



Explorations

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Restored Fort Amsterdam in Ambon
Image: Benjamin Moseley

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Welcome to **EXPLORATIONS: a graduate student journal of Southeast Asian studies**. The scholarship contained in this volume includes well-researched and original articles, eye-opening notes from the field, and constructive book reviews, all of which contribute to our ever-expanding knowledge of Southeast Asia as an area of study. Between these pages, graduate students and early career scholars explore important topics such as humor in contemporary Thai culture, differences and similarities between the China policies of Cambodia and Vietnam, and the dilemmas faced by scholars conducting field research in post-disaster areas in Indonesia.

The **EXPLORATIONS** editorial team is pleased to be a part of this student-initiated platform to encourage and promote graduate scholarship in Southeast Asian Studies. Nonetheless, we are grateful for the guidance and support provided by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Center for Southeast Asian Studies. We are especially appreciative of the center's always delightful associate director Paul Rausch and its lifesaving tech wizard Diliaur Tellei.

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Explorations



The Creeping Hand of the State in Post-*Reformasi* Indonesia

Is Democracy in Irreversible Decline?

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Abstract

There has recently been much hand-wringing and discussion about the global decline of democracy and liberal values. This debate is especially acute in Southeast Asia, where many recently democratized states appear to be back-sliding into authoritarianism and embracing illiberal values. In Indonesia, this can be observed in the increasingly influential role played by hard-line Islamic groups in shaping state policy, and concessions made by politicians to such groups, such as proposed anti-LGBT legislation. The state has also begun to encroach on the public sphere in worrying ways. While this does pose some fears about the future of liberal values in the country, this article argues that it is not an unexpected turn of events in a socially conservative country with under-developed institutions and weak rule of law that is working through the challenges of economic and political development. Rather, placing democratization on a pedestal and viewing it as a cure-all back in the 1990s created unrealistic expectations for what democracy was and what it could do. It minimized the complex, nuanced nature of how young democracies would actually struggle to balance the interests of a wide range of social actors, or that the beliefs and values underpinning democratic systems might change over time. What we are witnessing in Indonesia, and in the larger regional and global context, is thus not the death of democracy but the messy guts of the democratic process in action.

Introduction

Indonesia has often been viewed as a democratizing success story, with the New

York Times calling it a “role model for democracy” in 2014¹ and Freedom House conferring it the status of “Free” in 2006.²

¹ Cochrane, Joe. 2014. “In Southeast Asia, Indonesia Is an Unlikely Role Model for Democracy.” *New York Times*, September 4.

² Freedom House, *2006 Country Report* (Indonesia). Can be accessed here. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2006/indonesia>. While Freedom House’s rating system for press freedoms and civil liberties is not infallible, it serves as a good barometer for where the general consensus on how free and open a country is.

Some observers, however, have recently begun to wonder if the country is back-sliding into authoritarian tendencies, while its political class indulges in divisive identity politics. In support of this they cite recent legislation designed to criminalize homosexuality, the jailing of Jakarta's former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (commonly known as Ahok) on blasphemy charges, and the increasingly important role conservative Islamist movements are playing in shaping state policy.³ The rise of illiberal social forces, coupled with an expansion of state power is especially problematic in young democracies like Indonesia, which often have under-developed institutions, inefficient civil services, and weak rule of law. This combination of structural weaknesses exposes developing democracies to the influence of illiberal populist movements and opportunistic demagogues with authoritarian tendencies. Elements of this process are clearly underway not only in Indonesia, but in the Philippines, the United States, Brazil and Hungary to name just a few examples. Some have even wondered if this marks an irreversible democratic decline in the world.⁴

This article argues that current trends in Indonesia do not represent the death of democracy, although they may indicate a repudiation of liberal, Western-style democracy. Democratization has often been thought of as uni-linear and intrinsically good, when in practice it is

much more nuanced and complex. In the past several decades, the literature on democratization has sought to portray it as a self-evidently desirable normative ideal toward which societies should strive by embracing liberal values and enshrining them in a free and open representative political system. The primary failing of this approach is that it does not account for the fact that democracy simply promises to give the people a voice. It does not promise that the voice they choose will reflect Western ideas of universal values, or that those values will remain static.

The creeping illiberalism and expansion of the state's coercive power in Indonesia is not conclusive evidence that democracy there has entered an irreversible decline – in fact, this is not an unexpected example of what the democratic process would be expected to look like in a socially conservative state that is still working to develop its democratic institutions and locate a workable balance between individual freedoms and state control. In the Indonesian context, democracy is a far-cry from the normative, liberal ideal that has formed the basis of much writing and debate on the subject in the past. It has instead assumed the form of a messy and often contradictory process by which a diverse set of stakeholders compete with one another to advance their agendas, interests and values.

One consequence of this process is that conservative elements of society with

³ For a recent example of this back-sliding see Power, Tom. 2018. "Jokowi's Authoritarian Turn." *New Mandala*, October 9.

⁴ Rose, Gideon. 2018. "Is Democracy Dying?" *Foreign Affairs*. May/June.

illiberal beliefs and values are finding success in influencing the direction of state policy through democratic mechanisms. The process is also demonstrating that a democratic society may be willing to allow the state to infringe on certain liberties and freedoms in exchange for the promise of stability. This does not mean that democracy is failing but that the system of governance it produces is more dynamic, and more context-driven than is sometimes acknowledged. Indonesia's ongoing efforts to walk the tight-rope of democratization highlights some of the challenges that young democracies struggle with and helps explain why democracy in the country is not conforming to the ideal version that some observers once expected.

This analysis begins with a broad discussion of the literature on democratization in the post-Cold War period, and how that literature has struggled to reconcile itself with a global democratic recession. It will then move to a discussion of democratization in Southeast Asia, with special attention paid to the way in which the idea of "Asian Values" informed the debate prior to the Asian Financial Crisis, before moving onto an evaluation of how democracy has fared in the region. Having established this context and background, the paper will then narrow its focus to a detailed case study of Indonesia's democratization, with particular attention paid to the process by which different stakeholders are competing in the democratic space to work

out a balance of power that reflects underlying social and political conflicts, and why this process may appear like a democratic retreat or authoritarian regression even if that is not necessarily so.

Democratization in a Post-Cold War World

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, it appeared self-evident to some scholars that there was no longer any serious challenger to the dominance of a liberal democratic system of governance. It was in this year that Samuel Huntington published *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* in which he noted that, after Portugal became a democracy in 1974, the world experienced a "wave" of authoritarian regimes giving way to democratic systems of government in Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia. ⁵Francis Fukuyama famously wondered if we had reached "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."⁶

It has been over two decades since this fervor for democratization began to reach its apex, and the optimistic mood of the 1990s has soured somewhat since then. It has been noted that many of the regimes that transitioned to democracy during the "third wave" did so only superficially, and soon reverted back to a kind of semi-authoritarianism cloaked in rhetorical appeals to democratic ideals. The United

⁵ Huntington, Samuel. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.

⁶ Fukuyama, Francis. Summer 1989. "The End of History?" *The National Interest*.

