

DOI: 10.1355/sj31-3h

Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino–Vietnamese Borderlands. By Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. xii+223 pp.

The authors of this important contribution to the fields of Hmong and of borderland studies in Southeast Asia rely on no fewer than six years of ethnographic fieldwork with Hmong in the Sino–Vietnamese borderlands to focus on everyday politics and livelihood issues. Life in the Southeast Asian Massif, in an area divided by the state borders, has undergone heavy changes. The modernization programmes of the communist parties in China and Vietnam that have envisaged integration of Hmong and other ethnic minority people in the hills into their states and into the world economy have wrought these changes.

The Sino–Vietnamese border is now a precisely demarcated boundary of state control and no longer a zone of refuge for people seeking escape from state control. The book documents in rich detail how the Hmong have to negotiate their cultural traditions and livelihood aspirations with the state. In particular, the intensification of the rice frontier in Vietnam and the introduction of new cash crops in Yunnan deeply affect issues of livelihood, development and food security for the Hmong. Crossing the border legally to trade and to purchase consumer goods opens up a number of social opportunities for the Hmong. They benefit from the border differentials between the two economies, in, for example, the buffalo trade or in the increased demand for cardamom used for Chinese medicine in Yunnan or for home-distilled alcohol.

In fact, the life strategies outlined all aim to produce as much food security as possible for Hmong households, while producing a surplus to fulfil aspirations of the Hmong youth. Sometimes, with competition emerging as a result of development projects in the hills, new settlers' establishment of plantations on Hmong land and other modernization projects have severely changed the modes of livelihood. They continue to threaten traditional use of land and the

cultural traditions of the Hmong that are closely related to swidden agriculture. Traditional Hmong ways are branded “uncivilized” and therefore are subject to governmental discipline.

The central research questions are therefore how Hmong respond to dramatic change and by what strategies they seek to maintain traditions and livelihoods without confronting the state in violent ways. As the volume makes clear, the time simply to escape to higher altitudes or to remote corners of the country is past. Second, and more significantly, Hmong are flexible enough to accept state subsidies in the form of rice seeds or fertilizer and social services in the form of education and health. This is particularly true when the Hmong experience of such policies is positive and when those policies do not contradict fundamental Hmong values relating to cultural beliefs and the family. Hmong are thus willing to embrace modernity if it proves beneficial.

If, however, the policies are identified as harmful, Hmong use a strategy of localizing, harnessing, and integrating potentially harmful influences into their own system of values in order to bring those practices, as they may relate to the organization of agriculture or religion, under their own system of core values and social organization. This strategy has been termed by Marshall Sahlins as one of indigenizing modernity. This concept has been repeatedly used to explain the manifold ways in which indigenous people maintain core cultural values and forms of social organization while endorsing or partially endorsing modern concepts of development offered by the state or cultural globalization. This is nicely illustrated with the example of hemp production and indigo as a natural colour used for traditional Hmong clothes.

The gendered production of Hmong textiles is important as a marker of Hmong cultural identity. Hmong thus may partially reject the adoption of modern clothes even if the production of traditional clothes is more time-consuming and expensive. Another very interesting and fundamental example is rice and maize farming. Hmong farmers use subsidized hybrid rice seeds to plant rice or maize for sale on the market, while they continue to plant indigenous, but

more costly, varieties on their core family land to guarantee food security, to cultivate the knowledge of traditional rice growing and to enjoy the good taste of subsistence rice production.

The same goes for materials used in traditional housing. However, mores do change, as Jean Michaud observes in a postscript to the volume. While doing fieldwork in China, he found that Hmong youth in Yunnan now opt for modern housing made of cement and for jeans and t-shirts instead of traditional textiles.

The bulk of the book consists of thickly described ethnographies on rice planting and on cardamom, alcohol, textiles and other goods. They address the value that Hmong attach to modern education and communication and demonstrate their being engaged in trading without completely abandoning traditional modes of life. Thus, the authors argue convincingly that using motorcycles and cell phones does not mean that Hmong cease to be Hmong or that they become like the majority Han in China or Kinh in Vietnam. This is despite the fact that the pressure to integrate economically and especially politically is quite high and exercised in national education. Meanwhile, Hmong arts, crafts and clothes are not only produced for local consumption but also travel and end up in touristic markets in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

In sum, the authors of this richly documented and convincing volume argue that it would be limiting and unrealistic to study resistance only in terms of open revolt. They hold that it is more fitting to understand that Hmong act to stay relevant and to strengthen their identity in the face of modernization and of institutions that impose on their livelihoods. In multiple examples, the authors illustrate convincingly that their strategy is to make the most of the cultural and economic resources to which they can have access in order to retain as much of their way of life as they can. Hmong thus continue to indigenize modern technologies such as video cameras in order to use them in the tourist trekking business, while continuing to attach importance to family values, rituals, beliefs and cultural heritage.

Apart from scattered articles and anthologies, there are only a few volumes available on the livelihood strategies of Hmong and

other ethnic groups making a living in the hills of Southeast Asia. And, in showing that Hmong are not necessarily victims of economic pressure and political assimilation but that they are competent users of economic, social and cultural resources and that their economic strategies are embedded in their social and cultural organization, this volume is marked by optimism. It is to be hoped that Hmong are able to stay where they are and that they are not exotized or exposed to tourists as primitive people.

The book thus provides new insights into borderlands and everyday politics of ethnic minorities in the Southeast Asian Massif and might thus be used fruitfully in undergraduate teaching in the fields of both Southeast Asian studies and anthropology.

Alexander Horstmann

Anthropology of Southeast Asia, Estonian School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia; email: alexander.horstmann@tlu.ee.

DOI: 10.1355/sj31-3i

Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam. By Micheline Lessard. New York: Routledge, 2015. xxi+152 pp.

Focusing on the period of French colonial rule, Micheline Lessard studies human trafficking in Vietnam using sources written by French missionaries (pp. 1–47), by French military men (pp. 48–89), by French consuls (pp. 90–102), and by French colonial administrators (pp. 103–36). Since the available sources provide little direct testimony from the victims, the analysis is more political than social. This book studies the impact of French colonization of Vietnam on a phenomenon that had existed in pre-colonial times and shows that it increased during the colonial era because French policies exacerbated the conditions that allowed it to flourish. In a time of military conflicts and economic transformations, the most vulnerable elements of Vietnamese society, meaning women and children, were easy prey for the armed bands that ruled large areas of the northern