

Edited by Jean Michaud and Tim Forsyth

Moving Mountains
Ethnicity and Livelihoods in Highland
China, Vietnam, and Laos



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto
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Foreword

Terry McGee

It is much easier to move mountains than to change minds.

– Mien saying

It is a little surprising to find myself as an avowed urbanist writing a foreword for a book that focuses on the ethnic minorities in the eastern part of the Southeast Asian Massif, and in particular, on the highland borderlands of socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos – an area that is not characterized by high levels of urbanization. Fifty years of research on urbanization in Southeast Asia and China rarely took me beyond the metropolises of the region. The closest I got to the Massif was in the 1980s when I conceived the idea of what I believed to be a cunningly devised project to carry out research on the “colonial origins” of the “hill stations” of Southeast Asia, where history and liveability would combine to enable “comfortable fieldwork” in the pleasant temperatures of the highlands. Unfortunately, the project had to be aborted. Someone more clever than I had already mined the field and published it in a rather obscure press that my far from thorough research had failed to unearth.

However, in the process of doing preliminary work for that project, I spent a month in Dalat, the summer residence of the Emperor Bao Dai and the former French colonial administration. With the help of Vietnamese colleagues, a visit to an “ethnic minority village” was organized. At first, this appeared to be unlikely. Many permits had to be obtained from officials at different levels of the administration. But eventually we set forth in heavy rain; the macadam road ceased three kilometres outside Dalat and became a dirt road, which seemed to have temporarily become a major watercourse. Eventually, we stopped at a village that consisted of what appeared to be rather comfortable government-like housing. Not at all my image of a so-called ethnic minority village. It was in fact the commune headquarters, where, after meeting the chairman of the People’s Committee who, along with everyone else, appeared to be Kinh, we were entertained to a lengthy and quite alcoholic lunch. This seemed to break the ice, and

around about 4 p.m. we set off for the ethnic minority village, where we met our first ethnic minority representative. He spoke English with a marked American accent (somewhere in the South), and it turned out he had spent the last twenty-five years in the United States after arriving there as a refugee with his family. His family had originally come from this village, and he had returned to try to develop the village as a tourist site, working with tourist operators in Dalat. Members of the village staged a program featuring cheerful presentations of the local culture, dances, and goods – for example, woven baskets, food, and rice wine – which involved ample opportunity for the participation of the tourist that I had become instead of the researcher I had been. Far from the grassroots entrepreneurs of Yunnan of whom Margaret Byrne Swain writes in Chapter 8, the organizer was engaged in manipulating the authentic, in what seemed to me a reflection of American marketing practices. Having filled in the comments form with fulsome praise, we left at about 9 p.m. for the rather arduous journey back to Dalat.

I have engaged in this lengthy anecdote as a perhaps irreverent way to find an intersection between the world of cities that has been my research focus and this study of the ethnic minorities of the Southeast Asian Massif. A world remote and isolated from the large lowland cities, or so I believed. But as the Dalat experience reveals, this idea of remoteness and isolation and separation from urban areas needs to be carefully evaluated.

This observation leads me to the central issue I would like to explore in this brief foreword, which is how the processes of change among upland ethnic minorities resonate with the changes occurring in the urban areas of Southeast Asia. On the face of it, this is a very provocative proposition, for it challenges the conventional wisdoms that rural and urban areas are sharply differentiated, that urbanites are somehow more entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan than people who live outside urban areas, and that urban dwellers are less resistant to change. This, like much of the conventional wisdoms that influence research and policies in developing countries, is mostly derived from the experience of developed countries, as Forsyth and Michaud emphasize in Chapter 1 with their statement that “clearly, we should be careful in transferring concepts developed in settings such as modern industrial societies or post-industrial cities to locations such as the Southeast Asian Massif.”

Expanding the Knowledge of Southeast Asia

The three specific questions, paraphrased from Chapter 1, that this book seeks to answer in the study of these upland ethnic minorities are, I suggest, also echoed in the current rethinking about the urbanization process in Southeast Asia:

- 1 How do local populations on the margins of centralized states make a living and maintain their identity in terms of external forces – the state and, the market – and their own agency?
- 2 Why does the understanding of highland livelihoods need a more nuanced frame of transnationalism rather than simply proceeding by country analysis?
- 3 How can a more complex stance about assumptions of the region as a predictable social space be adopted?

These questions reflect a wider set of underlying themes that relate to the way knowledge is being generated about the processes of social and economic change in developing countries. But my interest in the book is the way it contributes to expanding our understandings of what I have called elsewhere the many “knowledge(s)” of Southeast Asia (McGee 2007). In this piece, I identify three types of knowledge as they are being used to interpret Southeast Asia. The first is “above ground knowledge,” which is what I would call globally applied theories that rely on hegemonic paradigms. The second is what I call “grounded knowledge,” which is a form of knowledge embedded in the practices of people and culture that inform these practices. Third, the idea of “underground knowledge,” which is influenced by James C. Scott’s formulations of everyday forms of resistance and the hidden transcripts of local people (Scott 1985, 1990).

In focusing on these issues, I of course realize that I am leaving aside important issues such as culture, kin systems, and identity that are an important part of the intellectual underpinning of the book. The editors and the other authors are certainly aware of the debates about the meaning of these terms that have been generated in the literature. I will leave it for reviewers to engage the issue of how important culture and identity are to an understanding of the way ethnic minorities survive in the Southeast Asian Massif.

Utilizing the framework of many knowledge(s), I would suggest three ways in which the book intersects with the formation of knowledge about Southeast Asian urban areas and contributes to our understanding of Southeast Asia as a whole. These are emphasizing the need to (1) (re)conceptualize hegemonic paradigms that are applied at a global level to interpret social, economic, and political change at national and local levels (above ground); (2) stress the importance of long-term grounded research into the practices and knowledge of local people that empower the role of local knowledge (grounded knowledge); and (3) recognize that there is also a form of underground knowledge and action that informs these practices, that is not understood or in many cases even known by policy makers, and that rarely informs global theories. In the next section, I explore these ideas in greater detail in a suggestive way rather than a prescriptive one.

(Re)conceptualizing Global Hegemonic Paradigms (Above Ground Knowledge)

Three hegemonic paradigms have influenced thinking about processes of change in Southeast Asia.

The Domination of the Idea of Urban and Rural Difference

First is the spatially embedded idea that rural and urban spaces are sharply divided and that within these spaces, rural and urban life are sharply different. This is a powerful hegemonic belief that effects assumptions about research and policy. Thus, urban areas (particularly the metropolises) are thought of as dynamic centres of political, economic, and social change. Rural areas are portrayed as increasingly marginalized – places where socio-economic change is slow and people are poor and resistant to change.

Much of the research reported in this book refutes this idea of the rural as static and marginalized. This is particularly important given that ethnic minorities are widely portrayed in popular perceptions as being at the extreme end of some rural-urban continuum. What we find is the stories of people of the Massif who are actively engaged in livelihood strategies that are, again in the words of Forsyth and Michaud, “experiments in finding solutions to basic needs, while at the same time asserting identity in accordance with their economic potential *and* the moral dimensions of local cultures.” This is occurring within the context of the modernization projects implemented by what many label the post-socialist state but which I prefer to call a form of hybrid socialism in the sense that the political control of the state still remains from the previous socialist period.

The Role of Globalization

A second hegemonic paradigm that influences thinking about social and economic change is the idea of the dominant role of international forces on the economy of Southeast Asia, which is often summed up with the term “globalization” in an attempt to capture the major components of economic and technical change that have characterized the world over the last fifty years. It is argued that globalization embodies three main elements. First, it is a process whereby the global economy is becoming increasingly integrated through linked production centres, commodity chains, and information networks that are reshaping the global market economy. Second, these developments are based on technological developments in transportation and communications that accelerate the flows of commodities, people, capital, and information in time and space. Third, this is accompanied by an ideological rationale based on a triumphant neo-liberalism that sees globalization universally increasing economic wealth within the market system.

This is not a discourse that the authors of this book engage to any great extent and, yet, implicit in their analysis of the changes that are occurring

in the Massif is the realization that improved communications and transport are freeing up space to move, interact, and trade, allowing the people of the Massif to become more mobile. For example, in Vietnam, the use of motor-bikes has been pivotal in breaking down the barriers of isolation and an inadequate transportation structure. These have facilitated the extension of social networks of ethnic groups even beyond national boundaries.