States' attempt to bring democracy through force to Iraq was an unmitigated disaster and with the election of Donald Trump, many think pieces and books have recently appeared wondering if perhaps the liberal democratic order is dead.⁷ *Foreign Affairs* devoted an entire recent issue to the question of what the liberal order was and whether or not we are losing it.⁸

Larry Diamond, the editor of the *Journal of Democracy*, the establishment of which in 1990 reflected prevailing beliefs in the inertia of democratic progress, recently published an article entitled "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession" in which he acknowledged that many of the early assumptions about the forces of democratization were incomplete and overly optimistic.⁹ While still maintaining that democracy as an ideal is superior to all others, Diamond admits that many democratic states that transitioned during the third wave remain illiberal and unstable.

Fukuyama has likewise modified his earlier optimism, writing that democracy as a normative ideal alone is not sufficient to sustain the transition to a functional democratic political system.¹⁰ Equally, if not more important, is the quality and design of

that system. Transitioning to democracy without strong institutions can actually weaken the quality of governance, an observation with high explanatory power when used to make sense of the global democratic recession that is underway.

This see-sawing reveals just how broadly the term "democracy" has been used over the years, invoked frequently but rarely defined with precision. In this essay democracy, as a normative ideal rather than a set of clearly defined procedures and institutions, is the belief that a group of people (generally the majority) collectively ought to decide the direction their society takes.¹¹ Schumpeter proposed that the best way for realizing this collective decision-making was through procedural means, namely "institutional arrangements for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."¹² This has become perhaps the most commonly held definition used by social scientists. In liberal democratic theory, the ideal institutional arrangement for achieving this normative ideal is something similar to the type of liberal democracy practiced by the United States -

⁷ See Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. Dartmouth: Yale University Press; Traub, James. 2018. "Democracy is Dying by Natural Causes." *Foreign Policy*, March 1; Galston, William A. 2018. "The populist challenge to liberal democracy." *Brookings Report*, April 17; Ikenberry, G. John. 2018. "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94 (1), 7-23.

⁸ See the March 2017 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. "What Was the Liberal Order? The World We May Be Losing."

⁹ Diamond, Larry. January 2015. "Facing up to the Democratic Recession." *Journal of Democracy* 26 (1): 141-155.

¹⁰ Fukuyama, Francis. January 2015. "Why is Democracy Performing so Poorly?" *Journal of Democracy* 26 (1): 11-20.

¹¹ This is the definition used by Tom Christiano in the "Democracy" chapter of the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, published on July 27, 2006. It can be accessed here <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/> and contains a thorough discussion of current trends and controversies in the study of democratic theory.

¹² Schumpeter, Joseph. 1943. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: George Allen and Unwin), p 269.

one that guarantees certain individual liberties and rights, especially those that are conducive to a free market capitalist economy.¹³ It was this notion of Western-style liberal democracy that informed much of the triumphalism of the 1990s.

If one drills down deeper into the literature on democratic theory, however, there are a number of scholars who have taken a more nuanced approach to the concept, noting that both the institutional and procedural designs of democracies, as well as the beliefs and values they reflect, can take many different forms.¹⁴ Moreover, it is entirely possible that the best political decision (that is the best policy outcome) could be arrived at in an undemocratic fashion, by elite consensus or even authoritarian means. Democratic theory struggles to definitively say which is more important: achieving the optimal result, or preserving the participatory nature of the democratic process.¹⁵ While scholars in the US championed the triumph of liberal democracy in the post-Cold War era, Southeast Asia was the scene of a more nuanced debate about the concept, as the region

struggled to reconcile competing visions of democracy, economic growth and governance.

Democratization in Southeast Asia

During much of the 1980s and 90s, Southeast Asia was home to a wide range of political regimes – from illiberal democracies to strong authoritarian states – none of which could be classified as strongly democratic. Despite this, the region was experiencing a sustained period of robust economic growth. This provoked a debate among observers about how strongly economic growth and democracy were linked, or whether a link even existed at all. Research into the issue at the time found the relationship between regime type and economic growth to be inconclusive.¹⁶ More contemporary scholarship is still unable to find a satisfying and complete theory that can explain regime change and continuity in the region.¹⁷

This led to the development of what became loosely termed “Asian Values”, a style of governance combining elements of democracy and authoritarianism that was

¹³ Democracy and Public Management Reform: Building the Republican State, ed. Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira. The Transition to Liberal Democracy. Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira. Oxford Scholarship Online: November 2004.

¹⁴ Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl. Summer 1991. “What Democracy Is... And Is Not.” *Journal of Democracy*.

¹⁵ Edited by Frank Jackson and Michael Smith, The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy, Democratic Theory, David Estlund, November 2007.

¹⁶ Bertrand, Jacques. April 1998. “Review: Growth and Democracy in Southeast Asia.” *Comparative Politics* 30 (3): 355-375.

¹⁷ Peou, Sorpong. 2014. “The Limits and Potential of Liberal Democratization in Southeast Asia.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 3: 19-47.

thought to be uniquely suited to the culture of Southeast Asia.¹⁸ It was essentially a way of using culture as an explanatory variable for the economic success of non-democratic regimes.¹⁹ Donald Emmerson was one of the foremost proponents of stretching the idea of what constituted democracy so that the concept could be extended to semi-authoritarian but prosperous regimes, writing in 1995 that “observers would do well to diversify what they mean by democracy beyond its conventionally liberal form.”²⁰ He elaborated that “even if there are no quintessentially Asian values.... differing societies may democratically implement differing views of the relative importance of social order versus individual rights.”²¹ This was criticized as a thin rhetorical excuse for justifying abuses of state power and not surprisingly, work in the *Journal of Democracy* at the time continued to espouse the intrinsic value of democracy as a system of normative beliefs.²²

For some, this debate was settled with the advent of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. The lesson drawn from the crisis by advocates of liberal democracy was that economic growth achieved under non-democratic regimes was not, in fact, sustainable and that much of the past two decades of strongmen-led growth had been something of an illusion.²³ This triumphalism was short-lived. Within seven years of the crisis, authoritarian regimes in the region were flourishing again while democracies were struggling.²⁴ As early as 2004, there was evidence that the consolidation of young democracies in Southeast Asia was stagnating and prospects for continued liberal democratic development were poor.²⁵

Since then, the prognosis for democracy in the region has only worsened, even as post-crisis economic growth has remained strong. In 2007, the ASEAN Charter explicitly called not only for increased political and economic integration

¹⁸ Neher, Clark D. and Marlay, Ross. 1995. *Democracy and Development in Southeast Asia: The Winds of Change*. Westview Press. See also Dae Jung, Kim. 1994. “Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia’s Anti-Democratic Values.” *Foreign Affairs*.

¹⁹ Caoili, Rachel. 2005. “Reflections on Democracy and Development in Southeast Asia: Why do the Philippines and Singapore differ?” *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies* 6(2).

²⁰ Emmerson, Donald. 1995. “Region and Recalcitrance: Rethinking Democracy Through Southeast Asia.” *The Pacific Review* 8(2).

²¹ Emmerson, Donald. January 1995. “Singapore and the “Asian Values” Debate.” *Journal of Democracy* 6(4): 95-105.

²² Ng, Margaret. April 1997. “Why Asia Needs Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* 8(2): 10-23.

²³ Thompson, Mark R. October 2001. “Whatever Happened to ‘Asian Values’?” *Journal of Democracy* 12(4): 154-165.

