

Introduction

Mobility and Heritage

in Northern Thailand and Laos:

Past and Present



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This volume brings together papers that were presented during the conference “Sedentism in the Mekong region: Mobility and Heritage in a long-term perspective” held at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Chiang Mai University, on 1st and 2nd December 2011. This conference was an opportunity to present the results of the program entitled “Sedentary settlements around the Mekong (Thailand/Laos): Identities, techniques, territories and environments” and the works of other researchers from the region about similar issues of locality, territoriality and identity.

All the contributions within this volume focus on Northern Thailand and Northern Laos (and to a lesser degree Burma, but always seen from the Thai side). These two areas share similar archaeological and historical features but have more recently followed different development patterns, offering thereby interesting characteristics for a comparative approach. In Prehistoric times, the Mekong river valley was a migration route followed by several waves of settlement. Diverse geographic and ecological systems offered the migrants opportunities of specialisation and differentiation when

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Figure 1: the regional context

they settled down. The middle Mekong valley was also an axis along which independent Tai and Lao principalities have grown, and progressively demarcated themselves from Chinese, Burmese and Khmer centres of power. More recently, from the second half of the 19th century onward, Northern Thailand and Northern Laos have followed different paths on many aspects (characteristics of state building, rural and urban mobility, development and prosperity, use of natural resources etc.). These historical developments gave rise to great contrasts in politics, culture, economy, society, in health and in environment.



Figure 2: Northern Thailand and Laos: places mentioned in the volume

A conference inspired by the theme of sedentism

Obviously, the question of “sedentism” that guided the conference, and to which all participants have tried to shed light upon, was not a common issue. Although social sciences have thoroughly studied migrations and mobility, they have never questioned “sedentism”, a neologism that is familiar to Prehistorians only. For them, sedentism is one of the main features of the Neolithic period: in

different parts of the world, at the same time in a recent prehistory, environmental, demographic, or technological innovations provoked the same kind of changes, summed up in the ubiquitous and simplifying concept of a Neolithic “revolution”. This concept has been elaborated in the West, to describe the technical, social and symbolic changes observed in Europe and the Near East. However, it is now generally acknowledged that this “Neolithic revolution” could have had, in different parts of the world, very different aspects, and that this notion could even have been irrelevant in some regions. Sedentism in itself refers to the processes that led more or less mobile human societies, which were dependent on spontaneous resources, to settle down while developing various forms of plant and animal domestication (Guilaine, 2005; Higham, 2002). More specifically, it refers to the process of “rooting down” among human communities, and to the construction of territories and networks. Compared to a two-dimensional territoriality as most geographers define it, sedentism also involves a third dimension that is the affective and symbolic investment of people in their land.

Until now, other fields of Social Sciences and Humanities did not pay as much importance to this notion as did Archaeology. In Geography, although issues about territoriality have been blooming since the 1980’s, the concept has been completely overshadowed by complementary issues of mobility and migration. In social Anthropology, the notion of sedentism has never been discussed, and moreover, the spatial dimensions of societies, even though they have been addressed in Condominas’ “social space” or in Lefevre’s “production of space” for example, are mostly considered as a projection of social patterns and treated secondary. On the contrary, Social sciences have emphasized the themes of migration and “plural mobility” in their research priorities since the 1960’s. As opposed to sedentism, considered as a social and political standard, migration was first seen as motivated by a crisis (of social, environmental, demographic origin...), which could generate risks, constraints and imbalances. But subsequently, with increased globalisation towards the turn of the millenary, some authors started to consider mobility as a new standard. Bauman (2000) for instance, among others, coined the term “liquid modernity” and insisted upon the widespread “nomadism” all around the world. Such mobility resulted

in an acceleration of “deterritorialisation” and “reterritorialisation” processes, whilst the increased movements of populations and the irresistible networks of internet and of diasporas shattered National territories and questioned the functions of borders. Simultaneously, renewed attachment to place was expressed, both in Western and Asian countries, through the emergence of “heritage” policies and tales of a rediscovered or reinvented past. Local actors also sought to negotiate their economic and political place at a local, national or international scale. In that way, heritage policies and discourses often became the counterparts of the technologies of mobility and praised globalisation which went along with them.