Within the urban context of Southeast Asia, globalization has become a more influential paradigm. As many writers have shown, the globalization trends accelerate urbanization (particularly the growth of the multi-functional port cities), as well as internal changes in urban space that have encouraged the universal outward spread of urban activity into surrounding areas. This has led to the breaking down of the boundaries between rural and urban and has precipitated the need to imagine new ways of thinking about rural and urban relationships in space in a similar way to the extensions of ethnic networks through national boundaries in the Massif.

Modernization and “Developmentalism”

Now the third hegemonic paradigm. All the trends listed in the previous section have been driven by a state-led push for modernization throughout Southeast Asia (Myanmar offers a peculiar kind of exception to this statement) in which, even in the hybrid socialist states, there is an increasing determination to seek techno-economic policies that are basic to this form of developmentalism. In this model of urbanization, technological change is seen as the catalytic element for modernism and economic growth. Recent research into the urbanization process has begun to question this model, particularly as it relates to the challenges posed by climate change, increases in energy prices, and the American-led recessions (McGee 2008).

Reinventing Research Paradigms, Vernacularizing Modernity (Grounded Knowledge)

A second theme relates to the need to reinvent research paradigms so that processes of change are seen from the perspectives of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of people actively negotiating these processes at the grassroots level. This approach is central to *Moving Mountains*. For instance, in the Conclusion, Michaud makes a sophisticated argument as to why the prevailing paradigms of modernism (summarized in the discussion of the first theme) set up a hegemonic view on the part of lowland majorities that portrays the locally embedded traditions stemming from ethnicity and culture as backward. These traditions have to be “normalized” through education, technological change, and, in some cases such as Laos, through dislocation and establishing new settlements. Developmentalists, often working for international agencies, tend to see ethnic minorities as people whose condition is one of poverty that is measured in terms of material and

supposedly objective facts, such as agricultural yields, transport costs, and so on. The contributors to this book start off from a very different position. They see the upland ethnic groups as actively engaging these processes with awareness and subtlety. To quote Michaud from his Conclusion, “Authors in this book have relied predominantly on qualitative factors: beliefs and spirituality, customary wisdom (indigenous knowledge), social organizations, oral history, fears, desires, and more. Across the board, their studies have benefited from long and recurring fieldwork periods, intense participant observation, life stories, loosely structured and repeated interviews, and perhaps most importantly, a marked empathy for their subjects, for their fate, and for their right to participate fully in deciding their own future.”

This same process is observable in urban areas. As urbanization has increased in Southeast Asia, the poor – squatters, street hawkers, *becak* drivers – have been portrayed as “people who get in the way.” In the view of the policy makers, they illegally occupy land, they cause congestion in the streets, and they block development. However, grounded research that relies on both quantitative and qualitative data has constantly emphasized the contribution that the poor make to cities in which they reside and their efforts that show how vigorous and adept they are at making livelihoods and at what I have previously called “making out” in the urban setting (McGee 1976). Grounded research in the urban areas of Southeast Asia constantly reminds us that, like the upland ethnic minorities, the urban poor deserve the right to participate more fully within the urban areas.

Reassessing the Relationship of People and the State (Underground Knowledge)

The final theme I wish to approach relates to the relationship between the state, the market, and people. In my rather simple view of it, this relationship is governed by the power and access to resources of different economically and socially positioned groups, which in my admittedly Marxist-influenced youth we used to call classes. The exploration of this relationship has been a constant theme of Southeast Asian research – for example, the work of Yeoh (1996) and Kusno (2000). One important thread of this research is the resistance of people who are marginalized in terms of access to the power of the state and participation in the market. Throughout most of rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asia (again with the exception of Myanmar), this relationship often involves liaison between the state and the major participants in the market, to which the growing middle classes are given complete access, while sizable proportions of the low-income communities and poor are given only marginal access. The study of resistance in the urban context of Southeast Asia is, in the highly factionalized urban society, complex and indicates that overt resistance (for example, student demonstrations at the

end of the Suharto era) has led to changes in political power. But resistance in the economic arena has been much less successful. In the political economy of hybrid socialism in which the upland ethnic communities live, where the centralized one-party states exert considerable power, this nexus between state, the market, and people is far more nuanced. Although Laos, China, and Vietnam are opening up spaces for the market economy as part of a modernist vision, there is only a limited discussion of open resistance presented in this book. However, there is ample evidence of covert resistance. These actions represent a degree of defiance that remains most of the time under the radar, and, to again quote Michaud from his Conclusion to this book, “it is the particular contours of customary social relations, local culture, and agency that decide the balance between the two.” In a way, this is not surprising given the general geographical and linguistic fragmentation of the upland ethnic minorities, the lack of real civil society, and their history of violent repression.

Critically Evaluating Homogenizing Paradigms

Finally, I would like to return to the anecdote I told earlier. All my assumptions about the ethnic minority village close to Dalat had been conceived out of an understanding of the world of upland ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia that had been formulated from the “colonial geographies” of Pierre Gourou and K.J. Pelzer, along with an uncritical acceptance of the minorities ideology that was a part of Asian socialism. These were, of course, part of a genre of homogenizing understandings that my work on urbanization in Southeast Asia had increasingly come to question (McGee 2002). The great strength of this book is that, in addition to being a major contribution to the study of upland ethnic communities in hybrid socialist societies, it creates space to reconceptualize our understandings of the processes of social, political, and economic change among the people of the urban worlds of Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. But this also involves us in critically evaluating the homogenizing paradigms that currently often guide our assumptions about the processes of social, political, and economic change; the ways we acquire this knowledge; and how we listen to the voices of the people in local settings. This is a task about which the majority of the authors in this volume seem to be quite hopeful and is already well advanced. But as the Mien saying that introduces this foreword suggests, this is no easy task.

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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of four years of work and talks. Discussions were often held via the Internet – at times, some authors could meet in person – and most congregated for a four-day workshop in Québec City, Canada, in October 2007. Financial support for that workshop was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Aid to Research Workshops and Conferences).

On that occasion and in conjunction with the bi-annual conference of the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, also held in Québec City, four panels were set up. In addition to the book's contributors, the following people contributed to these panels: Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy and Marise Lachapelle (Laval), Yves Goudineau and Christophe Caudron (EFEO, Paris), and Ménaïque Légaré-Dionne (Montréal). The editors thank them warmly for their valuable contributions.

Terry McGee, of the University of British Columbia, immediately agreed to write a Foreword to the collection, for which we are most grateful. Our author and colleague Sarah Turner generously contributed much of her time to significantly enhancing the whole manuscript. Laura Schoenberger also helped with careful editing.

The editors would also like to express their gratitude to Emily Andrew and Megan Brand from UBC Press for their excellent collaboration, as well as UBC Press's anonymous readers for making enlightening and stimulating suggestions.

Moving Mountains

1

Rethinking the Relationships between Livelihoods and Ethnicity in Highland China, Vietnam, and Laos

Tim Forsyth and Jean Michaud

In the far south of China and the neighbouring lands of Southeast Asia there is a mountainous zone that stretches some thousand kilometres from the South China Sea to the Himalayas. This land is not snow-capped nor entirely rocky but instead features a mixture of forest, rain-fed agriculture, and rice terraces that sometimes extend to the very top of steep slopes in deep valleys that criss-cross the region. More than 200 million people distributed over eight countries live in this zone, of which about half belong to ethnic minorities living chiefly in scattered hamlets, villages, and market towns in a staggering array of cultural diversity.¹ This vast region, which we call the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud 2000b), is now increasingly opening up to investment, regional planning, and development interventions, often as countries change from socialism to more liberal markets and political systems. Yet, despite its size and importance, there has been little in-depth research about how people make a living or about the interconnections of cultural diversity, political and economic change, and livelihoods in these highlands.

This book presents a number of rich analyses of livelihoods and cultural diversity in selected parts of this region. More specifically, the authors of the chapters here investigate the relationships between livelihoods and ethnicity in the high borderlands of socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos, which together represent more than two-thirds of the Massif's surface and an even greater proportion of its population. The aim of the book is to present locally grounded analyses of how ethnic minorities there fashion livelihoods and to question how ethnicity affects, and is influenced by, economic and political changes in relation to these livelihoods. We believe this discussion provides much-needed local information about this complex region. It also demonstrates the role of cultural and ethnic networks as an under-acknowledged influence in the livelihood strategies of so-called "poor people." This approach is crucial for better informing discussions on poverty alleviation and livelihoods in general; perhaps even more so for the countries of China,

Vietnam, and Laos, which have now opened up to marketization and political reform after years of centrally planned economies under state socialism.

Together, the authors in this book make three key arguments. First, we suggest that the ways local populations on the margins of centralized states in the Southeast Asian Massif make a living and maintain their identities are shaped both by external forces – such as the state and the market – and by their own agency. Indeed, marginal highland groups demonstrate particular, locally rooted, and culturally informed agency that, in our opinion, is often overlooked in generalized approaches to livelihoods within development practice.