²⁴ Thompson, Mark. R. 2004. “Pacific Asia after ‘Asian Values’: Authoritarianism, Democracy, and “Good Governance”. *Third World Quarterly* 25(6): 1079-1095.

²⁵ Croissant, Aurel. 2004. “From Transition to Defective Democracy: Mapping Asian Democratization.” *Democratization* 11(5): 156-178.

among member states, but also a greater commitment to human rights and democratic norms. Those parts of the Charter dealing with human rights and norms have been largely ignored.²⁶ In 2017, Freedom House failed to rank any country in Southeast Asia as “Free” despite a number of nominally democratic regimes in the region.²⁷ In the Economist Intelligence Unit’s most recent annual assessment of freedom across 167 countries, it concluded that the Asia-Pacific had “experienced the biggest decline of any of our seven regions in 2017” after posting gains in recent years.²⁸

In 2015, there was much excitement when Myanmar held elections for the first time in twenty five years, freeing Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from years of house arrest and allowing her party to compete and win in the elections. The commitment of her government to human rights and liberal values has subsequently been revealed to be hollow, as Myanmar has systematically engaged in the persecution and displacement of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Rohingya. As of the publication of this article, Thailand is ruled by a military junta that has repeatedly used *lèse-majesté*

laws to arrest dissidents. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has shown a wanton disregard for liberal norms, officially sanctioning extra-judicial killings in his hard-nosed war on drugs.²⁹ In 2017, the head of Cambodia’s opposition party was jailed on treason charges, part of a larger effort by President Hun Sen to sideline his political enemies.³⁰

In this climate, the rosy optimism of the 1990s has evaporated. The critical question to be asking now is why, and whether it is irreversible. Diego Fossati and Lee Morgenbesser explain this democratic recession in Southeast Asia mainly as a result of “policy failure”, and a feeling among regular people that elites are still firmly in control of the levers of power, a belief that discourages their active participation in the democratic process.³¹ Tom Pepinsky argues that the question is more usefully rephrased not as why is democracy failing, but rather why is authoritarianism enduring? His answer is that what “makes the politics of disorder a thorny problem for Southeast Asian democracy is that these illiberal policies are popular among many citizens. The trend towards illiberal politics and authoritarian leadership styles is a

²⁶ Hooi, Khoo Ying. 2017. “ASEAN at 50: A New Test for Democracy in Southeast Asia.” *The Diplomat*. Published May 3. Can be accessed at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/asean-at-50-a-new-test-for-democracy-in-southeast-asia/>.

²⁷ Freedom House’s annual reports gauging relative levels of press and social freedoms in the Asia-Pacific can be found at <https://freedomhouse.org/regions/asia-pacific>.

²⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/30/economist-intelligence-unit-asias-democracy-ranking-falls-in-2017.html>.

²⁹ Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany. 2017. “Extrajudicial Killings Prompt Suit Against Duterte at the International Criminal Court.” *Foreign Policy*. April 24.

³⁰ Hutt, David. 2017. “Death Knell to Cambodian Democracy.” *Asia Times*. September 4.

³¹ Fossati, Diego and Morgenbesser, Lee. 2017. “The Troubling Reality of Southeast Asia’s Democratic Recession.” *Griffith News*, Griffith Asia Institute and the Centre for Governance and Public Policy. Can be accessed <https://app.secure.griffith.edu.au/news/2017/12/07/the-troubling-reality-of-southeast-asias-democratic-recession/>.

consequence of the perceived weaknesses of democratic politics, which has proven unable to eliminate poverty, crime, identity-based conflict or political instability.”³²

This again highlights the blind spot experienced by post-Cold War democratization proponents in their zeal to champion Western-style liberal democracy. Democracy merely promises to provide a means by which the people, through voting, can exercise a measure of control over the nature and direction of the state. It does not promise that they will collectively embrace liberal values; indeed there is every chance that they may vote for and legitimize illiberal, discriminatory values. The American framers of the Constitution were aware of this inherent weakness in any democratic system, and erected structural barriers designed to serve as a check against an excess of democracy or demagogues seizing power by preying on “widespread envies, fears, or hopes.”³³

Young democracies, with weaker institutions and under-developed state capabilities, have less of a buffer when it comes to constraining the populist impulses of their citizens and preventing authoritarian figures from exploiting the envies, fears and hopes of the citizenry.³⁴ As such, many young democracies are struggling to

balance the desires and interests of a wide variety of newly empowered political actors. This can create opportunities for authoritarianism and illiberalism, as democratic systems are often slow to address entrenched social and economic problems. Indeed, the inability of the state to craft policies that effectively address the most pressing needs of the people – alleviating hunger and poverty, for instance – can create serious liabilities in a young democracy with weak institutions. When weak democratic institutions of governance are struggling to deliver on the basic promises of the Lockean social contract, a populist demagogue, channelling identity politics and offering stability under authoritarian rule might seem to be an attractive alternative.³⁵

A detailed look at democratization in Indonesia, however, shows that the process is not so easy to decode as it might seem. What at first blush may appear to be authoritarian back-sliding or the rise of illiberal tendencies may in fact be the democratic process in action, as political actors square off in the public space to try and assert their agendas and interests over those of their competitors. This may result in concessions made to illiberal social forces, but such concessions are not

³² Thomas Pepinsky. 2017. “Democracy Isn’t Receding in Southeast Asia, Authoritarianism is Enduring.” *East Asia Forum*. November 4.

³³ Ceaser, James W. 2007. “Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency.” *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society* 19(2): 257-298.

³⁴ See Morris, J., & Polese, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Informal economies in post-socialist spaces: Practices, institutions and networks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave; also Hite, K., & Morlino, L. (2004). Problematising the links between authoritarian legacies and ‘good’ democracy’. In K. Hite & P. Cesarini (Eds.), *Authoritarian legacies and democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe* (pp. 25–83). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

³⁵ O’Brien, Thomas. 2016. “Populism, protest and democracy in the twenty-first century.” *Contemporary Social Science* 10(4).

unexpected in democratic societies with deep social and political fissures and do not necessarily sound a death knell for the consolidation of democratic progress in the country.

Democratization in Indonesia

For over thirty years, Indonesia was ruled by the authoritarian New Order under President Suharto, until the Asian Financial Crisis precipitated his fall in 1998. In the face of mass demonstrations and violent protests, Suharto was replaced by Vice President B.J. Habibie who between 1998 and 1999 managed to push through a series of ambitious reforms that lifted media restrictions, allowed the formation of political parties, and laid out the architecture for wide-ranging democratic electoral reforms including a call for new elections in October 1999.³⁶

In 1999, Habibie lost the election to Abdurrahman Wahid, an influential moderate cleric. Wahid's presidency quickly became bogged down by political infighting and the newly empowered legislature moved to impeach him. This resulted in the creation of the country's Constitutional Court, which was imbued with the power to interpret and clarify constitutional ambiguity and mediate conflicts between the legislative and executive branches. By

2002, with the establishment of the Constitutional Court, the most extensive portion of the reform process had concluded and Indonesia's political and electoral system emerged vastly transformed and fairly robust.³⁷

Indonesia's transition to democracy was initially met with optimism. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the "third wave" was still ostensibly underway, as a number of autocratic and authoritarian regimes continued transitioning to democracy. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, was one of the biggest dominos to fall and was seen as an exemplar of a moderate Islamic democracy, one that enthusiastically adopted liberal values of civic engagement and tolerance.³⁸

Gradually, this optimism has turned to caution. After the transition to democracy, Indonesia experienced nearly a decade and a half of stable continuity under the administrations of Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004) and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014). Elections were widely considered to be free and fair, and high commodities prices buoyed solid economic growth which allowed Indonesia to enjoy a relatively high level of stability as it worked toward consolidating its democracy.³⁹ In the 2014 presidential election, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo prevailed over

³⁶ Crouch, Harold. 2010. *Political Reform in Indonesia After Soeharto*. Singapore: ISEAS. Chapters 2 and 3.

