe, which are the majority, are expected to make monetary contributions to the improvements of the village as a whole. Funds are mobilized from migrant households that have been absent from the village as long as their registration remains here. Yet most would readily do so, sometimes even overdoing it for the sake of recognition by the village and the local authorities – the sending and receiving of money between the village and overseas for such purposes are facilitated by a range of formal and informal monetary transfer services that has been enabling the circulation of huge volumes within Blue Mountain's transnational economy. Consequently, the infrastructure of the village, including the irrigation systems, its well-built road networks and community centres have benefited from financial resources mobilized from local families, much in the same way that the national program has been implemented elsewhere in the country on the basis of the "socialization" of resources (Nguyen 2017, 2018; Hoàng 2024).

Now, let us consider the Chinese village, Lianqi, whose mobility trajectory differs from Blue Mountain's in that it takes place mostly within China (a few people went overseas as migrant labourers in the past, but have returned due to rising wages in China). Yet, it shares the starting point of local people acting under the imperative of economic hardships induced by the constraints of the centrally planned economy by taking hold of a gradually emerging pathway of livelihoods beyond the village and beyond government approved forms of labour mobility. Lianqi villagers' narratives of their village's history are similarly rich in stories about how difficult life was at the turn of the 1980s and how poor the village had been as a result of the then government restrictions and their unfavourable remote mountainous location. Already before the reform, some villagers had started going around the country to practice mobile vendoring or operating stalls in open markets even as families were cultivating rice and practicing self-subsistence agriculture. With the growing migrant labour force in China in the 1990s, villagers identified a niche in the provision of low-cost household goods and processed food and drinks, such as instant noodles or sugared teas, to migrant workers in industrial areas and their households in migrant sending areas. For migrant workers who often cluster around their factories in coastal cities, they provide an important service when catering to their daily consumption needs in ways that suit the latter's restricted time availability (due to shift and overtime work on the production line) and living space as well as their high degree of job mobility (Nguyen and Wei 2024). At the beginning, villagers would rent vacant plots of land to set up temporary stores in those areas. Later, with urban development in coastal cities, they turned to spaces in more stable buildings such as the ground floor of factory worker dormitories or residential housing to open household-operated convenience stores that they refer to as supermarkets (*chaoshi*). Nowadays, a large number of families in the village are operating *chaoshi* all over the country; in order to optimize sales, their household reproduction and business operation align with the mobility patterns of migrant workers and their production lines (Nguyen and Wei 2024). If their stores used to be mostly located in coastal cities in places with high concentrations of migrant workers, many now are following the movements of migrant workers to provinces further inland alongside the industrial relocation that has been occurring as a result of rising wages and stricter environmental control on the coast.

As for Blue Mountain villagers, Lianqi people's mobility is underscored by risk assumption due to the instabilities and fluctuation of their mobile customer base and the likelihood of indebtedness, and the personal costs of long-term family separation because of the need to frequently shift locations. Notwithstanding, it demonstrates a high degree of resilience thanks to the strength of their rural networks based on which they could find suitable store locations, reliable suppliers and important pricing information. As well, a dynamism emerging from long years of cumulative experiences with translocal mobility, frequently setting up shop in new places and restarting business after set-backs, allows for the easy inclusion of new members. Despite the trade-offs and risks (Nguyen and Wei 2024), the resulting expansion of the *chaoshi* network has become one of the main sources of livelihoods for many villagers and brought about major material changes as can be seen in the high level of housing construction and improved living standards in the village, which provided the conditions for receiving further state funding for its infrastructure development. As for Blue Mountain villagers, some Lianqi villagers have managed to own urban properties with the earnings from the *chaoshi* trade. When speaking about these material changes in their life, most people would say that they have come about as a result of them having “eaten bitterness” in order to earn the “blood and sweat” money that makes these changes possible. “Eating bitterness” refers to the experience of persevering in the face of great hardship and personal sacrifices (note that during the land reforms in the 1950s, speaking bitterness was a political mobilization technique aimed at re-enacting the class-based violence that peasants had endured before the revolution – see for example a discussion in (Yan 2008)). It is often used to measure success by individuals and communities through the moral strength to withstand challenges in order to reach eventual desirable outcomes. Such narratives of overcoming insurmountable challenges to arrive at what one has achieved are also common in Blue Mountain, where the first things people would tell us is how impossible it seemed to mobilize large sums of money to finance the transnational mobility to Europe in the face of extreme poverty, and yet they still managed. Their assessments of the visible material changes in their village would invariably evoke the extremely precarious paths of mobility on wich they or their family members embarked, including immature and violent deaths (Nguyen 2021; Nguyen and Wei 2024).

In their narratives, villagers in both sites emphasize that the changes in their lives and that of their villages would not have happened if it had not been for their daring undertakings despite all sacrifice and hardship as well as their ability to master lives on the move throughout the country and across the national borders. As Lianqi people would often say: “We rely on ourselves!” (*kao ziji*) – they refuse to frame these changes as being brought about by the state rural development programs, although they appreciate being members of a model village with a higher level of development than other rural places. If asked about these programs, the Chinese villagers tend to talk about the issues of compensation for land expropriation or the unequal distribution of infrastructural projects. Some would laugh off the efforts of the local government to put on a show with their infrastructure projects, as our hosts in Lianqi did when once telling us about the houses with the beautiful flowery facades on the roadside leading into the village that in her opinion looked awful inside. The Vietnamese villagers would point out how “labour export” has enabled their village to become a New Countryside exemplar, although many would complain about the level of contributions to the construction of public infrastructure projects. In Blue Mountain, this has been inflated by richer migrant households' readiness to donate large sums as an indication of their success.

The narratives of the villagers contest the party states' claims that their policies have changed rural people's life through their project of improving the “quality” of the people, the mode of production and the beauty of the countryside. In the same way as depicted by the ironic statement of a farmer in North Vietnam (Nguyen 2017) – “the countryside can only be new if the people's pockets are full” –, implicit in these narratives is a commonly shared conviction that the outcomes of the state program depend less on state interventions than on local people's actions and the material improvements generated by migrant livelihoods. Even as they thereby recognise the authority of the party state in shaping the direction of rural development (Wilcox, Rigg and Nguyen 2021), these narratives are also people's claims to be the drivers of change, which pose implicit challenges to these party states' assertions of being the sole guardian and arbitrator of the modernity to be achieved by rural subjects through its orchestrated development programs. Simultaneously, people do map their personal transformations according to the state sponsored categories such as *suzhi* and *dân trí*, categories that define them as belonging to a different time and place from those occupied by modern citizen subjects (Chu 2010; Nguyen and Wei 2024). As a Lianqi mother, a successful migrant trader who had managed to build a profitable business, said to us: “Even if I had to be a beggar, I would try to support the education of my daughter”. She wanted her to be respected by others, she said: “it is important that people do not look down on you”, a statement that she made several times during our conversation. To Minh Nguyen's comment that she would be surprised if such a successful business person like her would not be respected by others, she said that those with jobs requiring higher education have “stable lives and stable incomes”, which people like her do not have, before adding: “They have higher *suzhi* and are more civilised. When they invite someone, even if they spend little money on the food, people would say it is great, whereas people like me could spend a lot of money on a meal to invite others and would not get as much appreciation.” The Chinese mother's determination to obtain higher education for her daughter to make up for her supposedly lower *suzhi* than educated professionals is underpinned by the same reference used by other *chaoshi* traders when commenting on the low *suzhi* of their customers in poorer regions (Nguyen and Wei 2024). In Vietnam, meanwhile, a very similar reference is evoked by Blue Mountain people when they talk about how far they have come from a beginning of poverty and low *dân trí* to become an exemplar of development to be looked up to by others in the region.

Conclusion

In both Lianqi and Blue Mountain, one could see how the transformations of rural infrastructure and economic life depend greatly on the commodification of rural land as well as rural people's actions and mobilities in finding their way out of poverty and pursue their aspirations for a good life. As pointed out by various scholars, the economic problems they had confronted had nothing to do with their assumed backwardness, but due to national policies and in the case of Vietnam, decades of war (Schwenkel 2020; Day 2013). Deploying their home-place networks and moral economic systems to traverse complex terrains of trade, risk and accumulation and multiple locations and spaces, these mobility trajectories of Lianqi and Blue Mountain people lay to rest any assumptions of peasant backwardness and passivity. As the editors of this special issue (Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024) also point out, they are by no means in need of being liberated from themselves – their habits and their way of thinking – and improved upon to become entrepreneurial subjects fit for the new economy as implied by state development programs. As they emphasise the moral strength of their homeplace and their rural networks, rural people articu-late an agentic positioning in engaging with the global and national economies to improve individual and communal lives that departs from the construction of them as the object of the state's will to improve (Li 2007; Rose and Miller 1992).

Yet, even as people's actions contest the state programs' underlying ideological construction of them as deficient subjects through categories of population quality, i.e. *suzhi* or *dan tri*, that relegate them to the lower rungs of the social order (Hoàng 2024), they tend to seek validation of their actions through the very categories with which they are so constructed. This makes it possible for the social outcomes of such grassroots actions and trajectories as those undertaken by Lianqi and Blue Mountain villagers to be absorbed by the state project of improving the countryside (Taylor 2007; Nguyen 2017, 2018; Nguyen and Wei 2024). Such appropriation of the value created through bottom-up initiatives is often made with the backing of the hegemonic notions of civility and progress as collective goals (Harms 2016; Hoàng 2024) that generate desires for national belonging and recognition. In the meantime, the construction of peasants and rural areas as deficient and in need of reforming continue to serve as a political foil for modernizing agendas that legitimise the power of the intellectual and political elite often located in urban centres, and that of these party states.

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RESEARCH

Civilizing Deficient Subjects: The New Rural Development Program and Trajectories of Rural Life in Late Socialist Vietnam

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Abstract

Since 2010, the Vietnamese government has administered the New Rural Development Program to improve the quality of rural people's lives. The program includes a set of 19 criteria for diagnosing problems, devising interventions and measuring changes. Villages must meet these criteria to be recognized as new rural communities. The criteria become not only a tool for authorities to govern rural people's lives, but also a source of reference and meaning for rural people to change their conduct and navigate their futures. In the process of rectifying their perceived deficiencies and constructing new identities, rural people may complain about the excessive demands of the criteria, but still they look for ways to be recognized by the program rather than challenge its core ideas.

Keywords: new rural development, socialist modernity, rural transformation, Vietnam

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Introduction

During a field research trip in late fall 2021, Thương,[2] an ethnic Nùng woman who serves as a local Women's Union officer in Lạng Sơn Province, told me: "I won't dare to work as the commune Women's Union officer next term anymore, because I can't even get my house done – it's embarrassing. I'm the Women's Union officer, my job is to propagate the program and urge people to implement the New Rural program, but if even my own house can't be done then no one will listen to me." Anyone present would be surprised to hear these words, as, in reality, it was not that Thương and her husband did not have a house: they lived together with the husband's mother in a house of decent size. The house in which we sat was a traditional Nùng rammed-earth house (*nhà trình tường*). Although built a long time ago, it was still solid and beautiful. According to local people, these houses' thick rammed-earth walls ensure that they are "warm in winter and cool in summer", making them especially suitable to the climate of Vietnam's northern mountainous region. However, because their main materials are wood and soil, they do not meet the standard of Vietnam's "National Target Program on New Rural Development" (NRD) that requires houses to be "strong and modern", following the program's "three hard" [*ba cứng*] criterion – "hard floor, hard frame, hard roof". Families that have yet to replace their traditional houses with new "three hard" houses are considered unable to fulfill the NRD's housing classification and assessment requirements. In addition, the house where Thương's family lived did not meet the program's standards for toilet, kitchen and area per person.

Housing – Thương's aching concern over the past few years – is only one among the NRD's 19 national criteria and 49 targets. Commenced in 2010, the program has attracted substantial participation from all levels of government, as well as contribution of resources, both material and human, from people throughout the country. In line with observations made of comparable programs in other parts of Asia (Pigg

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[2] In this paper, I follow the common ethnographic practice of using pseudonyms for all persons and places in order to protect the anonymity of informants.

1992; Li 1999, 2014; Wilcox et al. 2021; Mao et al. 2024), the underlying rationale of Vietnam's NRD is that rural areas are peripheral and marginal regions, lacking in key conditions needed for modernization and development. In essence, even though rural areas have experienced dramatic changes, their identity has been and continues to be represented and imagined as "old", "backward", "poor" and "irrational" – effectively locked into the timeless tyranny of tradition. The goal of the program – its "will to improve" a deficient rural population[3] – is expansive, involving a comprehensive transformation of rural areas, including infrastructure, natural environment, economic, social and cultural life, and, most importantly, people's way of thinking, in order to improve the well-being of the rural population overall.

The imposition of external development models on "underdeveloped" people is not uncommon among development policies and programs around the world (see, for example, Kampe 1997; Escobar 1995; Duncan 2004). The universalizing practice of applying a "central" civilization's supposedly more "advanced model" of development to "peripheral" societies has also been very common in both Western and Eastern societies in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts (Harrell 1995; Li 1999). In Vietnam, even before the 1986 economic reforms (*Đổi Mới*), the government had already implemented several programs aimed at civilizing rural people in both lowlands and uplands (Hoàng Cầm and Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2015; Hoàng Cầm et al. 2018). This vision of development, of which the NRD that this article discusses is a clear manifestation, continues to be implemented today. In addition to its similarities to other development programs, the NRD's new and important features, in terms of rural socio-cultural transformation, include its synchronicity and expansion, the essentiality of fixed standardized criteria in its execution and assessment, and the multiplicity of social actors involved in its implementation. In comparison with previous rural development programs in Vietnam, the NRD is considered a most important political mission, and its highly autocratic implementation is integrated into the resolutions of the Communist Party's congress at all levels, from national to local. Local governments and communities have no choice but to implement and complete the program according to the plans mapped out at the highest levels.

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[3] According to Foucault (cited in Li 2014:6), the will to improve is concerned with "men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with . . . wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with all its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to . . . customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.; and lastly, men in their relation to . . . accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, etc."

This paper, based mainly on ethnographic data,[4] examines the NRD's underlying ideology, implementation and impacts on rural people. I argue that the NRD, like other improvement schemes, is driven and shaped by the kind of objective that Li (2014) terms the "will to improve". In 2010, officials from diverse ministries and their trustees – their responsibility and their qualification to fulfil it "defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need" (Li 2014:4) – worked together to establish a concrete set of 19 national criteria and associated targets to be used to diagnose rural problems, devise external interventions and measure outcomes, with the ultimate goal being to improve the quality of life for rural people. The 19 national criteria cover not only economic conditions, infrastructure, landscape, housing, hygiene and environment, but also socio-cultural life, grassroots democracy and, perhaps most importantly, local modes of thinking. Rural people and communities throughout the country, whether ethnic minorities in the highlands or majority *Kinh* in the lowlands, must strive to meet these 19 national criteria and associated targets in order to be recognized as "New Rural" communities. The national criteria and targets have become not only a new tool for state authorities to govern rural people's life, but also a new source of reference and meaning for rural people to draw on in changing their conduct and navigating their futures. Seeking to make up for their perceived deficiencies and reconstruct their identities in order to be recognized as "new", rural communities have abandoned many of their traditional cultural and livelihood practices and other old ways of life. The inducement from the NRD to strive for a "new" life has presented a number of rural populations, especially those whose cultural practices and economic circumstances deviate from the program's criteria, with difficulties and challenges. Yet, while many communities – especially upland ethnic minority communities who are disadvantaged economically in comparison with lowlanders and follow different socio-cultural practices – may complain about the NRD's criteria being too demanding and difficult to achieve, still they seek ways to be recognized under the program rather than challenge its top-down ideas of modernization, civility and beauty.

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[4] The findings presented in this paper derive from ethnographic data, especially ethnographic interviews conducted in the five provinces of Sơn La, Lạng Sơn, Nam Định, Nghệ An and Quảng Bình in 2021-2022. In-depth interviews conducted in Lạng Sơn and Sơn La were mainly with local ethnic minorities, including Thái, Mường, Hmong, Tày and Nùng, while most of the interviews conducted in Nam Định, Nghệ An and Quảng Bình were with members of Kinh majority communities. Conducting research in provinces and among ethnic groups with different socio-cultural and economic conditions has allowed us to gain ethnographic understandings of different experiences and impacts of NRD on different social groups.

The New Rural Development Program and its Ideology

Vietnam is an agricultural, predominantly rural country. Before the economic reforms of 1986, nearly 90 percent of the population lived in rural areas. Today, although drastic changes in demographic composition due to urbanization and migration processes have been taking place, the rural population still accounts for a considerable proportion of the country's total population. According to the 2020 national census, there are nearly 17 million rural households, comprising about 67 million persons, almost 70% of the national population. Administratively, the rural areas are currently divided into over 8,000 communes, with about 66,000 villages. The majority of rural people are subsistence farmers. Historically, during the period of High Socialism (1960s-1980s), the rural areas were subjected to radical intervention, with the central government implementing development programs as part of its socialist state-building project. In pursuit of the goal of building a "new culture and new socialist man", livelihood activities and socio-cultural life were rearranged and reorganized. While livelihood activities were reorganized under collectives, traditional cultural practices, including funerals, weddings, spiritual rituals and ritual spaces, came to be considered vestiges of feudalism and were therefore banned (Malarney 1996). Even after 1986, when for purposes of national reorientation and security after the collapse of long-standing socialist alliances, terrible poverty and events of mass resistance (Kerkvliet 1995, 2005), Vietnam hesitantly began to engage with the liberal capitalist world order, the popular view of the country's rural areas did not significantly change. Ironically, as in China where rural areas have experienced massive transformation in all respects (Nguyen et al. 2024), in Vietnam even after the 1986 economic reforms (Kleinen 1999; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2018; Wilcox et al. 2021), hegemonic discourses on development still continue to portray rural areas, in both lowland and upland regions, as backward, underdeveloped and in need of radical modernization in all respects in order to improve the people's lives. After almost two decades of government modernization policies and despite ongoing transformations, the rural areas and their populations, both lowland and upland, are still considered to be lacking in basic factors essential for development and modernization.

From this perspective, Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW on August 5, 2008 on "Agriculture, farmers, and rural areas" took as its goal the modernization of rural areas in all respects in order to secure the well-being of the population at large.[5] The implementation of NRP is intended to concretize the spirit of this Resolution. Immediately after the Seventh National Congress at the end of 2008, 11 communes representing different regions of the country were selected to be the pilot subjects of the program. After almost two years of implementation of the pilot program, in June 2010, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 800/QĐ-TTg to officially kick off the NRP on a national scale. Up to the present, the program has completed two phases (Phase I: 2010-2015 and Phase II: 2016-2020) and started to implement Phase 3 (2021-2025). Officially specified as the most important national target program in the field of rural development, the NRD is structured and managed by committees at all levels, from central government to local villages. At the program's highest level is the Central Steering Committee, whose leader is a Deputy Prime Minister. Counselling and assisting this committee is the Central Coordinating Office, located in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the presiding institution of the program. Beneath the central level are steering committees at province, district and commune levels, and, finally, the "village development committee" [*Ban phát triển thôn – bản*]. Leaders of the steering committees of the programs at all levels, from province to village, are heads of the local Party chapters, or the Party committee secretaries. The all-encompassing scale of the program means that its steering committees include officials and experts in all relevant institutions and fields, including cultural, economic, public health, environmental, land, agricultural, and press and communication.

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[5] The Resolution was issued by the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party Central Committee (term X) in 2008.

The core of the program, also the most manifest expression of its development ideology, is the set of 19 criteria and 49 national targets, which were issued by the Prime Minister in Decision No. 491/QĐ-TTg in April 2009. In terms of quantity, during the implementation period from 2010 until now, the program's Central Steering Committee has made an adjustment to the original targets set in 2009, but up to now, when Phase III is beginning, the number of criteria has essentially remained the same. In terms of content, these 19 criteria are divided into 4 groups of domain, covering every aspect of rural residents' lives.[6] Besides the criteria set for meeting the program's standards, in February 2018, the government issued the "Advanced new rural village" [*Nông thôn mới bậc cao*] criteria set, and four months later, the

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[6] These are: Group I) Planning: 1 criterion (1- Planning); Group II) Socio-economic infrastructure: 8 criteria (2- Transportation and traffic; 3- Irrigation and natural disaster prevention; 4- Electricity; 5- Schools; 6- Cultural facilities; 7- Rural commercial infrastructure; 8- Information and communication; 9- Residential housing); Group III) Economy and production organization: 4 criteria (10- Income; 11- Multi-layered poverty; 12- Labor; 13- Production organization and rural economy development); and Group IV) Culture - Society - Environment: 6 criteria (14- Education and training; 15- Public health; 16- Culture; 17- Environment and food safety; 18- Political system and legal access; 19- National defense and security) (Official dispatch no. 1345/BNN-VPĐP on February 8, 2018).

“Model new rural village” criteria set [*Nông thôn mới kiểu mẫu*][7] in order to actualize the viewpoint of the Prime Minister on the rural modernization process as “having a starting point but no ending point”.[8]

As an essential part of a “will to improve” project implemented in a country where evolutionary and universalist notions of progress and modernity dominate (Evans 1985), the NRD’s criteria are aimed at replacing or complementing “inadequate” economic, cultural, social and environmental practices, as well as current infrastructure and facilities, with new factors that are considered more “modern” and “progressive”. For example, according to the criterion of residential housing, which belongs to Group II (Socio-economic infrastructure), a house that meets NRD standards, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, not only has to fulfil the “three hard” criterion and ensure the minimum area of 14 square meters per person, but also has to have a standard kitchen and a toilet. What is considered “hard”, according to the program’s definition, are “modern” materials, such as concrete, brick and cement. Traditional materials, such as wood and clay, from which Thương’s house was made, are excluded from the category of “hard” materials and thus fail to meet the standards. Similarly, a standard-meeting toilet must have the two-compartment septic tank design. Standard-meeting kitchens, though not having to follow regulations as rigid as those for toilets, must also be in a separate space and must be “order and clean”. A commune, to fulfil the criteria, must have no “dilapidated, makeshift houses” and must have at least 75% of households meeting the “three hard” criteria of the Ministry of Construction. Similarly, in the case of criterion No. 6 (Cultural facilities), traditional village cultural institutions, such as village communal houses, temples, shrines and family worshipping houses, are not considered standard-meeting cultural facilities. Therefore, to meet criterion No. 6, each village must build an additional “cultural complex”, including a “cultural house” of prescribed area, equipped with and bookshelves, loudspeakers, radio, microphones, banners and sports field. At higher administrative levels, each commune must also have all these cultural facilities, only in greater scale. Along with this addition of cultural facilities, villagers’ cultural customs must also change in the direction of socialist modernity, as regulated by criterion No. 16 (Culture). Based on the content of previous cultural

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[7] Decision no. 691/QĐ-TTg on June 5, 2018. The prerequisite for Advanced New Rural status is prior recognition as standard New Rural, and that for Model New Rural status is prior recognition as Advanced New Rural.

[8] This is the statement of former Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc at the ceremony to commend advanced examples in the emulation movement “The whole country joins hands to build new rural areas” in Nam Định in 2029: https://baochinhphu.vn/thu-tuong-xay-dung-nong-thon-moi-chi-co-diem-dau-khong-co-diem-ket-thuc-102262867.htm.

“civilizing” programs of the government and relevant ministries,[9] in order to have a standard cultural life, villages must be “cultural villages” for more than five years.[10] Interestingly, to be recognized as a “cultural village”, they must follow a number of supplementary criteria, such as: not holding funerals later than 24 hours after the deceased’s death; not scattering votive papers at funerals; not playing funeral music before 6am and after 10pm; burying the deceased in centrally planned cemeteries; not having domestic violence, theft or robbery, or other social vices in the community; not having too many feast tables at weddings; limiting 3-day, 7-day, 49-day, 100-day, first death anniversary and exhumation rituals to only one day and within the family; and so on. Village communities must also fulfil other supplementary criteria that are rather formalistic, such as: everyone must participate in public movements like “Day for the poor”[11]; those who are of working age must have a stable job; communities must achieve a certain level of clean water access; there must be no litter on village roads; “backwards and superstitious customs” must no longer exist; and so on. Other criteria, such as “Transportation and traffic” (No. 1), “Rural commercial infrastructure” (No. 7), “Production organization and rural economy development” (No. 13) and “Environment and food safety” (No. 17), are all directed towards replacing or transforming traditional customs with practices oriented towards universalist progress. For example, criterion No. 1 dictates that “100% of commune roads must be constructed with asphalt or concrete and over 80% of village roads must be ‘hardened’ for convenient car traffic throughout the year” and “the majority of village roads must be clean and able to ensure convenient traffic”. Similarly, criterion No. 7 stipulates that “the commune have rural markets or trading spaces”, and criterion No. 17 prescribes that “burial and cremation follow regulations and standards” and that communities “build green-clean-beautiful and safe landscape, not letting residential sewage gather”.

The numbers of the “Advanced New Rural” (reserved for communities already recognized as “New Rural”) and “Model New Rural” (reserved for communities recognized as Advanced New Rural) criteria sets remain at 19. However, in the content of these two criteria sets, besides the higher targets of the original criteria (average income per capita is equal to 46 million đồng per year versus 36 million đồng [USD 1,500] per year, the ratio of greened land per capita is 4% versus 2%, the ratio of cremation within the community is 10% versus 5%, and so on), new "hard" and "soft" content is also added to bring the communities to a higher level of modernity and beautification. For example, criterion No. 6 requires communities to "install facilities for sports and physical exercises in public spaces and organize culture, performance and sports events regularly". Similarly, with the criteria for model new rural villages, criterion No. 17 also instructs that "main roads have uniform shade trees, flowers and decorative plants for public landscapes", besides the requirement of greened area. Even more interestingly, one of the compulsory criteria for the recognition as "model new rural" is that each province has "at least one smart rural model", which means that there must be at least one community where people are able to use digital platforms in their lives, such as for communication, information access or production. For these two criteria sets, many provinces proposed their own initiatives based on the national criteria, with the purpose of making their rural areas more "clean, beautiful, and tidy", such as: every house must have a gate; flowers must be planted around houses and villages; each house must have a garden and plants, either fruit trees or flowers, in the garden must be arranged in orderly plots; and so on.

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[9] See more in Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2019) “Inspection and evaluation of the national New Rural criteria set in 2016-2020 period,” “Tentative direction for building the national New Rural criteria set in the period after 2020”.

[10] “Cultural village” [*làng văn hoá*], together with “cultural family” [*gia đình văn hoá*], is a category and merit title introduced by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism. In order to be recognized as a “cultural village”, a community has to meet a number of designated criteria and targets, as briefly mentioned in the text.

[11] A national movement, launched by the Central Committee of the Fatherland Front since 2000, taking October 17 as “day for the poor”. On this day, the Front mobilizes all people throughout the country to contribute money to help the poor, in both “material and spiritual aspects”.

Thus, the content of the program's criteria set clearly expresses a development vision based on the "high modernist" ideology (Scott 1998), which aims at a total social, cultural and economic transformation of rural areas. As Harms (2011, 2012), shows for Vietnamese urban contexts a new rural condition can be achieved only by (to some extent) demolishing "old" elements and replacing them with "new" ones displaying characteristics of socialist modernity and beauty. Created by trustees whose positions are separate from "the people whose capacities need to be enhanced, or behaviors corrected" (Li 2014:6), the detailed content of the NRD and its accompanying criteria is the foundation on which local authorities specify targets and plan their realization. It is also used as a national standardized tool to examine and assess whether communes and districts can be recognized as meeting NRD standards.