Second, we believe that understanding highland livelihoods in the Southeast Asian Massif as a whole requires a more nuanced appreciation of transnationalism than considering highland people simply in terms of “national minorities.” Many upland groups engage in cross-border trade, or have current or historical social networks across state borders. Some existing analyses of upland marginal groups in Asia fail to notice this transnationalism. *Civilizing the Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities*, edited by Christopher Duncan (2004), is an important work that summarizes problems and challenges for minority peoples in almost all the countries officially located in Southeast Asia. While having many merits, it overlooks not only cross-border issues within Southeast Asia but also the situation in the adjacent uplands of China, Bangladesh, and India. The overall picture thus produced is country-focused, fitting chiefly the needs of modern political analyses determined by state boundaries – *national* policies addressing *national* minorities. Moving on from such an approach, we demonstrate in this book that there is a compelling logic in choosing to study highland groups in the Massif transnationally and, in particular here, those of southwest China along with those adjacent in Vietnam and Laos, where borderlands opened only recently to outside scholarly inquiry, with little research of this kind having yet been published (see Lim Joo Jock 1984; Evans, Hutton, and Kuah 2000).

Third, we choose to adopt a more complex stance toward assumptions made about this region being a single and, in some ways, coherent social space. Willem van Schendel (2002, 647) proposed to call the wider mountainous region from the coast of Vietnam to Tibet – and even to Afghanistan, as he suggested later – “Zomia,” and claimed it was unexamined because it “lacked strong centers of state formation, was politically ambiguous, and did not command sufficient scholarly clout.” Along those same lines, political scientist James C. Scott (2009), in his thought provoking book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, picks up the baton and labels Zomia – which he confines, however, to the eastern section of van Schendel’s original Zomia, thus equating Zomia with the same region

on which this book focuses – as “the last great enclosure.”² For Scott, this is where a wide variety of populations have historically taken refuge from the surrounding “civilizations” in order to pursue an age-old or, in some cases, a renewed interest in the remarkable project of living in a stateless society (or at least in a space where the state does not control people significantly).³ Although we look at such considerations, made from a distance sympathetically, we argue for a more refined reflection from the ground up and a more dynamic understanding of the relationships between (marginal) local subjects, (global) market forces, and (national) states.

In other words, the authors of this book use locally grounded studies to reveal the unexpected ways in which people on the margins do not just get onboard and accept (socialist) modernity, but, rather, use their agency to maintain direction over their lives and livelihoods despite current and far-reaching changes to economic conditions and political authority.

The Southeast Asian Massif

We will expand more on the claims outlined previously and their rationales shortly, but first, it is helpful to more precisely locate the subjects of this book. The Southeast Asian Massif, as we define it, brings together the highlands of all the countries sharing a large chunk of the southeastern portion of the Asian land mass. These lie roughly east of the lower Brahmaputra River, in India and Bangladesh, and south of the Yangtze River in China, all the way to the Isthmus of Kra in Thailand at its southernmost extension (see Figure 1.1; Michaud 2006). As of 2008, as we mentioned, about 100 million of the Massif’s inhabitants belong to ethnicities that are distinct from the lowland majorities who form the cultural core in each of these eight countries, that is the Han (China), Kinh (Vietnam), Burman (Burma/Myanmar), Bengali (Bangladesh and northeastern India), Thai (Thailand), Lao (Laos), and Khmer (Cambodia) majorities. Over the course of centuries, these dominant lowland ethnic groups have – more or less firmly – ruled the highlands and their populations, albeit often with important disagreements. As such, one of the themes we address in this book is how these relationships have affected ethnicity and livelihood strategies.

We have selected three socialist states for analysis: the People’s Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. These are countries where, because of their participation in the world’s Communist “brotherhood” (Evans and Rowley 1984), a fused ideology has guided state dealings with “minority nationalities” (Michaud 2009, 30). Academic research on these populations by non-Communist academics was virtually impossible for several decades, roughly from 1945 to 1990. It is therefore useful and timely that the authors included in this book have been able to perform lengthy field-based investigations in these socialist

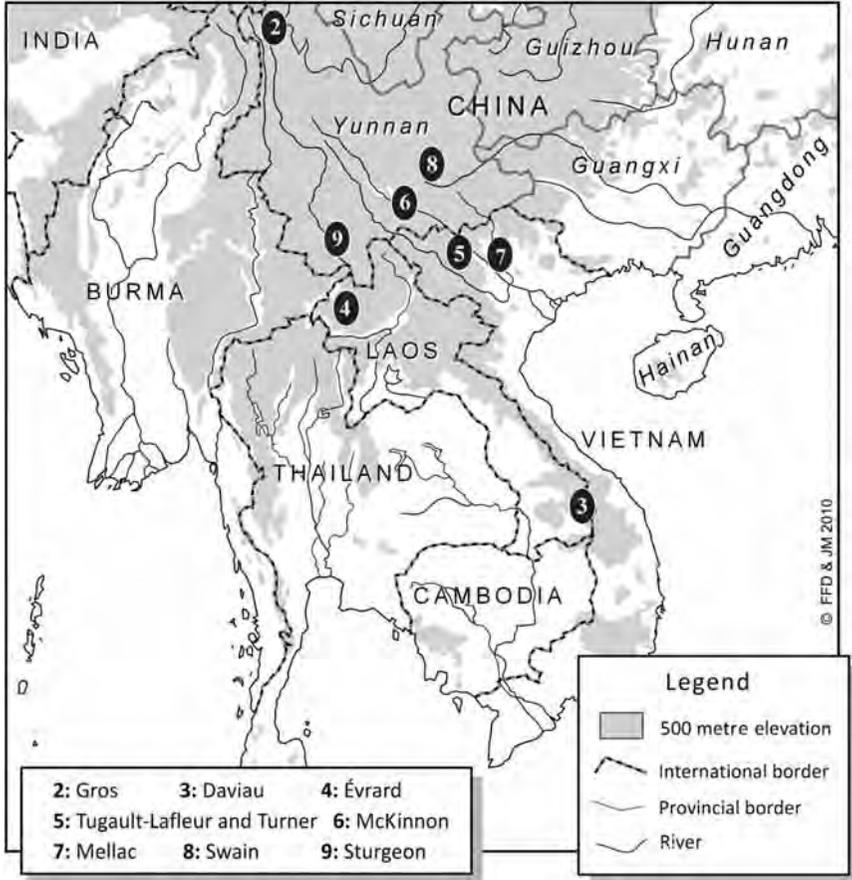


Figure 1.1 The Southeast Asian Massif and the eight case study chapters

settings and that they have developed intimate knowledge of the lived experiences of ethnic minorities in these highlands, and of what making a livelihood on the margins of a Communist state involves.

Some may argue that nowadays, what are often called the post-socialist regimes of China, Vietnam, and Laos have little in common beyond the worn-out veneer of previously being highly centralized revolutionary regimes, which have gradually departed from Marxist orthodoxy and have now opened up to the liberal market economy – China in 1978, Vietnam and Laos in 1986.⁴ Certainly, all three countries are liberalizing their economic activities. But at the same time, these three regimes share a unique ideology that directs the relationships of the state with minority groups dwelling within their national borders. In China, Nicholas Tapp (2001) has shown that the Soviet model, based on Josef Stalin’s considerations (1913) of the

“nation,” and the policies they eventually entailed, served in the 1930s as a template for strategies of alliance building between the Communist Party of China and minority groups whose support was essential to ensure victory over Republican forces. In Vietnam, the strategy that linked the Viet Minh’s political project with highland minorities closely followed the Chinese model, in this and many other aspects of the revolutionary struggle (McAlister 1967; Michaud 2000b). Furthermore, Yves Goudineau (2000) showed that the USSR-China-Vietnam ideological stance on minorities triggered a similar response in Laos.

Indeed, the parallels in approaches to ethnic minorities in China, Vietnam, and Laos raise several important questions for ethnicity, livelihoods, and state-society relationships. Many authors have acknowledged that the various national Communist revolutions in these locales could not have been successful without strategic wartime alliances with minority groups on the margins. For example, it is well known now that in China, the Yi of Yunnan sheltered and protected the fleeing Communist troops during the Long March of the 1930s (Mueggler 2001; Harrell 2002). In Vietnam, the Tày of Bac Thái province hosted and fed Viet Minh leaders in hiding from French colonial troops for years, while the Thái in northwestern Vietnam were instrumental in the decisive victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 (Michaud 2000a, 352-53).⁵ In Laos, with the majority of its national territory located in mountainous areas, the Communist triumph was possible only with the support of scores of highland allies (Goudineau 2000; Pholsena 2007). In all three countries, revolutionary leaders had to provide assurances of political autonomy to highland peoples, and included this in early drafts of national constitutions. This way, many ethnic minorities decided to ally with the Communist forces in hope of some political reward (McAlister 1967; MacKerras 2003).

