

(1) title

HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN ASIA'S SOCIALIST HIGHLANDS. METHODS, CONTEXTS, AND ETHICS

(2) conveners

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(3) brief description and explanation of the chosen format

This double panel reflects the final stage of a collective book manuscript currently under evaluation. It explores in novel ways the predicaments of upland societies in Socialist Asia: China, Vietnam and Laos. 12 authors in total contribute chapters to this book, 8 of whom are joining the Paris EuroSEAS conference, including the two co-editors of the book.

(4) brief description of panel

These two panels revolve around germane questions of the foremost interest when addressing the upland societies of Communist Asia: How can scholars manage to competently access information about the past? How do local societies produce and store their story in their own terms, terms that more often than not are ill at ease with national and Western categories? How is the memory of the past transmitted – or not – and following what logic? Regarding oral testimony, who are exactly the ‘wise ones’ – or the reliable ones? – researchers are routinely directed at for their interviews? How can one handle the oft-reported male authority on historical information and how can historical narratives better reflect the different voices behind the authoritative versions of those in charge? How should one cope with key informants but also with gatekeepers when working with minorities under authoritarian regimes? How can historical statements be addressed as situated speech acts and not mere data? And how is one to capture history-in-the making through events, rituals and performances rather than interviews and surveys, including the telling of biographies and micro-stories symptomatic of ancient processes? If written archives are the staple of historians, how do social scientists use them? Do they proceed the same way as historians, or do they develop a specific method and agenda? How does archival research intersect with fieldwork, and what kind of added value might it bring to it? Is access to the national or regional archives restricted for political motives? If so, what are the costs and the possible compromises needed to access them? And in sheer terms of positionality, by what right can Western and/or ‘White’ scholars dig into the past of societies other than their own?... Facing such minefields, this double panel is intended as a guiding discussion for those confronted with such multifarious and at time, daunting challenges. It is based on experiences and reflections rooted in decades of work in the three Marxist-

Leninist states of the subcontinent who share portions of the Southeast Asian Massif: China, Vietnam, and Laos.

(5) double session (2 x 90 min.): 1 short introduction and 6 papers.

PANEL 1 : HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN ASIA'S SOCIALIST HIGHLANDS.

Persons and history: life-stories in context

Introduction : Historical Anthropology in Asia's Socialist Highlands

Jean MICHAUD & Pierre PETIT

Gathering life stories and oral tradition among the Na of Southwest China

Pascale-Marie MILAN

In the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, official narratives of the national minorities' history are particularly focused on origins, a theme shared by national minorities through their interest in genealogy. However, official narratives contrast with oral histories held by these minority groups. Faced with the development of tourism, the Na of southwest China often publicly use these official narratives to also benefit from tourism income and gain a place in the modernizing political agenda of the country. Yet, they privately maintain other narratives about their past that are more in line with their own ways of thinking and cultural representations.

This article aims at presenting methodological and ethical issues on how to conduct research to access these hidden transcripts and foster the Na's view on their own history. Drawing on multiple field stays among the Na since 2007, I argue that reflexivity about the researcher's positionality can be helpful in accessing these narratives. By paying attention to vernacular terms and the ways in which they tell something about past, I suggest that blurred notions underscore a process of mythologization. While giving insights about rhetorical formulas, I discuss how the historical material binds with present day. Ethically, this linguistic perspective claims a pluralization of Na voices and puts forward their own experiences, strategies, and constraints, adding layers of complexity to Na history.

'I never knew my Dad experienced that!' Reflections on a collaborative oral history project with Hmong youth and elders in upland northern Vietnam.

Sarah TURNER & Sarah DELISLE

Oral history has been argued to be an important tool for studying the "hidden histories and geographies, the place-based lives and memories of disadvantages people, minority groups, and others whose views have been ignored or whose lives pass quietly, producing few if any written records" (George and Stratford 2016: 190-191). Hmong ethnic minority populations in Vietnam's northern borderlands have a long history of oral tradition and story-telling. Yet with an historical absence of literacy and no self-created written archives, the first-hand knowledge and experiences of Hmong elders is seldom communicated beyond their kin. Therefore, at the request of a Hmong community member we developed a collaborative, intergenerational oral history project that would allow stories of Hmong elders to be shared with others on the internet. This project including training Hmong youth in research methods, helping advance their English skills, and working towards inter-generational knowledge transfer.

Drawing on debates regarding collaborative North-South ethnography, positionality and critical reflexivity, and feminist fieldwork approaches, we reflect upon this process, and highlight the trials and tribulations along the way. In particular we analyze pre- and post-oral history interviews that we completed with the youth interviewees in which we attempted to gain an understanding of both their positionalities and their reflections

of the process as a whole. We also contemplate our roles as two Global North researchers interacting with Global South ethnic minority youth and elders, and the degree to which we were able to help support the creation of subaltern counter-narratives to Vietnamese state discourses of upland minority histories.

History of a Life-History. An Eastern-bloc European Anthropologist in 'Communist' Vietnam

Gábor VARGYAS

In 1989, during my first fieldwork among the Bru in Quảng Trị, Central Vietnam, I have recorded an 18-hour long life history of a widely informed, exceptional Bru man, covering grosso modo two third of the 20th century, from French colonization to the end of Vietnam War and the resumption of life around reunification. As the story was full of – then and ever since – touchy political and ideological details, conforming to my promise, I refrained from publishing anything of it during a quarter of a century. In 2007, in the course of a new fieldwork in Đắk Lắk among a resettled Bru community during the war, the exceptionally icy circumstances of my fieldwork convinced me to give up my hopes for the advent of a politically benign period in which the story may be welcome, and my reticence to publication. Delineating some of the constraints and pressures I had – and still have – to cope with, just as the solutions and answers I gave to them, I shall present an “insider’s” view of doing fieldwork in a “brotherly” communist country raising some fundamental questions of anthropological fieldwork in totalitarian countries.