Within this overall framework where globalisation, everywhere, had disrupted the relationships to land and places, the notion of sedentism, defined as the rooting or the attachment to places, offered a good start to question common ideas on locality, territoriality and their transformation in the globalised societies. First, there was a need to revisit the heavy ideology invested in sedentism. There has always been an opposition between sedentary peasant and pastoralists, or a gap between hunter-gatherers and farmers in most areas of the world. However such a clear-cut contrast, is a cliché derived from an evolutionist vision of cultures: that leading inexorably from the nomadic foragers of the origins to the sedentary agriculturalists. Each of these situations is associated to specific technical systems whose inevitable succession would illustrate the idea of “technical progress”. In this context, it is not surprising that the notion of sedentism is invested with conservative values (the more sedentary, the higher on the scale of evolution). It offers simultaneously striking paradoxes. For instance, one commonly contrasts rural sedentism to urban mobility - while in the history of mankind, people have been most effectively settling down in the cities! Everywhere in the world, states try to eradicate nomadism, hunting-gathering and rotational farming under various reasons: “development”, protection of the environment, control of populations, response to an international demand, etc. At the same time, by doing so, they legitimate new forms of mobility and threats which they are not always able to cope with (transnational labour migrations, depopulation of rural areas, environmental degradation).

This leads us to a second key idea which guided this conference: sedentism covers very complex situations, always involving mobility up to a certain degree; therefore the difference with migration or nomadism is not as clear-cut as could be presented. Sedentism has in itself the seeds of mobility, and in some cases can only be maintained by the migration of part of the group, for a permanent or a regular time-span. In reality, there is an interesting ambiguity in today's conceptions of sedentism. We may not be nomads anymore, but many of our practices are functioning in a way that evokes nomadism: the virtual nature of a great deal of the economy moves products and markets from one side of the earth to the other, and the circulation of people, ideas and goods, is something that has never been matched to such an extent in history. This perspective has to be carefully nuanced though: periods of acceleration and slowing down of exchanges and mobility have already occurred in the history of the world-system and many contemporary discourses on mobility seem to echo those held at the end of the 19th century when new techniques shortened distances and increased the speed of travels. Besides, not everyone can be mobile, and while some people may access to wider social and geographic spaces, others are forced into refugee camps or resettlement areas. The fact remains that the contemporary context has deeply affected our understanding of relations between people and places. It has created new connexions between local communities and the global world, a process summarized in the neologism "glocal": globalisation leads to a kind of standardisation, but this standardisation has its own character in every place. *Glocalisation* has thus created new issues, new problems, but also new opportunities.

The rediscovery of locality is certainly amongst the most interesting consequences of globalisation, and has been made possible by the generalised mobility and by the opening of communities to the rest of the world. There are however some other phenomenon which are linked to this generalised contact and that are grouped up in the different chapters of this book.

Ancient tales of present powers

In order to reassert or legitimate locality or territory, local groups use specific discourses that, most of the time, resort to memory.

The rooting of societies to their land is always linked to the invocation of the past and its connection to the present according to various procedures. Typically, they consist in narratives of discovery and colonisation of a new territory, as well as of rise and fall of local powers. Chanthaphilith Chiemsisouraj provides a very good example of such narratives with the Luang Nam Tha Chronicles in Laos, which describe the very complex movements of population that occurred in this area until the colonial times. Some other procedures that are conveyed to express or reassert locality resort to another temporality, like myth, legends, or the reference to ancestry. Olivier Évrard explains how local communities legitimate their territory through mythical and/or historical narratives in the Viang Phu Kha area in Northern Laos. He sets up the myths he collected in a solid historical background and explains the ethnical composition of the region: the myth appears as an ingenious way of expressing both the complexity of the settlement and the present-day social order.

In the same region, Oliver Pryce's contribution provides major results for Palaeometallurgy and knowledge of the possible imprint of such an activity on the environment. It also gives a glimpse of the complexity of past territories and societies. It shows by assumptions and inferences that things were not as simple as they appear. The mastery of metallurgy's technical knowledge, which was essential to the old political centres, could have resulted in a distribution of powers between highlands and lowlands that was very different from today's. During the discussion it was suggested that such an archaeological approach could also provide clues or arguments for present-day territorial constructions, with all the risks arising from the possible appropriation of the results it could provide. Above all it confirms the very strong symbolic and strategic dimension involved in the past, and more precisely in the discourse on the past.