³⁷ Mietzner, Marcus. 2010. "Political Conflict Resolution and Democratic Consolidation in Indonesia: The Role of the Constitutional Court." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10: 397-424.

³⁸ Hefner, Robert. 2000. *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³⁹ See for instance Abdulkabi, Louay. 2008. "Democratization in Indonesia: From Transition to Consolidation." *Asian Journal of Political Science* 16 (2), 151-172; and Bachelard, Michael. 2014. "Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's legacy: the great democratic leader who became a follower." *Sydney Morning Herald*. October 18.

Suharto's former son-in-law, Prabowo Subianto. Despite a clear electoral win, Prabowo challenged the election results. The Constitutional Court functioned as it was designed, overruling Prabowo's spurious challenge and upholding the legitimacy of the results. Viewed as a test of Indonesia's democratic institutions, this can be considered a successful example of their robustness, as the Court utilized sound legal principles to reinforce the legitimacy of Jokowi's electoral mandate.⁴⁰ However, during Jokowi's term commodities prices have fallen, exposing some of the deeper social, political and economic issues that were effectively papered-over in times of higher growth.

These include growing inequality, ethnic and religious tensions, and rampant corruption and inefficiency at all levels of government. Jokowi has also undertaken an ambitious reform agenda designed to reduce corruption and bureaucratic red-tape, open the economy further to foreign investment and ownership, increase tax revenues and develop the country's lagging infrastructure. This agenda, while sound on the merits, is disruptive and has had the effect of upending the status quo, challenging incumbent political and business elites and forcing Indonesian citizens to reconcile themselves to certain burdens that are political liabilities in a democratic system, such as paying taxes.

Jokowi's administration has underperformed its infrastructure and economic growth targets, something that is often attributed to the poor quality of governance.⁴¹ Many lower and middle-class Indonesians worry that they are losing out on opportunities that are being taken by other members of society.⁴² This less than stellar performance under a liberal democratic system, and the fears and envy it has engendered, are creating opportunities for conservative elements of society to push their own alternative vision for Indonesia. Hard-line Islamist groups are increasingly using the public space, which is a right guaranteed to them under a democratic system, to assert radical and often illiberal views about the way Indonesian society ought to be structured, and the values it ought to reflect. The most controversial evidence of this came during Jakarta's gubernatorial election in April 2017. In the run-up to the election, incumbent Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was accused of blasphemy charges which resulted in an enormous public demonstration against him on December 2, 2016.

The crowd, organized by conservative Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front Indonesia (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI), numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Ahok, a double minority as an ethnic Chinese-Indonesian and a Christian, was subsequently defeated in the April

⁴⁰ Wijaya, Pan Mohamad Faiz Kusuma. 2014. "Prabowo Fights on, but Indonesian Court Ruling Ends Legal Challenge." *The Conversation*. August 27.

⁴¹ Guild, James. 2018. "Jokowinomics vs Reality: A Look at PLN." *New Mandala*, April 4. Can be accessed at <http://www.newmandala.org/jokowinomics-vs-reality-look-pln/>.

⁴² Yasih, Diatka Widya Permata. 2017. "Jakarta's Precarious Workers: Are They a 'New Dangerous Class.'" *The Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47(1): 27-45.



A scene from the anti-Ahok protest on December 2, 2016.

Image: Voice of America/Fathiyah Wardah

election and shortly thereafter jailed on blasphemy charges widely considered to be fraudulent. Research into these events showed that although the majority of Jakartans approved of Ahok's performance as governor, they largely voted along ethnic and religious lines.⁴³ Thus, his performance as governor was ultimately a less important determinant than the shrewd exploitation by his opponents of identity politics, something that is an especially potent political weapon in an open democratic system.⁴⁴

This set the stage for a showdown between the President and a conservative Islamic organization last year, and the state's right to empower itself in restricting civil society groups under certain vaguely defined conditions prevailed. In July 2017,

Jokowi issued Presidential Decree No. 2/2017 on Mass Organizations. With this Decree, Jokowi empowered the executive branch to disband civil society organizations that it deemed a danger to the state, or to be in conflict with the secular state ideology of Pancasila. In the post-1998 reform period, Indonesia has erected considerable procedural protections for civil society groups in order to ensure a freer and more open democratic space in which society can challenge the coercive power of the state, something Muthia Alagappa has called an essential component of a functional democratic system.

Prior to the Presidential Decree, a lengthy legal process was required to determine if a mass organization posed a

⁴³ Mietzner, Marcus and Muhtadi, Burhanuddin. 2017. "Ahok's Satisfied Non-voters: An Anatomy." *New Mandala*. May 5. Can be accessed <http://www.newmandala.org/ahoks-satisfied-non-voters-anatomy/>.

⁴⁴ Alagappa, Muthiah. 2004. *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Contracting and Expanding Democratic Space*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

sufficiently dire threat to the state to be banned. By issuing the Decree, Jokowi gave himself the power to bypass that cumbersome process and unilaterally declare a group to be subversive in order to justify banning it. This new power was immediately used by the government to ban the radical Islamic group *Hizb-ut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI). HTI challenged the ban in the Constitutional Court, but the Decree was passed into official law by the Legislature in October 2017.⁴⁵

This highlights the slippery slope that young democracies find themselves forced to navigate in attempting to locate a workable equilibrium between stability and openness. At first blush, providing the state with a tool to outlaw a radical Islamic group appears to be an uncontroversial move. But by empowering itself to decide what civil society organizations are worthy of sharing the public space, the state is opening something of a Pandora's Box. There is no guarantee that current or future administrations will not abuse this authority to silence their political enemies and critical media outlets, for instance. Furthermore, as the Decree allows the state to ban groups that it considers to be in conflict with the state ideology, it gives the government considerable latitude in determining what the state ideology is and then imposing that

definition on society, a practice which is generally incompatible with liberal democratic values.

While the above example of expansion of state power might be defensible, other recent developments are more worrying. The national legislature, the People's Representative Council (DPR), passed a bill in February of 2018 that would allow the DPR to compel anyone who "tarnishes the dignity" of the chamber to appear before them for questioning. The law would also provide legislators with legal ways of obstructing corruption investigations.⁴⁶ Around the same time, the DPR was also working on a highly controversial draft bill that would criminalize extra-marital sexual relationships, although the LGBT community is considered the real target of the legislation.⁴⁷ Other small-scale examples of state overreach in the public sphere can be found throughout Indonesia, including efforts by multiple provinces and municipalities to ban Valentine's Day on religious grounds⁴⁸ and the recent questioning by police of a researcher who publicly cautioned about the dangers of a tsunami.⁴⁹

And the most obvious recent example of conservative religious forces increasing their influence in the machinery of the state was Jokowi's appointment of

⁴⁵ Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 16 Tahun 2017. Can be accessed at <http://sipuu.setkab.go.id/PUUdoc/175343/UU%20Nomor%2016%20Tahun%202017.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Walsh, Michael. 2018. "Indonesian Parliament Passes Controversial Law Targeting Its Critics, Anti-corruption Commission." *ABC News*. February 28.