The New Rural Development Program in Practice

According to the 2010-2020 NRP reporting conference held by the program's Central Coordinating Committee in Nam Định province, by October 2019, after nine years of implementation, 4,665 communes had been recognized as meeting the New Rural standards – a 35.3% increase from late 2015 (when the Phase I report was released)

– and the ten-year (2010-2020) target assigned by the Party, the National Assembly and the government had been surpassed by 2.4%. Among the areas that surpassed the five-year (2016-2020) target assigned by the Prime Minister are the Red River Delta (by 84.86%) and the Northern Mountains (by 28.6%). Out of 63 provinces and municipal cities, 36 completed and exceeded the targets assigned by the Prime Minister; and eight provinces and municipal cities had 100% of their communes recognized as meeting New Rural standards. In addition, by the end of 2021, nationwide, 764 communes had been recognized as "Advanced New Rural" and hundreds of communes had achieved "Model New Rural" status. During its nine years of implementation, apart from human resources the program has mobilized substantial material resources, amounting to 2,418,471 billion *đồng* (roughly USD 95 billion). A considerable proportion of this sum has come in the form of donations from people and private enterprises. In addition, within ten years, 45 million square meters of land has been voluntarily donated by the people to the program.[12]

These impressive numbers officially reported by the Central Coordinating Committee – especially as regards recognized communes and mobilized resources from the people – give rise to the question, how are the program's criteria and their associated targets put into practice in the localities? The implementation of any civilizing or development program, according to Li (2014; see also Scott 1998), requires distinctive means and methods. Apart from coercive measures and tools, they also utilize the means and methods of governmentality, in Foucault's use of the term, where "educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs" (cited in Li 2014:5) are utilized as effective means to bring rural people to change their living conditions, mode of thinking and conduct as calculated. However, whether coercive or persuasive, the means and methods used are all quite subtle, and are portrayed and generally interpreted as being in the name of the higher good for all individuals and the whole of society (Li 2014; Nguyen 2018). The New Rural program utilizes both of these approaches in its implementation.

Drawing on lessons learned from previous development programs,[13] the Central Steering Committee pays particular attention to the propagation of the content and significance of the NRD in mobilizing local people and authorities. Therefore, right after the Prime Minister signed Decision 1620/QĐ-TTg 20/9/2011, which launched the NRD nationally, propaganda work – in diverse forms, through a diverse range of media and with the participation of diverse ministries – was also started. At the national level, the most popular form of propaganda work involves cooperating with high-coverage communication agencies such as Vietnam National Television (VTV), National Assembly Television, People's Television and VTC to create new programs on New Rural topics, such as "Livable Countryside", "New Rural" (VTV1), "Rural Stories" (National Assembly Television) and "Reforming the Countryside" (People's Television). A series of New Rural press contests with impressive award ceremonies were held in order to maximize journalists' participation in the cause of propagating the content and significance of the program. Propaganda work at the local level, from provinces to districts, was even more diverse and lively, especially in Phase II (2016-2020). Following the Central Steering Committee's "National Target Program communication and propaganda project for 2016-2020" executive plan, all local communication agencies and media, from provinces to communes, were required to integrate the specialized "New Rural" program into their broadcasting schedule. In parallel with such top-down propaganda work, hundreds of New Rural communication products were produced and disseminated locally, including contests, cultural performances, TV gameshows and handbooks, varying in medium and form from locale to locale. Especially, and by no means less effectively, hundreds of thousands of propaganda banners and posters, with vivid and compelling images, forms and colors, were placed in all nooks and corners of the countryside, from uplands to lowlands, from central regions to the most remote villages of the country. Interestingly, regardless of communication form and medium, the main ideology and content of the program remain focused on a single message, which is that the NRD is the best model of development and can improve all aspects of rural people's lives, from material to spiritual. The images the propaganda panels and posters bear show what rural people will or should strive for. For example, the most common panel motif, with the slogan "New rural, new vitality, new appearance", is accompanied by images of villagers using modern agricultural tools (tractors and plowing machines) on a background of cultural houses, flower-fenced residential houses, clean roads and high-voltage electric poles – symbols of a modernized world.

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[12] Central Steering Committee of National Target Programs in the Period 2016-2020. "Report on 10 years of implementing the National Target Program on New Rural Development in the period 2010-2020." National conference materials, Nam Định, 2019.

[13] Prime Minister's decree on recognition of the "Cultural family" title; Circular from Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2011 on "Practicing a civilized lifestyle in weddings and funerals"; Law on Domestic Violence Prevention in 2007.

In order to put the program into practice, collective movements were also launched and implemented in parallel with the propaganda campaigns. In addition to the overarching "The whole country join together in building the New Rural" movement launched by the Prime Minister in 2011, most of the ministries and agencies, through their subordinate offices (down to commune level), designed their own movements with specific content and target audiences. For instance, the movement organized by the Central Veterans' Union is called "Veterans contribute initiatives and labor to the construction of the New Rural", and that of Vietnam Women's Union is called "5 have not's, 3 cleans".[14] The movements launched by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union are called "Youth join together in building the New Rural" and "4 companions of life-building youth". Provincial governments, on their own initiative or following neighboring provinces, also launched hundreds of movements on different themes, such as: Bắc Giang Province's "Clean from house to alley, clean from alley back to home"; Hoà Bình Province's "Clean house, beautiful garden, unpolluted environment, civilized neighborhood"; Vĩnh Long and Nghệ An Provinces' "Bright, green, clean, beauty"; Quảng Ngãi Province's "4 have's for communes" (have distinctive local products, model residential neighborhoods, flower-lined street and welcome gates) and "3 have's for residential areas" (have green gardens, clean houses and nice alleys); Quảng Nam Province's "Villages without garbage, replacing wild grass with flower paths"; and Hà Tĩnh Province's "Donating golden land to village cause" and "Donating land – one loss for two gains". In terms of content, the names of these movements show that they are aimed not only at transforming rural infrastructure and rural people's conduct, but also at creating images of a future that rural people should or must aspire to. In terms of implementation, participation in these movements is voluntary, at least in theory. In practice, however, members of the various associations and communities are required to participate to fulfil their membership responsibilities. Those who fail to participate or do not participate actively can be reprimanded in meetings and considered "irresponsible citizens" by their associations or communities while active members receive certificates of praise.

In all of the locations where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, along with propaganda extolling the NRD's benefits and encouraging people to join voluntarily, rectification of deficiencies, especially those at the household level, is carried out in different forms under various initiatives and under the strict supervision of government officials – and this tends to be coercive. A common scenario is as follows. Once assigned to participate following a set timeline, commune authorities, in cooperation with village officials, will ascertain which conditions the community still lacks in comparison with the national criteria set. Based on this assessment, authorities at all levels will then mobilize local people to participate in the program's implementation so that the lacking conditions are realized. In Phù Yên, a mountainous district in Sơn La Province, where the majority of the population consists of ethnic minorities, to meet the targets of environment and hygiene, especially the number of households with standard toilets, the commune authorities sent specialized officers to the villages to monitor families who were falling behind in meeting this criterion and to supervise their execution, with each officer in charge of several households. If the households under an officer's supervision did not complete the targets, the officer might be reprimanded for failure to fulfil the mission in the annual evaluation session. In addition, according to a commune leader in this district, to pressure people, the authorities came up with an "initiative" modelled on the national government's COVID-19 zoning strategy.[15] At the village cultural house, a village map with all of the village households' names and locations was displayed. On this map, households with no separate toilet were marked in purple, those with a toilet that did not meet the standards were marked in yellow, and those with a standard toilet were marked in green.

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[14] The five have not's are: no poverty, no legal violations or social vices, no domestic violence, no violations of the population policy, no malnourishment or dropping out of school; and the 3 cleans are: clean house, clean kitchen, clean alley.

The purpose of this public display was, on the one hand, to remind the households who had not yet met the target of having a standard toilet and to shame them into completing it, and, on the other, to publicly praise those who had already done so that others would follow their example. Under another initiative proposed by the commune, kindergarten and middle school teachers would reproach students whose families have not met the standard in front of class so that the ashamed children would urge their parents to finish their toilet construction. This was considered an "effective initiative", according to one commune official, because, in his words, "all parents love their children and fear the teachers." In a district of Nghệ An Province, in order to meet criterion No. 16 on culture, specifically "Civilizing funeral and wedding practices", according to the program's regulations, before holding a ceremony, a family would have to submit a 3 million *đồng* (120 USD) deposit to the commune authorities. Any families who failed to follow the regulations – for example, by holding a long funeral, playing music outside the permitted time, throwing votive papers in the street during the funeral parade, holding a big feast after burial, or having too many feast tables at a wedding – would not be allowed to reclaim the deposit money. A chairman of a district Party secretary in Nam Định Province said, "Every weekend a few other officials and I drive the car around the area to supervise the implementation of the environmental requirement. If I see any litter, I will call the person in charge of that area [the head of the commune or the village] so they can come to check and fix the issue."

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[15] At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the government implemented the zoning initiative to separate areas of differing infection rates. Areas marked in purple were danger zones with high infection rates, those marked in yellow were relatively dangerous, and those marked in green were safe zones.

Thus, the NRD, like many other development initiatives in Vietnam, uses two mechanisms for its operation. In addition to mobilization through exemplarity and self-consciousness, it also utilizes means of control and discipline. The combination of these two mechanisms of governance has contributed to “the construction of a moral subject occupied with self-optimization and private responsibility and yet possessed of a heightened sense of duty to community and society” (Nguyen 2018:629). Thus, as I discuss further below, for the people of rural Vietnam, participation in the implementation of the program is not merely a matter of coercion. Many people, both villagers and local authorities, participate voluntarily and, to some extent, proudly, taking a positive attitude towards the fulfilment of the duties and responsibilities of good citizens in joining hands to build a new, modern, beautiful and civilized countryside.

Về đích [Reaching the Finish Line] and Trajectories of Rural Life

Let us return to Thương whom I mentioned at the beginning of the article. Apart from falling short of the “three hard” criterion, Thương’s family’s house also fails to meet the program’s standards for toilet, kitchen and minimum area per person. Thương said that her family were unable to build a “standard” new house because she and her husband were struggling to have children. In order to have their first child, who was four years old and played with the research team during our interview, they had to borrow more than 500 million đồng (USD 20,000) to travel to Hanoi for in vitro fertilization (IVF) several times. Despite the burden of their debt, however, they worked hard to be able to replace the “dilapidated makeshift house” they had long been living in with a new house that met the standards. In fact, in order to partially fulfil the standards, they had to spend more than 30 million đồng [USD 1,300] – just enough to build a toilet area and renovate the kitchen according to the program’s criteria. Explaining why her family was so determined to meet the criteria, Thương said: “We have to follow whatever they do, because if we don’t make an effort our commune won’t be able to reach the finish line of the New Rural.”

“Reaching the finish line” [*về đích*], or fulfilling the minimum criteria stipulated by the NRP for recognition as New Rural, is a common turn of phrase used by both villagers and officials at all levels when talking about individual and collective efforts in participating in NRD, whether with or without coercion. If participating in the program can be seen as a marathon with a fixed finish line and goals, rural people, like marathon runners, must do their best, whether voluntarily or under coercion, to complete this long race, involving both hardship and honor, together with all of the other runners. In order to finish this race, which not only brings participants the glory of honor bestowed and New Rural certificate granted by their superiors but also allows them to become modern and civilized citizens, rural residents, including both villagers and officials, must do two things at once: renounce socio-cultural practices considered out of date or unfit for the new good life, and fulfil all the conditions they are lacking, from material to spiritual. For both individual families and communities, achieving the program's criteria and targets, thus, becomes "immediate desire for the material . . . or for more abstract: wellbeing, prestige, reputation and respectability" (Wilcox et al. 2021:14). The race towards the New Rural finish line over the past ten years has had notable impact on the appearance as well as the socio-cultural life of Vietnam's countryside, albeit on various scales in different locales and communities, as I discuss below.

The most remarkable and visible transformation is perhaps in terms of infrastructure. In my fieldwork trips in 2021-2022, what immediately struck me and my fellow researchers upon our arrival at many rural areas – whether upland or lowland, whether the local community was still trying to "reach the finish line" or had already "met the standards" [*đạt chuẩn*] – was the sight of wide asphalted roads lined with trees. Most of the village lanes had been expanded and straightened and adorned with colourful flowers on the sides. In the Northern Delta villages, beside ancient temples and village communal houses there stood cultural houses covering large areas and featuring sports grounds. Cultural houses, at both commune and village levels in many areas, including most of the highland areas, are all built according to a similar structural design and outfitted with similar interior decoration and equipment (amplifier, loudspeaker, radio, banner, desks and chairs, and so on). Similarly, drastic transformation was visible in the communities' agricultural production area, where most of the irrigation system and field paths were bolstered with concrete. Walking through recently built gates into houses qualified as Standard, Advanced and Model New Rural in communities I visited, I noticed that houseowners had arranged things in their houses – from kitchen to cattle shed – in a "tidier", more "orderly" manner. A woman in Nghệ An province, after inviting me and two colleagues to eat a plate of guava picked from her family's "model" garden [*vườn kiểu mẫu*], proudly invited us to visit the garden, which had been divided into beautiful neat plots. Each plot was covered with the same kind of fruit tree with signposts, even though the garden covered just over 200 square meters. This was a model garden designed according to the guidelines of the program's model countryside criteria. Similarly, in the definition of a commune chairman (on the "Livable Countryside" program broadcast on the People's Television), "A civilized village is the one that has streets with flowers and houses with designated number." Observing the changes that occurred in Nepal's rural areas under the impact of rural development programs, Pigg (1992) noted that these programs' discourses have transformed villages, with all their existing diversity, into villages in capital both in reality and in the villagers' minds. Many of Vietnam's rural areas today, viewed from the outside, have taken on a similar form. The uniformization of infrastructure in accordance with national standards will possibly become even more common, when all rural areas reach the finish line of Standard, Advanced and Model New Rural in the near future.

More importantly, the efforts and aspiration to "reach the finish line" through the fulfilment of the NRD's criteria and targets have transformed not only rural Vietnam's infrastructure, but also the people's ways of thinking, living and daily socio-cultural practice. The foundation and guiding influence of these transformations is the idea of the NRD's criteria set and targets, as it acts as an authoritative and hegemonic toolkit, offering villagers and local officials specific and detailed instructions on which socio-cultural practices and modes of thinking must be changed and which must be added to achieve a better life or a "good life". For example, participating in daily physical exercise, even after a long day of work in the farm, at village cultural sports institutions built to fulfil criterion No. 6, according to many people in both mountainous and lowland areas, is considered essential for becoming a modern subject and having a healthy and beautiful life. Based on this toolkit, Nùng people in a commune of Lạng Sơn Province and local cultural management officers, having implemented and received the New Rural recognition, have actively organized cultural performances, including new *then* (Nùng folk ritual) and *đàn tính* (Nùng traditional lute) songs, while simultaneously encouraging villagers to abolish the superstitious aspects [*hoạt động mê tín, dị đoan*] of their traditional rituals. Thương's rammed-earth house – the traditional house style of her people – is no longer considered a "suitable" house style, despite having the rare advantage of being "warm in the winter, cool in the summer" and is quite sturdy, despite being built with materials not considered "hard". Meanwhile, the "good" house model that satisfies the "three hard" criterion and the toilet and kitchen standards, becomes the house style that Thương's family aspires to build, regardless of their financial hardships. Similarly, in some lowland areas, numerous eating customs that have become cultural characteristics of local communities, such as "takeout from a communal feast"[16] in some areas of Nam Định, Thái Bình and Hà

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[16] "Takeout from a communal feast" (*ăn cỗ lấy phần*) is a long-standing custom in these regions: people who attend weddings and funerals only eat a small amount at the events, then the good food is shared among the guests to take home, with the host supposed to prepare containers (leaves or plastic bags) for the guests to carry the food in. During the implementation of the NRD in these regions, both villagers and authorities came to consider this an outdated custom that needed to be eradicated. Some locales even proposed forms of punishment if the hosts and guests did not abandon this fascinating feasting custom.

Nam, or “supplementary meal”[17] in Nghệ An, are discouraged by local authorities or by villagers themselves in their efforts to abolish “backward customs” that are unsuitable for the New Rural life. Also in a district of Nghệ An Province, based on the semantics of the concept of “brightness” in the NRD program’s “bright, green, clean, beauty” movement, many households voluntarily and with their own money rebuilt or repainted their fences and gates with the colors white or yellow, so that their houses could be “brighter” and “more beautiful”, even though many repainted or demolished walls had been built with stones covered in moss and thus had a pleasant antique look. In many other mountainous areas in Sơn La and Lạng Sơn Provinces, many families even spent almost 100 million đồng (4,500 USD), most of it borrowed money, on building standard-meeting toilets and bathrooms, although in some places, such as in Xuất Lễ (Lạng Sơn Province), “having two-compartment toilets is great, but many families cannot use them, because in many areas there is not even enough water for people, let alone for toilets,” according to an ethnic Nùng village official.

On a different level, “reaching the finish line”, through people’s efforts to satisfy all the criteria’s targets, promotes and reinforces the program’s core ideals of the evolutionary understanding and imagination of development and modernity, a developmentalist philosophy that has dominated development models among rural residents, especially local officials, in Vietnam during both high socialist and late-socialist eras.[18] This vision has led those who directly guided the implementation of the NRD to devalue their “old”, “outdated”, “hillbilly” (*nhà quê*) ways of life accordingly, while admiring new things and promoting changes envisioned by the program. Thus, several of the commune officials I met during fieldwork confirmed that after fulfilling the requirements, the people in the locales they were responsible for were no longer “starved for culture” [*không còn đói văn hóa*], or experienced cultural deficiency resulting from a lack of standard-meeting cultural facilities (cultural house, sports complex) and complementary cultural performances and activities, as specified in criterion No. 16. Similarly, certain terms in criterion No. 17 regarding environment, especially toilets and bathrooms in urban areas, are used as a basis for assessing whether a community's lifestyle is "civilized" or not. An ethnic Nùng commune official in Lạng Sơn confirmed: "Before the New Rural, most people here were very backwards, because almost none of the households had a decent toilet and bathroom." The struggle of Ngọc, an ethnic Mường woman and the commune present of a highland district in Sơn La Province, in specifying which cultural practices are considered good and civilized, also attested to the program's impact on her thinking. When asked how to differentiate between "good customs and traditions" and "superstitions", specifically in the case of the *mới* ritual – a shamanic healing practice of the Mường people, in implementing criterion No. 16, as a Mường person and at the same time the leader of the steering committee of the commune's New Rural program, Ngọc said: "Most of the time I find it difficult, as this is a long-standing tradition from our ancestors. But I think rituals that do not cause people's death are [good] customs, and those that result in people's death are superstitions."[19] She added that one of the biggest challenges in implementing criterion No. 16 in her locale was to convince non-Protestant Hmong families to give up their custom of "not putting the deceased in a casket". According to Ngọc, as proposed in the "5 have, 3 cleans" movement of the New Rural program in Sơn La,[20] where a sizable Hmong population lives, this is a "backward" custom that pollutes the environment.[21]

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[17] “Supplementary meal” (*bữa phụ*) is the meal right before or after the main feast in weddings or funerals. In a wedding, in the evening before the main ceremony, the host family organizes a meal to welcome guests from afar and to thank those who help the family prepare food for the main feast (butchering pigs, picking vegetables, etc.). The supplementary meal of a funeral is the meal that the host family prepares to express their gratitude to neighbors who have come to help their family prepare the funeral for the deceased.

[18] For more about the evolutionary thinking and understanding of development in Vietnam, see Hoàng Cầm and Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2015), Hoàng Cầm et al. (2018); Evans (1985) and Jamieson et al. (1998).

Discusions with Ngọc, Thương, and many others in upland and lowland areas revealed, as we have seen, that the NRD's vision of development and progress, expressed in the program's criteria set and targets, has provided rural residents with detailed and clear perceptions of what modernity and civility should be. Given its hegemonic value in recent local perceptions of a good life, the program's vision of development has motivated both local officials and, to a certain extent, the majority of villagers to believe in the righteousness of the program in general and the content of the criteria in particular. Therefore, besides Thương, who understood having a modern house and facilities not as a must-do but as a need-to-do, almost all of the people we met regarded changing customary behaviors following criterion No. 16 as the right thing to do and as necessary for the building of a better, rational and more civilized life. In terms of the impacts of the program, the ideas of modernity and civility that drive NRD have functioned in a way quite similar to that which Harms notes for ideas of urban beauty in the New Saigon (2012). Notions of beautification introduced by city planners, Harms shows (2012:737), act as "modes of control precisely because they appear not to be top-down, because their meanings are highly fluid, and because they are coded as 'positive' and resonate deeply with people at different stations in social life". In the years to come, NRD's development ideas, resonating with other development discourses and practices that have hegemonically portrayed rural people, especially ethnic minority communities in the uplands, as the evolutionary laggards of history (Evans 1985; McElwee 2004), will produce more "desiring subject" (Rofel 2007) as they shape rural people's lives and ideas about the future.

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[19] For similar situations see Yang (2020) and Endres (2002).

[20] To adapt the New Rural program to local contexts, the Women's Union of Sơn La Province changed the content of the "5 have not, 3 haves" movement launched by the Central Women's Union into the "*5 có, 3 sạch*" [5 have, 3 cleans] movement, which means "having safe housing, sustainable livelihoods, health, knowledge and cultured lifestyle" and "clean houses, kitchens and alleys".

[21] Some researchers (Nguyễn Phương Châm 2022 at al) discussed the potential loss of cultural diversity and the homogeneity resulted from the program's implementation. Their research shows that the implementation of the criteron 16 has led to the "unification" [*đồng phục hoá*] of the rural culture, not only in terms of cultural infrastructure but also lifestyle and ritual practices under the "5 have not's" movement. In a personal talk with me in 2023, one cadres from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism informed me that the regulation that funerals cannot be held for more than 24 hours has made it impossible for Muong and Thái people to perform all their funeral chants, (usually takes at least 2-3 nights) leading the risk of losing many ritual processes.

In the long race to reach the finish line of the New Rural, however, it is not always the case that everyone – especially those with a "low starting point" [*xuất phát điểm thấp*],[22] the phrase used to refer to communities with a large gap between their cultural practices and economic circumstances and the program's targets – can meet the program's criteria as well as their desires and aspirations demand. Despite the motto "The state and the people all work together"[23] used to herald the program's implementation, while economically well-off communities in the lowlands can meet the criteria and targets easily, many families and communities have faced difficulties and challenges, especially in terms of mobilizing financial resources to fulfil the targets.[24] Many families in upland areas, like Thương's, in their efforts to meet the program's minimum criteria, fall into debt. The economically disadvantaged families and communities that I encounter complain not only about inconsistencies in state financial contributions but also about rigidity in the implementation of the program's targets. The targets for income and environmental hygiene, for example, are difficult to achieve for many upland communities.

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[22] In Vietnam today, there still exists a large gap between the majority and minorities in terms of poverty rates and educational levels. According to data from the National General Statistics Office, in 2022, the multidimensional poverty rate in ethnic minority areas was 23.7%, while it was 2% among the Kinh: https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2023/10/thanh-tuu-giam-ngheo-va-cac-chinh-sach-ho-tro-nguoi-ngheo-o-viet-nam-giai-doan-2016-2022/.

[23] See more in Nguyen (2017).

[24] During fieldwork, we noticed that economic conditions, especially family income, infrastructure, environmental sanitation conditions or cultural institutions in many communities in the Northern Delta, such as Nam Dinh, has exceeded the targets set by the program. Therefore, implementing the program for them hardly encountered any difficulties.

Interestingly, however, despite difficulties, hardship and sacrifices, even poor families I met do not oppose the program's core ideals and vision of development. As in the case of the people of the New Saigon discussed by Harms (2012:734), their "descent becomes atomized", since having a new form of identity and subjectivity as well as modern and beautiful rural landscapes promoted by the NRD are also what they aspire to. In the process, rural people find different ways to get to the finish line. I asked Tuấn, a village leader of a Thái village in Sơn La, how his village could meet the criteria by the end of 2021, the deadline set by the commune and district. "There are many different ways," Tuấn replied without hesitation. One of the ways that Tuấn, as well as many other communities, used was to "ask for extension on targets, then compensate later". The criteria they often asked for extension on, as Tuấn explained, are those that are unattainable, such as household average annual income and environmental targets, or those that they feel are unnecessary, such as the standard area of the cultural house and sports complex. According to Thắng, another Thái village leader in Phù Yên District whom we talked to in 2021, this was the easiest way, as "once already recognized as New Rural, no one cares to ask us to make up for the unfulfilled targets." To prove this statement, Thắng said that the current situation of all the criteria for which he asked for extension, especially the environmental targets, was far from improved and was in fact even worse than before, although at the time of our meeting his village had already received the New Rural certification five years earlier.

Another way, even more common, Tuấn said, is to "distort the data". "If we want to, it only takes one night to get every household to reach the annual income that is equal to or even higher than the proposed target". "Data distortion" has become so common that Vietnam's National Television, in their program called "New Rural: Good and Not Good" recently exposed a number of cases related to this "data distortion". According to the reports, a community, despite not having any "solid" meter of dam, was still recorded in the certification file as having a dam made of cement and steel rods. Similarly, in a certified New Rural commune, the main village road was full of potholes, but was still recognized as "concretized" in the certification file. By misreporting or distorting data in these ways, local rural residents limit their agency to "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) or everyday tactics (de Certeau 1984)[25]. And in so doing, too, local people and local authorities both contribute to the transformation of rural life, albeit in many cases in unexpected manners and forms, and while reinforcing the stereotypes of the "backward" and deficient rural that, in both the short and the long run, must be further civilized and transformed.

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[25] In his *The practice of everyday life* (1984), de Certeau developed the term tactics to capute the ways in which ordinary or subjugated people utilize their everyday cultural practices as a "creative resistence" to the organizational power strutures.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to a new understanding of rural life in Vietnam by examining how the NRD, the most expansive and ambitious development initiative in the modern history of Vietnam, has been designed and implemented and has affected the rural areas of Vietnam over the last decade. The paper shows that the core ideals of the program, which are clearly expressed in its criteria's content and targets, bear important similarities to previous rural development programs in Vietnam (Hoàng Cầm and Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2015; Hoàng Cầm et al. 2018; Jamieson et al. 1998), Vietnamese urban development (Harms 2012, 2016) and other rural development programs around the world from colonial times to the present (Nguyen at al. forthcoming; Harwood 2014; Li 1999, 2014; Pigg 1992; Escobar 1995; Harrell 1995; Kampe 1997). The basic idea of the program is that the rural areas and their populations, whether lowlands or uplands, despite certain transformations, are still deficient subjects, lacking not only income and the material amenities of modern life, but also other basic factors necessary for them to be healthy, modern, and beautiful. In order to help the rural populations rectify their deficiencies, the program must, as its name partly suggests, replace and demolish "out of date" rural infrastructure and "disorderly" and "ugly" rural landscape. On another level, it also depends on cultivating a more rational, advanced mode of thinking and new socio-cultural practices so that rural people will have a "spirit of change and innovation" (Harwood 2014: x). In the process of helping rural people to reach a new level of life quality, various associated parties, especially ministries and their experts, who "claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need" (Li 2014:4) have acted not only to develop criteria and targets for the program but also to monitor its implementation and measure its final achievements.

To some degree, some content of the program has been resisted and modified, especially by those whose socio-cultural practices and economic conditions differ significantly from the program's criteria and targets. Yet, as Harms (2012) notes in the case of the New Saigon or Pigg (1992) describes in the case of rural Nepal, Vietnam's rural villagers, on the whole, ultimately support the core ideals of development visions designed by the NRD's trustees. They support the program because their aspirations for modernity and their ideas about what it means to have a "good life", at certain levels, crosscut state visions of development articulated through the NRD and other state development discourses. The idea of the good life as defined by the NRD, containing modern infrastructure, convenient, safe and hygienic material objects, and beautiful landscapes as well as advanced modes of thinking and lifestyles, is largely shared by rural people. Therefore, despite facing difficulties and challenges, Vietnam's rural people aspire and make great efforts, both in terms of human and financial resources, to build their rural homeland's landscape and infrastructure to be "modern" and "beautiful" following the program's vision and standards, as well as to change their socio-cultural practices and mode of thinking following the program's guidelines.

The hegemonic vision of development and progress envisioned and promoted by the program, especially its definition and designation of what is considered "good" and "bad", "old" or "new", thus, has been appropriated and internalized not only by local authorities but also rural people at large. The "new", equating with the "good", once appropriated and internalized, transforms what it means to be a true "new" or "civilized" rural people. Its vision of development, as we have seen, has been assimilated into the everyday practices and their mode of thinking of Vietnam's rural people. It has become a new source of reference and meaning for rural people to use to change their conduct and navigate their future (Nguyen 2017). In so doing, state imposed development discourse and practices articulated through the program's set of criteria and targets, thus, effectively act as governing mechanisms in shaping the conditions of rural life and people's conduct toward state goals. This efficacy of state power has led to the loss of diverse cultural forms that are significant for the flourishing of social and cultural lives among both upland and lowland communities.