Yet, once Communist victories were achieved, the new socialist states cunningly backtracked in unison. They argued that wartime pledges could not be carried out effectively without endangering the socialist project and the very existence of the new socialist nations. Early commitments to grant political autonomy were toned down, diluted, or sometimes plainly forgotten. In clear contradiction to all the promises made, these socialist states instead took the stance that highland margins and their populations could not be given real self-government. On the contrary, minorities had to readily accept being ever more firmly attached to the central state and to the socialist project of establishing a unified citizenship seeking uniform and predefined goals. Ironically, an important tool to achieve this forced marriage involved a decoy strategy of setting up showcase, largely powerless “autonomous territories” where sizable numbers of minority occupants were dwelling – one of Stalin’s original precepts. In China’s southwestern upland border zone, this practice became policy for the first time shortly after the Communist

victory of 1949, while in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), these came into existence in 1955, right after independence.

The modern practice of organizational segregation of mountainous areas in the Southeast Asian Massif can be traced back to British Burma, which set up administrative enclaves in the nineteenth century for numerically important ethnic groups, such as the Shan, Chin, and Kachin. Not long after, the French in Indochina took the same route with the Military Territories policy implemented in 1891 (Condominas 1978; Michaud 2000a, 344). As elsewhere throughout the colonial world, these constituted rather crude attempts at dividing local societies to rule them more efficiently, in this case, by encouraging an upland-lowland fracture rooted in ancient cultural distinctions. For the colonial powers, to ally with upland minority leaders served the purpose of thwarting nationalist sentiments and weakening resistance among the lowland majorities. It is not surprising that, in time, victorious socialist regimes in the region pragmatically accepted this heritage and used it to their own ends, blending it with original Soviet ideology.

Today, highlanders in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif are still facing governments that in large part lack dependable information about their history, cultural distinctiveness, and aspirations for the present and the future. More importantly, it seems these governments, taken by their fast-paced neo-liberal national growth agendas, often lack even the interest to learn more about ethnic minorities. Instead, they vigorously implement nationwide policies of cultural integration and economic standardization. Education, for instance, in principle a tool for emancipation, is geared instead toward Sinization, Lao-ization, and Vietnamization (Goudineau 2000; Potter 2007).⁶

For the most part, the region's state programs are attuned to growth and progress. The dominant rhetoric, after decades of applied social evolutionism inherited from strict Marxist ideology, has now moved increasingly toward the language of economic growth and development. Development agencies from the affluent world are joining governments to apply the technology of the international development industry to ethnic minority health, education, and agricultural practices; in the process, traditional practices end up being labelled as obsolete or even harmful, especially to the environment. Although the general indicators of health and education undeniably show an upgrading among highland populations, these initiatives also play directly into the national governments' strategies of integrating minorities into the central national economy and identity. In the process, cultural distinction is paid only subsidiary attention, with an array of other issues being judged incomparably more urgent.

China clearly has a strong central policy of controlling and integrating *shaoshu minzu*, minority nationalities, in its southwestern borderlands (Unger

1997; Baranovitch 2001; MacKerras 2001, Michaud 2009).⁷ This region is politically sensitive because it touches several international borders. It is also rich in natural resources important to the national economy, it provides a substantial portion of the country's diet through intensive agriculture, and it is a land of migration for many lowland citizens (Blum 2002; Wilkerson 2003). From the state's viewpoint, migration of lowland Han people to the margins of China might be motivated by a desire to eventually outnumber locals and take final political, economic, and cultural control over these margins (Harrell 2001; MacKerras 2003). Indeed, China's Go West campaign is an ambitious state-sponsored series of investments and land use plans that aim to bring development to provinces that would not usually attract the same level of industrialization as the seaboard. Started in 2000, the campaign aims to steer state investment, outside expertise, foreign loans, and private capital into western provinces of China, especially Yunnan, the province that occupies much of China's portion of the Southeast Asian Massif. Some of these activities include turning existing towns and cities into regional centres of economic development, such as the provincial capital Kunming. Yet, there has also been resettlement of villages in order to change the distribution of population in affected areas, and the reforestation of previously agricultural land by plantation forestry. Some commentators fear that the non-Han populations living in southwest China will find their societies, languages, and cultures threatened by these activities and the immigration of lowland Han (Plafker 2001). Picking up on this program, four chapters in this book consider various aspects of the Go West campaign (Gros, McKinnon, Swain, and Sturgeon). They illustrate that, in remote locations of southwest China, resistance to such programs exists, while taking covert, restrained forms.

In Vietnam, the state has officially made its peace with its *các dân tộc thiểu số*, the minority nationalities, through their legal enshrinement in official polity since the late 1970s (McElwee 2004). But the Vietnamese government still considers dangerous political resistance to be simmering in the Central Highlands and elsewhere. The government has denounced political support for minorities coming from mainly US-based organizations, often made up of Vietnamese who fled the country in the 1970s and whom the government branded reactionary (Anonymous 2002; Saleminck 2003). Christian missionary activism is a bone of contention, chiefly in the south, but increasingly in the northern highlands too. As a countermeasure, education is seen as a tool for the state to preserve carefully selected and benign features of local highland cultures (Nong Quoc Chan 1978) while showing the public eye the face of a benevolent state preserving minority cultures (McElwee 2004).

In Laos, the government has adopted a vigorous relocation program in order to move some minority ethnicities (*sonphao*) from upland areas to the lowlands and to force scores of highland villagers into larger groupings (see

Daviau, Évrard, this volume). This approach allows highlanders to be placed directly under the Lao state's gaze – a form of national panopticon as it were. Also, a deeply rooted mistrust between the socialist state and old royalist factions among certain highland groups has ensured that armed struggles endured long after the revolution was officially over in 1975. The Xaysomboun Special Region in northern Laos, an area sealed off from outside observers, was enforced from 1994 to 2006 to isolate pockets of minority resistance to the Laotian forces. Clearly, however, with nearly half its population belonging to one or another of many non-Lao ethnicities, Laos cannot afford to wage an all-out confrontation on its minorities, and a degree of negotiation has to prevail (Goudineau 2003; Ovesen 2004; Soukamneuth 2006).

The Implications of Ethnicity

In this culturally complex, mountainous transnational setting, authors in this book reflect on the relationships between ethnicity and livelihood practices on the frontiers of the state (see Brown 1994; Donnan and Wilson 1994; Lamont and Molnar 2002). But what do we mean by “ethnicity”? And why is this important in state-society relations and livelihood strategies?

Within the expansive field of identity studies, ethnicity generally refers to kinship, group solidarity, common culture, and shared strategy (see Barth 1969, 1999; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Cohen 1978; Gordon 1978; Yinger 1985; Nash 1989; Thompson 1989; Banks 1996; Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Eriksen 2002; Cornell and Hartmann 2007). With the possible exception of increasingly industrialized urban settings where anonymity can sometimes prevail over most other components of individual and group identity (Fong and Shibuya 2005), blood ties and regionalism have always played, and still do play, a crucial role in defining individuals as part of groups, and groups as distinct from each other (Rata and Openshaw 2006).

But it would be a mistake to presume that ethnicity thus implies an essential, fixed, or unchanging form of identity rooted only in biology and location (Melucci, Keane, and Mier 1989).⁸ For many years during the European colonial era and then during Communist regimes in the twentieth century, defining an ethnic group was above all an act of classification and control. Administrators saw indigenous cultures as fixed entities – “tribes” (Sahlins 1968) – with permanent characteristics in the likes of skin colour and facial features, and circumstantial evidence such as location and dress, as determining exactly who was or was not Karen, Masai, or Maori (see Sollors 1996).

The social sciences have since come a long way. Ethnicity today is believed to refer to personal and collective decisions, circumstantial strategies, and various other influences that sustain a discrete and negotiable form of collective identity (Jenkins 1997). Indeed, this was a tenet of the influential *Political Systems of Highland Burma* by Edmund Leach (1954), which found

that the ethnic group called the Kachin was actually far more differentiated than initially thought, and communal identities were more contingent on short-term strategies and needs than outsiders predicted. As later summarized by Eriksen (2005, 353), ethnicity came to be seen as comprising aspects of both symbolic meaning and instrumental utility. These forces may be defined as desires to fit in (such as via belonging or compliance) and strategies to opt out (via distinction, resistance, or defiance), which together compose an astoundingly complex and highly localized set of factors forming the agency of a particular group (Sollors 1989). Indeed, agency is a vital notion in this book; it is the instrument by which local responses to external pressures for change are conceived and put in practice (Holland et al. 2001). It is the highly localized element defying the routine elaboration and application of overarching models of development and integration of local societies into nations, the market, and the global world.