This strategic dimension can also be found reflected in the special relationship of the "first inhabitants" of a country with the land, as shown in the papers of Olivier Évrard and Marie Guémas, which both reveal their role as intermediaries with Chthonic forces inhabiting the ground. Such supernatural relationship with the territory is also present in Pr Tanabe's contribution exposing spirits

worshipping in Northern Thailand. Spirit-mediumship appears to be a reaction to disturbances at an individual level, that the author attributes to the rapid economic and social transformation of the country and to the loss of “locality”, defined as the natural relation of a culture to a geographical and social territory: spirit possession would be a kind of ritualised contestation, concludes the author, to the rise of capitalism in Thailand.

Constraints and opportunities of the modern state

We noted that the considerable changes of modern times primarily affect the rooting down of societies to their places, and the state appears as one of the main agents in this disruptive process. This chapter’s idea is to confront the “spontaneous” territoriality of local communities (as derived from the history of settlement), with the constrained territoriality derived from the influence of a modern state.

Amongst the contributions which focus on public policies and their consequences on local communities, Olivier Évrard gives the general context that governs political choices affecting minority groups’ territoriality in Laos. He reminds us of the importance of different factors, such as wars, the demands of international institutions, and the changing ideology of “development” in explaining the shifts in the geostrategic value of highlands and borders. A constant of these evolutions seems to be the resilience of mobility practices amongst the populations that have adapted to extremely changing contexts in the last decades.

With specific examples from her fieldwork in the Luang Phrabang region, Marie Guemas shows how archetypal representations of territory among local communities, some flexible and some more static, explain adaptation or blocking in today’s dynamics of Lao society, changing under the pressure of the state. Moreover, her paper shows how long-term relationships between different ethnic groups have been perpetuated up to the present, and how the balance of power eventually switched to the detriment of a specific group, an idea that will be met in some other contributions.

Mallee Sitthikriengkrai describes the spontaneous territorial organization of a Karen group in the province of Chiang Mai

(Kalayani Watana district), showing how in recent years the experience of the creation of a new district and of its associated infrastructure by the Thai state, intended to be a participatory process, resulted in disarray. The manipulation of territoriality is sometimes the occasion of negotiation, when for instance local communities and the state discuss the symbols that will be retained in the construction of the modern “common building”. This process is also for the author the opportunity to convey, after Rodman (2003), the notions of “multivocality” and “multilocality”, expressing that the opening of the community to the outside world entails a multiplicity of actors and of visions of the same territory. In this process, the villagers have claimed the possibility to “dream” the future of their land, i.e. participate to its conception according to their own representations and values, before revolving back, after a disappointing experience, to their old rituals in order to restore the indispensable balance of society and territory.

Crisis of territory

Some authors described modernity as being linked to the end of frontiers. But borders are still a huge issue, and in a context of important mobility, they have taken other significances. They offer opportunities to play on the different possibilities of two countries, or to re-create new societies in a foreign context; over the border one can also find possibilities that are not available in one’s original community. Borderland, as an area where the state-community confrontation is extreme, may be a zone of conflict; it is also a zone of opportunities, for the economy but also for new social or religious constructions. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti gives an example at the Burma-Thai border where, on the Burmese side, the unstable political situation, and dangers such as mines or warfare, induce work migrations towards Thailand. Thai entrepreneurs supported by governmental agencies recruit Karen workers who are the indispensable workforce of a commercial agriculture that can exist only because of the contrasts on each side of the border. This strategic use of the frontier causes back the development of cash crops in Burma, based on the same networks and know-how. Peace or conflicts around the border determine the impulse of this opportunistic economy.

Other papers evoke locality as an instrument, a pattern that can be reproduced or adapted, or that can be used to divide. Some groups resist or even escape pressure or threat on their land through mobility, migration, and ultimately the setting up of other forms of territoriality, which usually imply fluidity or networking. Re-territorialisation can also be a solution, consisting in the recreation, elsewhere, of the same territoriality or of a modified, adapted one. Kwanchewan Buadaeng, with the example of the Talaku movement of the Karen at the Thai-Burma borderland, shows that such a reterritorialisation process consists in various attempts to adjust to the power of the state. This contribution provides interesting hints on how adaptation proceeds, with different tries that can be contradictory sometimes, such as the conversion to political or religious movements, the negotiation for new land with other groups, the closing up of the society on itself or, finally, the strengthening of cultural practices.