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RESEARCH

Rethinking Rural Schooling in Laos: From a Deficit Perspective to Patchworked Mobilities, the State, and the Trope of Remoteness

Roy Huijsmans[1]

Abstract

By combining insights from mobilities studies and the anthropology of the state and development, conceptual space is created for thinking about the social effects of the diverse sets of mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling. This includes realising the state as a social relationship. Thereby, this article goes beyond a common deficit perspective on rural schooling. Drawing on ethnographic data, I show how diverse mobilities involving different sets of actors are valued and recognised differently, in part, because of their particular relation to constructs of remoteness, the state, and visions about rural futures.

Keywords: development, education, ethnography, mobilities, Laos, rural schooling, state

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Rethinking Rural Schooling

Mobilities have long been an important component of rural life across the global south (e.g. De Haan 2002; Evrard 2011; Grieg 1994). Rural transformations, including infrastructural and technological developments, have expanded, shifted, and intensified these mobilities (Rigg 2007; Rowedder 2022). It has given rise to new movements and flows while older mobilities have not necessarily ceased to exist but continue to unfold albeit in changed circumstances (Huijsmans 2019a; Pholsena and Banomyong 2006; Rigg 2007). Yet, as argued by Doreen Massey (1994:149) not all mobilities are equal. Various mobilities are valued differently, have differentiated effects. and are not similarly realisable or avoidable for differently positioned groups of people.

It is with these points in mind that I turn to the seemingly sedentary institution of rural schools. Drawing on research conducted in a northern province in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter 'Laos'), I argue that rural schooling in the global south comprises various mobilities. Some of these mobilities are unquestioned or considered contributing to the improvement of rural schooling. Yet, other mobilities by other actors are deemed problematic and viewed as getting into the way of realising educational objectives and associated futures. Foregrounding the patchwork of mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling, I argue, illuminates how schooling, as a development intervention, plays out in practice whilst simultaneously providing a unique vantage point for developing an anthropological understanding of the state.

The dominant narrative about rural schooling can be characterised as a 'deficit perspective'. This reflects prevalent discourses about rural areas in general (Clarke-Sather 2020; Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). This view is particularly prominent in the development practice related literature. For Laos, a joint publication by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Sport of Laos (2015) makes a good example. The report is titled *Situational Analysis: Student learning outcomes in primary education in Lao PDR*. It presents a long list of well-documented problems that are perhaps not unique to rural schooling but are often most pronounced there (see also: Demas, Naka, and Mason 2018). This includes, amongst other things: poor learning outcomes, irregular attendance (of both teachers and students), limited or poor quality infrastructure, shortage of learning materials (UNICEF and MoES 2015). These observed shortcomings, attract new development interventions, which, in turn, lead to further studies assessing the impact of such schemes of improvement. This not just perpetuates a deficit perspective; it also means that rural schooling receives scholarly attention mostly for its shortfalls in relation to planned change and much less frequently for its role in actually unfolding processes of development and social change.

In order to create the conceptual space to go beyond a deficit perspective, this article draws inspiration from the new mobilities paradigm (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006) and combines this with insights from anthropological approaches to studying development (Hilhorst 2003; Mosse 2005) and the state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; High 2014). This allows reflecting on the productive function of school-related mobilities, and its various social effects. Anthropological research on education has shown, amongst other things, how rural schools symbolise the presence of the state in contexts in which the state is otherwise hardly visible (e.g. Trần Thị Hà Lan and Huijsmans 2014), the role of rural schooling in making real the idea of the nation even in the nation-state's remotest corners (Evans 1998:167; Keyes 2014:61), and rural schools as spaces of distinction in a temporal, embodied, occupational and aspirational sense (Dungey and Ansell 2022; Huijsmans and Piti 2021:167). Yet, anthropological work on the interplay between schooling, development and the state has been relatively silent on the role of mobilities therein, something I seek to redress in this article.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section I explain the research methodology, reflect on its 'compromised' status, discuss the notion of 'remoteness' and introduce some key description on rural schooling in Laos. Next, I briefly outline a mobilities perspective and discuss how it has been used in research in the global south and in relation to rural schooling. I also link mobilities scholarship to anthropological work on development and the state. The analytical section that follows is divided into two, pivoting on the state. In the first part, 'mobilities of state', I analyse some mobilities part of rural schooling in which state-related officials are those that move. These mobilities rarely attract any attention because they are seen as unproblematic. This silence has left underemphasised how the Laotian state as a social relation and encounter is produced (High and Petit 2013:421), among other things, through the various mobilities underpinning rural schooling. In the second part, 'sideway mobilities', I discuss mobilities related to rural schooling that are deemed problematic focusing on the mobilities of actors other than state-officials. In the concluding section, I reflect further on how the mobilities discussed relate differently to state practices, the trope of remoteness, and visions of rural futures. I also tease out implications for development practice, arguing that some of the answers to the question of why rural schools too often fail to deliver the many development outcomes they are meant to realise are found in the friction between the multiple mobilities comprising rural schooling.

Compromised Research, the Construct of Remoteness, and Rural Schooling in Laos

The research underpinning this article was embedded in the logic of development practice, and therefore implicated in a deficit perspective on rural schooling. First, it was realised through development research funding from the United Kingdom's DFID/ESRC joint scheme on *Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems*[2]. Second, per the requirement of the funding scheme the research was conducted in collaboration with a Laos based partner organisation; the Laos office of the international development organisation PLAN International[3]. Third, our research project had to be accommodated within an existing Memorandum of Understanding between Plan International and the Laotian government. This meant that, a) our project got attached to an ongoing development intervention focusing on pre-school education, b) had to be conducted in target villages covered by this intervention, c) had to be carried out together with the Laotian government partner of Plan International, the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports.

These complex partnerships shaped in important ways how the research unfolded. Indeed, one could say that our research got compromised by the circumstances and relations through which our work had to flow. In the research site in northern Laos, for example, it meant that spending time at the district level office of the Ministry of Education and Sports (DESB: District Education and Sports Bureau) became a significant part of the research. And since all our trips to the study villages were accompanied by (a) DESB official(s) (formally: to ensure the security of members of the research team) we ended up spending more time with DESB staff than with the children, teachers and parents who were the core focus according to project's research design.

Admitting that the research was compromised since it was materially, institutionally, and discursively embedded on the interface between development practice and the Laotian state does not mean the research has failed or has become futile. Rather, for any research conducted in Laos on the basis of a formal research approval this is inevitable, and is something that needs to be reflected on as part of the findings (Herberg, Seeliger, and Möller 2023:4). Spending lots of time in meeting rooms and in cars with district level state-officials, staying with them in the villages and taking part in the village meetings they called for (on our behalf), made clear that moving and waiting for things to move was not just a key feature of the governing of rural schooling, it was also part and parcel of state practices in rural Laos. Consequentially, a focus on mobilities provides unique insight into how, in rural Laos, the Laotian state manifests in a situated manner as sets of social relationships. In addition, spending time on the road and waiting for things to happen in the company of district level education officials was highly instructive for learning about rural schooling, including about efforts to improve it and how key stakeholders related to it. In the spirit of an ethnographic research approach, I let the insights obtained through the actual unfolding of the research guide the analysis rather than the research questions set out in our original research proposal. Therefore, the data presented in this paper are largely ethnographic and generated mostly through informal encounters. This included, for example, informal chats with district officers and teachers, or when socialising in between our various formal research activities (sharing food, going for walks, playing games of pétanque, etc).

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[2] Project title 'Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings' (ES/N01037X/1). DFID is the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, and ESRC is the British Economic and Social Research Council.

[3] In Laos, there are no Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs). Additionally, collaborating with the National University of Laos (an otherwise suitable partner) is difficult to realise because of the tight and rigid deadlines of most funding bodies, including ESRC/DFID. For these reasons, we ended up partnering with the Laos office of PLAN International, an organization whose international leadership was used to working with the particularities of international funding bodies and rigid funding deadlines.

Our research activities were led by a Laotian national researcher of Lao ethnicity[4] (who prefers to remain anonymous) per the requirement of the hosting organisation (PLAN international). The author joined the Lao researcher on several trips to the study villages and other research activities. The data presented in this article have been processed by the author and the Lao researcher together, through constant conversation about the material.

In Laos, we carried out research in two villages in a northern province. One village, the smaller one, we refer to with the pseudonym *Baan Noi*.[5] *Baan Noi* is mostly populated by people of Hmong ethnicity. It is a relocated village, built on a road-side running across the ridge of a hill. *Baan Noi* has a full primary school. The other village (which I will refer to as *Baan Nyai*) was slightly bigger, had long been a site of residence, and was located in a valley. Here the ethnic profile was more mixed with ethnic Khmu making up the majority. Next to a full primary school, *Baan Nyai* also had a near complete secondary school which drew students from various neighbouring villages.

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[4] Laos is home to multiple ethnic groups. The Lao is the largest group, and economically and politically dominant.

[5] In other protect the anonymity of the various Laotian nationals involved in this research, I have decided to anonymise geographical and personal information to the extent possible.

According to our study design the research was conducted in two villages that can be considered ‘remote’. However, we soon realised that remoteness is relative, fluid and most importantly, a perspective from the vantage point of the centre. Martin Saxer (2022:10) notes in this respect that ‘remoteness is seldom just a descriptive device’ and draws attention to remoteness as a ‘figure of thought’ that illuminates particular aspects and ideas about rural places whilst muting others.

Remoteness features firmly in development discourses. It is associated with backwardness and poverty and remote rural areas are seen as disconnected from markets and the state – precisely the kind of issues development interventions seek to remedy (Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox this issue). It may also map onto ethnic differences (Clarke-Sather 2020). This is no different in Laos, both historically (Pholsena 2006:21) and contemporary. For example, Jonathan Rigg quotes from a speech of a Chairman of the Laotian National Rural Development Committee in which rural areas are described as ‘areas which are isolated, remote and uncivilised, in which the ways of living of people are different from others’ (UNDP 1996:14; IN: Rigg 2005:83).

Saxer (2022:10) further notes that the ‘trope of remoteness’ suggests ‘a degree of isolation’. Isolation refers here to a lack of connection with state centres and with state services and formal markets more generally. This perspective summons certain mobilities while muting others. For example, it calls for mobilities from the centre into rural areas to undo its assumed isolation while it leaves out of sight the many mobilities comprising rural areas, both historically (e.g. Evrard 2011; Tappe 2023) and contemporary (e.g. Ó Briain 2018:177; Trần Thị Hà Lan and Huijsmans 2014).

Historically, formal education was very sparsely provided for the population of what is now Laos, even if seen in relation to other parts of French Indochina (Bilodeau, Pathammavong and Lê Quang Hông 1955), through a colonial-era school system that was largely urban-based. During the Indochinese wars, the communist *Pathet Lao*, from the 1950s onwards, provided basic forms of education in parts of rural Laos that were under its control (Chagnon and Rumpf 1982:166) and also sent many children and young people from these areas for education to North Vietnam (Pholsena 2012:178). Following the establishment of the Lao PDR in 1975, the agenda of expanding basic education provisioning across the country was continued, not least because for the new regime state-provided mass schooling was a key tool for nation-building (Evans 1998; Faming 2007). As a result, education enrolment figures have increased substantially. The primary school net-enrolment rate stood at 93.8 *per cent* in 2017. Yet only 82 *per cent* of those enrolled in primary school reached its final (fifth) year and secondary school enrolment rates have remained relatively low at 60.4 *per cent* (Boualaphet and Goto 2020:963). Moreover, there is a notable concern with education quality. A joint report by the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports and the World Bank Group titled *The Learning Crisis in Lao PDR* states that 'on average, fourth-grade students can correctly answer only 23 percent of math questions and only 58 percent of Lao language questions' (Demas, Naka, and Mason 2018:1).

These national averages hide important differences. Studies on education in Laos repeatedly remark that, on the whole, in rural areas school attendance and learning outcomes are lower than in urban areas. These rural differences are even more pronounced for children from poor households, children of ethnic groups other than the Lao, and girls, and further aggravated by the intersection of these factors (Boualaphet and Goto 2020; Demas, Naka, and Mason 2018). It is in part because of these challenges that 'Laos has been subject to a range of external interventions that seek to enhance educational provision' typically taking the form of external donor agencies collaborating with Laotian government (Jeong and Hardy 2023:1).

Mobilities and Rural Schooling in the Global South

Over the past decades, the theme of mobilities has received increased attention across the social sciences as the so-called 'new mobilities paradigm', or the mobilities turn (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). The new mobilities paradigm sets out to challenge 'the ways in which much social science research has been 'a-mobile' and underpinned by sedentarist theories (Sheller and Urry 2006:208). Sedentarism, Mimi Sheller and John Urry, explain, 'treats as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treats as abnormal distance, change, and placelessness' (ibid 2006:208).

Research published as part of the new mobilities paradigm has tended to focus on relatively contemporary infrastructures and products of mobilities such as the internet, airports, and digital devices. Subsequentially, research flowing from this paradigm has been skewed towards research conducted in the global north – especially initially (Benwell 2009:78; Rigg 2007:118). Reflecting on this in his *Everyday Geography of the Global South*, Jonathan Rigg (2007) argues that the premises of the new mobilities paradigm are of relevance for research in the rural global south, too. First, it calls for taking serious 'old mobilities', such as long-standing trade and migration patterns part of peasant societies (e.g. Evrard 2011). This is relevant for debunking persistent popular, and at times academic, assumptions about the remoteness and boundedness of rural villages and peasant life (Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024; Rigg 2007:124). This point needs to be extended to include assumptions about the lives of rural children and youth, which especially in the context of the global south were and often have remained mobile, too (Huijsmans 2016; Porter et al. 2010). Second, new mobilities have unfolded in the global south as well, ranging from young women's involvement in migration to the particular ways in which mobile technologies have become part of everyday life in the global south, too (Mills 1999). With regard to the latter, it is again young people who have incorporated such new digital mobilities most fully into their rural lives (Huijsmans and Trần 2015; Porter 2016).

Schooling has hardly received any attention in the mobilities turn inspired literature. The few exceptions, that also focus on the global south, include a small body of work looking at children's journeys to school (Benwell 2009; Gerber and Huijsmans 2016; Porter et al. 2010; Tran and Huijsmans forthcoming). This literature conveys several important points. First, in rural areas children's everyday school attendance often adds a further layer of mobility to young lives that are already mobile. Journeys to school come in addition to various other mobilities rural children are involved in (e.g. walks to collect water or firewood). Children experience journeys to school, often by foot, at times as dangerous but also as fun, often varying substantially by season (for similar findings from rural Malaysia see Gerber and Huijsmans 2016; Porter et al. 2010). Second, rural children's journey to school requires rethinking indicators of school-readiness. Given the distance children need to cover, their physical strength becomes a more relevant measure than chronological age which is used in education policies (Porter et al. 2010:97). Third, the emplaced institution of the school stands in friction with the mobility requirement of rural school attendance. For example, rural students' journeys to school may lead to them arriving late, or getting their shoes or school uniforms muddied which 'can result in punishment at school or being barred from school for 'not being neat'' (Porter et al. 2010:97). Such disciplinary measures contribute to forging a disconnect between young people's everyday rural realities and the aspirations cultivated and promised through modern schooling (Ansell et al. 2020; Morarji 2014).

In the anthropology of the state and development, mobilities have received somewhat more attention (Bærenholdt 2013; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta's (2002:982) seminal piece focusing on development practices in the Indian context shows the role of spatial metaphors and mundane mobilities of state practices in making real the idea of states as positioned above *and* as containing its localities, regions and communities. Amongst other things, this representation of the state is realized by the muting and marking of different mobilities. For example, being mobile is considered an unquestionable part of the job for state-officials to become more encompassing, realized, for instance, by following up and checking on the implementation of development interventions "on the ground". Yet, these very same conceptualisations discursively fix other people in place; effectively making them "local" so that they can become encompassable by the state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:985).

The discussion above has begun to unravel some of the mobilities that comprise rural schooling, how these matter, and how these are differentially recognised. Whereas children's muddied clothes caused by their journey to school flags remoteness and may be reason for punishment, a visit by education officials to a rural school is often met with praise and contributes to the undoing of remoteness by reinforcing its relation with the state. In other words, the construct of remoteness, or its opposite connectedness contributes to constructing different mobilities differently – with the state playing a pivotal role. For this reason, the next section first attends to 'mobilities of state' before moving to examples of 'sideway mobilities: mobilities despite the state and development'.

Mobilities of State

Long pai baan: Realising the State Through Mobilities

Laos' political system is hierarchically and spatially structured running from central, provincial, district, to village level (Pholsena 2006:9). The 2012 *Sam Sang* (literally: Three Builds) policy directive sheds light on how power flows through Laos' political structure. It describes '(1) provinces as strategic units; (2) districts as sectorial strengthened units; and (3) villages as development units' (Vongpraseuth and Choi 2015:793), and notes that the latter may include the merging of villages into clusters (*khoumbaan*).

Permission for our research had to flow through this chain of command, starting at central level (the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports) all the way to the DESB office at district level who, then, introduced the research team to the village authorities. The DESB continued to play a crucial role throughout the research project; any request for visiting the study villages had to be approved by the DESB, all our research visits to the study villages had to start and end with reporting at the district office, and all our village stays had to be accompanied by a DESB official.

The power differentials between village and district are apparent from Laos' political structure. Yet, how do these pan out in practice and what is the role of mobilities in this? The expression '*long pai baan*' makes a useful starting point. We heard it being uttered many times by district level officials when talking about work-related trips to villages. It literally means 'descending to the village'. Yet, the district centre concerned is located in a valley and reaching any of the villages in the district required climbing the hills and ascending from the valley. Therefore, '*long pai baan*' needs to be understood metaphorically. The utterance refers to travelling down the power hierarchy of Laos' political system from district to village (compare: Clarke-Sather 2020:27).

Once district level officials arrive in the village, it is the expectation that the village hosts them by offering accommodation (often staying with teachers or village level officials) and sharing meals. During these stays, village-level actors and district officials interact intimately. They share the same food, and enjoy leisure time together; creating a degree of intimacy between the political centre and its peripheries that Herzfeld (1997) refers to as 'cultural intimacy'. In these instances, formal hierarchies and power differentials articulated by the phrase '*long pai baan*' blur and moments of good times can be observed without difficulty (Huijsmans and Piti 2021). Nonetheless, social hierarchies quickly resurface in formal meetings that are part of these visits, too (Singh 2014). Although co-chaired (by a village level official and a district level official), roles are distinct in such meetings: district level official instructs villagers about policies, village authorities welcome the district guests and further participation is typically limited to listening, note-taking and listing reasons for why it has been difficult to live up to policy expectations.

Official village-bound mobilities are usefully contrasted with the individual travels village level teachers make in the reverse direction (see more below). For example, a teacher recollected a visit he made to the district centre. There, he greeted some district level officials he had hosted weeks previously in his house in the village. He explained how dismayed he was that they did not know, or pretended to not know, his name any longer and did not pay him much attention.

This section has illustrated the role of mobilities, including the encounters they give rise to 'at the interface between the formal and informal' (High and Petit 2013:421), in enacting the state as a social relation in rural Laos. First, a relation of authority is realised through discourse when district officials refer to their village-bound journeys as going down the social hierarchy. Second, the direction of official mobilities reinforces this further, as district-level officials tend to travel to villages much more frequently than to provincial centres, let alone the national centre. Third, it is through the encounters and mundane interactions flowing from mobilities that the state comes to be experienced intimately and power differentials become lived experiences (Bærenholdt 2013:21).

The Intensification of Mobilities: The Role of (Inter)national Development Actors

Mobilities may be important for realising the state as a social relation in rural areas. However, in contexts such as Laos, the state, especially at district level, has limited financial capacity for such mobilities. Therefore, we need to pay attention to the role of external actors not just in terms of how they influence development processes discursively and materially (Jeong and Hardy 2023), but also to their role in facilitating and intensifying state-related mobilities.

Since development actors working in Laos need to partner with Laotian government offices, the mobilities of (inter)national development actors do more then merely mapping onto those of the Laotian state. In the case of our research project, the DESB officials assigned as our partners achieved many more trips to the villages because our project funds removed the financial constraints that normally delimit the number of such trips by covering the travel expenses and *per diems* of our DESB counterparts. It then follows that if 'the dynamics between the rulers and the ruled; around authorities and the formation of authority' that make up the state a bundle of social relationships (High and Petit 2013:421) is for a good part realised through mobilities, (inter)national development actors effectively reinforce and intensify these power differentials.

Moreover, when non-Laotian nationals, like the author, join these trips, the district office will assign yet more staff to accompany the team – often motivated based on protecting the security of international visitors. Such trips then quickly become development tours involving at least one car, often more, packed with staff and supplies such as bottled water and packaged snacks. Development tours contribute to intensifying the experience of the state, and this intensification also has effects on education.

The embodied presence of these visitors and the material objects part of the entourage exposes villagers directly to representations of the promise of education (Morarji 2014). For example, hearing that some villagers name their children 'Vigo' (after a type of Toyota often used for these trips) indicates that these mobilities affect people's aspiration (Huijsmans and Piti 2021:178). Next to stimulating aspirations for education, such trips, paradoxically, may contribute to eroding the very structure through which educational aspirations are meant to be realised. First, these larger tours, too, are hosted by village officials – including teachers. Hosting duties now become a serious undertaking and often take a gendered form with women tasked with chores such as fetching water, preparing the meals and doing the dishes. For education projects, these development tours, then, easily end up compromising the educational improvements they seek to realise because it places additional burdens on (women) teachers which get into the way of their regular teaching work.

Second, for district level staff, partnering with an international development actor is attractive financially for the *per diems* it generates. In addition, it may also offer rare opportunities for jumping scale. As we have seen, the direction of the physical mobilities of the Laotian state are largely downwards in the state hierarchy (i.e. from district to village). Projects funded through international development assistance or research offer rare chances for breaking this pattern, for example, when such projects invite district level project partners to national level project-related events in the name of participation. These travels offer district level staff an opportunity to demonstrate their qualities at provincial and central level. At times this leads INGOs to hire local level government staff at provincial or even central level. In such instances their temporary jumping of scale gets a permanent character. Such career promotions would take much longer to realise within the state system. However, once Laotian nationals have made the transition from working for Laotian government to the INGO sector it is improbable that they can return to a government position thereafter. At stake is the low salary, slow career progress but long term socio-economic and political stability of a government position versus a higher salary, more dynamic careers but little long-term security within the INGO sector. Importantly, not all district level staff stands an equal chance in such scale-jumping. It is those with a command of English (or Japanese, Korean, French), and ideally also a command of an ethnic minority language, and who display confidence in interacting with (inter)national partners that stand out. Thereby, selective social mobilities may come to affect the quality of human resources at district level state-offices in particular ways.

Sideway Mobilities: Mobilities Despite Development and the State

The Mobilities of Non-local Teachers: Commuting and Diversifying Beyond Teaching

In rural Laos, few adults possess the educational qualifications required for becoming a teacher. Therefore, a good part of the teaching staff in rural Laos teaches in villages, districts, or even in provinces that are different from their natal ones. DESB staff observed that many of these non-local teachers ‘are not willing to settle in the school or village where they are teaching’, because of the more limited facilities in these locations. Many non-local teachers resolve this dilemma as follows: Part of the week they stay in the village in which they teach (the workstation) and the other part they spend in their actual home where they have their family or where their longer-term commitments lie (the home station).

Such non-local teachers often leave their workstation early on a Friday and return late on a Monday. This shortens the school week for teachers and consequentially also for students (see also: Demas, Naka and Mason 2018:8). At the district level office this was often interpreted as non-local teachers having their commitments in the wrong place. For example, a running joke about such non-local teachers we heard at the DESB goes as follows: 'My name is teacher …, but my surname is *lor van souk* [waiting for Friday]'. Yet, cutting teaching weeks short to realise a translocal life is not necessarily a sign of putting private concerns above professional ones. It may also be a pragmatic response to poor road conditions that makes travel in certain parts of rural Laos, during parts of the year, time-consuming and unpredictable. In such cases, leaving early on Friday, then, is necessary to reach destinations before dark and arriving late on a Monday may well be due to transport problems encountered.

Moving between places also comes with economic opportunities (Rowedder 2022:33). This is evident across rural Laos, involving diverse occupations. Bus drivers may earn a little extra by not only transporting passengers but also unaccompanied letters and goods. INGO staff or government staff may bring back from their rural work trips freshly caught fish, wildlife, or other non-timber forest produce (NTFPs) – despite protection efforts. Hence, when non-local teachers pack their motorbikes with agricultural produce, wildlife or other NTFPs to sell these in district centres and make the reverse trip with goods available at district markets they follow a common pattern of reaping economic benefits from mobilities, thereby economically diversifying beyond the salaried teaching job.

In sum, the mobilities of non-local teachers matter in multiple ways. It may negatively affect learning outcomes if it ends up contributing to teacher absenteeism (Demas, Naka and Mason 2018:8) but it also reflects a wider social pattern in which the ability to move offers economic opportunities. This latter fact is fully accepted in relation to INGO and government staff for whom *per diems* received for travelling are often much more substantial than the costs incurred. Hence, the economic opportunities that come with the mobilities of non-local teachers may be valued by the teachers concerned. Yet, the time it takes and the economic diversification it allows can end up compromising precisely what these jobs are meant to contribute to: good quality rural schooling.

Villagisation: Sedentary Development and Mobile Lives

The Laotian government has committed to providing primary schools to each village of a certain size. These schools may not offer the complete 5-year primary cycle, yet this commitment ensures that there is some basic education provided within walking distance for most children in Laos. However, not all settlements are recognised as villages. This is a relevant point for settlements in the mountainous parts of northern Laos. In these areas, so-called village resettlement policies have mobilised rural folk, mostly of ethnic groups other than Lao, to leave their settlements and their mostly non-permanent houses (built with natural material from the forests and fields) in the hills and mountains for a government identified village (either joining an existing village, or a newly established village), where they are encouraged to construct permanent houses (using concrete and metal sheets), located on the road network and where basic social services are provided (Baird and Shoemaker 2007; High 2008).

Many rural folks have followed this policy of villagisation. However, the idea of realising development in place has only worked in part. Basic social services are indeed provided, villagers increasingly build so-called permanent houses (Stolz 2019). Yet, in these rural areas of resettlement opportunities for trade and other non-agrarian income-earning activities have remained limited, let alone opportunities for salaried employment. This was also true in the study villages in which we worked (especially in *Baan Noi*) and affected villagers of non-Lao ethnicity most. Therefore, these villagers must continue to rely on their *sanam* (gardens) and temporary houses in the hills (see Figure 1) where they practice swidden cultivation even though banning this agricultural practice has long been a Laotian policy objective (MAF 2021:15).[6] Since the *sanam* is often located at some distance from the village, the villagisation policy has resulted in more rather than less mobility among rural villagers because many of them stay part of the week in their 'old settlement' at the *sanam* which is their economic mainstay, and some days in the new location that was created based on the promise of development in place (compare: Nguyen and Rigg 2024).

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[6] Cross-border migration to Thailand that is widespread in many other parts of rural Laos, especially areas bordering Thailand appeared to not take place on a large scale in the study villages.