⁴⁷ Harvey, Adam. 2018. "Indonesia's LGBT Community Under Threat as Government Sets Sights on Making Gay Sex Illegal." *ABC News*. January 29.

⁴⁸ *The Straits Times*. 2018. "Goodbye to Romance: Indonesian Cities Ban Valentine's Day." February 14.

⁴⁹ Klemetti, Erik. 2018. "Indonesian Police Questioning Scientist About His Recent Tsunami Study." *Discover*. April 10.

conservative cleric Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate for the 2019 election. Ma'ruf, in his role as the chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), which is the highest body in Indonesia for issuing rulings on Islamic issues, has been a lightning rod for controversy. Under Ma'ruf's leadership, MUI issued a *fatwa* against the rubella vaccine and also testified in court that Ahok had committed blasphemy, aiding in the conviction of one of Jokowi's closest allies. This has been widely interpreted as a cold political calculation on Jokowi's part to neutralize criticism from conservative religious groups who might have attacked him from the right, as well as a practical concession necessary to keep NU in his political coalition.⁵⁰ But it also raises serious questions about how influential of a role Ma'ruf might play in a second Jokowi administration, and how much ground is being given up to appease an increasingly conservative and influential bloc of conservative voters and interest groups.

All of this is worrying, and rightly so, to observers of Indonesia's democratic progress. It is not, however, necessarily evidence of irreversible authoritarian regression or the decline of democracy. That

conservative Islamic groups are inserting themselves into and shaping public discourse is not unexpected in a democratic country where a large majority of the population are Muslims, many of whom adhere to socially conservative values.⁵¹ Indeed, it is a sensible if cynical strategy for politicians to court this sizeable electoral force as Islamic organizations operate some of the largest and most reliable voter-turnout operations in the country. On the other hand, the largest Islamic political organizations, *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama*, each of which has tens of millions of members, both continue to push back against conservative ideology and publicly call for tolerance and pluralism in the country, although with varying degrees of success.⁵²

Likewise, the inertia of public discourse is not solely trending in an illiberal direction. Democratic safeguards in Indonesia continue to create and defend public space for civil society actors to contest powerful and illiberal interests, as evidenced by the success activist groups have had in holding up and forcing modifications to large development projects over environmental impact concerns.⁵³ Demonstrations are a constant fixture at the

⁵⁰ Fealy, Greg. 2018. "Ma'ruf Amin: Jokowi's Islamic Defender or Deadweight?" *New Mandala*. August 28.

⁵¹ A survey by Pew Research conducted between 2008-2012 found that 72% of Indonesian Muslims were supportive of some form of Sharia law. It should be noted that individual understandings of Sharia can vary widely and do not necessarily connote the most extreme interpretation. Nevertheless, the results indicate that conservative religious values are strongly held in Indonesia in general. The report can be accessed: <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>.

⁵² Arifianto, Alex. 2018. "Islamic Campus Preaching Organizations in Indonesia: Promoters of Moderation or Radicalism?" *Asian Security*.

⁵³ *Mongabay*. 2017. "Indonesian Court Revokes Environmental License for the Cirebon Coal Plant Expansion." April 25.

National Monument in the heart of Jakarta, and civil society groups are frequently and vocally engaged in public discourse.⁵⁴ They may not always prevail in the end, but there is space for them to voice their opinions and contest the power of the state. It is also important to point out that there is no evidence that elections in Indonesia are not free and fair, meaning the mechanisms of democracy are functioning more or less as designed. If illiberal values are making it into legislation, that is because they are finding a receptive audience in the electorate.

In Indonesia illiberal and conservative social forces are now more openly competing in the free market place of ideas guaranteed to them under a democratic system. These ideas are finding a receptive audience for a variety of reasons. This has provoked a two-fold response from the state. First, politicians have begun making concessions to these illiberal forces in order to secure their support at the ballot box and side-line their enemies. Legislation that targets the LGBT community or the use of blasphemy charges to neutralize political opponents reflects the ascendancy of these kinds of hard-nosed political strategies. Secondly, the state has moved to expand its own power in order to reign in some of these more disruptive social forces. So far they have only invoked this power to ban hard-line and intolerant group that challenge the state's legitimacy. But this leaves the door open for a further expansion of state

power to clamp down on civil liberties and associational freedoms.

This may not be the vision of liberal democracy that Francis Fukuyama and Larry Diamond once had, but it is a recognizable form of democracy in which a group (usually the majority) collectively decide what direction their society will take. These are the messy guts of the democratic process playing out as the country struggles with the challenges of political and economic development. While it is entirely possible that the pendulum will ultimately swing toward authoritarian back-sliding, or that illiberal, hard-line social forces will become empowered to the point where they will seek to banish their enemies through violence, that is not currently the situation and it is hardly the only or a predestined outcome.

Ultimately, this returns the discussion to just what exactly democracy is and what it is not. In this analysis, democracy is a conceptual tool that provides a platform for reflecting the beliefs and values of a particular society. Beliefs and values are not static, nor are they universally shared by all, and as they change the nature of the democratic system representing them will also change. Recall Donald Emmerson's observation that "differing societies may democratically implement differing views of the relative importance of social order versus individual right," which is surprisingly resonant in today's political climate.

What Emmerson perhaps grasped more intuitively than many in the post-Cold

⁵⁴ Savirani, Amalinda. 2017. "Indonesia's Regions a Test Bed for Civil Society Engagement." *New Mandala*. April 24.

War democratization movement was that democracy can function as both a liability and an asset. It gives society agency over the governing apparatus of the state, and guarantees a voice in the governing process. But it cannot guarantee what that voice will say, or that what it does say will be in lock-step with Western, liberal notions about what democracy is or how it should function. Indonesia is still in the process of

trying to find its democratic voice, and while the process is messy and precipitating worrisome developments, it is important to understand what the process of democratization actually is, rather than what we wish it to be. The development of democracy in Indonesia, a story that is still being told, highlights this important distinction.