In some cases, local groups can't keep their traditional links to the territory and have to alter deeply their patterns of mobility. The Mlabri nomadic hunter-gatherers presented by Sakkarin Na Nan offer a case in point. Under the pressure of their neighbours and of the state, they had to learn to live in a restricted place and to adapt to the life in villages. The resurgence of old patterns of mobility among the "settled Mlabri" and the geographic instability of several settlements (for various reasons) show that the state's will to have its population settled down is not easily nor completely implemented. Some recent public and private projects in Mlabri settlements have even encouraged the preservation of a nomadic tradition, either for livelihood necessity (conservation approach) or for mercantile prospects (shows for tourists).

These three texts address a theme that runs throughout the book: the symbiotic nature of the relations between highland and lowland societies and the superposition of recent political borders over older systems of territorial relations. A similar theme, with different patterns, is to be found in most Southeast Asian countries. In his latest book, James Scott (2010) classifies the highlanders as "runaways" fleeing the power of the lowland political systems, but he acknowledges that the situation has been completely transformed since the 1950s by new technologies and by techniques of control

driven by the state. However, anthropology and history show that the relations between highland and lowland populations have often been based on complementarities, rather than solely on conflict and escape. Besides, the nature of these complementarities may have changed over time: the archaeological approach alone shows that power relations between highlands and lowlands may not have been the same in the past. Similarly, policies vis-à-vis these groups can vary from one country to another, and their philosophy also varies over the recent period following the changing representations that the central states have on their minorities. This draws a very dynamic array of geopolitics between the populations of this region.

Mobility, identity and health care

Our last chapter addresses these issues from the point of view of health status, practises and policies. Peter Kunstater's contribution shows how access to care epitomizes inequalities and power relations between highlanders, migrants, and lowlanders. His analysis is based on detailed statistics of Lahu, Chinese and Northern Thai communities. Major differences in access to care are due to relative poverty, limited Thai language ability and a variety of social and cultural factors. This paper also suggests some potential adjustments in local health policies that could help reduce health service disparities in the migrant and minority populations.

Health seems to express in a special way the quality of the relationship to places, and the mobility potential. Two related contributions, by Audrey Bochaton and Jean-Marc Dubost, are dedicated to medicinal plants in Laos, and question more specifically the way in which their use and commerce reflect current changes in territoriality. Plants knowledge is an intimate expression of the attachment to the land and reflects the consequences of migration in a given area. Jean-Marc Dubost's contribution compares, in different ethnic communities, how specialists pass along knowledge on medicinal plants from one generation to another. Depending on their social organisation and on other factors (writing system, relations to environment and public health services for instance), this knowledge is more or less degraded. It can also be revitalized, as shown by Audrey Bochaton's paper about the trading networks of medicinal plants among the Hmong of Laos. Such networks

connect them to the Hmong diaspora members in Western countries, who want to access traditional Hmong medicine and, beyond borders, strengthen their connection with their original land.