The ethnic factor is everywhere. Around the world, internal hostility toward ethnically distinct groups within national borders surfaces with a stubborn regularity in Burma, the Sudan, Iraq, India, China, Indonesia, and Brazil to name just a few zones where ethnic tensions flare (see Eller 1999). The so-called developed world is not immune either, as the recent incidence of ethnic war and ethnic cleansing experienced in Eastern Europe demonstrate (Cigar 1995). Furthermore, policies of singling out and excluding specific ethnic identities are still rampant in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Germany, Switzerland, and France (Dean and Levi 2003). Ethnic factors can be invoked to support both affirmative action and the harshest political projects (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005). But the ethnic factor, in all its fluidity, is also a powerful tool for understanding human behaviour in context, including, for our purpose here, how certain peoples in given locations negotiate their livelihoods (Lamont and Molnar 2002). In fact, it is so powerful that we contend that neglecting ethnicity and its local cultural determinants will ensure the long-term failure of effective good governance and development programs. Many contemporary approaches to livelihoods and development, we contend, do not pay sufficient attention to this challenge.

Recent debates on ethnicity have been lively. Essentialists (see Fuchs 2005), primordialists (Geertz 1963; Eller and Coughman 1993), and sociobiologists (van den Berghe 1987) have long insisted on blood ties and locality as the key elements of ethnicity over other possible dimensions. This position is fragile: Is one's brother really automatically one's best ally or trading partner? Are different ethnic groups necessarily prohibited by custom to marry across ethnic boundaries? Clearly, interracial, inter-ethnic, or cross-class cooperation occurs and is not routinely doomed, even if social customs exist to ascribe limits to it. At the other end of the spectrum, instrumentalists insist that, nowadays, ethnicity is not rooted in essence. They argue that ethnicity

is in fact nothing but a short-term, instrumental construction that is used by specific actors to achieve specific ends. This drastically opposite position is equally fragile: Can a Hindu really move across castes freely and without hindrance (Reddy 2005)? Will the Sicilian mafia, the Japanese Yakuza, and the Chinese Triads smoothly admit members from any racial background? Indeed, could the American voters elect a black president without ever raising the issue of race? And finally, in parallel, Marxist analyses have argued against ethnicity being related to any of the above. Friedman's classic work (1979) challenged Leach's emphasis on local explanations for ethnic identity and instead claimed that ethnicity and indeed culture are themselves produced through market forces and modes of production (see also O'Connor 1995; the new introduction to Friedman in 1998; Robinne and Sadan 2007).

Efforts at bridging the gap between such extremes have led to a middle ground based on propositions such as those supported by transactionalist and ethnosymbolist arguments (Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1995; Hutchinson and Smith 1996). The majority of proponents of such conciliatory positions see ethnicity as partly biological (visible in marriage preference, inheritance patterns, preferred trading association, clustering in times of adversity, and so on), and partly subjective and political (visible, for instance, in strategic grouping and modern urban lifestyles that allow diverse, competing identities encouraged by volatile technologies, challenges, and living circumstances) (Sanders 2002; Dean and Levi 2003; Fong and Shibuya 2005). The balance between these sets of characteristics can vary hugely across time and space but, overall, all are believed to play a role (Fuchs 2005; Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005; Cornell and Hartmann 2007).

Clearly, we should be careful in transferring concepts developed in settings such as modern industrial societies or post-industrial cities to locations such as the Southeast Asian Massif. For our purpose in this book then, ethnicity refers to blood ties, cultural variety, local agency, and the political agendas of highland peoples dealing with opportunities and constraints. Ethnicity helps people reproduce an identity they believe in. This is especially important when a group has to maintain itself in the face of fast-changing circumstances such as those related to globalization and, as in our case studies here, when attempting to create viable livelihoods while negotiating particular standardization constraints created by socialist regimes. In turn, this means paying attention to both the growing role of national and global trade flows in these regions, as well as local explanations of distinctiveness. This is an approach that is shared by all the authors in this book.

The Dilemmas of Livelihoods and Development

Let us also explain what we mean by "livelihoods," and how these may connect with ethnicity in the Southeast Asian Massif. But, to begin, how can

livelihood studies help us understand socio-economic change and “development” in this region?

At the most basic level, livelihoods are the means by which people make a living, such as through agriculture, trade, and waged employment. A common image of highland livelihoods in the Southeast Asian Massif focuses on scattered villages following customary ways, with the occasional road or access to electricity, and with inhabitants engaged in a combination of subsistence agriculture (that is, farmers’ land used for food production), cash cropping, gathering of forest products, and subsidiary trade. This image includes the cultivation of upland dry (non-irrigated) rice, frequently on steep slopes, and the growing of vegetables and maize, the latter mainly as feed for pigs or as an ingredient for alcohol making. Furthermore, a common form of agriculture in the past was “pioneer” shifting cultivation (Conklin 1963), in which migratory groups, such as Miao-Yao speakers, would use land and forests exhaustively before relocating villages every ten to twenty years.⁹

Yet, these classic images of livelihood practices in the Massif are questionable. Subsistence agriculture and shifting cultivation certainly exist in this region, but many highland peoples in northern Vietnam and southwest China, for instance, have been sedentarized (that is to say, settled on a semi-permanent or permanent basis) for centuries, especially those using irrigated rice terraces under local feudal chiefdoms. Added to this, other villages are becoming sedentarized either through choice or because they have been forced to resettle to lowland sites by state campaigns (see both Daviau and Évrard, this volume). Consequently, challenges to such allegedly classical images of highland livelihoods in the Massif have appeared, in part, because academics and development agents have come to realize that many researchers had been influenced by their experiences with the so-called “hill tribe” minorities in northern Thailand. For many years, researchers from the First World found themselves confined to Thailand because it was next to impossible to gain access to China, Vietnam, and Laos, and their findings bear that signature. With approximately one percent of the total highland ethnic minority population of the Massif, the Thailand heritage has been given an importance that today appears disproportionate. For several reasons relating to politics (the advent of socialism), demography, and history (including colonialism), research findings arising from this relatively constricted research hotbed are not often easily transferable to China, Vietnam, and Laos. Contributing to bridging this gap, scholarship based in these three countries is at last flourishing, helping to correct this discrepancy, and conveying a more attuned picture of the highland realities there.

Upland agriculture has often been cited as a reason to encourage resettlement or sedentarization. Highland practices such as shifting cultivation have been blamed for various environmental problems, including lowland flooding

and upland erosion. Undoubtedly, much classic shifting cultivation occurred on land that was previously forested, and farmers burnt forest and other vegetation in order to plant crops and add nutrients to the soil. But ecological geographers and anthropologists have argued that shifting cultivation, in locales with low population density, and without interference from the state or rival communities, is sustainable for upland societies (Conklin 1963; Boubet 1975). More recently, hydrological researchers have shown that the links between upland agriculture and these environmental problems are likely to be exaggerated because fluctuations in soil, rain, and water flows are complex and not always linked to agriculture, and because many upland farmers adjust practices to many of the risks they face (De Koninck 1999; Bonell and Bruijnzeel 2004; Bruijnzeel 2004; Forsyth and Walker 2008). These findings have been claimed for traditional forms of shifting cultivation, as well as for cultivation under higher population densities or with newer commercialized crops. This work does not suggest that upland agriculture has no environmental implications but questions the certainty with which environmental degradation has been cited by states and other actors to justify resettlement or reforestation.

It is now also widely acknowledged that subsistence agriculture has been supplemented for years through trading or bartering products, or by paid labour. Labour has been an income source from the post-feudal era (that is, roughly from the mid-nineteenth century) until the collectivization of the economies in China, Vietnam, and Laos in the mid-twentieth century. During that period, trade in agricultural products such as opium and home-brewed alcohol was complemented by trading livestock, timber, and a mind-boggling variety of non-timber forest products, including live and dead animals, or parts of animals. Waged agricultural labour also grew markedly after the end of the collectivized era (from the 1950s to the 1980s). In addition, non-agricultural incomes in larger settlements in the Massif grew considerably following numerous state-led industrial projects as part of overarching modernization plans. Indeed, Rigg (2005) notes that one should not only focus on assessing sources of agricultural income from the land around villages, but also acknowledge the growing importance of paid employment and remittances from off-farm labour.