Figure 1 The village of *Baan Noi* (left) and a sanam location (right). Photos by the author

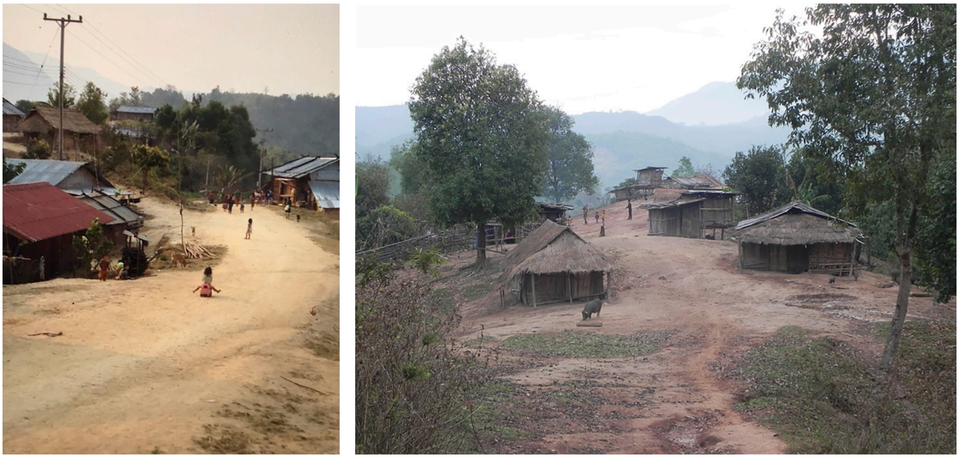
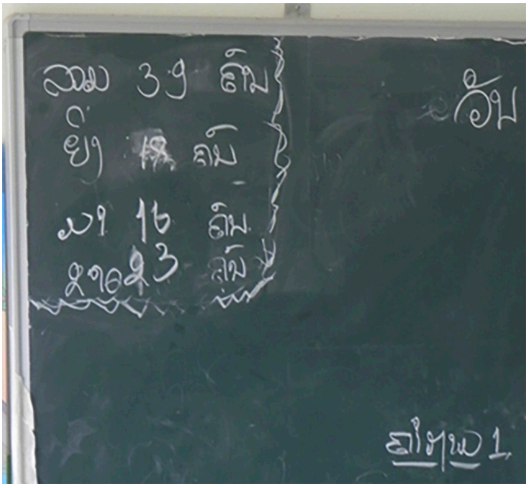


Figure 2 Student attendance recorded on the blackboard (39 registered (18 girls); 16 present, 23 absent). Photo by the author



According to parents, the effects of their *sanam*-bound mobilities on children's school attendance varied by age. Parents agreed that families with young children would typically take all their children with them to their *sanam*. If children were a little older, some parents said they would leave their children behind in the village so they could attend school while the adults would stay and work in the *sanam*. Other parents said they would take older children with them to the *sanam*, too. Sometimes so that these older children could provide childcare for young siblings in the *sanam*, but also because of fears about what could go wrong when children stayed behind unsupervised. For example, we learnt about one instance in *Baan Nyai* in which a primary school aged student had drowned in the river while her parents were away in the *sanam*.

Altogether, villagers' *sanam*-bound mobilities affect children's everyday school attendance, and during the busy agricultural season substantially so (see Figure 2).

In addition, it also stands in friction with betterment programmes that seek to improve rural schooling. This can be illustrated based on two common rural development interventions that build on the place-based premise of modern schooling. First is the school lunch programme. Providing students with school-lunches is a common policy tool implemented to increase school attendance and to improve learning outcomes (students do better on a full stomach). In the context of Laos, school lunch programmes are organised as follows: The donor provides food and the village provides the physical structure (kitchen/storage) and labour (preparing meals). The first part of the deal, villagers realise without much difficulty, the second part is more challenging because it requires a continuous effort. Moreover, while men have often constructed the kitchen and storage space, women are typically charged with the duty of preparing the meals. Especially during the busy planting and harvesting season, food for school meals often remains locked away in the storage space as women need to prioritise labouring in their *sanam* above staying in the village to prepare school meals. Second, early childhood education is another common policy tool rolled out to improve learning outcomes in rural areas. This policy seeks to address the phenomenon of late enrolment and seeks to realise a degree of school readiness, thereby aiming to increase learning outcomes in primary education. However, also this policy tool assumes a sedentary village population which stands in friction with the *sanam*-bound mobilities practiced by a good part of the village population. Sedentary development interventions that provide social services in place without attending to mobility requirements of villagers' livelihoods, thus, risk resulting into uneven development as those villagers who can afford a sedentary life benefit while those who must live their lives translocally between the *sanam* and the village lose out or benefit only partially.

Sanam-bound mobilities not just stand in friction with a mode of development that is place-based, its direction is problematic too. Villagisation policies brings villagers into the fold of the state, and the associated promises of a better life are largely desired by villagers (High 2014). It is a centripetal mobility, which can be contrasted with the centrifugal *sanam*-bound mobilities that take villagers away from planned development and (back) into rural spaces that, as we have seen, are viewed remote and undeveloped (Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox this issue). As the discussion has shown, leading mobile lives, persistent involvement in swidden cultivation, and irregular school attendance should not be read as a rejection of the state or modernity as argued by Scott (2009) or as characteristic of certain ethnic groups (Clarke-Sather 2020:15). Rather, it is a response to the absence of a foundation for substantial livelihood options in the proposal of sedentary rural futures in Laos (compare: Nguyen and Rigg this issue).

Mobilities in the Realities and Future Aspirations of Rural Youth

Textbooks expose students to a small range of possible occupational futures. The figure of the teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer feature with marked consistency in these textbooks (Ansell et al. 2020). Except for the police officer, these are also one of the few salaried and modern occupations that rural students will have seen in their immediate environment, and their uniformed nature no doubt adds a further appeal. Our research with primary school-aged children indicates that regular exposure to such occupational futures both in textbooks and in actual reality contributes to the formation of modern occupational aspirations (Ansell et al. 2018).

For rural students, realising these aspirations requires mobilities and relocations. Full secondary schools are only available in larger villages and post-secondary schooling requires relocating to a provincial capital or beyond. For rural children and youth, educational success in the form of progressing through the school system, thus, requires gradual movement towards urban or even national centres (Huijsmans 2019b).

When we asked primary school students what steps they would need to take to become a teacher or a nurse few students could respond. The textbooks did also not explain the educational pathway and the mobility requirements for the occupations it featured. Moreover, when we discussed with primary school teachers children's lack of knowledge about realising their aspirations, the teachers insisted that at primary school level it is the task of teachers to provide students with dreams. They did not see it as their task to complicate these dreams by elaborating on the mobilities required for realising aspirations. Additionally, mobility was also absent from children's motivations for their aspirations. For example, they said they would want to become a teacher to teach children in the village, become a soldier to make the village safer, or become a doctor to cure ailing fellow villagers. Thus, primary schoolchildren drew on school-based aspirations in constructing their own images of desired rural futures.

In our study villages, few parents could afford the cost of school-related mobilities and relocations and certainly not for all their children. Some ethnic students would benefit from scholarship programmes and boarding facilities (Faming 2019). Yet, for most rural students, aspirations for completing secondary education, let alone entering further studies, remained unrealised. More commonly, rural youth terminated their schooling prematurely and entered the world of work. Sometimes this took them to provincial or even national centres. Yet, more commonly rural youth found work (typically farm work) in other rural areas, within the district or in neighbouring districts or provinces – often in combination with contributing labour to their natal household. In sum, the mobility requirements for realising the aspirations propagated through schooling remained absent from textbooks, as well as students' and teachers' reflections on these aspirations. This might be to save rural students from, or suppress, the frustration that their families would be unable to finance the mobilities required for progressing through the school system. Once out of school, mobilities came to shape young people's lives, nonetheless. Yet, these were typically rural-bound mobilities for purposes of low-skilled manual labour. Any mention of these mobilities was equally missing from student textbooks, and thus scripted out of state-proposed visions of rural futures (Huijsmans and Piti 2021).

Conclusion

Education is central to a range of development objectives rendering it a key instrument *and* promise for realising particular futures (Jeong and Hardy 2023; Naafs and Skelton 2018). Over the past decades considerable progress has been made toward realising universal access to at least some years of primary schooling (Gerber and Huijsmans 2016). Yet, various challenges have remained especially in the provisioning of education in rural areas. As a result, a deficit perspective on rural schooling continues dominating research and policy discussions on rural schooling.

The research presented in this article was institutionally, discursively, and materially embedded in such a deficit perspective. As I have shown, this does not have to dictate the methodological and conceptual approach taken. 'Compromised research' can provide a unique vantage point for observing and reflecting on the actual working of the social systems rural development interventions become embedded in (Herberg, Seeliger, and Möller 2023:4; Hilhorst 2003; Mosse 2005). I have done this, by foregrounding ethnographic observations of the mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling. This has shown that rural schools must be appreciated as more than service providers or institutions, and also as nodes in diverse mobilities. The sedentary structures of rural schools are emplaced in highly mobile rural landscapes, consisting of new and old forms of mobilities, which pose a challenge to thinking about rural and urban spaces in a neatly bounded manner (Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). The various mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling each have their own social logic and involve different sets of actors. Thinking across these differences illuminates a patchwork of mobilities that shapes in important ways the actual unfolding of development interventions related to rural schooling.

The different mobilities described in this paper are valued differently, pivoting on their connection with the state, and relate to rural future making differently. I have distinguished between 'mobilities of state' and 'sideways mobilities'. Mobilities of the former kind are rarely questioned. These are considered part of everyday state practices, further reinforced and intensified by agents of international development because in the context of Laos development projects always involve the Laotian state (High and Petit 2013:420; High 2014). I have argued that in rural areas these state-related mobilities contribute in important ways to realising the state as a set of social relationships, which includes the formation of authority, relations of power, but also intimate engagement with state-officials and the production of aspirations. As such, these mobilities are insightful not just for their relation to formal visions of rural futures from, i.e. official development agendas, but rather for the mundane practices they give rise to that change social relationships in the present. Sideways mobilities, on the other hand, are often constructed as a problem in development discourse, not least because they are viewed as reproducing remoteness, a trope that development interventions, such as rural schooling, are set up to counter. Nonetheless these sideways mobilities remain essential for rural folk precisely because the economic promise of rural development in place, whether it is schooling or villagisation, albeit not resisted, remains unrealised or unrealisable for many.

The analysis presented has implications for intervening in rural schooling. Most importantly, development interventions seeking to address the problem of poor learning outcomes such as introducing preschool programmes, school meals, curricula reforms, etcetera, necessarily become embedded in, and further reconfigure the patchworked mobilities comprising rural schooling. Thereby, they shift or intensify the mobilities making up rural schooling. The analysis has indicated that these interventions, therefore, can never be viewed as mere technical fixes. They reshape the patchwork of mobilities related to rural schooling. This includes ways in which the state becomes realised and experienced, materially and discursively, in rural areas (Bærenholdt 2013; Ferguson and Gupta 2002), as well as the role of place and mobilities in diverse forms of present and aspired livelihoods. The point is not whether this is good or bad, but rather a reminder that development interventions are rarely just linear pathways of improvement, as common theories of change suggest, but have social effects that may well be different from its stated objectives and will affect different groups of people differently.

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RESEARCH

The Soft Power of Authenticity: Lao Eco-tourism as Participatory Exclusion

Michael Kleinod-Freudenberg[1]

Abstract

Ecotourism is uniquely situated within a key tension of the current "greening" of global capitalism – conservation vs development, which also defines the political ecology of late socialist Laos. Synthesizing the results of fieldwork on model ecotourism projects this paper argues that a fetishized notion of Authenticity takes on material force in ecotourism practice that works as a soft, i.e. inclusive form of power tending to reproduce the marginalization of rural populations. The paper traces the sources of this intricate complex of participatory exclusion, describes its workings and twisted outcomes, and considers ecotourism futures in rural Laos in the context of increasing integration into China's sphere of influence as well as potential pathways for transformation.

Keywords: ecotourism, inequality, Laos, nature reserves, participatory exclusion, postcapitalist transformation

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Introduction

When news broke in 2019 that despite concerted conservation efforts, "Laos lost its tigers"[2], this seconded results of a doctoral study on which this paper is based (Kleinod 2017). These news came in the wake of a report (Rasphone et al. 2019) on the National Protected Area (NPA) of Nam Et-Phou Louey in Laos' Northeast, where the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), supported by funds from GIZ and World Bank, had established a program for protecting the last viable population of tigers in the country. This project was and remains one of the best equipped and managed conservation projects in Laos, an important element of it being a cutting-edge ecotourism project established by a former advisor to another outstanding Lao project, the ecotourism model in the Nam Ha NPA in the Northwest. This news also had something of a *déja vu*. For it was a few years earlier at Nam Ha that the headman of an ecotourism village inside the NPA had told me that there were no tigers left – again despite conservation efforts to which ecotourism was a central ingredient. There were other apparent contradictions as well: Despite the anti-opium policy that was a component also of tourism development, opium consumption remained high or even increased (along with that of other drugs, such as methamphetamines) in at least one village along one of the first, classical ecotourism routes through Nam Ha NPA.[3] Slash-and-burn cultivation, another target of ecotourism as conservation strategy, as well as cash crop production (namely rubber) were going on in Nam Ha NPA against regulations. Around Nam Et-Phou Louey, it was exactly in key ecotourism villages that incidents of illegal hunting appeared highest, and endangered species were sold under the table in shops of ecotourism villages or at a bus station directly under a banner stating to "not hunt wildlife for sale". Meanwhile the same bus bringing ecotourists to their remote destination has prohibited wildlife as cargo on its way back to be sold in the urban center.[4]

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[2] https://news.mongabay.com/2019/10/how-laos-lost-its-tigers/.

How could those contradictions around ecotourism be explained? Since its inception ecotourism is hailed by policy-makers and conservationists as a sort of panacea: due to its supposed potential of reconciling capitalist development and resource conservation in so-called Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) (Butcher 2007) it is widely employed on a global scale as a means to facilitate the management of nature reserves in a more inclusive, less fortress-like fashion. Concurrent with capitalism's ecological crisis nature conservation discourses and practices reach new heights (Wilson 2016; Marris 2013; Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Vettese and Pendergrass 2022). Thanks to a widespread discourse of "natural capital" among policy-makers all the way up to UN climate and biodiversity summits envisioning the greening of capitalism, as well as due to an increasing longing for untouched Nature going along with its loss, ecotourism is a central ingredient in many if not most of the protected areas established in recent decades, and in those soon to be established in the internationally sanctioned "30 by 30" agenda[5] (Dinerstein et al. 2019) that became part of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in late 2022. According to neoliberal conservation where nature pays its way (Duffy 2013: 99), income derived from nature appreciation in ecotouristic activities is used to fund and manage nature reserves. Moreover, it will contribute to the income of villages within or adjacent to such parks, providing an alternative to direct use of forest resources, and to integrating them into conservation activities, or so it is hoped. From the beginning, sustainable, pro-poor and community-based forms of tourism have been central to the tourism strategy of late-socialist Laos, which is heavily dependent on tourism income as a main foreign exchange earner.[6] Ecotourism thus was a central component of the country's socio-economic future(s), and remains so even more pronouncedly under recent schemes of green growth and climate change adaptation where the further "greening of tourism" is a medium to long-term priority of the Lao government (GoL and UNDP 2021).[7]

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[3] As according, among others, to the village teacher at the time of visit in 2014. Apparently, quite a few areas of Luang Namtha have become opium-free afterwards because of new government policies, and addicted people have been send to rehabilitation programs. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this information.

[4] This is not to say that such contradictions from the perspective of ecotourism and conservation are perceived as such emically among locals (see below).

Laos can be considered a model country for the implementation of ecotourism as a development-through-conservation scheme in that it hosts an early, internationally renowned model project, the Nam Ha Ecotourism project, supported since 1999 by UNESCO (Lyttleton and Allcock 2002; Gujadhur et al. 2008; Schipani 2008). In order to control unregulated opium tourism, and to shift local economies away from opium production and shifting cultivation to safeguard the protection of Nam Ha NPA (Harrison and Schipani 2009), the project has seen considerable international financial and advisory support in the establishment of ecotourism structures,[8] and it has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in Laos. Nam Ha was thus intended as a model for further ecotourism development in the country and the region. And so it was that Nam Ha advisors soon established further schemes that were even more advanced, as they were based on a critical appraisal of the pros and cons of the Nam Ha project, such as in the ecotourism project in Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park, which came up with its own, and much celebrated, model (Eshoo et al. 2018).

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[5] "30 by 30" is a worldwide initiative for governments to designate 30% of Earth's land and ocean area as protected areas by 2030.

[6] In 2019, tourist arrivals to Laos reached an all-time high of 4.8 million, with international tourism receipts totaling about $935 million – a main source of foreign exchange earnings, and with a direct contribution to the GDP of 5.1% sustaining about 10% of total employment (ADB 2021). Numbers dropped by 81.5% in 2020 due to COVID-19 (GoL no year) while, "70% of tourism enterprises surveyed had reduced employees, cutting employee numbers by 38%" (Yamano et al. 2020:4). According to the COVID-19 Recovery Roadmap, tourism "has the potential to overtake mining and electricity export revenue in less than five years […] and become the top export earners for Lao PDR" (GoL and UNDP 2021:6)

[7] This relates to similar developments in late-socialist China and Vietnam (Bruckermann 2024; McElwee 2016).

[8] According to Lyttleton and Allcock (2002:47), "it is unlikely there is a development project in the world that has maintained this level of expertise relative to the number of target communities", with almost one technical advisor per target village in the first phase.

Seeking to comprehend above contradictions, this paper synthesizes the results of extensive fieldwork on those model projects in terms of socio-ecological theory-building, namely regarding how ecotourism constitutes a "world-ecological"[9] practice putting the reproduction of humans in urban realms of capitalization into the service of the recreation of nonhumans ("biodiversity") on capital's frontiers (Kleinod 2017; Moore 2015).[10] Combining this approach with critical tourism studies and Bourdieusian praxeology, it conceives ecotourism in Laos from a critical, yet nuanced, perspective. It argues that a peculiar, fetishized notion of Authenticity (i.e. untouchedness) takes on material force in ecotourism practice, entailing an intricate complex of participatory exclusion: a double take on the local community as both environmentally "ignorant and noble" translates into a "servantization" of locals as tourism-cum-environmental servants, which results in the exclusion of locals from command over resources and economic proficiency. This dynamic relies on the dualisms of Nature vs. Society and Tradition vs. Modernity that reflect the well-off social positions of those whom ecotourism is largely for; i.e. members from urban middle-class milieus (see below). It works as a soft, i.e. inclusive, form of power that tends to reproduce the marginalization of rural populations in and around nature reserves in Laos by drawing on their active participation. This assessment is not to bluntly reject or condemn ecotourism, but to enable the envisioning potential pathways for transformation. My concern is thus only indirectly with the contradictions in conservation projects, and more with their social, and sociological, implications. What the failure to achieve project goals points at is the way in which, at the Lao frontier, conservation often undermines its ambition by further squeezing the resource base of local livelihoods relegated to continued subsistence. Focusing on a specific, key practice in conservation work, i.e. ecotourism, this paper is not only concerned with an under-researched topic in Lao studies, but also with one that is uniquely situated to demonstrate the "uncomfortable" nexus (Büscher and Davidov 2013) between large-scale resource development and conservation that defines Lao political ecology around the "turning of land into capital" (Dwyer 2007; Kenney-Lazar 2021). This also speaks to the global ecological predicament more generally as some kind of productive relation between conservation and development, as envisaged by ecotourism ICDPs, is clearly required in order to meaningfully deal with an aggravating socio-ecological crisis.

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[9] World-ecology seeks to understand the global ecological crisis through the capitalist law of value emphasizing the production of Cheap Nature in global capital's frontiers and their appropriation for production and capitalization in capital's centers, in order to maintain the overall rate of profit (see Moore 2011, 2015).

[10] This peculiar relation was termed "ecorational instrumentality". Empirical research was carried out between 2011 and 2014 focusing predominantly on semistructured interviews with tourists (25), ecotourism advisors, management staff and guides (23) as well as villagers (more than 60). The general fieldwork design was structured formally by the concept of the host-guest relation as central to (eco) tourism practice, and according to the intention to trace the conservation-development tension (see below) through practice. Four sites were selected, three of which were ongoing ecotourism projects: the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project at Nam Ha National Protected Area; the Nam Nern Night Safari at Nam Et-Phou Louey NPA; and the Katang Trail at Dong Phou Vieng NPA.

It needs to be stressed, again, that the criticism in this paper is not levelled against any particular project or individual; it does not deny the convictions and good intentions, the hard work as well as the successes of those involved in such projects, nor the benefit that ecotourism does bring to local communities. The critique is rather structural: it considers the symbolic "presets" of the ecotourism concept that quite necessarily tend to turn into certain material constraints when this concept gets enacted. The paper demonstrates how the symbolic-material rural/urban divide underpins a socially structured-structuring practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox forthcoming) that subscribes to, and reproduces by practical acknowledgement, the exclusionary Nature/Society distinction that nature reserves are principally based on. Applying a "world-ecological" notion of ecotourism as related above, it further highlights the global entanglement of the rural and the urban in a concrete, observable practice. It deliberately goes beyond a strictly localized ethnographic account to make a structural point, considering how rural areas, including in late socialist countries of Asia, are being integrated into schemes of "ecorational instrumentality" designed to address the global ecological predicament in capital-friendly, thus contradictory ways. More pronouncedly, the paper traces the sources of the soft inclusive power of Authenticity, describes its workings and twisted outcomes, and considers ecotourism and rural futures in Laos in the context of recent socio-structural transformation and the COVID-19 rupture.

Ecotourism and Authenticity

The logic behind ecotourism as ICDP is aptly caught by the expression "nature conservation through nature appreciation" (Ellenberg 1998). It is in this sense that this paper refers to ecotourism: as touristic travel being directly linked to conservation management and local development. Ecotourism became increasingly popular with the rising criticism of conservation projects based on the "fortress" model that regularly led to the exclusion, and often outright expulsion, of local populations – as in the iconic parks of Yellowstone or the Serengeti (Chatty and Colchester 2002). Integrated Conservation and Development Projects should instead be community-based, i.e. letting locals participate to a considerable degree in various aspects and phases of such projects (Flacke-Neudorfer 2015). Despite increasing criticism (Butcher 2007; Duffy 2013; Büscher and Davidov 2013; Fletcher 2014),[11] ecotourism is employed to align local economies with nature conservation through basing them on "non-extractive" resources, such as the willingness of tourists to pay for appreciating nature and local culture.

The idea behind ecotourism needs at least some historical-cultural unpacking if the force is to be grasped that its employment as conservation tool draws from. Such unpacking demonstrates the cultural specificity of a practice relying on a peculiarly Euro-American notion of "Nature with a capital N" (Moore 2015:2), as supposedly pure realm of the wild nonhuman, to be experienced in aesthetic and kinesthetic consumption.[12] A fondness for the wild, one that could bring certain people as ecotourists into the position of "funders" for the management of nature reserves (Johnston and Ladouanglerd 2002), has long been in the making throughout European and US history, and it is still continually reproduced through nature spectacles (Igoe 2010; Igoe et al. 2010). The European Natural Theology's idea of God's presence in nature became secularized as aesthetic Sublime from the Renaissance onward (Groh and Groh 1991); the Sublime combined with the uniquely Northern American experience of the Frontier into a contrived, romanticist notion of wilderness as basis for the establishment of nature reserves as well as for the cultivated urge to experience nature (Cronon 1996).

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[11] Criticism targets the concept of participation as well-meaning yet difficult to implement for the lack of local capacity and the integration of communities in hierarchical power structures. A romantic focus on "the local community" tends to downplay local differences while at the same time creating or exacerbating local social differentials. Potentials for local development are seen as limited due to an intrinsic notion of "limited development" as ideal (Butcher 2007; see below). The model itself is principally non-local, Eurocentric in nature (Cater 2007), and, national tourism policies are often inadequate to ensure success.

[12] For Jason W. Moore's world-ecology, "Nature with a capital N" denotes the neat separation of Nature (as purely nonhuman) and Society as the ontological basis for capitalism's cheapening of production inputs. It is the same dualism that underlies nature conservation as well as the ecotouristic, romantic notion of authenticity, which is therefore also written in this text with a capital A.

Following Adorno's critique of the *Jargon of Authenticity*, ecotouristic Authenticity equates "agrarian conditions, or at least [...] simple commodity economy" to "something undivided, protectingly closed, which runs its course in a firm rhythm and unbroken continuity"; this "left-over of romanticism" is "transplanted without second thought into the contemporary situation, to which it stands in harsher contradiction than ever before" – as if it was "not abstracted from generated and transitory situations, but rather belonged to the essence of man" (Adorno 1973:59). In short, Authenticity constructs Lao landscapes as realm of "untouchedness", uncorrupted by modernity and its markers; of primordiality, actuality (such as that a life "close to nature" is perceived as happier, more "natural", desirable); of life before the fall, of threatened abundance. As Cronon notes, the Authentic wild is a place that "we ourselves cannot inhabit" (Cronon 1996:19); while, in turn, wilderness from early on – beginning with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 – was created not least (perhaps even mainly) for touristic enjoyment.[13] Although ecological concerns were instrumental for establishing protected areas from the beginning, it is only with the increasing awareness of widespread biodiversity loss and climate change that protected areas enter the center stage of global politics. In other words, the protection of "Nature" and its aesthetic experience went in hand from the outset, and continue to do so under current conditions of "ecocapitalism". Because wilderness only works if humans remain detached from it, the only way of being in wilderness is in a mode that is by and large non-extractive. It is an ideological notion of untouchedness that underlies, as Cronon's (1996:15) lucid analysis foreshadows, wilderness experience up until recent ecotourism, as in Laos:

> *Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled. For them wild land was not a site for productive labor and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation. One went to the wilderness not as a producer but as a consumer, hiring guides and other backcountry residents who could serve as romantic surrogates for the rough riders and hunters of the frontier if one was willing to overlook their new status as employees and servants of the rich.*

Wilderness and its experience were, in other words, artefacts of social structure (Fletcher 2009) – not least implying the rural/urban fault line that is so crucial to the capitalist metabolism (Foster 1999; Moore 2011). This is a central preset built into the ecotourism concept as one of nature appreciation: it relies on, and tends to reproduce, the social differences associated with the rural/urban divide that it takes for granted and sometimes even glorifies (see Mao, Nguyen, Wilcox 2024). The typical ecotouristic guest (to Laos and elsewhere) hails from Western urban realms where she occupies social positions within the middle and upper middle class, while the typical ecotouristic host (at least in Laos) tends to dwell in rural, peripheral places and occupies socially marginal positions.[14] And as we will see, the promise of experiencing actually-existing (relative) untouchedness, which tends to reproduce the social distance between host and guest, underpins the practice of ecotourism: in order to appear convincingly Authentic, local nature and culture are conceived of in the mode of limited development – a compromise between (rather than a sublation of) conservation and development in favor of conservation (Butcher 2007).[15] Authenticity, the normative affirmation of simplicity and "untouchedness" in above sense, sanctifies and tends to reproduce underdevelopment and poverty at the same time as it enhances the cultural and symbolic capital of tourists.

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[13] Also see in this regard the US Wilderness Act's definition of "wilderness" as, "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd645666.pdf).

It is argued below that ecotourism involves the exclusion of locals from their means of (re)production in a specific, inclusionary sense – and the socio-cultural specificity of Authenticity, which implies its socio-cultural alienness to the economic and historical context of rural Laos (as suggested by Cronon above), is a central element in this dynamic. The contrariness of ecotouristic habitus, and thus of the motivational structure of their clients, is an objective constraint to ecotourism projects, because whether or not a certain destination will receive funds depends on the customer's willingness to pay. To walk a fine line between the customer's "romantic gaze" (Urry 2002) of Authenticity and her need for (Inauthentic) services and infrastructure, is tricky for local villagers socially unfamiliar with this specific habitual makeup. And it is this tradeoff between development and conservation that underpins the idea of "limited development", which advocates,

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[14] The social demography of ecotourists to Laos in this study goes along with an early study according to which ecotourists tend to be comparably young, highly educated and well-earning white collar professionals (Crossley and Lee 1994). If recent German socio-demographic studies on nature awareness are any indication, ecotourists are most likely to hail from the milieus of "upper-conservatives", "post-materials" and "expeditives" – situated in the upper-middle class echelons between traditional and innovative orientations – as well as the most innovative but less well-off "neo-ecologicals" (BMUV and BfN 2023).

[15] Or as an ecotourism advisor once put it in an interview: "As much conservation as possible, as much development as necessary" – in other words: local development should find its limits in the demands for conservation, i.e. it becomes a function of an ecorational outlook.