Conclusion : locality revisited

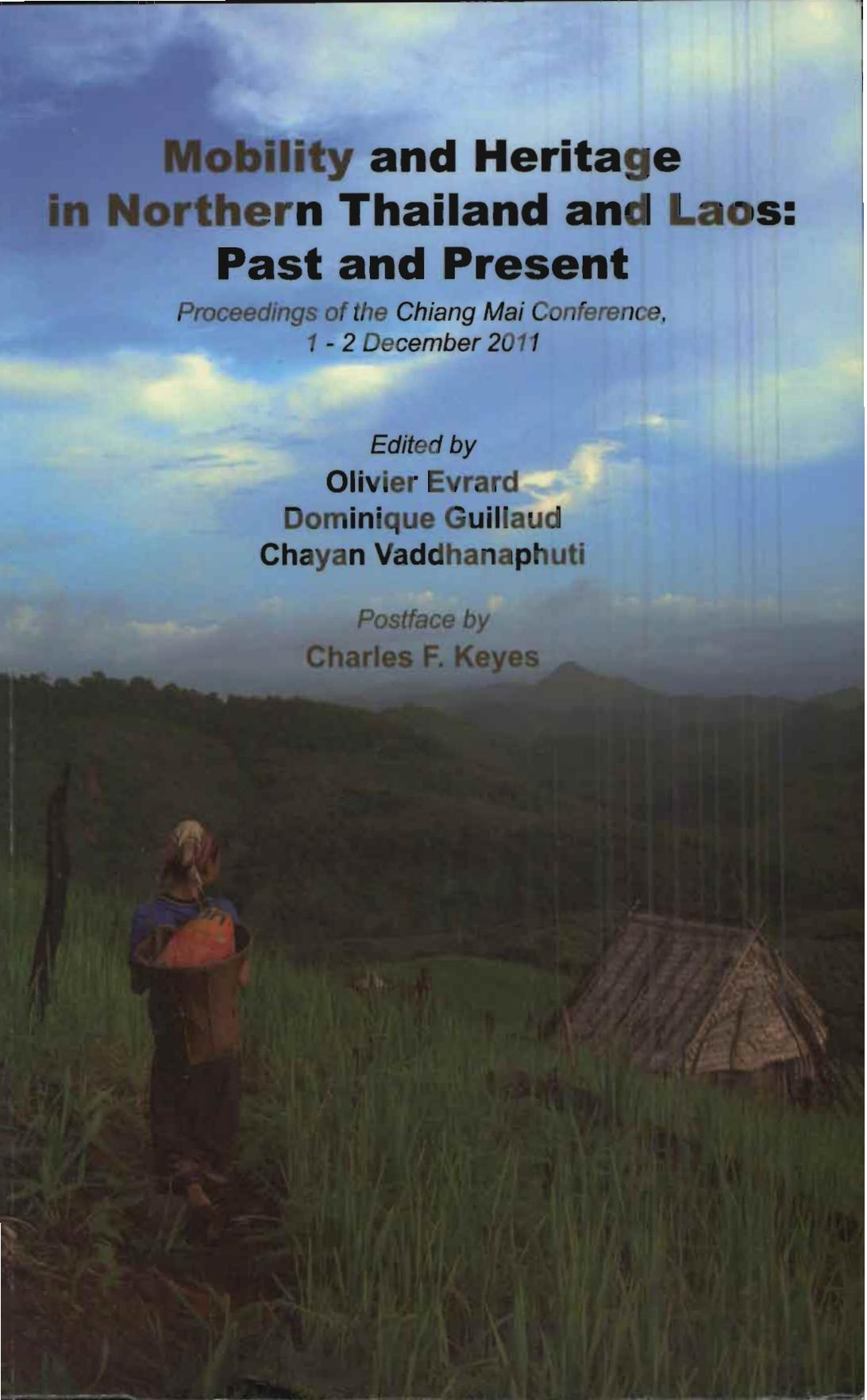
While all these papers take as a starting point the relationship to land and the mobility patterns associated with it, they all end up converging toward the theme of local (and mainly immaterial) heritage, showing the importance of such an issue to understand social dynamics and relations between peoples and the state. The contributions reveal how local-based knowledge on nature and on the territory is intimately linked to the identity of the group, and how the severance of these links can affect local society; reversely, claims or reassertion of such links can become very strong arguments for social, territorial or political legitimation, which corresponds to the process of “heritage-making”. Most papers reveal that these processes and claims are local, spontaneous, and not imposed by the upper levels, even if they have appeared as a reaction to national or international action. These processes that we can qualify as “bottom-up” seem to be crucial in today’s approaches of heritage and they design an important entry. In some cases of course, as for diaspora networks for instance, ethnic identification takes the precedence over belonging to a place. However most contributions indicate that heritage processes are better understood at the level of the village, or rather of a group of villages, than at the scale of an ethnic groups. This observation, which matches in some ways the notion of “social space” as defined by Georges Condominas (1983), finally leads to stress the importance of fieldwork in all the papers presented here, which show research practices that are in close contact with local people, and always with a view to report on their perceptions and representations.

All the papers presented here are based on in-depth and long-term studies with the people, that the authors accepted to share with us. We thank all of them for participating to this conference, as well as all those who accepted to chair the various panels and to discuss the papers with the other contributors. We are especially grateful to Professor Charles F. Keyes who has kindly presented

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