Moreover, it is important to assess to what degree long-term customary land tenure systems have continued to operate in these uplands, or have been reformed or challenged by new systems imposed by successive national regimes over the last century. As China, Vietnam, and Laos undergo economic and political liberalization, opportunities for highland peoples are changing, local decision making has taken on new urgencies, and new property rights and forms of agriculture are merging with ancient ones. Moreover, as land use rights (but not land ownership) are now transferable and marketable, there is increased competition for land (see Mellac, this volume).

These insights into how highland people gain livelihoods are vital for understanding social and economic change in the Massif today. Yet, “livelihoods” mean more than the activities people use to make a living. Understanding livelihoods also requires looking at the less obvious social resources, organizations, local politics, and ethnic and social networks and decision making that underpin economic activities and can effectively reduce or increase social vulnerability to economic and political change.

The language of the development theorist Amartya Sen is particularly useful in understanding the wider basis of livelihoods (Sen 1984, 1987). Sen suggests that livelihoods are a means of achieving *capabilities*, or the range of a person’s life options, and are not only a means of achieving an economic income. Similarly, livelihoods reflect the availability of *assets*, or those valued items that also enhance an individual’s ability to achieve life goals and lifestyles. Such assets might include a combination of physical, natural, and social properties such as infrastructure, land, and social networks along with human talents and skills, and financial resources that provide access to certain livelihoods. Accordingly, a livelihoods approach focuses not only on activities but also on access to these and on how changing social contexts might change the underlying means by which people can seek suitable livelihoods on a long-term and rewarding basis (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Ethnicity, or the social and cultural networks that maintain local identity, is clearly an important variable for understanding sources of capabilities and assets, as well as access to them.

Recent discussions, regarding long-term and rewarding livelihoods, within anthropology, human geography, and development studies have used the concept of sustainable livelihoods to refer to how one might make a living that can continue despite upsets or threats to income. Chambers and Conway (1992, 1) define a sustainable livelihood as one that “can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation.” Sensibly, this framework focuses on addressing the vulnerability and poverty of affected peoples as they themselves see these (Chambers and Conway 1992; Scoones 1998; Ribot and Peluso, 2003), and requires “an examination of critical elements such as a livelihood’s impact on resources and its relationship to poverty reduction, security, equity, well-being, and capability” (Turner 2007, 403).

To identify livelihood strategies, many sustainable livelihoods approaches recognize five kinds of capital, or forms of assets available to an individual or to a household, village, or region. These capitals are human capital (educational and practical skills, health); natural capital (resources such as land and forests); physical capital (infrastructure such as roads); financial capital (savings, credit); and social capital (networks and relationships of trust) (Bebbington 1999). These assets, in turn, are deemed to allow vulnerable

people to increase livelihood options through three broad strategies: first, agricultural intensification (such as increasing the number of crops per year, including the use of fertilizers, mechanization, or access to more productive land); second, incomes diversification (including access to non-agriculture income in addition to agriculture); and third, creative uses of migration as a means of securing incomes (for example, involving one household member working for cash elsewhere, or an individual travelling to a city to engage in non-agricultural activities on a cyclical, seasonal basis). These capitals have been used by development agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development as the basis of livelihood analyses and aid programs.

Critics, however, propose that seeing diverse communities through the lens of these capitals is to adopt a cookie-cutter style of analysis, a mechanical model that assumes these factors will create success, regardless of context, and overlooks the assumptions employed when using them. According to Hinshelwood (2003, 254, 243) these capitals are "merely a confused diagram and a wordy manual." Others have suggested that using words such as "capitals" in uncritical, easily transferred ways may reduce the ability for local people to assert their own values in framing development policy (Arce 2003, 204). Indeed, some social analysts have suggested that using the word "capitals" to describe social networks and culture reflects a market-driven outlook; unsurprisingly, the capitals approach was developed largely in countries with liberal economies.

Accordingly, critics have argued that any focus on the five capitals should be matched by an awareness of what these capitals mean in different cultural contexts. Similarly, there is a need to understand how specific cultural and/or political factors govern access to different assets (Ribot and Peluso 2003; Forsyth 2007; Scoones 2009). Assets are not accessible to all citizens equally, including in socialist regimes. Consequently, some observers have argued that we need to incorporate more rigorous forms of bottom-up, rights-based analyses into livelihood studies. Such approaches would consider how ethnic minorities or poor people assert their needs and make decisions, rather than, in the case of development programs, achieving top-down "sham participation" by the poor in pre-set development goals (Baumann 2000, 34; Carney 2003).

To that end, in this book, we question how far ethnicity, encompassing cultural identity and linkages, should be considered an agent of access, or indeed as an asset itself when wishing to better understand ethnic minority livelihoods in the socialist portion of the Southeast Asian Massif. If one takes on board the five capitals approach, discussed above, then it is the concept of social capital that is assumed, most commonly, to include social associations and networks, ties, and linkages. Some analysts, however, have argued

that actors such as the World Bank have used the concept of social capital in ways that overlook various deeper and indeed, more negative forms of power and control (Portes and Landolt 2000; Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Harriss 2002; Radcliffe 2004). Other critics have suggested that this approach avoids deeper understandings of social connectivity – one example being Bourdieu’s earlier formulation (1972) of social capital – along with that other form of capital bypassed by more recent livelihood analysts, namely, cultural capital. Under Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation (1972), cultural capital focuses on shared meanings within societies and cultures, which – knowingly or unknowingly – may be used both positively to include more people in decision making or negatively to reinforce existing political power.

In sum, cultural factors, or the presence of shared values and understandings, are a crucial source of support and creativity within livelihood strategies. Yet, many critics, including the authors, feel that current approaches to the analysis of livelihoods do not take culture and ethnicity sufficiently into account (Ellis 2000; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). As noted earlier, the aim of this book is therefore to question how and to what extent ethnicity impacts the fashioning of local livelihoods and how it interacts with other oft-forgotten variables such as political relations and social change.

Rethinking the Relationships between Livelihoods and Ethnicity

What, then, needs to be done to better understand the relationships between ethnicity and livelihoods, and how can we illustrate this in the highlands of the Southeast Asian Massif?

As we stated at the start of this chapter, this book is based on three key arguments. First, local people’s ability to forge livelihoods is a product of both external changes, such as political and economic changes, as well as of their own agency, always influenced by ethnic identity and culture. Second, ethnicity is best understood on a transnational basis relating to the existence of cultural and trading links across borders rather than within the restrictive and artificial (at least culturally speaking) context of single countries. And third, we need to view the Massif area in more complex and dynamic terms that go beyond categorizing ethnic minorities as just state-controlled or stateless, or considering all local people as sharing the same political, cultural, and economic characteristics.

We propose a few central routes to advancing these new understandings of the Massif. First, we suggest that studying and understanding ethnicity and culture assists in helping highland peoples achieve effective livelihood strategies. By stating this, we propose that there is a need to indicate how, and in which ways, culture can be assessed and better understood. This has been a recurrent concern for social anthropology in particular, which has advocated research methods adapted to local circumstances and involving long-term observation (Bernard 2005), rather than rapid rural appraisal or

the largely quantitative strategies that are used by governments or development agencies and tend to focus on current activities rather than on livelihoods as embedded in longer term decision-making processes and taking into account the nuances of ethnicity.¹⁰ All the chapters in this book offer telling examples of ways to approach local cultures that can lead to more refined understandings of how the inclusion of ethnicity, along with its associated trading and migration links, in the development equation can offer more diverse strategies for enhancing livelihoods while simultaneously retaining – or attempting to retain – a core identity (see Jonsson 2005). In the words of Sarah Turner (2003, 198): “Culture is never static but is constantly being recreated and negotiated by conscious actors. Accordingly, a framework designed to examine [local economic agents] must incorporate the cultural context as a dynamic dimension of human agency.”

Another avenue is to realize how livelihood strategies influence ethnicity. Clearly, it is argued throughout this book that ethnicity bears a significant influence on the local definition and achievement of livelihoods. The substantivist argument (see Stanfield 1986) suggesting that the economy is embedded in cultures and that it cannot be studied advantageously outside its particular local context is convincing in the Southeast Asian Massif but also in the lowlands around it. Turning this proposition around is also true, or more exactly, a retroaction is to be expected: changes in livelihood options will affect ethnic identity through local responses to important political or economic changes, including the indigenization of state reforms or increasingly pervasive markets (Sahlins 1999; Engel Merry 2006).