> *… the meeting of 'basic needs', or 'sustainable rural livelihoods', not as a stopgap measure,* ***but as development itself****. This is the approach of ecotourism ICDPs – to orient rural development around a rural, self-sustaining livelihood that meets basic needs (Butcher 2007: 165, emphasis original).*

Restricting tourism development in ecotourism sites in the name of "carrying capacities", including visual carrying capacity (Urry 2002), serves as much the "romantic gaze" as the conservation efforts it is intended to fund.[16] It is on these ideological grounds that the existence of an "ecotourist bubble" becomes comprehensible, i.e. a mode of ecotouristic experience that "ignores its context" (Carrier and Macleod 2005:316) like any form of alienated spectacle (Igoe 2010) and thus enables the experience of Authenticity in settings that are to be regarded "Inauthentic" according to the measure of untouchedness underlying this concept – as is clearly seen in the sociohistorical making of Laos into a capitalist frontier.

Conservation on the Lao Resource Frontier

The landscapes and people appreciated by ecotourism as Authentic are all but untouched. This becomes abundantly clear when looking at the historical making and recent makeup of the Lao political ecology. Most obviously, Laos is, "the most heavily bombed country per capita in history",[17] and unexploded ordnance from the Second Indochina War is still littering the countryside, not least also in those ecotourism destinations close to the former logistical network of roads and trails known as the "Ho Chi Minh Trail", which ran from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through the eastern parts of Laos, and which was heavily bombed during the American War.

The recent political ecology of Laos has been conceptualized as a resource frontier, where "a free, unbounded space available for commodity extraction and production" is awaiting investors (Barney 2009:150). In Marxian parlance, "frontiers" necessarily accompany capital's inherent expansionary drive to maintain the rate of profit (Moore 2015; Harvey 1982). More precisely, the frontier is characterized by the appropriation of "natural" resources to provide "cheap" input to commodity production in the centers. The "cheapness", i.e. devaluation, of nature means, for example, that the social and environmental costs of resource extraction by capitalist enterprises are largely unaccounted for, left for the rest of society to remediate. Cheapness often also implies, not just in Laos, an authoritarian state, weak law enforcement, and elite capture. Social services, from healthcare to education, tend to be rather poorly developed, and access to them is highly unequal (see Huysmans 2024). The Lao saying, "The rich don't go prison, the poor don't go to the hospital", captures this situation well. This also means that a large part of the population in frontier areas, such as in Laos, rely considerably on subsistence economies including social safety nets within communities, traditional medicine (Elliott 2021) and so on.

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[16] To be sure, nature appreciation and conservation do not always and necessarily go smoothly together. There are many examples where both are at odds in actual practice, such as, when a wide view over an NPA is offered by an illegal swidden.

[17] https://www.legaciesofwar.org/legacies-library.

Nature reserves and ecotourism inhabit a precarious niche in the overall political-ecological context of Lao late socialism, or what has recently been called Laos' "statist market socialism" (Creak and Barney 2022). Creak and Barney (2022:5) argue that the political ecology in Laos is only inadequately understood through categories of elite capture and or "rentier state" (Barma 2014); rather, in the case of Laos, it is analytically helpful to consider the regime's exploitation of natural resources in relation to the key nonmaterial resources that facilitate this exploitation, namely its institutional resources that mediate its relationship with society and the environment, and the ideological resources that rationalize the regime's exploitation of natural resources in the name of the national community.

In this perspective, the quasi-official policy of "turning land into capital" (e.g. through hydropower development, mining, or cash crop farming on plantations) serves the durability of the socialist regime. Nature conservation and ecotourism have to be seen within this context.[18]

While social inequality increases steadily with increasing capitalization, and has certainly seen a boost with COVID, a large section of the population still has access to land for subsistence agriculture – a tried and tested fallback option that people quickly turned to during COVID, even by official recommendation (Trostowitsch 2021).[19] NPAs tend to be located in the peripheries, often concurring with comparably high levels of poverty, and with a comparably multiethnic setup (Epprecht et al. 2018). Nam Ha and Nam Et-Phou Louey are both situated at historically important regional gateways. Both have been heavily fought over during the Second Indochina War (commonly known as the “Vietnam War”, in Vietnam and Laos also “American War”) and both have been shut off from further reaching networks for a certain period after the Lao Revolutionary Front took over in 1975 (Walker 1999). The forest became military dominion with the Second Indochina War, and still today the presence of the military in protected areas is considerable as many newly created conservation forests, such as NPAs, were and remain military strongholds (Dwyer et al. 2016). Both NPAs are located at main thoroughfares to China or Vietnam, respectively, including or bordering villages of often mixed ethnic populations of Khmu, Hmong or Lanten, Akha, and lowland Lao, as well as further groups. Villagers’ livelihoods (see Persson et al. 2021) revolve around multiple sources of income – from paddy rice and subsistence shifting cultivation, including hunting-gathering, to cash crop farming (rubber, maize, banana, melons), construction work and remittances from family members migrating to factories or other income opportunities in Vientiane, Thailand, China, Malaysia, or even further afield. Rather than static – as perceived in the ecotouristic outlook – Lao peasants are clearly “on the move” (Cole and Rigg 2019; Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). While some cash crops compete with traditional staples such as rice for land, a dynamic which tends to infringe on the boundaries of the nature reserves, illicit trade in endangered wildlife and precious timber is rampant due to the proximity of large booming markets for traditional medicine and the conspicuous consumption of the newly rich in the urban centers of China, Thailand and Laos itself (Nooren and Claridge 2001; Singh 2014). Cash crop plantations – rubber in Luang Namtha, maize in Houaphan, as well as conservation efforts, continue to have notable implications for local ecologies and livelihoods, encroaching into NPA land at the same time as they increase local reliance on cash, as well as localized inequalities (Thongmanivong and Fujita 2006; Vongvisouk et al. 2014). Yet, even those most well-off still tend to regard rice cultivation for subsistence their top livelihood priority (Persson et al. 2021).

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[18] More specifically, Creak and Barney (2022: 8) suggest that "statist market socialism" in Laos today functions as, "(1) an ideological, future-oriented project of state-building and national development [...] based on Marxist-Leninist principles [...]; (2) a political and organizational form based on party institutions [...]; (3) statist economic principles and programs [...] applied flexibly and in combination with incentives for private enterprise; (4) a statist system of extensive trusteeship over the nation's natural resources [...]; and (5) a statist mode of social mobilization [...]."

[19] Various official orders around the time of the first COVID lockdown in Laos, such as Prime Minister's order 06/PM (March 29, 2020), did not include the prohibition of agricultural activities, 80% of which are subsistence oriented. I thank Sypha Chanthavong for this information.

The ecotourism projects at Nam Ha and Nam Et-Phou Louey seek to mitigate the adverse impacts of the overwhelmingly extractive nature of Laos’ resource politics, by providing income for locals and park management. The relation of conservation, and by implication ecotourism, and resource extraction is not just one of mitigation, however. Rather, it makes sense to think of this relation in the Lao context as one of “uncomfortable bedfellows”, as Büscher and Davidov (2013) characterize what they call the ecotourism-extraction nexus. For Laos as well as other countries certainly, the observation is crucial that NPAs are considered key source areas of illicit wildlife trade (Nooren and Claridge 2001:214). While it may seem trivial to observe that in NPAs the concentration of endangered species tends to be high, it is important to note that illicit wildlife trade has the existence of conservation as a condition of possibility, exploiting the difference between de jure and de facto access to protected areas and their valuable inhabitants. From this perspective, NPAs appear as wildlife factories of sorts producing the goods for a market that is booming thanks to increasing inequality. Local villagers can, and often are, part of those networks, providing cheap labor extracting wildlife from its habitats. Easy run-off is facilitated by major roads connecting markets in China, Vietnam or Thailand, which often cut through or closely pass by NPAs.

The way in which resource conservation is connected to profit can also be seen in the connection between NPAs and hydropower projects. In fact, a forestry official in Nam Ha reportedly stated unofficially that the NPA still exists only "because of the dam" that was about to be constructed. To see what he meant, a brief shift to another major NPA is worthwhile: Nakai-Nam Theun NPA is perhaps the best endowed NPA in Laos, and considered to be among the most important in terms of conservation value. A major reason for its exemplary status is the nearby Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project – one of the best-known and well-studied hydropower projects in Asia if not worldwide (Singh 2009; Lawrence 2012; Baird and Quastel 2015; Scudder 2021). Its scheme includes the annual payment of US$ 1 million to the NPA management – but not necessarily out of concerns for "greenwashing" or mitigation, but in order "to assure an adequate water flow with low sedimentation into the reservoir of the NT2 Project" to safeguard profitable dam operation (WMPA 2005). In this way, nature conservation and ecotourism tie productively, if inconveniently, into the extraction regime of the Lao resource frontier.

Participatory Exclusion in Lao Ecotourism

It is against the backdrop of the previous sections that the soft, symbolic-material power of Authenticity, as enacted through ecotourism ICDPs in Laos, can be understood. I employ the concept of "participatory exclusion" (Agarwal 2001), which I take beyond its original formulation in the context of gender inequalities of forest management in India, denoting a form of excluding certain populations from access to resources by way of including them into certain participatory arrangements. Exclusion is thus not effected openly, like the expulsion of local people from conservation "fortresses", but in a soft way and often inadvertently by practitioners, through the presets inherent in peculiar schemes.

In this sense, the Authenticity presumption of untouchedness in ecotourism becomes a material force when guiding practices, i.e. real-world actions. As the wilderness fixation underlying this assumption (and which in turn is based on the capitalist rural/urban divide) is made an objective fact in nature reserves, it gains material, compulsory force often already before ecotourism's onset, declaring resource use illegal in certain parts of a park, namely its core zones. As the Lao Forestry Law stipulates, in "totally protected zones" of conservation forests, "it is prohibited to conduct any activities except those for scientific research or walking trails for ecotourism" (GoL 2021: Article 71). Thereby, local ecologies which throughout history had, based on a subsistence-agricultural outlook, factually co-produced those spaces suddenly see themselves excluded from any further such co-production[20] in places now explicitly reserved for urban pursuits, while "adding layers of governance that simply complicate being poor" (Dressler et al. 2010:13).

Livelihoods in the area are far from "untouched" or "backward" but instead shaped and shaken by history and cutting across neat Nature/Society distinctions as envisaged by ecotourism as conservation tool. The same household, indeed the same person, can be involved in nature conservation as local guide for tourists or researchers, a hunter of endangered wildlife, a cash crop smallholder encroaching into preserved forest, a temporary labor migrant constructing the cities of the future. In fact, people living at the margins of a resource-based economy are often required to continue relying on a broad subsistence portfolio, including wage labor and commodity production, given the ways in which their means of reproduction are being constantly reshuffled by a policy of busily "turning land into capital".

Nature conservation adds to a situation in which local livelihoods become complexly constrained – forced by a logic of "cheapening" nature and labor (Moore 2015) to continued reliance on subsistence economies, and thus also on the resources available locally. Thus, the restriction of such resource use by NPA regulations often plays out as further squeeze of the local resource base, even though ICDPs such as ecotourism do provide some amount of monetary income. To systematize the symbolic-material power of ecotourism in the Lao countryside, we could therefore say that it involves three distinct moments that have Authenticity at its core: a) a double take on the local community as both environmentally "ignorant and noble" that translates into, b) a double "servantization" of locals as tourism-cum-environmental servants, which results in, c) a double exclusion of locals from command over resources and economic proficiency.

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[20] The banning of local resource use is still rational and necessary from the viewpoint of conservation as certain "traditional" land uses, like slash and burn cultivation, are being turned unsustainable due to the legal restriction of fallow periods, for example; or as "traditional" consumption of wildlife becomes entangled with region-wide networks of profit-making.

The Noble-and-ignorant Savage

The trope of the noble-and-ignorant savage is deeply engraved into Euro-Western consciousness since the "discovery" of the New World, and it survives up until today in much development and conservation thinking (Görg 2003:243-51). In conservation, the wilderness optic makes for a precarious situation of local communities as they become valued in a contradictory manner (Kleinod 2011): on the one hand – in the register of "Nature vs. Society" – they are valued negatively, as potential or actual threats to protected ecosystems. However, if properly managed, such as through ecotourism ICDPs, they may be turned into environmentally benign actors. This is seen from the hope that ecotourism might not just provide village income as alternative to extraction, but may also, and through this, inspire an ethical valuation of untouched resources. Thus, hands-on conservationists do not appear to buy into the myth of the "ecologically noble savage" (Redford 1991) in Laos.

In ecotourism itself, i.e. from the viewpoint of ecotourists, however, local communities are regarded as ecologically "noble" already to the extent that these localities convince visitors to be simple and close to nature, so that they become positively valued in the register of "Tradition vs. Modernity". The fact that this myth has been thoroughly debunked in academia (Redford 1991; Buege 1996; Ellingson 2001) does not prevent it from gaining traction in ecotourism practice. The aspect of "ignorance" that is present and tangible in conservation's framing of the local community as primary threat thus gets transformed in ecotourism into a function of locals' perceived ecological "nobility": to the degree they remain ignorant of Modernity, that is, they can "remain" ecologically benign. That it is virtually through ecotouristic practice itself that this supposed proximity to Nature is brought about, i.e. through turning peasants into tourism providers, somewhat necessarily escapes the fetishized bubble of ecotouristic experience. From the perspective of conservation, the experience of supposedly actually-existing environmentality among local people serves its factual creation.

So, while ecotourism in Laos drives on the Authenticity of historically rather static, supposedly "relatively untouched" populations, "noble" because of their supposed "ignorance" with regard to corruptive Modernity, the overall enactment of this idea in ecotourism as socio-economic and ecological practice works dynamically, feeding into the broad trend of transforming local populations and their livelihoods in line with the Nature/Society dualism underlying the capitalization of land as well as nature conservation. It is not least the drive of preserving nature and culture that is at the heart of the double exclusion (below) effected by the presuppositions, a) that locals are most credible as ecotourism service providers when "ignorant" about tourism matters, supposed to "actually" be peasants – thereby reproducing their marginal social positions; and, relatedly, b) that the logic of development-through-conservation means that local development has to find its limits in the requirements of conservation, setting carrying capacities and employing a regime of limited development "*as development itself*" (Butcher 2007:165, emphasis original).

Tourism-cum-ecosystem Servants

This peculiar double take works towards turning locals into what the Convention on Biological Diversity calls "stewards and custodians of biodiversity".[21] It is by their inclusion into ICDPs, such as ecotourism, that locals become so: engaging in touristic services catering for customers who seek and pay for nature appreciation and cultural experience involves them in a meaningful way, while at the same time keeping them from harming the environment. Moreover, the economic benefits derived from such supposedly nonmaterial form of consuming nature will also translate into an ethical valuation of untouched environments.

What makes the ideological configuration such as the "noble-and-ignorant savage" (above) a material force that tends to work into the direction of locals being turned into "servants" are two important factual presets: first, the actual existence of a (more or less well managed) nature reserve; and, second, the general rationale underlying ecotourism that ecotourists become the "funders" of conservation (Johnston and Ladouanglerd 2002). This implies that successfully dealing with the milieu-specific expectations and habitual makeup of rather well-off, well-educated and travelled, urban Westerners is *the* key for ecotourism to work as an "integrated development and conservation" tool. Customer is king in the sense that her willingness to pay decides on whether conservation and village development is funded or not. What makes this construction a conservation tool is that the customer largely expects the experience of "conserved" nature and culture. That is to say that to the degree that the ecotourist's expectation is in line with conservation, the transformation of locals into tourism service providers at once also turns them into ecosystem caretakers. However, this is the case only to the extent that ecotourism income – which is intended to be limited by design – provides "alternative income" to local households, i.e. alternatives to other aspects of livelihoods that are seen as ecologically destructive. I will argue towards the end that this idea is problematic especially since ecotourism ICDPs come with a notion of limited development that does not appear to put locals into positions in which they can afford to act according to the affluent "either/or" proposition of nature conservation (as indicated by the notion of alternative income).

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[21] https://www.cbd.int/tourism/process.shtml.

In both projects, Nam Ha and Nam Et-Phou Louey, local participation in ecotourism was made dependent on benign ecological behavior more generally, employing cooperative agreements and contracts (Schipani 2008; Eshoo et al. 2018). Thus being employed as a local guide required that this person will not also hunt or gather restricted forest products, and trade in endangered species. Locals are also required to assist in scientific research as well as to maintain trails, bridges, boats, lodges etc. for tourists. Initial schemes at Nam Ha also required the village funds to be used for such maintenance of touristic infrastructure, rather than village development more generally (Gujadhur et al. 2008). According to a tour company manager in Nam Ha NPA, in the past bank books were kept by village headmen who regularly embezzled monies, so that, at the time of fieldwork, the books were kept by the company's office in Luang Namtha and headmen had to collect the money once a month upon justification of how it will be put to use.[22]

In this spirit, individuals and communities are to participate in ecotourism projects as providers of food, accommodation, handicraft or information. The notion of servant is to be taken critically here: it denotes a form of domination in that local livelihoods are made dependent variables of conservation as defined by experts, governments, and not least ecotourists. It denotes the social inequality and distance between hosts and guests as well as the differentials in the "freedom to act" to which the rural/urban divide is a key symbolic-material fault line (see Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox 2024).

Economic-ecological Exclusion

The ecotourists' habitus and motivation appears hard to understand for villagers, and even provincial guides; bluntly put, "Why pay a lot of money just to look at the forest and underdeveloped villages?" Such a habitus is arguably a contrived one, as contradictory or dialectical as the idea of "human-presence-in-wilderness" itself. First of all, it requires finding a balance between the "romantic gaze" and a degree of arduousness that goes along with the Authenticity urge on the one hand, and on the other the need for infrastructure, facilities, amenities and local hospitality in line with international hospitality standards. What this comes down to is the requirement of facilities and proficiencies at the local level to be "basic" – from the point of view of the customer that is (see Kleinod 2011). In short, the demand structure (on the satisfaction of which successful ecotourism involvement hinges) is socio-culturally alien and hard to grasp for local service providers – who are thus in a certain sense excluded from command and proficiency regarding their economic pursuits, continually relying on external support from urban professionals in terms of advice and explanation as well as in order to draw potential customers.

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[22] Misuse of village funds by local elites appeared to be a constant concern among ecotourism practitioners also in Nam Et-Phou Louey NPA, reflecting the fact that participatory, community-based instruments may still be contingent upon community-internal inequities.

Although it is true, as argued, that local residents opt into ecotourism mainly for hopes of economic gain, i.e. development, local views of conservation and ecotourism are still rather complex. As Martin, Myers, and Dawson (2018) have shown for Nam Et-Phou Louey in particular, locals adjacent to protected areas in Laos exhibit seemingly contradictory opinions, criticizing conservation due to land loss but also embracing it due to the perceived necessity to protect resources and the rules established by government bodies. Generally, anti-conservation sentiments are less based on a denial of the necessity of protecting resources, but rather due to the perception of conservation as a foreign, Western agenda (Singh 2012). Western ideas of conservation, and ecotourism by implication (Cater 2007), which are geared towards "untouched nature", resonate in local statements that, "We know that we need to protect the forest. But we don't know how because we are so poor." It is clear to locals that "without forest, there is no village", but this expresses a different understanding of resource protection that is based on the sustainable use of resources, not their total non-use. In a similar fashion, villagers are in favor of ecotourism also for the experience of getting in touch with international visitors and exchange ideas and information, not just for the revenue, which they still hope will further increase. While revenue may at times be considerable (World Bank 2019; Keovilay 2012; Ounmany 2014), it remains limited in general, and necessarily so given the conservation goal that ecotourism strives for. It is still the case, though, that it is difficult to understand for villagers, and even provincial guides at times, why foreigners would pay huge sums of money just to look at the forest and poor villages, or why tourists insist on avoiding and removing garbage during tours.

More broadly, locals are being excluded from control over their means of reproduction also in a sense commonly known from tourism-dependent destinations: they are made dependent on conditions far beyond the reach of the community, such as those that determine global tourism flows and preferences. The COVID-19 rupture of global travel was an impressive and painful example here, though far from the only one. Also political developments or the capricious fashions of the global tourism market are beyond local control. Ecological-economic exclusion of locals is obvious in the fact that the core zones of NPAs forbid resource use while allowing ecotours and scientific research – i.e. subsuming rural under urban pursuits. Locals are thus allowed into the core zones of NPAs only as guides and helpers of tourists and researchers

– into localities, that is, which were accessible for their subsistence needs until quite recently.[23] Thus, by their inclusion into ecotourism ICDPs they automatically become ecologically excluded, that is, from local resource use.

Given that, in the scope of ecotourism ICDPs, locals are made to participate in a rather contrived scheme that posits a logic of environmentally restricted local development – with a socio-culturally alien set of motivations at its core (Singh 2012) – as either/or alternative to other local livelihood strategies deemed ecologically destructive; and given that conservation initiatives tend to further squeeze the local resource base, putting demands on livelihoods that are already, and continue to be, marginalized – then it certainly comes as no surprise that this construction of peculiar, contradictory precepts gets undermined by the daily realities on the resource frontier: ecotourism income, that is, somewhat necessarily tends to be employed as additional (rather than alternative) income as part of a subsistence portfolio that cannot afford an either/or logic of alternatives, but is forced to pragmatically employ an as-well-as logic in order to make a living. From this perspective, villagers can provide ecotourism services while still practicing swiddening, or keeping an eye on lucrative wildlife. The initially mentioned apparent contradictions, such as that illicit hunting was reportedly highest in certain ecotourism villages, thus do not seem very surprising. Harking back to the beginning, this provides a sense of how the last viable population of the Indochinese Tiger in Laos has become wiped out despite outstanding conservation efforts, and including an award-winning ecotourism project as a central strategy.

All of this is not to bluntly denounce ecotourism in Laos as an outright, ill-intended strategy of domination against rural populations. Rather, my point is that the dynamic just examined is implied in the overall symbolic-material order of ecotourism, in Laos and elsewhere, and that it plays out somewhat automatically or unwittingly, regardless actors' intentions.

Lao Ecotourism Futures

With this step in the argument we enter the uncharted terrain of lacking further up-to-date research on tourism in Laos. We are thus left here largely with educated guesses and open questions. Ecotourism in Lao NPAs has spread and developed. Not least, outstanding areas in conservation terms, such as Nakai-Nam Theun and Hin Nam Nor NPAs (the latter contagious with Vietnam's Phon Nha Ke Bang National

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[23] Whereas, in turn, an ecotourism advisor to Nam Et-Phou Louey NPA would not "advertise to tourists" that around the tourism camp in the core zone former swidden fields can still be recognized.

Park), which have recently attained the novel designation National Park (including Nam Et-Phou Louey), have introduced ecotourism projects in the past years. Moreover, the concept of nature conservation through ecotourism has expanded beyond the confines of NPAs proper, such as in the popular Gibbon Experience as well as the high-class Nam Kat Yorlapa Lodge (Kleinod and Chanthavong 2024).

While the recent impact of COVID on Lao ecotourism is still a matter of research, above considerations suggest that ecotourism and conservation inhabit a rather precarious niche in Laos' overall extractive political ecology. Maintaining a line between untouched nature and social development requires some kind of alternative income to detach livelihoods from the material use of the immediate environment. Ecotourism is central to Lao tourism in general, which, in turn, is major aspect of the national economy creating an inbound migration stream, while temporary or permanent rural outmigration constitutes an outbound migration stream that is central to rural subsistence portfolios (Sunam, Barney, and McCarthy 2021). Both streams were cut off and brought to a standstill by the pandemic. This has certainly not helped ecotourism projects–ones that are often hardly economically profitable anyhow, given their remoteness as well as the required socio-ecological responsibility of tour companies. Quite to the contrary, just like tourism guides in the capital found other jobs in car rental or food delivery, rural populations also in ecotourism villages tended to “go back into the forest” to hunt and gather, as the owner of a large national tour company stated in an interview. Conservation efforts may become thwarted rather than be successful under such conditions of an economic squeeze that endures into the present due to skyrocketing inflation rates and alarming levels of debt.

An important upshot of the COVID crisis in terms of tourism futures in Laos is the campaign “Lao Thiao Lao” (Laotians visit Laos): initiated by leading tourism proponents and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce, this campaign sought to salvage the national tourism industry in the complete absence of international customers due to COVID restrictions of movement. Touristic experiences and services established for comparably well-off, Western tastes – many of them ecotouristic in nature – were and are being sold now, at greatly reduced prices, to Lao people. While research is thoroughly lacking also in this respect, it appears that this campaign constitutes a further moment in the shaping of “socio-ecological” milieus among an emergent modern domestic urban middle class (Kleinod and Chanthavong 2024; Rehbein 2017; for China see Bruckermann 2024).

How this process will play out is far from clear, and needs to take into consideration another dynamic that becomes ever more pervasive: Chinese investment, and the integration of Laos into China's Belt and Road Initiative (Rowedder 2020; Wilcox 2022). Aside from Chinese-dominated businesses in the country and intensifying economic relations as well as dependencies overall, a steep increase in tourists from China is expected and already happening not least thanks to the newly established high-speed rail line between Kunming and Vientiane. As interviews with ecotourism proponents in Laos suggest, the industry demands from political leaders to proactively engage with this foreseeable trend instead of getting overrun by unregulated tourist movement and expectations, to channel and design this process so that achieved levels of quality and sustainability are not being sacrificed. While numbers of Westerns tourists are picking up again after the steep COVID dip, ecotourism companies are increasingly seeking to cater to environmentally-minded customers from China, Thailand, Vietnam or Singapore. How this trend will play out – especially in combination with increasing touristic capacity and interest among the Lao population itself – remains for further research to be closely observed, examined and, importantly, criticized.[24]

Conclusion

What is the upshot of above considerations for rural futures in late socialist Asia? What does the disappearance of the Indochinese Tiger – despite concerted efforts involving cutting-edge ecotourism projects – signal concerning the future viability of ecotourism, and regarding the future wellbeing of rural populations in late socialist Laos?

Overall, as mentioned, ecotourism is uniquely situated at central fault lines of Lao political ecology as well as the global ecological predicament more generally – namely in terms of its central guiding difference/relation between conservation and development. For one, the quaint contradictions around conservation and ecotourism signal that the power of Authenticity ruling ecotouristic practice, as expressed in the notion of "limited development", appears to almost necessitate its own undermining in an overall extractive, indeed frontier context. This directly relates to rural ambitions, to participate in ecotourism schemes, for example. In a structural sense: the key relation in ecotourism, between conservation and development, appears right within the host-guest relation, as those villagers who become part of such projects hope for “development” while guest are in it for “conservation”. The “developmental” orientation of locals may be subsistence oriented, thus necessitating an inclusive portfolio of income strategies that simply cannot afford neat separations between Nature and Society. Moreover, the promises by the developmental state of wellbeing and wealth are echoed at the local level as well, aspiring to more than just survive. It would be hardly surprising if ecotourism and conservation were another means to making ends meet, for rural people. Ecotourism and conservation have existed in precarious niches within an extractive context, and they continue to do so, providing useful monetary income for various local needs.

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[24] It is widely recognized, for example, that infrastructure development is conducive for the extraction and run-off of natural resources (Nooren and Claridge 2001). With by far the most important destination of illicit trade in timber and wildlife from Laos being China, further development of the Belt and Road Initiative could be regarded as matter of grave concern from a conservation point of view.

How both will develop in the future will increasingly depend on China, for the fundamental degree to which Laos is indebted to and dependent on Chinese political economy is plain and clear. If the early observation by the external reviewers of Nam Ha’s second phase is any indication – namely that “attractions based on cultural commodification”, and “a fabricated tourism experience that has been heavily influenced by the Chinese model” are “detrimental” to community-based ecotourism schemes thought up by Westerners (Gujadhur et al. 2008:37-38) – increased presence of Chinese tourists may be at odds with existing ecotourism ICDPs. Indeed, it was a central point in this paper that the power of Authenticity is highly culture-specific. It certainly saw a decline during COVID lockdowns, and it may further lose its grip with increasing presence of Chinese investment, traders and tourists. However, it may also get a little more complex since a socio-ecological orientation increasingly becomes constitutive of certain middle-class milieus not just in “the West” but also in late socialist Asia. In any case, it seems clear that the way in which conservation and development are related in ecotourism ICDPs – that is in terms of Authenticity and limited development – makes for their precarious, almost self-defeating existence within the frontier economy of rural late socialist Laos. While it is foreseeable that the power of Authenticity described here is bound to wane with increasing integration in Chinese rationales of development, it remains to be seen if the latter will find a more viable, less contrived mediation between conservation and development. Such kind of mediation is envisaged in recent proposals of “convivial conservation” (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Massarella, Krauss, Kiwango, and Fletcher 2023), and “postcapitalist tourism” (Fletcher et al. 2023) – which could potentially be fruitful in terms of late socialism as distinguished from capitalism proper.