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Transnationalism and Multi-dimensional Flow of Remittance in Cambodia

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Abstract

Since migration from Cambodia to Thailand has become a phenomenon, emerging studies have mainly discussed the development impacts of remittances on Cambodia. However, lacking transnationalism conceptuality, those studies have underplayed the broader logics behind the flow of remittances into Cambodia. This study seeks to fill the gap by utilizing a conceptualization of transnationalism. Drawing upon empirical data from two migrant-sending villages in Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia, this study finds that there are socioeconomic and sociocultural logics in explaining multidimensional flow of remittances into migrant-sending households and the whole community. On the one hand, remittance flow is determined by various forms of socioeconomic contracts such as house modernization, asset accumulation, agricultural intensification, children's education, shadow banking, housing installment, loan and borrowings, and informal real estate intermediary. On the other hand, sociocultural determinants, such as marriage norms, family narratives, and Buddhist norms and practices, explain the regularity of remittance

Introduction

Since its transition in 1990s, Cambodia has experienced gradual growth and arrived at a new point of high integration and connectivity due to its accession to various regional initiatives, namely the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN). This rise in connectivity provokes questions on the reconfiguration of its population as post-conflict Cambodia still faces challenges including unemployment, poverty, and population growth.¹ As a result, many Cambodian people seek alternative livelihood strategies, one of

¹ National Institute of Statistics, Labour and Social Trends in Cambodia 2010 (Phnom Penh: Cambodia's Ministry of Planning, 2014).

which is international migration as a means to access resources and capital in more advanced countries.²

From 2000 to 2015, the percentage of Cambodians migrating overseas has increased from 3.7% out of 12 million total populations to 7.6% out of 15.5 million total populations. The top destination country is Thailand, which receives 68% of total Cambodian migrants.³ This massive outflow of migrant workers is boosted by bilateral agreements between Cambodia and Thailand. For an instance, in 2014, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Employment of Workers to foster legal recruitment of Cambodian workers to Thailand. Then, over 700,000 Cambodian workers were registered.⁴ Today, migrant workers are acknowledged as agents of innovation and development since the Cambodian government and international development institutions are preparing effective and comprehensive frameworks and policies to

sustain development based on Cambodian overseas workers.⁵

Aside from attracting the attention of government and NGOs, the migration from Cambodia to Thailand has elicited academic interest. Recent scholarship has focused on topics relating to migration patterns,⁶ legal status and vulnerable well-beings of Cambodian immigrants,⁷ and general consequences of international migration on various aspects such as family roles,⁸ poverty alleviation,⁹ livelihood choices,¹⁰ and financial settings.¹¹ Unfortunately, these studies generally lack a transnational approach which delves into multi-stranded relations and spaces shared by both immigrants in Thailand and non-migrants in Cambodia. Instead, they are preoccupied with a ruptured framework that only sticks to experiences and livelihoods of either migrants or those individuals and communities that remain in Cambodia.

Drawing upon empirical data collected from two villages in Banteay

² Eun Hee Lee, *Poverty, Livelihoods, Social Capital, and Migration: A Case Study of Two Villages in Northwest Cambodia* (PhD Thesis) (Brighton: University of Sussex, 2005).

³ OECD/CDRI, *Interrelations between Public Policies, Migration and Development in Cambodia* (Paris: OECD, 2017).

⁴ Mekong Migration Network, *The Precarious Status of Migrants in Thailand: Reflections on the Exodus of Cambodian Migrants and Lesson Learnt* (Hong Kong: Mekong Migration Network, 2014).

⁵ Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, *Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia 2015-2018*, (Phnom Penh: Royal Government of Cambodia, 2014).

OECD/CDRI, *Interrelations between Public Policies, Migration and Development in Cambodia*.

⁶ Sarthi Acharya, "Migration Patterns in Cambodia: Causes and Consequences," *Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting on Migration and Development* (Bangkok: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2003).

⁷ John C. Walsh and Makararavy Ty, "Cambodian Migrants in Thailand: Working Conditions and Issues," *Asia Journal of Social Science* (2011) 23-29.

⁸ Sabina Lawreniuk and Laurie Parsons Mother, "Grandmother, Migrant: Elder Translocality and the Renegotiation of Household Roles in Cambodia," *Environment and Planning A*, 49(2017), 1664-1683.

⁹ Roth Vathana and Luca Tiberti, "Economic Effects of Migration on the Left-Behind in Cambodia," *The Journal of Development Studies*, (2016) 1-19.

¹⁰ Maryann Bylander, "Depending on the Sky: Environmental, Distress, Migration, and Coping in Rural Cambodia," *International Migration* 53 no. 5 (2013): 135-147.

¹¹ Maryann Bylander, "Borrowing Across Borders: Migration and Microcredit in Rural Cambodia," *Development and Change*, 45(2014), 284-307.

Meanchey province, Cambodia, this study highlights the occurrences of socioeconomic and sociocultural logics in multidimensional flow of remittances into the households and the whole community. The paper has three sections. The first section discusses the existing studies of transnationalism focusing on the concept of transnational social fields, which gives broader understanding on remittance flow. Building on the reviewed literature, I pinpoint a theoretical limitation that underplays the roles of migrant-sending households and communities in catalyzing the flow of remittances. The second section describes a methodology which focuses on research sites, the context of migration, and data collection methods. The third section proceeds with the occurrences of socio-economic and sociocultural logics in regulating the multidimensional flow of remittances into the migrant-sending households and the community.

Transnational Social Fields as Linkages for Remittance Flow

Scholars have long been interested in the topic of immigrant assimilation, particularly in regard to the migration of workers from poor countries to rich countries. Among other issues, many scholars have discussed the relationship between immigrants and the informal economy in the receiving countries. For instance, the rise of the informal economy in the United States does not reside in the influx of immigrants, but is the result of structural transformations of the larger urban economy.¹² Immigrants are just the one of the groups who seize the opportunities which allow them to be part of the informal economy. They are not the direct cause of it.¹³ Likewise, in Germany, the increase of immigrant participation in the informal labour market is the result of post-war deregulation policies on foreigners,¹⁴ while in the Netherlands the rise of informal enterprises actually depends on high demand of cheaper labour and marginal-

¹² Saskia Sassen, "The Informal Economy," in *Dual City: Restructuring New York*, ed. Mollenkopf, John H. and Manuel Castells (New York: Russell Sage, 1991), 79-101.

¹³ Saskia Sassen, "Informalization: Imported Through Immigration or a Feature of Advanced Economy?," *WorkingUSA* 3, no.6 (2000): 6-26.

¹⁴ Czarina Wilpert, "Migration and Informal Work in the New Berlin: New Forms of Work or New Sources of Labour?," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 24, no.2 (1998): 269-294.

ization of immigrants.¹⁵ Additionally, the non-economic impacts of immigrants were also discussed with emphasis on the emerging citizenships,¹⁶ race differentials,¹⁷ uncertainty in immigrant legality,¹⁸ and social mobility of immigrants within different ethnic groups¹⁹ and different generations.²⁰

In addition to discussions on immigrant assimilation, other scholars have taken a different glimpse into a conceptual framework that calls for interconnectedness between immigrants and home. The conceptual framework is called “transnationalism” which prefers a term “trans-migrant” in lieu of “emigrant” or “immigrant” on the ground that *trans-migrants* not only assimilate and make changes in the host countries but also forge multidimensional relations and networks with those in their home countries, beyond the containment of state-defined boundaries.²¹ With regard to the decline in nation-state containment, scholars have proposed a

framework that contemporary societies have changed not only their outer relations between and beyond nation states but also their internal quality. What matters most is the ambivalence in what and who constitutes the society or field which people are living in and crossing on.²²

In line with the proposal to rethink the meaning of societies, transnationalism scholars contend that human society is rather transnational. They found that immigrants actually do not just leave but carry their homelands with them across national boundaries. To do so, the immigrants re-territorialize their transnational space by establishing connections and ties with non-migrants and relatives living in their homelands. In this essence, though trans-migrants are visibly limited by national boundaries, they are invisibly limitless because their sense of nation appears to be quite mobile and transnational.²³ It therefore provokes a reconsideration of society and social membership.