One example of how identities may change comes from James Scott's classic work *Weapons of the Weak*, written after a substantial period of field research on socio-economic change in a Malaysian rural community following mechanization and the introduction of new cropping practices. Scott argues that the withdrawal of customary, kinship-based, and village-based social welfare practices following these changes undermined the livelihoods of poorer villagers and altered the nature of social identities. These alterations occurred because of what he calls the “euphemization of property relations” (Scott 1985, 305) into practices that today's researchers might call social and cultural capital, such as providing access to food, loans, and social networks between richer and poorer peasants. Yet, in keeping with both the positive and negative aspects of cultural capital, Scott argues that these changes did not simply result in a “victim class” but also created a new class of peasants-turned-capitalists that shattered the old village hegemony. These new capitalists changed identities by disregarding custom in favour of new commercialism. In other words, going back to Sahlins' typology (1968), these changes tipped the balance of reciprocity in the village of Sedaka in favour of rampant negative reciprocity, in which social linkages became obsolete and the pursuit of personal profit grew dominant. This kind of

research by Scott underscores the value of long-term field investigation, familiarity with a local group, and the resulting deeper insights into how cultural and economic changes interconnect.

A third avenue is to operationalize these lessons for livelihood practices and, especially, understand the role of local agency. As we argue above, the agency of local communities is not merely the willingness and ability to accept and comply with new market opportunities, land reforms, and socio-economic circumstances under globalization and liberalization. Rather, as Sherry Ortner (2006) and Saba Mahmood (2004) argue, it is more fertile to see agency as a locally and culturally informed type of self-maintenance, even resistance, that allows minorities to uphold identities and customary practices that may counteract the external forces of change, even if these have an apparently overwhelming weight.

To some extent, the recent economic-liberalization changes in China, Vietnam, and Laos are still so new that we are only beginning to understand how peasants might respond to the resultant globalization processes and cultural change (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Sturgeon and Sikor 2004). One cultural analyst, Arjun Appadurai is relatively optimistic. He argues: "Those social orders and groupings that were apparently passive victims of large forces of control and domination were nevertheless capable of subtle forms of resistance and 'exit' ... that seemed to be not primordialist in any way" (Appadurai 1996, 145). In other words, even if many do succumb to degrees of subordination and compliance, a fair number of simple farmers can succeed in avoiding domination in restrained, yet successful ways (Kerkvliet 2005, 2009).

How might peasants assert their culture and identity while also complying with new political and economic orders that can at times take the shape of hegemonies? Several authors in this book suggest that new livelihood strategies are, for the subjects in the Massif, experiments in finding solutions to basic needs, while at the same time asserting identity in accordance with their economic potential *and* the moral dimensions of local cultures. In the terms of James C. Scott (1990) again, the public projects of state reform and marketization coexist with local hidden transcripts, which provide marginal people space to confer among themselves and seek ways to maintain and assert who they want to be, and even profit economically, without feeling prey to the reforms. Within these forms of resistance lie the combinations of ethnicity and resourcefulness that offer significant assets for livelihood strategies.

How the Chapters Tackle These Themes

This book is a vast and rather ambitious project. When recruiting contributors, transnational research experience, as well as an intimate knowledge of the realities on the ground for the local groups each proposed to write about,

were two qualities we sought. In terms of disciplinary background, we were eager to build a degree of diversity within the social sciences in order to disembed case studies from potentially restrictive intellectual disciplinary boundaries, often tied to partisan discourses that do not always stand the test of time well. We contend that transdisciplinary considerations enrich our understanding of a complex object such as the Southeast Asian Massif and its populations.

Thus, contributors to this book are evenly spread among the fields of social anthropology, development studies, and human geography. They have in common broad field experience in one or several highland areas in the Southeast Asian Massif – particularly the socialist segment of it – combined with critical publications on the highland minority groups in the region. In addition, beyond these disciplines and the six countries the authors originate from, half belong to French-speaking academia and thus bring an intellectual tradition and a series of insights on the region that many among the English-speaking audience are not always entirely familiar with. This combination of disciplines, experience, and intellectual background brings a unique depth to this collection.

The case studies have been arranged according to the degree to which the livelihoods of the groups under investigation are integrated into the market economy, ranging from those most remote from the market to those most dynamically involved in it. Each chapter is based on a given ethnic group's profile and signature agency, not in relation to a specific national situation, which would run against the transnational objective we favour. The resulting picture shows, among other details, that integration in the market is intimately linked to the degree of political and economic formalization each group achieved before the Communist takeovers in the three countries under consideration. The initial chapters are based on lineage groups (for whom social organization was or is based primarily on kinship), such as the Drung, Tarieng, Khmu, and Hmong. These groups show the least degree of market integration and sometimes also the weakest forms of agency in dealing with outside influences. Geographical isolation, which has sheltered some of these groups from the unmediated reach of state administration (Scott 2009), could be part of the explanation as to why this situation exists. The book then moves to ethnic groups that were functionally integrated into a feudal system before colonization or Communist victories, either as a dominant group or as commoners, and which seem to have adopted market practices more rapidly. Does this mean that their agency is also weak and they simply give in to modernizing pressures? Not necessarily so, as the cases of the Hani, Tày/Thái, Yi, and Dai seem to suggest. Does that mean that the more integrated in the market they are, the more hazy their ethnic identity becomes? Nothing is less sure. Ethnicity, let us recall, is fluid and prone to strategizing.

Turning now to each chapter, the following four chapters, Chapters 2 to 5, focus on lineage groups. In Chapter 2, geographically as much as culturally, the Drung, a small *shaoshu minzu* of Yunnan province, stand uncommonly remote from the political centres of China's southwest. In this chapter, "Economic Marginalization and Social Identity among the Drung People of Northwest Yunnan," Stéphane Gros, a social anthropologist, discusses ethnic identity and political as well as economic change through time in this distant northwestern corner of the province. The Drung have long been pushed to the extreme of dependency and exploitation by more powerful neighbours. It was only at the end of the imperial era in the early 1950s, when the revolutionary administration finally reached them, that they experienced a welcome relief from chronic domination. By retracing the Drung people's history of relationships with their powerful neighbours and their inclusion into the People's Republic of China, Gros shows how they experienced successive forms of dependency that eventually impacted their sense of identity. The Drung embody the notion of the isolated and subjugated "tribe" in the highlands of the Southeast Asian Massif, a politically weak society falling prey to predation and, later, struggling to "get a grip" on socialist modernity. New economic opportunities such as tourism, Gros assesses, appear to be just another way for the Drung to remain marginalized.

Only slightly less isolated but more numerous than the Drung, the Tarieng dwell on the border between southern Laos and central Vietnam. Also a lineage society, the Tarieng have been active through history, in a dominant role to some groups in their vicinity when the opportunity to trade slaves presented itself, while just as often falling victim to the lowland powers surrounding them. Times have changed since the 1950s, though, with the Vietnam War and the sudden geostrategic value of their customary territory, located on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Since 1975, socialism has also had its impacts. As such, in Chapter 3, "Integration of a Lineage Society on the Laos-Vietnam Border," Steeve Daviau, a social anthropologist, looks at Tarieng identity by analyzing the recent changes in their lives stemming from their adaptation to state-led resettlement programs. The Tarieng, like many other highland minorities in Laos, face overwhelming external vectors of change. Forced resettlement and compulsory clustering of small villages are efficient mechanisms of surveillance and control of such non-Lao, animist minorities and speed up their integration into the Lao nation. These mechanisms leave Tarieng farmers with few options, one being to start to move, looking for unskilled, low-paid wage work in the mid- and lowlands. However, despite a totalitarian political climate, the Tarieng population is not altogether passive. The Tarieng undertake elaborate and diverse strategies, reactions, and forms of resistance at the local level in an attempt to maintain some autonomy. Nevertheless, their case exemplifies some of the ways in which a strong state can put minority groups under economic, social, cultural, and political

integrationist pressures and use its strategic power to break down ancient social fabric.

Also in Laos, this time in the north of the country, close to Burma and China, the case of the Khmu appears somewhat more encouraging. Here, Olivier Évrard, a development anthropologist, has researched the historical emergence of identities and new livelihoods among Laos' largest minority group, with half a million people. He especially considers, in Chapter 4, "Oral Histories of Livelihoods and Migration under Socialism and Post-socialism among the Khmu of Northern Laos," the role of migration as part of households' livelihood strategies and points to the fact that livelihoods are not just located on one's own farming land or trading premises but also exist through travel and by connecting into helpful commercial networks. Évrard also provides a useful example of a biographical method for investigating how specific individuals express their agency in seeking specific livelihoods.