As just mentioned, however, the COVID rupture and subsequent developments, such as soaring inflation connected also to the Ukrainian conflict, have had and continue to have a detrimental impact on the social economy of Laos. Given a pronounced “return to the land” for the sake of food security and an increasing dependence on Chinese development and investment indicate that rural futures in late socialist Laos aren't particularly rosy, at least from the perspective of sustainability. In order to maintain regime stability, the late socialist state is bound to further rely on its strategy of "cheapening" production inputs such as resources and labor (Moore 2015), and to further restrict public debate and protest – while the latter, in turn, increases with ongoing ecological destruction and social media use. Although China's presence is regarded with suspicion by many Lao people, attitudes appear more ambivalent: attentive to the advantages as well as disadvantages of Chinese involvement in Lao development and politics (Rowedder et al. 2023). It appears certain, however, that the notion of "late socialism" will acquire more, rather than less purchase with the increasing recent and future integration of Laos into the Chinese political-economic realm.

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RESEARCH

Life Efforts Online: E-commerce Entrepreneurship and Platform-based Governance in Rural China

Weijing Wang[1]

Abstract

This article explores how people work as e-commerce entrepreneurs under the control of platforms and the blueprint of rural development laid out by China's central government. It asks: through what mechanisms do the state and the platform govern rural e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve their economic and political goals? And how the unprecedented scale of e-commerce in rural China has reshaped local communities and people's lives? It argues that the popularization of e-commerce in rural China is encouraged by the partnership of state and Chinese platform giants as a public-private alliance. Rural e-commerce entrepreneurs are aspiring to be their own bosses, nonetheless, they are in "the digital cage" where work and life get blurred in the social domain. The family-based online entrepreneurship in rural China contributes to China's future developmental mode from the grassroots.

Keywords: E-commerce, platforms, rural China, entrepreneurs, governance

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Introduction

This article investigates how people work as e-commerce entrepreneurs and how they conduct their business by using e-commerce intensively under the control of platforms and the rural development pattern laid out by the Chinese central government. It analyses state discourses, platform engagement with China's rural e-commerce, and personal e-commerce entrepreneurship experiences on a local scale. In general, China's rural e-commerce boom began in 2014 when the Alibaba Group launched its Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan (千县万村计划)[2] on Taobao.com. At the time, Alibaba had planned to invest 10 billion Yuan over the next three to five years to develop 1,000 county-level e-commerce service centers and 100,000 village-level e-commerce service stations. In fewer than twenty years, the number of Taobao villages has increased from three in 2009, to 7,023 in 2021 (Zuo 2021). Among them were 745 Taobao villages with transaction volumes of more than 100 million RMB, accounting for 13% of the total number of Taobao villages, and the number of active online stores reached 2.96 million.[3] The progress of platform giants like Alibaba in China's rural areas has relied on the support of the Chinese government's rural development discourse and policies. For example, the selection standards of Taobao Village are dependent on capital investment and local government operations. This shows that a public-private alliance has been established between the state and platforms.

Since China joined the WTO in 2001, the Chinese government has been committed to attracting foreign investment, liberalizing markets, and gradually shifting from heavy reliance on importing foreign technology to a greater emphasis on boosting domestic capacity for indigenous innovation and 'leapfrog' development (To 2022:89). During this period, foreign direct investment brought about the technological improvement of Chinese firms, the construction of numerous "special economic zones", growing demand for temporary laborers in urban areas, and an increase in wages. These have caused many young adults from rural areas in China to rush to the cities, draining the population of the countryside. Meanwhile, China's urbanization rate has risen significantly, from 36.22% in 2000 to 63.89% in 2020. The per capita disposable income of urban residents has increased from 6,280 RMB in 2020 to 40,378 RMB in 2020, compared with 2,253 RMB in 2020 and 15,204 RMB in 2020 for rural residents.[4] However, due to the Household Registration System[5] and its associated welfare connotations, migrant workers continue to be denied the same privileges as urban residents despite the shrinking wage disparity.

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[2] The Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan is a plan for Alibaba Group to invest 10 billion RMB within three to five years to establish 1,000 county-level county logistics centers and 100,000 village-level service stations. This project was promoted by local governments alongside Alibaba, and aims to establish the logistic network in rural China and advance rural e-commerce in China.

[3] Alibaba Research Center. 2020. Annual Report on China's Taobao Villages. Alibaba Research Center.

After 2010, the urbanization process slowed down. The continued rise in wages for workers in labor-intensive industries has given China no advantage over other developing countries in the low-skilled labor market. In 2012, China's working-age population declined for the first time in recent history (To 2022:92). Along with other issues affecting the inefficiency of the Chinese growth model, such as an ageing population, the Chinese government began to recognize the limitations of the nation's demographic dividends. In 2015, Premier Li Keqiang announced the "Internet Plus" action plan, which was China's first official large-scale strategy for information and communication technologies (ICTs) (The State Council of the PRC 2015a). In the same year, Li Keqiang announced another strategy called "mass entrepreneurship, mass innovation (大众创业，万众创新)" as a response to global trends in digitalization (The State Council of the PRC 2015b). In Central Document No. 1 of 2016, "rural e-commerce" was mentioned separately as a single concept for the first time for assisting China in solving the three rural issues,[6] and has been considered essential in China's rural development strategy, such as poverty alleviation and rural revitalization by energizing the grassroots in the countryside.

Meanwhile, the expansion of e-commerce into rural areas has created a new battlefield for platform capitalism. Alibaba, China's largest e-commerce company, started its investigation of rural e-commerce in 2014, as mentioned previously. Taobao.com was founded by Alibaba in 2003 and is positioned as a customer-to-customer, or C2C retail platform. At the same time, China's economic growth model was also in transition, resulting in a delicate and mutually beneficial relationship between the state and platforms. In retrospect, Alibaba's Taobao Village initiative resembles a standard top-down system in that it functions as a partner to the provincial and county governments at the local level, acts as a think tank agent at the national level, and develops and promotes a variety of rural e-commerce models based on villages at the village level (You 2020:92). Later, Pinduoduo,[7] Douyin,[8] and other e-commerce platforms began their rural e-commerce popularization journeys in different ways, such as the “10 billion subsidies” promotion on Pinduoduo.[9] It was estimated in 2021 that rural online retail sales in China reached 2.05 trillion RMB, accounting for 15. 66% of total online retail sales in China[10] – this is the outcome of the state’s and platforms’ collaborative efforts to popularize e-commerce in the countryside.

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[4] National Bureau of Statistics. 2021. "Resident Income and Consumption Expenditure in 2020, National Bureau of Statistics" (National Bureau of Statistics, 18 January). Beijing, CN: National Bureau of Statistics. (http://www.stats.gov.cn/xxgk/sjfb/zxfb2020/202101/t20210118_1812464.html)

[5] 户口制度, *Hukou* System, a population management system in China that began in 1950 and led to the establishment of a dual structure between urban and rural areas, resulting in different employment, education, and social welfare systems for urban and rural residents.

[6] 三农问题, *sannongwenti*, a concept that was first put forward at the Fifth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the October Party in 2005, which encompasses issues regarding agriculture, rural areas and peasants.

The existing literature on China’s rural e-commerce and Taobao Village primarily focuses on three distinct areas. First, quantitative research has discussed the correlation between rural e-commerce development and China’s economic growth model. These studies often pay attention to a certain variable in the model, such as the income of rural residents and increases in the sales of agricultural products, thus exploring the impacts of rural e-commerce development within a limited scope (Chen et al. 2022; Lin et al. 2022; Komatsu and Suzuki 2021). Second, political economy analyses of China’s rural development path have highlighted how, in the 2010s, China’s industrialization policies gradually moved towards technological innovation. Thus, these studies have treated the development of rural e-commerce in China as part of a process of rural platformization under state capitalism probing into the multiple interactions between the state, local governments, platform firms, and entrepreneurs (Haji 2021; You 2020:101). Finally, research on the influence of rural e-commerce on traditional social structures has contended that the development of rural e-commerce is a process of integrating traditional rural social relations with the new spirits of the market under globalization in which disadvantaged groups like the elderly and women are empowered through new trends in technological innovations (Avgerou and Li 2013; Boullenois 2022; Lin et al. 2016; Yu and Cui 2019). However, despite platforms becoming one of the main carriers of the state’s project of rural revitalization, how rural entrepreneurs engage with e-commerce activities at the individual level and what mechanisms constitute the governing technologies through e-commerce entrepreneurship have remained under explored.

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[7] The Chinese version of Temu. Initially, by selling relatively inexpensive goods, it attracted users in rural areas as its main target customers.

[8] The Chinese version of TikTok. Unlike traditional e-commerce platforms like Taobao and Pinduoduo, Douyin sells goods based on the traffic gained through video content production or live streaming of influencers.

[9] Pinduoduo platform issued 500 million RMB in shopping subsidies, including coupons that can be used when people pay for their orders on this platform.

[10] China Rural E-Commerce Development Report (2021-2022), https://ciecc.ec.com.cn/upload/article/20221024/20221024113120420.pdf.

This paper aims to address this gap by asking what mechanisms the state and platforms use to govern rural e-commerce entrepreneurs to achieve their economic goals. How has the unprecedented scale of e-commerce in rural China reshaped local communities and people's lives? To answer these questions, this paper begins by reviewing the literature on digital entrepreneurship in China, and drawing from conversations in platform studies and theories of governmentality to develop the theoretical framework. I then describe my methodology, which consists of a year-long ethnography in a Chinese county. I claim that local governments introduce platforms into the lives of rural residents through projects such as e-commerce training courses, thereby enabling it to exert control over the rural reserve army of the workforce to extend from workplaces to the social domain; however, work-related stress is unchanged. While entrepreneurial laborers on platforms who are motivated to launch their online businesses believe they are their own bosses, they tend to be exploited by platforms in an unequal non-employment relationship with high risks, and, because of the platforms' ranking systems, they must constantly be self-enterprising. Additionally, because these entrepreneurs run their businesses as family-based, the boundaries between work and life, workplace and home, are largely blurred while they are actively involved in e-commerce entrepreneurship year-round.

Cultivating E-commerce Entrepreneurial Laborers from the Grassroots in China

Michel Foucault (2007) developed the concept of governmentality as the "conduct of conduct", that is, governance, based on a power relation between knowledge and its subjects (or objects), is translated and enacted through a multitude of programs, strategies, tactics, devices, calculations, negotiations, intrigues, persuasions, and seductions that are conducted by the authorities in families, schools, prisons, factories, and other spaces. In many contemporary contexts around the globe, the proportion of government interventions is decreasing, while the settings for governance are increasing. As governance spreads, the government's responsibility to the individual is gradually dissolving and being replaced by "technologies of the self": self-enterprise, self-regulation, and "taking care of the self" (Foucault et al. 2007; Rose 1999). Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose explain that the state no longer builds relationships with individuals by providing a series of public services, but by individualizing "private" choices so that each individual conforms to the expectations of the state while maximizing their individual "quality of life" (Miller and Rose 2008:78). This approach has been applied to scrutinize China's marketization and privatization over the past several decades by arguing that individuals' market choices, everyday lives, and aspirations are not only driven by the market but also through political techniques from a distance for adapting China's developmental mode (Hoffman 2010; Rofel 2007; Zhang and Ong 2008; Zhang 2017).

With the emergence of digital platforms in China, the digital economy has become dominated by the power-money-intellect iron triangle while the government turned to hide behind platforms by using less coercion and centralized guardianship as the primary control methods (Yu 2017; Zhao 2008). As an entrepreneurial agency, the state has introduced and promoted platform capitalism in new territories in China particularly in the countryside (Wu 2017). Van Dijck (2013:29) contends that the platform is "a mediator rather than an intermediary", because it shapes sociocultural performance instead of merely facilitating resources (Andersson-Schwarz 2017). Therefore, as platform capitalism has expanded and more individuals were cultivated into digital laborers, platforms have come to serve as one of the most effective tools for governance, restructuring the personal choices, aspirations and everyday lives of digital laborers by conforming to the government's instruction.

Platform-based governance is reflected in several distinct aspects. It generates a wealth of data and shares this information unevenly, implements calculative and reward mechanisms, individualizes the users, and heightens competitive relations among them (Vallas and Schor 2020). The governance of the platform is also represented in biopolitics, such as time-space surveillance through algorithms (Cheney-Lippold 2011). Who owns the platform and is attempting to change the world with it? This question has been raised and explored by many authors to elaborate on "the technological affordances of platforms in relation to their political, economic and social interests" (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Gillespie 2010; Hands 2013; Langlois and Elmer 2013). In Western countries, where middle-class people are generally regarded as the primary group of digital laborers, the argument is that platform giants like Facebook shape consumers or users on platforms into digital laborers who contribute to the production process of platforms without any payment (Fuchs 2014). China's scenario is more complicated since, as part of this process, the state has also achieved its expectations for digital laborers through regulations on platforms and the ideological output they propagate.

Along with Alibaba's Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan in the Chinese countryside, a new form of flexible production based on platforms with seemingly low thresholds has taken root in rural China (Liang 2022). Rural people appear to have found a pathway to freedom: their working time, location, and the contract type are more flexible, with the work content becoming task-oriented (Castells 2004:309; Srnicek 2016:43). However, this is undoubtedly a false impression produced by the mechanisms of platforms. Drawing on Max Weber's (2005) critical concept "the iron cage," Vallas and Schor (2020) propose the concept of "the digital cage" as a critique of the exploitation that users face through digital technologies. The algorithm is a typical instrument used by platforms to accomplish a sort of "soft biopolitics” through a set of regulatory rules by sorting, ranking, categorizing and displaying certain content (Cheney-Lippold 2011) so that users’ personal choices and aspirations are reshaped when they endeavor to achieve a higher ranking or better category. Compared with traditional employer/employee relationships, the relationship between platforms and their users is more complex. As Vallas and Schor (2020:278) note, “The general theme is that platforms reduce the worker’s capacity to resist, elude, or challenge the rules and expectations that firms establish as conditions of participation”. Additionally, for these online entrepreneurs, the boundaries between work and life, paid and unpaid labor, have become blurred (Ritze and Jurgenson, 2010), which may result in “an accelerant of precarity” compounded by the lack of welfare (Gray and Suri 2019:162; Vallas and Schor 2020).

Consequently, similar to how Marx previously theorized the future of laborers, migrants in China were to be freed from the land through the removal of long-standing rights, and freed for being exploited in the labor market (Rose 1999:70). With the rise of the platform economy, some of them have been freed from factories due to the popularity of platforms and their low thresholds for new entrepreneurs, however, freed for being exploited on platforms. Furthermore, characterized by family-based, rural e-commerce entrepreneurship motivated a number of the countryside’s reserve army of surplus laborers, such as rural elderly and rural women (Zhang 2021). At this moment, the boundaries between “labor” and “entrepreneur” are blurred, as self-reliance has become common for workers (Zhang 2023:3). Eventually, although there is no employment relationship between platforms and their users, the former restricts users by the agreement of unequal protocols, and will not provide them with related labor security like traditional employers (Gray and Suri 2019:162; Vallas and Schor 2020).

The development of rural e-commerce, as this paper will show, is a microcosm of how rural individuals are subjected to the governance of both the state and platform giants, and how they shape their own lives via this process. Thus, the contribution of this paper is that it demonstrates rural e-commerce as a case of Chinese developmental projects in line with the expansion of Chinese platform capitalism. Different from platform studies in Western countries which tend to concentrate more on middle-class workers, this paper offers an angle from which to view how the daily lives and aspirations of rural communities in China are shaped by the governance of platforms that introduced by the government. At the same time, it explores how the rural grassroots are progressively heading towards precarity while nevertheless contributing to the developmental path of China.

Research Method

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in Chengshi County, Zhejiang, during May and June of 2022. Situated at the source of the Qiantang River in the western region of Zhejiang Province, Chengshi County is one of six districts under the jurisdiction of Quzhou City. The Quzhou government's censuses[11] show that 0.423 million individuals, or over 21% of the entire population, live in Quzhou and work in agriculture, with 0.181 million of them being women. Just 0.019 million of these individuals are under the age of 35, while 0.18 million are between the ages of 36 and 54, and 0.224 million are 55 and older. Chengshi County has an area of 2,224 square kilometers and a population of 0.36 million. With a forest coverage rate of 79.2%, industry as a means of promoting economic growth is prohibited. Nearly one-third of the population migrates to nearby cities like Shanghai and Hangzhou because residents of Chengshi County have long maintained that Quzhou is the poorest city in Zhejiang and that Chengshi is a poor county inside Quzhou. As a result, many of the county's rural population lack steady employment and do not work in agriculture. Since Chengshi County is in Zhejiang and adjacent to Yiwu, its advantageous location and logistical resources enable some of the county's residents – who were my primary informants – to become e-commerce entrepreneurs on their own.

This study relied on two primary ethnographic methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation which were conducted from May 2021 to July 2022. The investigation covered both usual periods and special occasions (e.g., June 18, November 11, and the pandemic lockdown). A total of 61 people were interviewed, including local government officials, the management of a local e-commerce industrial park, e-retailers, manufacturers, potential e-entrepreneurs, and gig workers in industries that support e-commerce (e.g. couriers.). Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 75 years old, while most were between 20 and 50 years old. Among them, 25 were interviewed at least three times. The participatory observation initially took place in a local e-commerce industrial park. As the survey deepened and the social networks with the interviewees were established, my observation extended to interviewees' offices, homes, and their commutes to work. In addition to the first-hand information, second-hand data was collected from the local government's official website and WeChat public platform.[12] Informal conversations were instructive for this investigation as well.

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[11] Bulletin of the Seventh National Population Census, The third agricultural and rural census.

[12] 微信公众平台, *weixingongzhongpingtai*, APIs embedded into the WeChat app, which can be operated by both individuals and institutions, similar to Blogs.

The interviews mainly centered on how rural livelihoods and everyday life are shaped by people's participation in e-commerce. Empirical questions encompassed the entrepreneurs' previous life experiences, daily routines, family strategies, dilemmas they encountered as e-entrepreneurs, and their consumption practices, with special attention to entrepreneurs' experiences and perceptions of change as a result of rural revitalization and the penetration of platform capitalism into the countryside.

Becoming a Rurality Seller: Governing Entrepreneurship from Afar

This section elaborates on the mechanisms that local governments have implemented to incorporate rural people into the platform economy through e-commerce. "Internet Plus", "mass entrepreneurship, mass innovation", and Alibaba's Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan were all launched in the 2010s, suggesting that a new form of public-private alliance governance composed of the state and platform capital has emerged. In this context, the state or local governments as agencies, in an effort to better integrate rural people into the platform economy, introduced a series of policies, such as infrastructure construction and free training classes.

Consequently, nearly all Chinese counties have a variety of public facilities, including lecture halls for rural revitalization and exhibition halls for agricultural products. The exhibition halls are used to showcase regional agricultural brands and goods, while the lecture halls are set up for skill development at the county level. The local government of Chengshi County regularly organized programs like e-commerce classes for entrepreneurial incubation, provided financing for free seminars on e-commerce incubation, contracted out this work to for-profit e-commerce companies, and evaluated it based on participant attendance. Furthermore, these e-commerce incubation businesses received incentives from the local government for each entrepreneur successfully incubated. The standard for successful incubation was monthly online sales exceeding 5,000 RMB for six consecutive months.

The target audience for these courses was villagers who were either interested in or facing layoffs at home. In every class, women made up over 60% of the participants. The instructors for these free courses were usually so-called successful e-commerce business owners who illustrated how regular rural people might become wealthy through e-commerce while imparting the essential knowledge of e-commerce. When one class ended, another one started. Some residents in Chengshi County enrolled because the sessions were free and they had no work at home; some did so because they wanted to "pick up one more skill," while others did so because they believed that e-commerce would one day make them wealthy. Several disadvantaged groups in rural China took part in these training classes. They heard tutors' personal stories and their own aspirations for being successful online entrepreneurs during class. In addition, they created social networks within the class and followed each other on the internet.

Product exhibition halls have been built to provide a venue for showcasing regional agricultural products and act as a middleman between consumers and agricultural business owners. The local government of Chengshi County created the public integrated brand "On the Riverside", which was divided into five product categories: fish, tea, honey, camellia oil, and root carving. The local government also created cartoon representations for agricultural products, such as WeChat emoticons, to promote the brand more widely online.

These marketing techniques, which subtly limited the content of local e-commerce businesses, created the connection between local agricultural goods expositions and e-commerce. Local e-commerce entrepreneurs quickly realized that following the government's brand planning might increase traffic to their products on many e-commerce platforms. While some entrepreneurs worked to get their products integrated under the public brand "On the River" with the hope of expanding their sales channels through displaying in the rural revitalization exhibition hall, others used these five categories to replace their products and match their keywords to this brand on platforms.

Government rewards have also been a significant tool for motivating e-commerce entrepreneurs. For example, the central government holds some e-commerce-related competitions through subsidies utilizing a top-down strategy with the central government distributing duties and incentives to all levels of government while local governments then assign them to specific departments and individuals. As a result, in order to win projects, lower-level governments increase investments in relevant content so they can receive subsidies from upper-level governments. For example, the central government calls for encouraging and subsidizing e-commerce entrepreneurial talent and projects, and local governments like that of Chengshi County immediately launch competitions for e-commerce entrepreneurial talent. It is easy for people to believe that e-commerce is equal for everyone because the county-level entrepreneurship competitions that are presently held in many counties do not have high prerequisites for achievement.

Mr. Xu, who once participated in e-commerce training classes in Chengshi County, and now operates three online e-commerce stores, is a typical case of a successful online entrepreneur who was cultivated by the public-private alliance, currently, in his forties, Mr. Xu grew up in a village on a mountain in Chengshi County. It takes more than an hour to walk up the mountain from the bottom. Due to its location only a few elderly people still live in the village, and young and middle-aged people have already gone down the mountain to make a living. Owing to the impoverished situation, Mr. Xu migrated to cities in his early twenties and worked in factories for almost 20 years. In the first half of 2022, Quzhou held the first entrepreneurship competition called Hometown Spokesperson of Rural Revitalization, which was designed to select rural influencers suitable for rural revitalization propaganda. To participate in this competition, starting in April, he would stroll far into the mountains every morning. In addition to filming the mountains and rivers in his hometown, he also captured glimpses of rural life in the area, including how to make rice dumplings, tofu, and dried sweet potatoes during the Dragon Boat Festivals. He then edited, polished, and narrated these videos before uploading them to Douyin with the hashtag “Three Rural Issues”, which drives more traffic to the platform.

In 2016, the Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan, promoted both by the Alibaba Group and the local government, entered Chengshi County. Mr. Xu applied for the county-wide recruitment of Alibaba’s rural business department and was selected from 2,600 competitors to be a Rural Taobao partner[13] at the township level. He began managing all Taobao transactions for his village, including local purchases on Taobao and county-village delivery. By doing this, he would receive a 2%-7% commission from Alibaba. This was where Mr. Xu started his online entrepreneurial career. It was also during this period that he began to have contact with the local government through Alibaba: he accomplished the first “express delivery to the village” case in Chengshi County with the aid of Alibaba’s logistics capabilities, and subsequently turned into a model for the development of local government logistics.

Soon afterward, due to the expenditure, Alibaba returned its Taobao business to the county level, and the rural Taobao came to an end. As a result, Mr. Xu shifted his identity from that of a rural Taobao contractor to a logistic contractor. During this process, he attended local e-commerce training classes and discovered that e-commerce and logistical services could be combined. He learned that the local government was developing online sales of agricultural products and creating an agricultural brand, thus, he established his online store selling agricultural products and was able to successfully integrate his brand with the government-created public brand.

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[13] For delivery between cities and villages, Aliaba conducted Rural Taobao in 2006, establishing logistical infrastructure, and selecting contractors called Rural Taobao Partners in each township to ensure that the deliveries would go smoothly.

Now, he resides in the house with his wife, mother, and his brother's family and runs three online Taobao stores selling his agricultural products and a Douyin account that primarily serves to advertise these products through video posts. Mr. Xu does not actively participate in the production process; instead, he contracts this out to experienced processing manufacturers outside the county. He established a brand named after the village where he grew up. He selects products from peasants, packages them with lovely decorations, and markets them in a way that gives the impression of a high-quality lifestyle. This is how he selects his suppliers:

> *There are ten villages in our township. We selected a person for quality control in each village and cultivated one variety of agricultural products for each. The person responsible must have prestige and a certain degree of integrity as well. We signed contracts with the villagers. We only accept agricultural products that meet the standards and eliminate others because bad things can't be sold, and good things don't have to worry about selling.*

Nowadays, the number of individuals in China without enough food is extremely low. What is this going to result in? Consume limited, natural, and difficult-to-get items. "Expert's mode" is anticipated to be our future marketing approach. Using sweet potatoes as an example, do you know how to eat them healthfully? Can you distinguish between good and bad? We intend to include these components in our goods.

Some villagers attacked Xu's strategy, claiming that he was profiting from them by choosing the crops they cultivated and selling the goods online for far more than he paid them. "They can also sell at this price if they can, but it is impossible," Mr. Xu retorted, "These things can only be eaten as food if we don't collect them. Actually, we're assisting them in turning a profit." Nonetheless, many people were envious of him since he rose to prominence as an influencer, made ties with the local government, and made money online. This connection can be traced back to his signing with Alibaba as a rural Taobao partner.

Mr. Xu and a co-founder manage this small-scale business, and his wife helps him with package deliveries. He is regarded as a local influencer in Chengshi County, meanwhile, due to his close ties to the local government, his likeness can be seen on the product packaging, with his brand being integrated into the public brand that the government established. His products can also be bought at the rural revitalization exhibition hall in the local. He is regularly invited to talk about e-commerce and rural revitalization at county events, and he sometimes appears on shows in the local media.

The success of Mr. Xu sheds light on the kind of rural person China has aimed to develop. He became an e-commerce entrepreneur after experiencing the initial cooperation between the local government and the Taobao.com platform. He also took part in training and incubation classes and made money by maintaining the rural image that the local government wanted to project on platforms. Nonetheless, as a result, the platform economy has become ingrained in his life, choices, and goals, and his family puts great effort into supporting him. This is the precise goal of the public-private partnership founded on platforms.

Flexible Entrepreneurship in the "Digital Cage": Controlling the Digital Laborers Through Platform Governance

One day, the nephew of one of my informants came to visit her family. During the conversation, I learned that he had just come to work in Zhejiang not long ago. He was 18 years old, and was quick to express his disdain for the factory workers:

> *I don't work in the factory. I went in for one day and never wanted to go in again because it was dirty and took up too much of my time. I am still young and can make money in the future, but freedom is important to me. I want to see the world, and I don't want to live a hard life.*

In fact, his ideas are well-represented among young rural people in this locality. Many of my interviewees in their twenties had migrant experiences before becoming rural e-commerce entrepreneurs but they mostly worked as service workers such as hotel attendants, and apprentices in barbershops or beauty salons, and never thought of going to work in factories as their elders did. An indispensable reason for them to become e-commerce entrepreneurs was "freedom". As one of my interviewees said, "E-commerce makes me my own boss!" Becoming their own bosses which entailed autonomy and flexibility, was a very common answer when asked why they became e-commerce entrepreneurs. But this begs the question, is this really achievable? The answer is no. In this section, I discuss the precarities faced by these rural e-commerce entrepreneurs as a result of platform governance, Chinese state restrictions that platforms must adhere to, and unequal platform-user relations.