¹⁵ Robert Kloosterman, Joanne van der Leun, and Jan Rath, “Across the Border: Immigrants’ Economic Opportunities, Social Capital, and Informal Business Activities,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 24, no.2 (1998): 249-268.

¹⁶ Lirio K. Negroni, review of *Remaking Citizenship: Latina Immigrants and New American Politics*, by Kathleen M. Coll, *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 38, no.3, Article 12 (2011): 181-184.

¹⁷ Cybelle Fox and Thomas A. Guglielmo, “Defining America’s Racial Boundaries: Blacks, Mexicans, and European Immigrants, 1890-1945” *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no.2, (2012): 327-379.

¹⁸ Cecilia Menjivar, “Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants’ Lives in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no.4 (2006): 999-1037.

¹⁹ Lucinda Platt, “New Destinations? Assessing the Post-migration Social Mobility of Minority Ethnic Groups in England and Wales,” *Social Policy & Administration* 39, no. 6 (2005): 697-721.

²⁰ Peter Catron, “Made in America? Immigrant Occupational Mobility in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” *American Journal of Sociology* 122, no.2 (2016): 325-378.

²¹ Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, “Transnationalism: A New Analytical Framework for Understanding Migration,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645 (1992): 1-24.

²² Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Sociology of the Second Age of Modernity,” *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no.1 (2000): 79-105.

²³ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton-Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

Later scholarship reevaluated the meaning of society and social membership using a notion of “transnational social fields”.²⁴ The field is a set of multiple interlocked networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are exchanged, organized, and transformed. Transnational social fields distinguish the ways of being and the ways of belonging amongst transnational individuals. Levitt and Glick Schiller explain:

“If individuals engage in social relations and practices that cross borders as a regular feature of everyday life, then they exhibit a transnational way of being. When people explicitly recognize this and highlight the transnational elements of who they are, then they are also expressing a transnational way of belonging”.²⁵

They further add that Catholicism exemplifies a platform of transnational social field in which Cuban immigrants in Miami, by conducting their Catholic rituals and shrines in places they are settling, can symbolically move back-and-forth the two societies (home and host), and sustain their past memories when they were in Cuba and future when they will return.²⁶

The ways of being and ways of belonging not only maintain symbolic transnationality, but also serve as a platform for capital circulation. One example of this phenomenon can be observed in a study by Glick Schiller and Fouron on Haitian community in the United States. Through the language of blood and descent,²⁷ Haitian immigrants in the United States and Haitians in Haiti maintain ties to their family members and non-family members living in Haiti and construct transnational networks. To elaborate, the immigrants can access to and enhance the social capital just by sharing a common sense of nationalism in language of blood and descent. The acquired social networks have economic benefits for the immigrants because they could facilitate the immigrants with the economic possibilities and investments in Haiti.²⁸ Another study by Amporn Jirattikorn situates in a transnational society lived by Shan immigrants in Chiang Mai and Shan elites in Myanmar. The society is forged by “cross-border ethno-nationalism” which is shared and practiced by both groups in both sides. It is a kind of structure that Shan immigrants are entitled to pay tributes to their home nation via economic, social, and political cross-border activities. What Shan immigrants in Chiang Mai

²⁴ Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” *International Migration Review* 38, no.3 (2004): 1002-1039.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 1028.

²⁷ Obligation is a key to understand how the language of blood and decent helps establish a transnational social field lived by Haitian diasporas and the left-behinds in Haiti. These two kinds of Haitians are socially defined as brothers and sisters, etc., and those Haitians living in immigrant states like the U.S. continue to have *obligation* to those they left behind (see Glick Schiller and Fouron, 1999: 340-341).

²⁸ Nina Glick Schiller and George E. Fouron, “Terrains of Blood and Nation: Haitian Transnational Social Fields,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no.2 (1999): 340-366.

receive in return is symbolic capital in forms of social and political recognitions by Shan elites in Myanmar. Therefore, they become emancipated to continue their lives and social membership in both Chiang Mai and Shan state, as argued to be forever transnational.²⁹

The aforementioned cases in Haiti and Chiang Mai shed light on transnational linkages only from the immigrants' perspectives—how immigrants forge social networks and ties to secure gains from sending communities. However, we know almost nothing about the perspectives of non-migrants in the sending community. To elaborate, the existing studies only reveal the ways in which immigrants maintain the ways of being and the ways of belonging to their home countries in order to secure their gains. Yet, it does not mean that the non-migrants at home do nothing in reciprocity.³⁰ In fact, they too have potentials to build ways of being and ways of belonging with the immigrants who are obligated to send remittances necessary for livelihoods of a wide range of people at home.

Finally, I claim that the concept of transnational social field is a powerful instrument for conceptualizing the potential linkages connecting those who stay behind and those who leave. Without moving physically by themselves, the left-behind individuals and communities in Cambodia

can maintain cross-border social relations with the immigrants in Thailand through various forms of communications. Moreover, to a large extent, the communication serves as a potential platform that attracts certain qualities and frequency of remittances (i.e. capital) into the sending households and community.

Methodology

The field research was conducted in two villages: Kandal and Poy Samrong in Preah Netr Preah commune (*khum*), Banteay Meanchey province, northwest Cambodia. The commune's economic status ranks lower than its neighbors, so economic migration is unavoidable for economic relief (Figure 1). The site was chosen for three reasons: geographical proximity to Thailand, long experience of migration, and dynamics of groups with different socio-economic profiles. Since the villages are close to border checkpoints, and transportation is getting easier, people now reach Bangkok in between 5 and 6 hours by local taxi networks. In addition, villagers have extensive experience in migrating to Thailand in two periods of time. The first period started in late 1980s or early 1990s, and ended in mid 2000s. The second period, on the other hand, began consecutively up until today, in which the main reasons for migration include the damages and

²⁹ Amporn Jirattikorn, "Forever Transnational: The Ambivalence of Return and Cross-border Activities of the Shan across the Thailand-Myanmar Border," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 38, no.1 (2017): 75-89.

³⁰ Marcel Mauss argues that human relations in a society remain constant due to the norm of reciprocity, on the account of which gift exchange is an obligation to survive the relations (also see *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison. London: Cohen & West, 1950). Alvin W. Gouldner, "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement," *American Sociological Review* 25, no.2 (1960): 161-178.