PANEL 2 : HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN ASIA’S SOCIALIST HIGHLANDS.

Missing memories and written history from the outside

The Archive, the Road, and the Field Between: Towards a Geography of Vietnam’s Black River Region

Christian C. LENTZ

This paper offers a methodological reflection on the ethnographic research underlying my book, *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* (2019). Whereas the book’s empirical foundation rests on archival documents from Vietnam and France, “The Archive, the Road, and the Field Between” discusses the fieldwork conducted to collect those documents and situate them in the context of the Black River region. Spread over more than a decade, this ethnographic fieldwork was multi-sited, involving lengthy visits to national archives in Hanoi, Điện Biên’s province library, offices in Điện Biên Phủ, travel around the region, and immersion in the social life of rural, montane villages. The paper focuses on several moments in the longer research process when ethnographic engagement offered crucial insight into the historic themes treated in the book, ranging from an interview with a farmer accompanied by five officials to an encounter with veteran in Hanoi and informal labor exchanges with archival leadership. Each moment led me to consider my own positionality as a young American researcher working in a former conflict zone. Taken together, these experiences generated a sense of place, empathic understanding, reciprocal commitments, and appreciation for ethnolinguistic diversity that both informed the book project and, I argue, renew a geographic dialog between history and anthropology in the highlands of Southeast Asia.

Silences and amnesia: Historical memory and its hollows in the Lao highlands

Pierre PETIT

Historical anthropology usually proceeds by generating new information through fieldwork and archival research. Taking a reflexive stance, the present chapter will rather question the silences and hollows of the research process, with a view to discuss their potential – and paradoxical – value.

Historical hollows cover a wide range of situations. Information can be intentionally silenced or disguised for various reasons. It sometimes remains invisible without any intention to hide, when the context simply does not make it salient. Dearth of information sometimes results from people's unawareness on a topic, because it was not deemed important to remember, because memory has turned to dust over time, or of course because information has been intentionally altered or suppressed. Traumas may engender situations where memory is present, but properly unspeakable. Researchers are themselves involved in this landscape of hills and hollows, they can produce blind spots by downplaying or refusing specific historical evidence. Silences and omissions typically do not appear during the research process. They become salient when the researcher reflects on data, compares with other sources, or is confronted with unexpected questions from colleagues and audiences. The circumstances of such realizations deserve consideration, for they steer the research.

Based on my work in Houaphan Province, Laos, I explore these questions taking a few issues as starting points:

- Despite their volume, the colonial archives consulted in Aix-en-Provence (France) turned out to have countless blind spots. But they also raised my attention to realities that did not appear during fieldwork. I will highlight how the two sources are mutually enlightening.
- The villagers' memory is acute on some episodes, but overall, the precolonial and colonial past is very partially remembered: how can we explain the selective remembrance of the past? What is to be learnt from the least remembered episodes of history?
- The way anthropologists discuss historical memory often makes it appear as largely shared in a given society. In fact, this knowledge is usually the privilege of a tiny minority (usually male elders and leaders). Historical knowledge is for most people of little relevance and limited to their family biography. This unequal distribution deserves more consideration.
- What is silenced? What kind of information is consciously concealed, and how can it be revealed? This question applies also to the official history of the province, whose narrative is by definition selective. This chapter argues that notwithstanding the kind of sources considered, silences and amnesia tell something about the circulation of historical knowledge inside groups (villagers, researchers, colonial/postcolonial authorities, etc.), but also between groups. It advocates for a communicational

The synergy of oral and written historical accounts in the production of anthropological knowledge – a Chinese case study.

Sylvie BEAUD

Dealing with fieldwork, the ethnographer in China is often caught between different types of historical discourses as well as various memory traces scattered everywhere that may be of use for his/her research. The number of documents, research productions on the history of China can be overwhelming. Oral testimonies of the informants, archives, interviews with local historians or civil servants, stelae, ritual and theatrical practices, among others, all provide different pieces of the historical puzzle(s) of the investigated topic. How do we, anthropologists, make use of these historical accounts? How do they dialogue between themselves, and with our academic writing?

In the proposed paper, I shall look back at the research, conducted among Hans people in Yunnan province (PR China) between 2005 and 2012, for which the informants were referring to history in multiple ways. I was therefore led to investigate their past and I adopted the posture that I consider typical of anthropology, that is: starting from the informants' discourse and exploring the past backward (or, regressively in Marc Bloch's terms) to make sense of it.

Following the chronology of my research, I shall first explain what sources were available and how I navigated through them. Then, I shall draw on the informants' discourses to highlight the specific contexts in which they call history as a proof or as an explanation. Finally, I shall consider the use of history by the researcher, namely, the way I included it in my academic work.

I shall demonstrate that resorting to an historical analysis in anthropological research was not so much meant to reconstitute the past of the population but was rather a method to understand that population's cultural representations. This paper, taking the epistemological form of a self-reflexive investigation thus argues that history was in the service of anthropology: it proved efficient not only to deepen the analysis but also to uncover a way of thinking.