While many people imagine that low-cost e-commerce entrepreneurship can make them rich, most of them turn out like Mr. Wang, who has been exploited by the "digital cage" (Vallas and Schor 2020) throughout his e-commerce entrepreneurship career. Chengshi County has a tea market with over 30 tea wholesalers and retailers, four of whom have online businesses. Mr. Wang is one of these, and he has been operating his online tea shop for more than ten years, with nearly 90% of his income coming from the internet. Mr. Wang is in his forties. He migrated to Quzhou after graduating from high school but returned after half a year because he disliked the migrant lifestyle. He then followed in the footsteps of his father and decided to become a tea farmer. Initially, he contracted a tea plantation and recruited peasants to collect tea leaves every spring in his tea highlands, making profits by wholesaling processed tea to dealers. Due to the low profits, he eventually abandoned his tea plantation and became a tea salesman. In 2008, after one of his friends told him that it was simple to make money on Taobao.com, Mr. Wang launched his own e-commerce business journey.

This was around the time that Taobao.com began to gradually gain popularity in China. Mr. Wang and his Taobao online store have seen firsthand how Taobao has grown from a startup to a massive platform; at the same time, he has also gradually lost his privileges as a common Taobao.com e-commerce entrepreneur.

Platform traffic allocation rules are subject to constant change. The rule was that “the most recent products that were posted obtained the greatest traffic” when Mr. Wang first started looking into e-commerce on Taobao.com in 2008. This meant that as long as Taobao entrepreneurs regularly displayed items, customers would be able to notice them and create potential orders. Tmall is a business-to-customer, or B2C, retail platform where only businesses can join, in contrast to Taobao.com, which is a customer-to-customer, or C2C, retail platform. Since then, Taobao stores have seen a decrease in traffic as it has been diverted more and more to Tmall. In 2017 and 2018, Taobao.com saw very little free traffic that was distributed randomly. Instead, most of the traffic was distributed through package purchases or more sophisticated algorithms like lower price competition.

Platform accessibility guidelines are also updated continually. Mr. Wang has been utilizing Taobao for over a decade, during which time the platform has consistently enhanced the certification requirements for online entrepreneurs such as himself. Originally, product information labels on packaging bags were required. Nevertheless, as product classification evolved, tea was moved from the agricultural to the food category, requiring a Quality Safety (QS) certificate. The QS certificate was replaced by the SC (Shengchan, 生产, production) certificate in 2018 by the Chinese government, and now running an internet tea shop requires having the SC certificate. While it makes sense that platform requirements would adjust as the state’s food standards rose, the methods platforms used in this process were often arbitrary.

> *Sometimes, we woke up and suddenly found that all of our online items had been compulsorily removed by the platform. In the meantime, we received notification that we needed to submit the new certificates. But when we applied for and acquired these certificates and subsequently reposted our commodities, the traffic and data that had accrued over time vanished. We had to start all over again.*

It is worth mentioning that the current SC certificate has relatively strict requirements for elements such as company scale, technological procedure, and equipment list. That is, even online, the space for small-scale shop owners is constantly being squeezed.

There was a sharp increase in the number of platforms and a constant diversification of their features over the past decade. Most of the people I spoke with have several Taobao stores, one Pinduoduo store, and an account on Douyin. Mr. Wang, however, has just one Taobao store. Before 2015, he recalled, there was only one well-known platform – Taobao – and his business was far better than it was in 2022. He used to be filled with optimism for his e-commerce business. However, as diverse e-commerce platforms like Pinduoduo, Douyin, and others have grown in popularity, customers have become increasingly more split, and their business has declined. Mr. Wang appeared to be helpless in this situation:

> *We are too tired to accomplish anything else such as filming videos on Douyin for commercial purposes. We also don't have enough money to pay for advertisements from internet influencers. Furthermore, once we have become accustomed to the mode of this platform, what happens when a new platform is launched? So, whatever, so be it.*

Things may be getting even worse. Currently, Mr. Wang and his spouse manage their internet store while his mother collects tea from tea peasants. Mr. Wang and his spouse respond to questions and complaints from consumers as customer service agents for their internet store every day from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed. The store's traffic allocation would be directly impacted if the responses were delayed. They package and ship the goods in the afternoon within the allotted time window; otherwise, customers would leave unfavorable reviews. To boost traffic, Mr. Wang must also develop a range of discount offers coordinated by platforms despite the fact that their profit margins have been declining. The platform's algorithm incentivizes price reductions, leading to intense competition in this market; yet, the wholesale price of tea remains unabated due to the escalating wages of temporary tea laborers.

> *These days, traffic rather than product quality determines the number of sales. What, then, is the significance of e-commerce? How much can rural revival be achieved? These days, only the elderly farm. I can't even climb a mountain at the age of forty. At the moment, every person who assists us in harvesting tea leaves is older than 55. If they are unable to get the tea for us, I have no idea how I will be able to stay in this field.*

Mr. Wang, who seems to have many complaints about life and business, is the source of the criticism mentioned above. In contrast to Mr. Xu, who is thought to be an excellent example of e-commerce entrepreneurship, Mr. Wang's case is relatively unsuccessful and shows how rights and access are gradually being excluded on platforms over time. Mr. Wang's situation is not unique. In fact, his story mirrors many digital platform entrepreneurs. Digital labor rooted in platforms is more precarious for rural grassroots workers than factory laborers were in the past because of these platforms' unevenness, high level of competition, constantly changing reward systems, time-space algorithmic control, and users' individualization (Cheney-Lippold 2011; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Van Dijck 2013; Van Dijk, Poell, and de Wall 2018:47; Vallas and Schor 2020). Although platforms have yielded a substantial number of apparently entrepreneurial opportunities, they have also made capitalist exploitation more hidden and difficult to resist.

Redefining One's Life as a Family-based Self-enterprise

China has been relying on cheap labor as the primary driver of its economic growth and capitalist development since 1978, resulting in rural residents being the main force of the reserve army of labor through their migration. Following the 1994 fiscal recentralization reform and the reform of China's real estate market in 1998, land became a vital growth resource (Lei 2023:32). Throughout this process, 40-50 million dwellers became landless peasants. The population that the governmentality of China targeted changed from migrant labor, to consumerist subjects and entrepreneurial labor (Pun 2003; Zhang 2023). By 2022, the number of rural online stores reached 16.33 million.[14] Consequently, platforms have been presented as a way to help laborers who leave the factories but do not wish to return to the land by developing them into online entrepreneurs who both consume and produce content online as digital entrepreneurial laborers, blurring the lines between life and work.

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[14] China Rural E-Commerce Development Report in 2022.

Rural e-commerce entrepreneurship is generally family-based (Zhang 2021, 2023), which entails two advantages from the perspective of the state. First, such an arrangement makes it possible for the platform-based industrial system to incorporate an even larger reserve army of surplus laborers in rural China. Second, the boundaries between work and life, and between business expenses and daily consumption, are becoming more obscure (Castells 2004:309; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Srnicek 2016:43). In a word, entrepreneurs turn into digital laborers on platforms and keep their businesses running by integrating their family's assistance – this is precisely where the state shares its responsibility with the individual and their family.

According to the China Rural E-commerce Development Report 2021, 10.1 million entrepreneurs returned to rural areas in 2020, 1.6 million more than in 2019. Among these, 55% of rural entrepreneurship projects were primarily related to the internet, such as launching online stores.[15] Chengshi County has a population of 360,000, with almost 100,000 migrants per year. For these individuals, e-commerce seemingly allows or even requires their families to stay together and support one another.

In Chengshi County, e-commerce entrepreneurship typically spans three generations. For example, the wife may oversee customer service and deliveries while the husband runs the store and designs promotions. Their parents are frequently responsible for their children's daily needs. Young couples usually live with the husbands' parents. During the day, the spouses' parents care for the children. At night, the children's mother puts them to bed. One of my interviewees, Ms. Zheng, who is in her twenties, informed me that she and her mother had previously migrated. She worked at a beauty shop, while her mother worked in a factory. Due to marriage and childbirth, she and her husband returned to Chengshi County and launched their e-commerce store. When she is busy, her mother comes over to help and she gives her mother an appropriate salary. E-commerce allowed her to reunite with her relatives in their homeland, although life and work have been thoroughly blurred for entrepreneurs like her.

Ms. Zheng starts her day like this: she gets up with her child at 8:00 am, arrives at her warehouse in an e-commerce economic zone at 9:30 am, and begins to type out the courier orders to be sent out and sort them according to different types and models. At noon, she cooks for her husband (who is responsible for online store operations and customer service during the day) and the temporary workers they hire. In the afternoon, she continues packaging and shipping and tries to get all the day's deliveries out by 5:30 pm. During the daytime, her in-laws help them with their child. After returning home at night, she takes care of her child while working as a customer service person for her online stores. There is a peak of order inquiries at 9:00 pm, and after 11:00 pm, the number of inquiries becomes less. "I have my own time at 11:00 pm since my son has gone to bed and the customer service shift is essentially finished", she told me, "But I was exhausted after playing for a while and promptly went to sleep at twelve o'clock". Though Zheng believes that it is difficult to accumulate wealth through online entrepreneurship, however, it is better than when she was migrating, she said.

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[15] The Information Center of Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2021.

Even though the dream of e-commerce entrepreneurship often appears in the propaganda discourse of platforms, e-commerce has not made the vast majority of entrepreneurs rich. As one of my interviewees mentioned:

> *We don't make a lot of money from e-commerce. The money earned is almost equivalent to the income generated from migration, and what we earn is just enough to support our family. The advantage is that we conduct e-commerce in our hometown, and everyone works together with mutual respect.*

Take one of my interviewees, Mr. Liu's family of four, as an example. The husband and wife run an e-commerce business to sell socks, and their two sons go to primary school and kindergarten respectively. Their annual gross profit on the e-commerce platform is about 1.2 million RMB, but the payment for traffic purchases on platforms reached 800,000 RMB, excluding costs, and their annual net income is about 200,000 RMB (Figure 1). In daily life, their major annual expenditures include about 3,000 RMB for the new rural cooperative medical insurance for six people in the family (parents, husband and wife, and two children)[16]and 18,000 RMB for the social pension insurance for the young couple. This latter expense is due to the requirement to purchase social insurance for the parents in order for their elder son to enroll in primary school, since they did not buy an apartment in the county seat. The cost of renting a house in the county is about 10,000 RMB per year, and the tuition fee for the elder son is 12,000 RMB per year (including the cost of hiring a retired teacher to help him complete homework after school). There is also daily food and clothing consumption which amounts to about 30,000 to 60,000 RMB per year. "In most cases, at the end of the year, we can't save much money". Mr. Liu commented.

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[16] 新农合, *xinnonghe*, the public medical insurance for rural people in China.

Table 1 One-year expenses for a family of four as an e-commerce entrepreneur

	Expenditures on Platforms (Yuan)	Expenditures on Necessities (Yuan)
Advertising costs	800,000	
Turnover costs	200,000	
Insurance		21,000
Rent		10,000
Children's education		12,000
Food and clothing		45,000
Total	1,000,000	88,000

Mr. Xu mentioned above operates an online shop with his wife, who manages a logistics point in their township. Sometimes, he lives in his hilltop house to film short videos related to the rural lifestyle, while his wife is responsible for their online shops and township-level logistics point, as well as taking care of their family. An ordinary e-commerce entrepreneur like Mr. Wang, who started doing business in the early days, also runs his online tea shop with his mother and wife, with the labor being divided between them. Given the family-based e-commerce entrepreneurship, women, the elderly and other disadvantaged groups in rural areas are involved in the state's developmental mode through platforms.

Conclusion

This paper examined a group of rural-based online entrepreneurs who are energized by both the Chinese government and platform capitalism and engage in the Chinese platform economy. It scrutinizes how China as an agency facilitates platforms for incubating online entrepreneurship, and how these entrepreneurs are situated in the new workplace and life scenarios. The prevalence of rural e-commerce in China distinguishes its platform economy from those in the West in that platform giants are becoming less submissive to sovereign governments or states because of their competitive market values (Van Dijk, Poell, and de Wall 2018:163).

Digitalization is happening in rural China, and e-commerce is one of the main examples. The collaboration between Chinese platform companies and the state is promoting the growth of e-commerce in rural China. The Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Villages Plan, which was a national initiative carried out by Alibaba in cooperation with the Chinese government, served as its foundation. People are motivated to become self-employed by the entrepreneurial dream driven by an ethos of success, but they are actually stuck in the "digital cage", where work and life are blurred in the social factory and exploitation occurs within unequal unemployment relationships (Fuchs 2014:285; Vallas and Schor 2020). Bröckling (2016:81) argues that the essence of neoliberal governmentality is that governing means promoting competition, while self-governing means promoting one's own competitiveness. As a result, by using ranking systems on platforms, online entrepreneurs must become continuously self-enterprising transforming from factory laborers to entrepreneurial laborers who are supported by their families and contribute to China's developmental mode from the grassroots (Pun 2003; Zhang 2023).

The platform-based governance is typically regarded as the governing relationship between platforms and the users. However, in China, platform giants and the government frequently work together to achieve governance. China's 509.79 million rural residents have become the primary target of both the state and platform giants, with the former emphasizing employment rates and labor reserves and the latter seeking to develop daily activities and users. The cases of digital entrepreneurs in rural China presented in this paper contribute new insights to existing studies by highlighting that, following industrialization, privatization, and urbanization, the Chinese countryside is now experiencing digitalization, which has been promoted by both the state and platforms. Much like in the past, modernization mechanisms are being applied to current rural development (Mao et al. 2024; Nguyen et al. 2024); the difference is that the state and platforms represent two distinct interest groups, even if their needs somewhat overlap and mutually constitute each other.

Taobao Village is recognized as the birthplace of rural e-commerce in China and represents the first attempt at a mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Chinese platform giants. Starting with Taobao, more sophisticated rural e-commerce models were progressively established by other platforms like Douyin and Pinduoduo. The partnership between China and Chinese platform capitalism has grown to be the key component of China's techno-developmental regime, regulating people's work and life (Lei 2023:22). Rural populations, which once constituted China's "neglected" army of informal laborers (Huang 2009), are now being transformed into entrepreneurial laborers (Zhang 2023). Therefore, the Chinese countryside is being integrated into global digital capitalism through e-commerce, not only offering new opportunities for rural people, but also new forms of precariousness.

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RESEARCH

Revitalization with Stagnation: The Mixed Effects of Vietnam's New Rural Development Program

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Abstract

Based on research in four communes in rural areas of Hanoi, this paper investigates the hidden shortcomings of Vietnam's New Rural Development program. Introduced in 2010, the program was designed to modernize farming, diversify rural economies, boost incomes, and reduce rural poverty. We argue that while headline data paint a positive picture, these achievements have been secured through an unsustainable combination of non-farm laboring, often *ex situ*, by younger generations and low return farm laboring, *in situ*, by older residents. These are socially combined – and make economic 'sense' – in the context of households that operate as units of production, reproduction and redistribution. With rice land abandonment and ageing farmers, the fissures in the New Rural Development program are becoming all too clear.

Keywords: Vietnam, rural development, agriculture, rice land, household

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Introduction: The New Rural Development Program in Historical Context

In traditional Vietnamese rural society, the household was the basic production unit and livelihoods were secured through agricultural production, especially wet rice cultivation, and/or handicraft production (Nguyễn Hồng Phong 1978:481). During the period of agricultural collectivization from the late 1950s to the 1980s, however, households lost their role as the primary production unit, to be replaced by agricultural cooperatives (Quang Truong 1987; Tương Lai 2002; Vickerman 1986; Woodside 1970). This period of collectivization was comparatively short lived, especially in the south, and from 1981 to 2003, shifts in agricultural policy led to the progressive dissolution of agricultural cooperatives, with the household and the family farm being gradually restored to their former central position and role in rural production, as well as in rural society (Kerkvliet 2005).

Three critical interventions drove the dissolution of the collectivist policies of the decades from the late 1950s. In April 1988, 'Resolution 10' set the stage for decollectivization. Although it was presented as a means to make the collective production system more efficient, it was *de facto* a first step in the dismantling of that system by contracting production to individual households (or groups of households). In 1993, the Law on Land was enacted, which allocated land to households and individuals, giving them the right to convert, transfer, lease, inherit, or mortgage land use rights (Article 3, Clause 2) (Quốc hội [The National Assembly] 1993]). For Kerkvliet (2005:228), Resolution 10 and the Land Law "gave villagers and local officials the green light to proceed pell-mell with allocating land to individual families". A decade later, the 2003 Land Law reinforced these provisions (Quốc hội [The National Assembly] 2003).

While these three critical interventions reinvigorated what was becoming an increasingly moribund rural economy, with stagnant production and declining material living standards, by the end of the 2000s it had reached its limits and second order – or second generation – issues had begun to emerge. No longer insulated from developments in the wider national and global arenas, rural Vietnam was seeing the impacts of – and being profoundly shaped by – such wider processes. Agriculture was being squeezed as opportunities in other sectors eclipsed the attractions of farming; young people were being draw away from, and out of, the countryside; and rural-urban relations were evolving in a manner that challenged the rural/urban binary and transition 'pathways', sometimes to the detriment of communes, socially and environmentally (Nguyen Tuan Anh 2019a; Nguyen Tuan Anh 2019b; Nguyen Tuan Anh 2021; and see Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). The integration of the rural economy into the wider space economy of Vietnam has, therefore, created numerous new challenges for rural households, family farms and, by extension, for the rural economy and society. These include rural out-migration, population ageing, labor shortages, growing inequality in land access, and aspirational changes that have made farming an increasingly low status occupation, especially for the young (Nguyen Van Suu 2004; Nguyễn Duy Thắng 2007; Nguyen et al. 2021; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2018; Nguyễn Xuân Mai 2007). The result is that even in areas of historically high rural population densities, such as the Red River Delta, farming is being dis-intensified and agricultural land abandoned in some places, as the social (low attractiveness) and economic (poor returns) factors that disincentivize agriculture combine with the effects of excessive land fragmentation and, in some places, land degrada-tion (Nguyen Tuan Anh 2019:331-333). In the space of little more than three decades, then, Vietnam has transitioned through three, overlapping agrarian eras:

- 1950-1980: collectivist era that concluded with low agricultural productivity and declining rural living conditions;
- 1980-2010: reform era of marked increases in agricultural productivity and improving rural living conditions;
- 2010-present: late-reform era of rural diversification, thorough-going rural-urban integration, and agricultural stagnation accompanied by improving rural living conditions.

A good deal of scholarship has focused on the first two of these three agrarian eras, but rather less on the third, which is emergent. While material living standards in rural areas of Vietnam have continued to improve across the piece, agriculture in many places is either stagnant or in decline. The basis of rural livelihoods is less tied to farming and instead is allied to the expansion and growing significance of non-farm activities and occupations, both on farm (i.e. *in situ*) and off farm (i.e. *ex situ*), a process referred to in the wider literature as de-agrarianization (see Hebinck et al. 2018; Yaro 2006; Babin 2020; Bilewicz and Bukraba-Rylska 2021; Majumdar 2020).

In effect, the rural economy and the living standards of the rural population in Vietnam have become progressively de-linked from farming and conditions in agriculture. To appreciate this, it is necessary to see the rural economy as more (and increasingly so) than the agricultural economy, and rural livelihoods as more (and increasingly so) than farming. This direction of travel is implicitly recognized in Vietnam in the New Rural Development (NRD) program or Nông Thôn Mới, introduced in 2010 with the intention of shaping a "new countryside" (Nguyen et al. 2021). While the NRD recognized that existing rural development policies were out of step with the realities of the Vietnamese countryside – hence 'New' – we argue in this paper that the authorities have been unwilling to jettison the productivist tendencies (i.e. the maximization of production and profit through intensification [see Wilson and Burton 2015]) that date back to the revolutionary era, when 'more' was necessarily 'better'. This has resulted in a gap between what the NRD program seeks to achieve, and its grounded effects in rural areas.

The NRD program, like the efforts of the collectivist era, has both a productivist and a civilizational imperative. Hoàng's (2024) focuses on the latter; here, we pay attention to the former. Our contribution should be read alongside Hoàng's, as both are important and linked components of the NRD.

We argue that much as farmers during the collectivist era sought ways to get around those policies, so rural populations in the era of the new countryside are giving the impression of enthusiastically adhering to the program while energetically doing otherwise. This is not to suggest that the policies of the Vietnamese government, like those of the Chinese government (see Nguyen, Vo and Wei (2024)), do not leave a mark and are not of significance when it comes to understanding the direction and nature of agrarian change in Vietnam. Rather, it is to note the need also to pay attention to the gaps between policy prescriptions and policy effects. In similar vein, Li (2007:28) argues that attention be paid to the 'messy consequence of programs' which are just as real as the programs themselves and the aims, objectives, levers and instruments that programs deploy to make their case and achieve their ends. Drawing on research in communes in the north of the country, we show that many rural workers, including both the young and the more elderly, have been either unable to achieve or unwilling to address the program's goals of raising rural incomes through transforming agricultural production methods. Indeed, rural workers, and especially younger workers, have often abandoned agricultural production to seek alternative livelihoods. Some younger rural women and men have turned to factory work in industrial zones or engaged in various non-agricultural professions, such as domestic help or small-scale trading in central Hanoi, often migrating to urban and industrial areas to seek work.[3] Middle-aged and more elderly laborers, by dint of their age and education, have not had been afforded these opportunities, forcing them to continue their low-return agricultural activities or engage in low wage non-agricultural work. On the one hand, the new rural development process has failed to retain the young in rural areas while, on the other, it has not adequately supported those older generations who have remained. An aspirational squeeze with a distinct demographic signature has emerged, with the result that the NRD's productivist aims are being thwarted. In this paper we explore how the NRD has become twisted. As a national program, it is impossible to ignore or overlook; but as a program which is out of kilter with the realities of rural life and livelihoods, it is equally impossible to embrace. It is this paradox, and how it is navigated on the ground in the communes of north Vietnam that this paper investigates.

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[3] The contemporary mobility revolution in Vietnam is quite well covered in the literature, focusing on a wide variety of migration flows from transnational (Bélanger 2011) to rural-urban (Locke et al. 2012), with attention paid to such issues as marital dissolution (Locke et al. 2014), precarity (Nguyen 2019), climate change (Ngo et al. 2023), poverty (Brauw and Harigaya 2007) and livelihoods (Rigg et al. 2014).

Research Sites and Methods

The paper draws on data gathered from field research conducted in four communes in rural areas in the vicinity of Hanoi. These communes are Lam Điền commune in Chương Mỹ district, Hát Môn commune in Phúc Thọ district, Hữu Bằng commune in Thạch Thất district, and Ngọc Liệp commune in Quốc Oai district, all situated between 23 km and 30 km from the center of Hanoi (Table 1).

Table 1 An overview of the research sites

	Hát Môn[4]	Lam Điền[5]	Hữu Bằng[6]	Ngọc Liệp[7]
Distance from center of Hanoi to the commune	30 km	23 km	25 km	25 km
Total land area (ha)	434	811	178	611
Agricultural land (ha)	254	524	125	338
Agricultural land as a % of total land	58%	65%	70%	55%
Population	8,585	12,870	16,832	9,321

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[4] Sources: Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Hát Môn - huyện Phúc Thọ [Communist Party Committee of Hát Môn Commune, Phuc Tho district] 2017: 9-12; Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Hát Môn [Hát Môn Commune People's Committee] 2022.

[5] Sources: Hội đồng Nhân dân xã Lam Điền [Lam Điền Commune People's Council] 2016: 1; In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022; In-depth interview with Đại Từ hamlet head, Lam Điền commune on September 21, 2022; In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022.

[6] Đỗ Danh Huấn 2022: 57, 138; Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Hữu Bằng [Hữu Bằng Commune People's Committee] 2021: 1.

[7] Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Ngọc Liệp - huyện Quốc Oai [Communist Party Committee of Ngọc Liệp Commune] 2013: 12; Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Ngọc Liệp [Ngọc Liệp Commune People's Committee] 2021; Cổng thông tin điện tử Ủy ban Nhân dân huyện Quốc Oai – Thành phố Hà Nội [Portal of Quốc Oai district, Hanoi city] 2017.

The four communes selected for the study all met – on paper – the standards of the New Rural Development Program. This consisted of 19 indicators covering a range of objectives from the social to the economic and environmental (see below). In these four communes, a significant proportion of households relied on agricultural production, albeit to varying degrees. Alongside such agricultural work, households also engaged in a diverse range of other activities, contributing to the multi-stranded (and often multi-sited) livelihoods that have become a hallmark of Vietnam's – and Asia's – evolving space economy. The communes were selected to reflect the different household livelihood patterns and spatial signatures that are emerging in rural areas around Hanoi.

The fieldwork and interviews were undertaken in September 2022 and September 2023. These were supplemented with telephone conversations between the first author of the paper and some of the informants in April 2024 to clarify issues. Prior to that, both authors conducted multiple field trips to Lam Điền and Hát Môn communes between 2017 and 2021, as part of a separate but related study.[8] Two main data collection methods were employed. The first involved analyzing existing data, including numerous documents and reports from Party Committees, People's Councils, and People's Committees of the communes, which were used to support, challenge and cross-check the primary data. Alongside and to complement this information, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with key informants and respondent household heads. In total, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted, 16 in September 2022 and a further nine a year later. These included interviews with key informants (e.g. commune leaders and village/hamlet heads) and respondents (e.g. rice and pig farmers, and craft workers). The distribution of interviews between communes was: Hữu Bằng (7), Ngọc Liệp (8), Hát Môn (4) and Lam Điền (6).[9] In addition to these interviews, we draw on the interviews undertaken during the authors' field trips to Lam Điền and Hát Môn between 2017 and 2021. In effect the study has become longitudinal, stretching over six years, enabling us to situate the NRD Program within the context of Vietnam's agrarian transition more broadly.

The New Rural Development Program and the Evolving Nature of Inequality in the Vietnamese Countryside

The Resolution of the Seventh Conference of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 2008 set out the objectives of the New Rural Development program, as follows: “To develop a new countryside with modern socio-economic infrastructure, a rational economic structure, and productive organization that links agriculture with the rapid development of industry” (Ban Chấp hành Trung ương [Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam] 2008, and see Hoàng forthcoming). To give practical shape to this Resolution, on October 28, 2008, the Government reaffirmed a commitment to build and organize rural life to achieve ‘modernity’ (*hiện đại*) while preserving cultural identity and the physical (ecological) environment (Chính phủ [The Government] 2008). Based on this Resolution, the Prime Minister issued a Decision on April 16, 2009, introducing a set of national criteria for assessing the achievement of these NRD objectives (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2009). Following this Decision, a ten-year plan running from 2010 to 2020 to build the New Countryside was launched, on June 4, 2010 (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010). This plan set the goal of “building new rural areas with gradually modernized economic and social infrastructure; rational economic structure and production organization forms, linking agriculture with rapid industrial and service development; [and] integrating rural development with urban planning…” (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010). For economic development in rural areas, the plan outlined five specific ‘contents’ as follows:

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[8] See Nguyen et al. 2020 and 2021.

[9] The names of the interviewees in the paper are pseudonyms.

> *“Content 1: Restructuring the economy and agricultural production towards developing commodity production with high economic efficiency;*
> *Content 2: Strengthening agricultural extension work; accelerating research and application of scientific and technological advances in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries production;*
> *Content 3: Mechanizing agriculture, reducing post-harvest losses in agricultural, forestry, and fisheries production;*
> *Content 4: Conserving and developing traditional craft villages under the motto ‘one village, one product,’ developing industries based on local strengths;*
> *Content 5: Intensifying vocational training for rural laborers, promoting industrialization in rural areas, addressing employment and rapidly shifting the rural labor structure.” (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010, and see Hoàng 2024).*

Twelve years later, on March 8, 2022, the plan was updated with a new national set of criteria for new rural communes issued for the period from 2021 to 2025 (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022). Among 19 criteria to determine whether a rural commune warrants the epithet ‘new’, there is a criterion relating to the organization of production and rural economic development. One of the contents of this criterion is that the “commune has a model linking production with consumption of key products to ensure sustainability” (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022).

The implementation of the New Rural Development Program in Vietnam over the period since 2009 has yielded significant accomplishments. As of July 2021, 65% of communes across the country had achieved the standards set for new rural communes and in 12 provinces and cities all communes had met these standards. The headline achievements are impressive: between 2010 and 2020, per capita incomes in rural areas more than tripled and the proportion of rural households defined as multidimensionally poor declined from 11.8% in 2016 to 7.1% in 2020 (Lê Sơn 2021). Against these achievements, however, are a set of emergent trends that indicate a re-shaping of the nature of inequality in Vietnam that the NRD has not managed to address and may even have accentuated.