In spite of being classified as one of the most primitive and poor minority nationalities in Vietnam, the Hmong farmers and traders in Lào Cai province, discussed in Claire Tugault-Lafleur and Sarah Turner's Chapter 5, "Of Rice and Spice: Hmong Livelihoods and Diversification in the Northern Vietnam Uplands," show a high degree of cultural adaptability in negotiating modernity while jealously protecting a core identity. Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, two human geographers, focus on how Hmong have engaged with cardamom production and trade within broader complex livelihood strategies. They take an actor-oriented approach to livelihoods as they root, focusing on local ethnic relations and culturally rooted decision-making processes. After an examination of Hmong livelihood coping tactics during the socialist and post-socialist periods more generally, the authors focus on current-day Hmong livelihood portfolios while unravelling the adoption of strategies of income diversification that allow Hmong households to adapt to local-level political and economic transformations. These transformations have included the creation of a national park in the district and consequent restrictions on forest use, a ban on opium production and timber felling, as well as new market integration opportunities.

In the next four chapters, sedentarized groups long embedded in feudal systems take the front stage. With 1.5 million people, the Hani in southern Yunnan are one of the more numerous *shaoshu minzu* of China; their representatives, under the ethnonym Akha, can be found across the borders in several adjacent countries in the Massif. Two chapters in this book focus on the Hani (Chapters 6 and 9). Chapter 6, "Hani Agency and Ways of Seeing Environmental Change on the China-Vietnam Border," is written by John McKinnon, a development geographer long acquainted with highland Thailand and who then studied Hani communities of Yunnan in the course of a New Zealand development aid, participatory research project. McKinnon

focuses on the adoption of state directives, and later, cash crops, in Hani villages near the Vietnam border and the environmental outcomes of these, as well as how Hani identity appeared to be subjugated by state directives. McKinnon describes how Hani communities received and then attempted to “indigenize” the development options put to them. He further shows how their ethnic identity was able to reappear when their communities were brought together to face the environmental consequences of recent livelihood decisions. McKinnon criticizes years of outside intervention by the state and development agencies that have not sufficiently appreciated local values and customs. As an alternative, he illustrates how local Hani leaders have been able to assert their identity and some autonomy through traditional land use conservation measures. Whether the Hani will now be able to circumvent the far-reaching implications of the Go West national program of modernization in the highlands remains to be seen.

Chapter 7, “Land Reform and Changing Identities in Two Tai-Speaking Districts in Northern Vietnam,” explores the links between land reform and identities in communities of northern Vietnam belonging to the Thái and Tày minority nationalities. Marie Mellac, a human geographer, considers how recent changes to land allocation and related laws have allowed local groups to negotiate, with uneven success, access to land and the relationship that these changes have with the adoption of non-agricultural income and hence livelihood diversification. Land tenure stands at the core of territorialization processes and takes an active part in the social organization of these formerly feudal groups. As such, large-scale land reforms carried out by (post-) socialist Vietnam over the last twenty years have interfered with customary social rights within each community and have altered the political and economic balance between neighbouring groups, also affecting the farmers’ relationships with political institutions at every level. Mellac surmises that these reforms may lead to the homogenization of local society with mainstream Vietnamese culture through the erosion of ethnic identities.

Yunnan tourism in the early twenty-first century relies heavily on merchandizing ethnic diversity as a local renewable resource. Studying the case of the Yi, social anthropologist Margaret Swain analyzes, in Chapter 8, “Commoditized Ethnicity for Tourism Development in Yunnan,” the recent tourism boom in Yunnan and how such change influences Yi identity and livelihoods. Using the examples of groups in two tourist sites – the Sani in Stone Forest (Shilin) and the Bai in Dali – Swain looks at issues of equality in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class, and the promise of cosmopolitan discourse to shape opportunities for selling one’s own (or someone else’s) ethnic identity. Building on a growing body of research on the tourist industry in the region, she argues that tourism offers great diversity for non-agricultural incomes among minorities. Yet, as has been observed in many

other similar situations, the downside is the tendency, rampant throughout China, to commoditize ethnicity as an attraction; an ethnicity, that is, that has been reduced to benign exotic characteristics and devoid of any political potency. She suggests, in these cases, that while staged identities are presented to visitors, more meaningful changes still occur within groups but remain less visible and more difficult to assess.

Finally, the case of communities among the Dai (Tai Lue) and Hani (Akha) groups in Xishuangbanna in the far south of Yunnan, near Laos, appear like a success story. Development geographer Janet Sturgeon, in Chapter 9, "Rubber Transformations: Post-Socialist Livelihoods and Identities for Akha and Tai Lue Farmers in Xishuangbanna, China," observes the influence and impact of state-led programs for rubber plantations in Yunnan on local livelihoods and identities among these two *shaoshu minzu*. Sturgeon argues that the new trend of taking up rubber plantation production represents an extension of neo-liberal governance to this region following the entry of China to the World Trade Organization. It turns out, she explains, that Hani rubber farmers emerge as savvy entrepreneurs renegotiating land use and entering markets in this globalizing moment, though not without unsettling the identities of both themselves and state farm workers. As state rubber farms slide toward bankruptcy, Akha rubber farmers, Sturgeon argues, are getting rich. It is suggested that the evolution of new governance offers opportunities but also presents new dilemmas for highlanders, as the state requires them to take more responsibility for providing social services such as education and health care. Nationalism appears as a means of asserting identity and livelihoods in the face of changes imposed by the Chinese state.

Finally, in the Conclusion to the book, "Lesson for the future," Jean Michaud draws from these case studies the lesson that, to fruitfully rethink the relationships between ethnicity and livelihoods and to assess how well highland minorities in China, Vietnam, and Laos are faring in these turbulent times, agents of development would gain much from learning to pay closer attention to local factors such as culture and agency. Michaud proposes that deadlines and tangible results should not be the only guiding lines along which projects are designed and implemented. If more importance could be placed instead on factoring in local historical and cultural ways of sharing and understanding the relationships between livelihood strategies, agency, local politics and resistance, then the programs put in place by state development actors, overseas development practitioners and academics, and non-governmental organizations would stand a better chance of yielding long-term dividends for ethnic minorities in the Southeast Asian Massif.

Notes

- 1 The notions of ethnic minority and national minorities are being used cautiously here as a historical construct that is a consequence of the installation of the modern nation-states in the region (Michaud 2006).
- 2 On Zomia, see the thematic issue of the *Journal of Global History* (Michaud 2010).
- 3 For a global presentation of the Zomia debate, see Michaud 2010.
- 4 It should be noted here that in this book some authors speak to the current situation in these locales as “socialist” while others use the term “post-socialist.” This is personal choice, but in all cases, authors are cognizant of the recent liberalization of these economies, including their opening up to outside market integration forces, while politically these states retain certain socialist principles of rule and a firm hand over political organization as well as specific “takes” on ethnic minorities, discussed here.
- 5 The Thái and the Tày in Vietnam are not to be confused with the Thai of Thailand. All belong to the “Tai” language sub-family, which refers to any speaker of the Tai branch of the larger Tai-Kadai language family, which includes all speakers of one form or another of that vast cluster of languages found in Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, Burma, Assam, Vietnam, Laos, or indeed Thailand, where most of them dwell (Michaud 2006).
- 6 Recent history suggests that it is only in southwestern China and northeastern Burma, where some minority groups such as the Zhuang, Yi, Hani, Shan, or Dai reach several million people, that forms of resistance to cultural assimilation can sometimes arise. For most of the other groups, resistance must be subtle, sometimes covert, often hidden (see Scott 1990, 2009).
- 7 Based on Michaud (2009).
- 8 Essentialism implies ascribing an eternal and discrete sense of identity to peoples, rather than seeing how ethnic identities coexist with other social and cultural factors.
- 9 The name “swidden” has been given to fields that are cleared and cultivated in these ways.
- 10 We do also acknowledge that for many, time is of the essence, especially where the state might not look particularly favourably on long-term research by outsiders. A summary of faster yet effective ways to use anthropological methods can be found in publications such as Handwerker (2002).

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21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on FSC-certified ancient-forest-free paper
(100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Moving mountains : ethnicity and livelihoods in highland China, Vietnam,
and Laos / edited by Jean Michaud and Tim Forsyth.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7748-1837-7

1. Mountain people – Southeast Asia – Social conditions. 2. Mountain people –
Southeast Asia – Economic conditions. I. Michaud, Jean II. Forsyth, Tim

GN635.S58M69 2010

305.800959

C2010-904720-6

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

UBC Press
The University of British Columbia
2029 West Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
www.ubcpress.ca

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