It has long been noted that rural-urban inequalities are persistent. The 2021 Population Living Standards Survey, recorded that average monthly incomes per capita in urban areas were 1.5 times higher than those in rural areas (5.4 versus 3.5 million Vietnamese dong (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2022). Indeed, the government's NRD program was instituted to address these inequalities, with the aim of achieving greater balance in Vietnam's spatial economy. There is even some evidence that the country's trend of widening inequality has reversed. Between 2016 and 2020, the Gini coefficient of income inequality declined from 0.431 to 0.373 (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2020). But if inequality is viewed *within* rural and urban areas (rather than *between* rural and urban areas), the trend becomes more nuanced: urban areas displayed a lower and more rapidly declining level of income inequality compared to rural areas. In 2016, the Gini coefficient in urban areas was 0.391, declining to 0.325 in 2020. In rural areas, the respective figures were 0.408 in 2016 and 0.373 in 2020 (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2020). In terms of the rich-poor gap, inequalities in the countryside have barely declined. The gap between the lowest and highest quintile income groups in urban areas decreased from a multiple of 7.6 in 2016 to 5.3 in 2020; in rural areas the figures were 8.4 in 2016 and 8.0 in 2020 (Tổng cục Thống kê [General Statistics Office] 2020).[10]

In 2008, the area of Hanoi expanded significantly when Ha Tay province was formally incorporated within the administrative areas of Hanoi city, adding 2,193 km² of land to the city. This administrative action, however, did not at a stroke make rural areas, urban. In many respects – in terms of infrastructure, services and amenities, structure of the economy, livelihoods and income levels – these newly incorporated areas are rural in complexion. Since 2008, only two rural districts, Nam Từ Liêm and Bắc

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[10] The impact of the COVID pandemic and government provisions to poorer segments of Vietnam's society may also have helped to lift the incomes of the poor.

Từ Liêm, have been formally recognized as urban districts.[11] The majority of the areas that were rural in 2008, remained so. Per capita incomes in Hanoi's rural areas in 2017 stood at 38 million VND/year, less than half the Hanoi city average of 86 million VND/year (Đặng Kim Sơn 2022).

While the evidence is only emergent, and the support packages put in place by the government during the COVID pandemic have complicated matters, the NRD policy has had the effect, we suggest, of reshaping inequalities in rural areas and between rural and urban areas. In sum:

- Income inequalities *between* rural and urban areas have begun to narrow after a long period of widening. (That said, they remain historically and internationally high.)
- Income inequalities *within* rural areas remain high and may by some measures even be widening.

The conjecture here is that to understand these two trends, we need to look at processes of transformation in the country's rural communes, processes that have been supported by the NRD policies. The paradox is that the NRD may be making rural areas collectively relatively more prosperous in income terms than urban areas, but at the same time making some – usually poorer and more vulnerable – segments of rural society relatively less prosperous in income terms than those that are more prosperous and resilient.

There are several factors contributing to income inequality between rural and urban areas. Perhaps the most significant – historically – was the low income generated from agricultural production, and particularly from rice cultivation. The land allocated for rice cultivation remains small and is becoming increasingly fragmented, leaving each household with only very small areas for cultivation. The income derived from rice production on such limited land is meagre, hardly sufficient to support farmers' livelihoods. To exacerbate matters, while rice prices have trended downward in real terms, the numerous expenses that farmers incur – for soil preparation, planting, harvesting, fertilizers, pesticides, and more – have trended upwards, further squeezing profits and returns per-unit-area.

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[11] On December 27, 2013, the Prime Minister signed and issued a Resolution adjusting the administrative boundaries of Từ Liêm rural district to establish two urban districts: Bắc Từ Liêm and Nam Từ Liêm. With this decision, the rural communes of Từ Liêm were transformed into wards under the urban districts of Bắc Từ Liêm and Nam Từ Liêm (source: https://vnexpress.net/ha-noi-them-2-quan-bac-tu-liem-nam-tu-liem-2929721.html).

In 2018, we interviewed farmers in Lam Điền commune to calculate the costs and returns to rice production (Table 2). The net returns, after costs, from farming two crops of rice over three *sào* (1,080 m^2) of land amounted to some 3 million VND, or US$136. Agricultural wage laborers in the commune were paid 250,000-300,000 per day; this profit was therefore equivalent to around two weeks' waged work. As one male farmer in the commune said with some frustration, 'the cost of cultivating rice is similar to the price of buying rice' (Hoàng Văn Tuyến, male, 38, Lam Điền commune). No wonder, then, that many farmers had abandoned their fields in search of other job opportunities that offered higher wages. Some farmers, however, could not access such alternative opportunities – and it is at this point that the vision of the NRD begins to fray.

Table 2 Costs and returns to rice over 3 *sào* of land (2018)

Production and returns	**per *sào* (360m^2), per crop**	**Over 3 *sào* (1,080m^2) of rice land**	
		per season	**per year**
Production (kg)	150	450	900
Market value (VND)	1,350,000	4,050,000	8,100,000
Costs (VND)			
Commune fees	100,000	300,000	300,000
Ploughing	140,000	420,000	840,000
Transplanting	300,000	900,000	1,800,000
Fertilizer	200,000	600,000	1,200,000
Harvesting	180,000	540,000	1,080,000
Total costs	920,000	2,760,000	5,220,000
Net profit (VND)	**430,000**	**1,290,000**	**2,880,000**

Note: commune fees are levied per *sào* per year; US$1 = 22,000 VND
Source: household interview, Lương Xá hamlet, Lam Điền commune, 2018; adapted from Nguyen et al. 2020.

Except for a handful of farmers in the communes we studied who were cultivating extensive areas of land or raising livestock on a large scale, farming alone was not sufficient to support the average household: areas of land were too small, costs too high, and output prices too low. In response, rural livelihoods were becoming multi-stranded, based on the interlocking of farm and non-farm, agricultural and non-agricultural, and rural and urban activities. In this way, households were raising their incomes and material prosperity, even while agriculture was in relative decline. But, and here is the rub, access to the more remunerative activities that comprised these pluri-active livelihood complexes was uneven. Household members who found themselves *de facto* excluded from such work were the old and infirm, the unskilled and less well educated, and those forced to juggle work with caring responsibilities. In most instances, however, this unequal access could be navigated at the household level. For instance, older members grew rice for subsistence consumption while caring for their grandchildren, and younger members worked away from the commune remitting money to support the natal family. Nguyen Van Suu's (2004) study of inequality in the Red River delta focused on inequality of access to land. Here, some two decades on, we suggest that inequality of access to factors of production *other than* land are more significant in explaining the status of rural livelihoods. Whether this juggling of activities to secure a livelihood is sustainable long-term is questionable in the light of Vietnam's dwindling demographic dividend (Wei et al. 2019).

The government's NRD program for the periods 2010-2020 and 2021-2025 anticipated the declining returns to farming – and especially rice farming – evident in Table 2, placing an emphasis on restructuring the rural economy towards non-agricultural activities (e.g. through promoting craft production and the 'one village one product' principle) and agricultural production towards high return commodity production (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2010; Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022). The inter-locking objectives of the NRD program were to create employment opportunities for people in rural areas, increase incomes for rural residents, and reduce poverty rates in the countryside (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022a; Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2022b; Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2009). In reality, however, a two-fold problem emerged which sheds light on the evolving quality of inequality in the Vietnamese countryside. On the one hand, younger farmers – who were often best placed to embrace new, non-traditional high value crops and alternative production methods (see Borda et al. 2023; Jansuwan and Zander 2022; FAO 2017) – were not inclined to remain in farming. They were leaving agriculture to seek higher-paying and more prestigious and desirable jobs in industry, mainly in urban areas. This was contributing to an accelerated aging of the farm labor force. And on the other, those who remained to farm were, in the most part, unable or unwilling to embrace high value agricultural commodity production.

Rising Incomes, Lagging Farming: The New Rural Development Program and Innovation in Agriculture

As noted, one of the key aims of the NRD program was to encourage innovation in agriculture as a means to raise productivity and boost incomes. This would then entice rural populations, and especially the young, to stay in the countryside. In both aspects, the NRD program had largely failed in its stated mission in the four study communes. Younger inhabitants continued to leave rural areas and/or agriculture to seek work in urban areas and non-agricultural sectors; and farming had not been reinvigorated through the planting of new crops and the use of new methods to enhance agricultural productivity. The absence of change in agriculture was particularly acute in wet rice farming areas. There were, however, exceptions to this general picture. For instance, in Lam Điền commune, some households had shifted to livestock farming as part of the NRD initiative. But opportunities for change in rice farming were limited both for agro-ecological (paddy fields have evolved over centuries into quite 'sticky' agro-ecological systems) and political/regulatory reasons (rice was a strategic commodity where crop change was resisted by commune leaders). Thus, in the four communes that we studied, most younger workers opted to leave rice production in search of non-agricultural jobs, whether local or more distant, while older generations continued to farm rice, sometimes supplementing inadequate income from farming with low skilled non-agricultural work in the commune.

In Lam Điền commune, a Vice Chairman of the Commune People's Committee estimated that there were 700 individuals aged between 18 and 22 registered as resident in the commune. Some were attending university, college, or a vocational school, while others not pursuing higher education typically found work as laborers in factories or in various other non-agricultural occupations in Hanoi. Those aged between 22 and 60 years numbered around 5,000, with approximately 4,000 employed in non-agricultural jobs, such as working in industrial zones, construction, domestic cleaning, housekeeping, and trading, particularly in central Hanoi. Remarkably for a commune which had such an agricultural history, only about 20% – around 1,000 – of those aged between 22 and 60 in Lam Điền commune were working in agriculture, of whom the majority were aged 50 or older.[12] As the Vice Chairman of the commune explained:

> *Employees [of the commune] from 18 years old to under 50 years old are basically workers working outside [this commune]. They go to work as workers for enterprises [in industrial zones], or as cleaners [for families in the center of Hanoi], or as builders.*

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[12] In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022.

> *Some people trade. They take vegetables grown in the village to sell at the wholesale markets [in Hanoi] and buy fruits at the wholesale market to sell here [in the commune]. The people in the village who are [factory] workers are mainly employed in the industrial zone in this district, about 10km from their homes… About 4,000 laborers work outside the [commune]… [Just] a thousand work in [this commune and they] are mainly 50 years old and above…*[13]

In Chương Mỹ district, there were several industrial zones which attracted young workers from communes, like Lam Điền, in the vicinity. One industrial park was only about 10 kilometers from the commune, allowing workers to commute daily between their homes and workplaces. Laborers employed in this industrial park earned approximately 250,000 VND per day, or 6 million to 7 million VND per month. This was significantly higher than what they could earn from agricultural work.[14] For younger residents, the returns to non-agricultural work made the choice an obvious one on pecuniary grounds alone. Allied to this, however, were the various other attractions of such work. It was physically less taxing, compared to farm work; often indoors, out of the sun and sometimes in an air-conditioned environment; and brought together young women and men from across the district, so was socially appealing as well.

In Hữu Bằng commune, agriculture was the primary livelihood activity until the 2000s, and the commune – and life there – was defined by farming (Đỗ Danh Huấn 2022). This lasted even after *đổi mới*, with rice growing dominating work and life through to the late 1990s (Đỗ Danh Huấn 2022:58). Since the turn of the Millennium, however, Hữu Bằng's identity as a rice-growing commune has diminished. According to Mr. Đặng Trung Long,[15] from the early 2000s, local residents gradually abandoned their fields and by 2010 only a minority of households continued actively to farm. Initially, some households continued to produce rice by hiring labor from neighboring areas to undertake the various cultivation tasks. But by the end of the decade farmers in Hữu Bằng had stopped farming altogether. The land still belonged to these households, but they no longer cultivated it, leaving the fields idle. In September 2022, only three households in Hữu Bằng commune were still involved in rice cultivation, managing approximately 80 *mẫu*[16] of land. Each household planted rice on 25 to 30 *mẫu* – very large areas indeed, historically. The only way for these households to farm such large expanses of rice land was by investing in labor-saving machinery and all three had purchased tractors and harvesters. They had, in effect, made the transition from smallholders to professional, commercial farmers. Interestingly, these three households initially sought permission to cultivate the land from its putative owners; in time, however, they cultivated the abandoned fields without consulting the original owners.[17] In September 2023, when the two authors conducted fieldwork in Hữu Bằng commune, of the three households cultivating rice in 2022, only one household continued to cultivate a few *mẫu* of land; the two other households had quit cultivation in the year since the 2022 fieldwork.[18] This sole farming household also stopped agricultural production in 2024. The head of the household explained that the profits from agricultural production were too low, and switched to non-farm work.[19]

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[13] In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022.

[14] In-depth interview Vice Chairman of Lam Điền Commune People's Committee, September 21, 2022.

[15] In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

[16] 1 *mẫu* = 3600 m^2.

There were two main reasons behind the abandonment of fields and the shift away from rice cultivation in Hữu Bằng commune. Neither was surprising, although they were historically remarkable. The first reason has already been noted: the low returns to rice cultivation. Each adult in Hữu Bằng was allocated one *sào* of land (360 m^2) for cultivation, allowing for two rice crops per year, yielding rice with a value of approximately 2 million VND. This was the subsistence guarantee that came with residency of the commune, a guarantee that threads its way deep into the Red River's past. The reasons why households were willing to renounce this guarantee and potentially lose access to their land reveals the depths of change in Hữu Bằng commune. Abundant alternatives to rice cultivation presented themselves: factory work, which yielded monthly earnings from 4 to 6 million VND; and craft work for which monthly incomes were higher still, ranging from 10 to 15 million VND. Even the elderly could find marginally more attractive alternatives to farming, taking on cleaning and polishing tasks in the commune's craft workshops, undertaking domestic chores, or following small-scale trading opportunities. With scarcely a glance over their historical shoulders, former farmers either left their rice lands idle or let them be cultivated by others at their will.[20]

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[17] If the owners of the land make a request to reclaim their fields, then the expectation was that these three households would return the land to the original operators. In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

[18] In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2023.

[19] In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, April 10, 2024

[20] In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022; In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

The second reason was that young workers in Hữu Bằng were no longer interested in farming, finding non-agricultural employment opportunities, within the commune and further afield, more attractive as well as more remunerative. As farmers left their fields untilled, so carpentry workshops began to emerge in Hữu Bằng. Some households converted their rice land into furniture production workshops. Younger workers either found employment in these workshops or, in some cases, started their own production workshops. Some individuals who did not have available land (or land in the right location) purchased rice land from other households to establish their furniture workshops. This change in land use – from rice land to craft land, so to speak – was against the law, yet commune leaders were unwilling or unable to prevent such conversion. [21] A retired land administrative officer in the commune, said:[22]

> *The local government still prohibits [the conversion of agricultural land into carpentry workshops], but there are some daring individuals who still proceed with it. Given the local context, the prohibition is only enforced to a limited extent.*

A former Director of the Agricultural Service Cooperative in Hữu Bằng commune explained why it was so hard to hold the line when land policies ran against the grain of evolving livelihoods:[23]

> *So, carpentry is the main profession... That's why land is complicated, it's very complicated... Nowadays, to develop the carpentry industry, people must have their own land. So, the cooperative's fields*[24] *have been reducing because households keep encroaching on agricultural land to build their carpentry/furniture workshops. This person gives it [sells his/her agricultural land] to the other. It's complicated like that.*

While the boost that this development gave to local employment opportunities and incomes was in line with the policies of the NRD program, the means of its achievement – by encroaching on productive rice land – was not. The issue was that returns to rice cultivation had become so out of kilter with other activities, that it had created the conditions where even commune leaders found it impossible to resist the logics of the market. A relatively unskilled worker in a carpentry workshop in Hữu Bằng could earn about 500,000 VND per day, and a skilled worker over 1 million VND per day.[25] The income from one *sào* (360m^2) of rice land could be matched by just a few days' work in a carpentry workshop. The aims of the NRD program were achieved, but the means of their achievement went against the broader aims of the program.

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[21] In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022; In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

[22] In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

[23] Nguyễn Văn Trung, born in 1951, former Director of agricultural service cooperative in Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2023.

[24] In the past, during the socialist transformation period, agricultural land belonged to agricultural cooperative.

Like Hữu Bằng, Lam Điền commune was also peppered with abandoned,[26] recently productive, rice fields. The hamlet of Đại Từ consisted of 553 households and possessed around 80 *mẫu* of agricultural land, of which 20 *mẫu* were abandoned.[27] Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Thủy was one householder in the hamlet who had stopped cultivating her rice land. Aged 41 years when we interviewed her, she and her 45-year-old husband possessed 6 *sào* of land. Five *sào* they continued to cultivate, growing pomelos and vegetables, but they had stopped cultivating their one *sào* of rice land five years previously. They retained ownership, however. Mrs Nguyễn's husband, the Duẫn, no longer farmed at all: he drove a vehicle for a paper company in the Chúc Sơn industrial site.[28]

The broad employment trends across the four communes were clear: a move out of farming into non-farm work; a relative shift from rice farming to other crops; and the spread of idle rice lands – unless they could be converted, against the grain of policy, to craft land. These changes can only be understood in relation to urban spaces and opportunities, challenging the rural-urban binary that obscures the "multiple ways in which [urban and rural] are entangled with and connected to each other and the global world" (Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox 2024). Where we take this forward is in arguing that these shifts were not equally spread across income classes or generational cohorts. It was younger workers who were leaving farming for non-agricultural occupations. According to a farmer[29] in Ngọc Liệp commune, 'left behind' farmers are aged 45 years, or older. Approximately one-in-ten households in the commune had left farming altogether, and two-in-ten no longer grew rice. These were households without older members able to continue farming when younger members had absented themselves to pursue non-agricultural occupations. Some allowed relatives and neighbors to grow rice on their land, while others sold or leased their fields to households within or outside the commune. But there was also a group of households who were unable to pursue these alternative farming strategies, and instead left their land uncultivated.[30] An informant explained:

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[25] In-depth interview Đặng Trung Long, born in 1969, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022; In-depth interview Nguyễn Đình Nhu, born in 1960, Hữu Bằng commune, September 10, 2022.

[26] In other words, the land has been uncultivated for a long period (*ruộng bỏ hoang*), with no indication that it was likely to be brought back into cultivation.

[27] In-depth interview Hoàng Văn Chinh, born in 1956, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

[28] In-depth interview Nguyễn Thị Thủy, born in 1981, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

[29] In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

> *The younger generation no longer works in the fields. Some households have even sold all of their farmland. Many young people let others cultivate their fields or leave the land for their parents to work on, while they work as laborers in companies. They are employed by enterprises, and their fields are either cultivated by others or left for weeds to grow instead of rice.*[31]

One of the central objectives of the NRD program is to modernize agriculture, improve productivity, and thereby raise incomes for smallholders. However, the evolving picture in the communes presented above reveals that the NRD goal of modernizing agriculture was not being achieved. Three reasons present themselves. First was the 'stickiness' of land which meant that – albeit with exceptions – land holdings remained small. Even when some more committed farmers assembled historically large areas of land (such as the three farmers in Hữu Bằng commune), this did not endure. Part of the reason was that even relatively large farms barely paid their way; but also at work, and this is the second reason, was the tendency for the young to absence themselves from agriculture, a theme noted not just in Vietnam but across Asia (Rigg 2000). Of significance here is the possibility that the NRD program may be contributing to this tendency through its civilizing mission (see Hoàng 2024), implicitly valuing certain occupations, behaviors and skills over others through its developmentalist philosophy. A third reason was that households were unwilling to transfer their land use rights to agricultural enterprises to enable the consolidation of land into larger units of production. In Lam Điền, Ngọc Liệp and Hữu Bằng, no enterprise had come to negotiate with households over land assembling; only in Hát Môn was an enterprise holding discussions with households to lease their land. These negotiations, though, had become stuck over the duration of the land lease and farmers' post-lease rights.[32]

Rather than seeking to innovate and modernize, or to lease their land to others who might be minded to innovate and modernize, farmers either continued to farm using their established methods or left their land idle and uncultivated. The former approach tended to be preferred by older farmers, and the latter by younger workers. Often times, cross-generational households embraced both, with income from working in non-agricultural activities providing the leeway to permit 'unproductive' farming to continue. This runs counter to the objectives of the NRD program; to be sure, household incomes had risen, but in the context of a contracting farm sector. These economic changes had quite far-reaching social consequences. For while some of the young commuted to work, returning home each evening, many had left the communes longer term for work in Hanoi. This led to an increasingly top-heavy age profile, raising questions about how elderly care will be delivered in the longer term and as Vietnam's demographic dividend becomes a demographic burden, in short order. The households that were most vulnerable were those without younger members. Those aged around 50 years and older found it difficult to secure non-farm work, farm work had become increasingly arduous as these commune members aged, and they did not benefit from income remitted by absent children to support their livelihoods. These were the emerging precariat in Vietnam's rural communes, and we argue they were hidden behind the inequality data.

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[30] In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

[31] In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

[32] In-depth interview Nguyễn Đăng Minh, born in 1963, a leader of Hát Môn commune, September 13, 2022.

The NRD program, a success on paper, is revealed to have been rather less so when the headline income and poverty data are scrutinized more closely and viewed against emergent trends in the communes. The young have not been retained in the countryside, but have escaped their natal communes; the elderly have largely missed out on new working opportunities, and have been marginalized in low return farm and non-farm work; and farming, far from being modernized, has languished or been written out of the rural script altogether. This was not the vision of a new rural future that the NRD program set out to create.

Households under Pressure: Juggling Farming, Work and Care

The key challenges evident from our research in these rural communes around Hanoi were the twin failures of farming to modernize and older commune members – aged around 50 years or older – to transition to non-agricultural occupations. These challenges were of a piece, and evident in the experiences of two cases drawn from our research, those of Mr Hoàng Van Chinh and Mr Đỗ Danh Vang.

Mr Hoàng Văn Chinh,[33] a resident of Lam Điền commune's Đại Từ village, was born in 1956. He and his wife had three children: two married daughters who were living separately, and a son born in 1992 who was living with his parents along with his wife and their two sons (Mr. Chinh's grandsons). Mr. Chinh and his wife cultivated 3 *sào* of rice and 3 *sào* of vegetables. Although this extended family of six lived under one roof and ate together, Mr Chinh's son and his daughter-in-law did not actively engage in agriculture. Instead, they worked as industrial workers in Phú Nghĩa Industrial Park, some 10 km distant. Long working hours meant that they left the house early in the morning and returned late at night. This left the task of caring for their children to Mr. Chinh and his wife, who were juggling farm work on 6 *sào* of land with caring responsibilities for their grandchildren.

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[33] In-depth interview Hoàng Văn Chinh, born in 1956, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

Mr. Đỗ Danh Vang[34] was born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune. He and his wife had three children, all married and living separately. Mr. Vang's children still owned the land that was allocated to them in 1993 by the former cooperative, with each receiving 540m^2. None cultivated their land; they were full-time industrial workers, scrap collectors, and welders. Instead, their fields were cultivated by Mr Vang and his wife (who also farmed their own land). The children collected rice harvested from their land for their own consumption. Other than farming, this ageing couple also produced votive papers for ancestor worship, a common occupation among the elderly in Ngọc Liệp commune but one which generated only about 50,000 VND per person per day.

These two households – one co-residential and the other multi-sited – might be characterized as ones where inter-locking livelihoods sustained the families, with the tasks of production and reproduction taking on a cross-generational hue, to the benefit of all. But this overlooks the degree to which the strictures of work constrained matters. Mr. Chinh and his wife remained in farming because they had no choice; non-farm work was not an option. Mr. Vang and his wife likewise, supplementing the meagre returns from farming with the equally low returns from making votive papers. From these cases, two views of such transforming rural communes offer themselves. First, as economies where residents creatively combined farm and non-farm, subsistence and cash, reproduction (care) and production (work), and local and non-local, to the collective interests of all. The young benefited from care work by older family members and subsistence rice production from their fields; and older cohorts were supported by income generated by non-farm employment by younger generations. The second view is to see these households, and especially older cohorts, as trapped. Returns to rice farming were so marginal that it was barely worth continuing[35] and even vegetable farming was risky, with Mr. Chinh talking of wild price fluctuations depending on market conditions.[36] At the same time, residents of fifty years or older were in large part excluded from non-farm working opportunities in the modern economy.[37]

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[34] In-depth interview Đỗ Danh Vang, born in 1952 in Ngọc Liệp commune, September 10, 2022.

Evidently, farming has not modernized in line with the vision of the NRD program. Most farms were too small and profits too thin or too risky to warrant investment. The young had little choice but to seek work elsewhere, leaving older generations marginalized in farming. The outcome was that in these rural areas of Hanoi, there had been little change in agricultural, and especially rice cropping practices.

For the meantime at least, this cross-generational combination of marginal farming with precarious non-farm work delivered rising incomes at the household level even if the incomes of some individuals – namely, older generations in farming – were (relatively) falling. At the national level there were also clear attractions: cheap labor from rural areas could be transferred to serve capitalist production in Vietnam's industrialization process. The costs of reproduction were transferred to rural communes to be borne by families rather than by the state, and rice to meet the subsistence needs of these workers – and the nation – continued to be produced. Furthermore, at the household level the NRD program had met its broad aims, raising incomes and reducing poverty. But at the scale of the individual there were a growing number of vulnerable elderly. Furthermore, this situation may not be sustainable. Given population ageing and total fertility rates that have dipped under replacement levels, the ability of households to continue to juggle livelihoods in this manner will become increasingly difficult. The responsibilities of the state and the pressure on the state will only grow.

Conclusion: Staying and Leaving the Commune

Vietnam is facing many of the agrarian challenges highlighted in other countries of Asia: a rapidly ageing rural population (Rigg et al. 2020), the challenge of elderly care (Phongsiri et al. 2023), stagnant smallholder farming (FAO 2021; Otsuka et al. 2016), and enduring rural-urban inequalities (Imai and Malaeb 2018). The country's New Rural Development program was devised to address these issues, notably by increasing agricultural productivity through promoting new, modern methods and raising the incomes of rural workers. Officially, the program has been a success: as noted, by mid-2021, two-thirds of communes nationally had achieved the standards set and in 12 provinces and cities achievement was universal, and incomes had tripled in the decade to 2020.

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[35] From their three *sào* of rice, the family produce around 1,320 kg of rice each year. After deducting expenses, they are left with 660 kg of rice to feed the family. With the price of rice in 2022 of 800,000 VND/100 kg, this would yield an income of 5.3 million VND per year.

[36] He remarked on onion prices fluctuating between 7,000 and 45,000 VND per kilo.

[37] In-depth interview Hoàng Văn Chinh, born in 1956, Lam Điền commune, September 21, 2022.

In this paper, drawing on research undertaken in four communes in peripheral areas of Hanoi, we dig into these headline achievements to show that they are both more, and less, than they seem. We argue that there has been the co-production of rising incomes and generally stagnant farming, the latter reflected most strikingly in the *de facto* abandonment of large areas of historically productive wet rice land. Diminishing relative returns to agriculture, and especially rice farming, have created the conditions in which villagers search for alternative working opportunities. At the same time, the income generated from such alternative work permits low return farming to persist. They are two sides of the same rural development coin: integration into urban spaces and non-farm employment is the solution to rural underproduction, but also further promotes such underproduction.

This pattern, and this is the second point, took on a distinctly generational hue. It was the younger generations who were able to access the better paying non-farm work opportunities, while those over around 50 years of age remained in farming. From a household perspective, and most data use the household as the unit of analysis and assessment, this combination of farm and non-farm delivered rising aggregate incomes. But it was only rendered possible by the willingness of older generations to provide their labour at a cost of less than its reproduction. And this willingness was embedded in a household 'bargain': younger cohorts transferred the costs of their children's care to grandparents; older cohorts allocated their labour to care and subsistence production for the family; and the income from younger generations' work helped to lift the collective incomes of the household (see Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox 2024).

The New Rural Development program has not only failed to address this challenge, it has played a part in creating it through supporting the emergence of a rural space economy where younger workers have to leave to secure their futures, and older workers remain tied to the past. From the urban and national vantage points, the countryside is a reservoir of cheap labor and even cheaper agricultural commodities, both supporting the industrialization process. From the rural communes, the cracks are beginning to show.

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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".

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 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, 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, 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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STUDYING POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

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