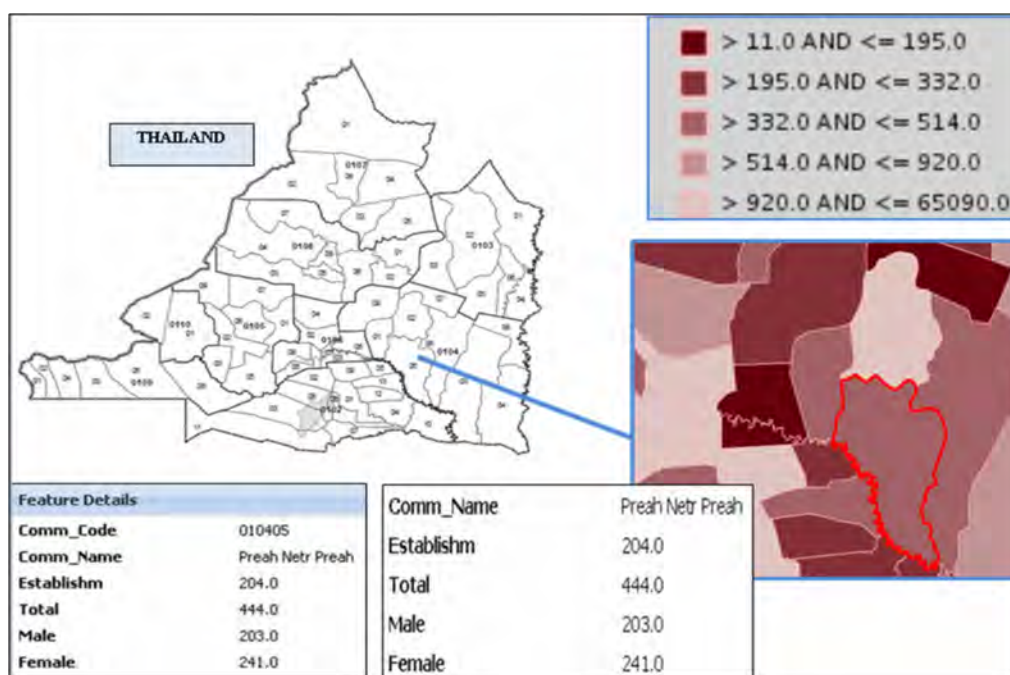


Figure 1: Banteay Meanchey province and Preah Netre Preah's Economical Status
 Source: Statistics Bureaus of Japan http://www.stat.go.jp/info/meetings/cambodia/pdf/01com_m2.pdf (Access 06/08/2018), and Harvard University's World Map database <http://worldmap.harvard.edu/maps/8012> (Access 05/03/2018).

devaluation of agricultural products, and land confiscation motivated by the local military and economic land concessions. In the villages, there are social groups with different socioeconomic profiles—between those who survive on receiving remittances from migrants in Thailand and those who survive on running businesses and trades in the villages.

I use both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection. I conducted thirty-three semi-structured interviews with migrants' relatives, non-migrants, return migrants, and village chiefs, and I observed households' lifestyles and communication with migrants in Thailand. With qualitative method, I expect

to understand how the left-behinds maintain relations with the migrants so that they could receive remittances as their common income. Additionally, I conducted a household survey (N=64) to seek general information of remittance flow and usages. I visited the villages twice. The first time was in April 2017 during which I observed the villages and migrants visiting on occasions like Khmer New Year.³¹ The second time was between December 2017 and March 2018 when I spent the rest of my fieldwork on the survey, interviews, and observation. To note, the research ensures the confidentiality of informants by using pseudonyms for the rest of the paper.

³¹ In fact, migrants visit home on other celebrations like *Pchum Ben* and *Kak-Then*. "*Pchum Ben*" is an annual cultural celebration that lasts for 15 days in total during which people go to the temple for making offerings to indicate respect for their dead ancestors. Among these 15 days, the last three days are the occasions that attract the most majority of people. "*Kak-Then*" is an annual religious celebration when Buddhist followers contribute all kinds of offerings especially money to make merits and good deeds.

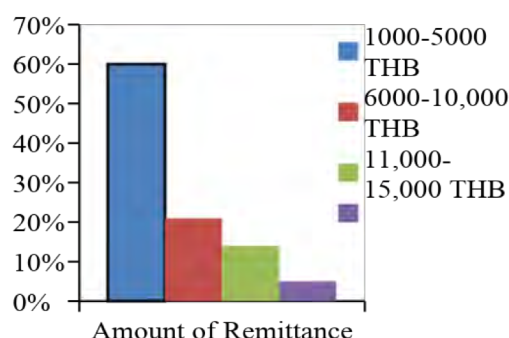


Table 1: Monthly Remittance by Households

Remittance Flow in General: Amount, Frequency, Channel

According to the survey, different households in Kandal and Poy Samrong receive different amounts of monthly remittance - approximately 60% of households receive remittance between 1,000 to 5,000 Thai Baht (THB), 21% receives remittance between 6,000 to 10,000 THB, while 14% receives between 11,000 to 15,000 THB. The remaining 5% receive up to 20,000 THB (Table 1). Overall, the differences of remittance quantity depend on the number of emigrant members and their left-behind children in each household. These monthly remittances are used for general purposes in households such as food, education, babysitting supplies, and healthcare. The result also depicts gender differentials in remittance management. While in 75% of total households, the use of remittances is primarily managed by mothers or wives manage, in 11% households, the fathers or husbands act as the primary managers of remittances (Table 2).

However, the time of sending remittances is not always determined by month. Occasional remittances occur when migrants are visiting home during cultural

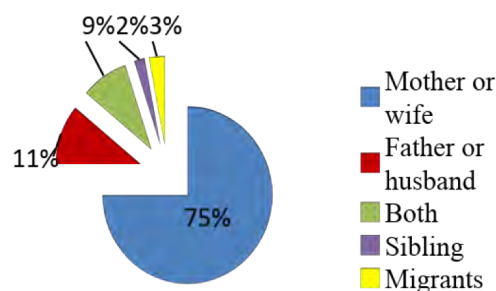


Table 2: Gender Differentials in Remittance Management

festivals or when families are in need. On annual occasions, such as *Khmer New Year* and *Pchum Ben*, each migrant may send 500 to 1,000 THB to their parents. For weddings and housewarmings, the migrants send between 400 and 600 THB to their parents who, in turn, attend the events on behalf of the migrants. Approximately, in a single wedding season, one household receives up to twenty invitations. There is also investment remittance which migrants send to their parents in order to buy land or to invest in rice farming.

All money is remitted in THB through informal money transmitters based in each village. The transmission process goes through a complex system which demands truthful networks in both Cambodia and Thailand. Initially, there must be one transmitter stationed in the village of receivers. Then, the transmitter has to secure his access a Thai bank in Thailand; there are two ways to secure the accessibility. The first way is to have a counterpart who stations in borderland towns like Poi Pet, whereby the counterpart easily crosses to Thailand and fetches money from a Thai bank or ATM. The

second way is to generate a Thai bank account by having a Thai citizen as the guarantee. The migrants in Thailand have to know the bank account of the transmitter carefully. Then, when they want to send money to their parents, they just send to his account and let the transmitter know. After confirming the transaction, the transmitter passes along the money to their waiting parents. In terms of transmission fee, transmitters made good money with 1000 THB for 10,000 THB transfer, accounting for 10%. However, now the fee rate has decreased down to 20, 40, 60, or 80 THB for 10,000 THB transfer, depending on tougher competition and available networks of each transmitter.³²

The advancement in telecommunication and transportation plays a key role in encouraging mutual visits between migrants in Thailand and their family members at home. In early years, migrants did not communicate with home frequently because the international phone calls and travelling were costly and dangerous. However, today migrants can visit and contact home with cheaper and safer ways. 50% of total households in my survey use both Facebook video calls and normal phone calls while the other 50% of households use *only* normal phone calls. Importantly, through Facebook, migrants and families exchange information and ideas more easily and more frequently. Therefore, they hardly miss the updated situations at home and in Thailand. The

exchanged information appears in both negative and positive images. On one hand, family members at home feel more relaxed and more tolerant to long distance and duration of migration because they are well informed of what the migrants' well-beings. On the other hand, family members especially parents, when seeing sad images on migrants' Facebook page or on video call, appear to be more intolerant. For instance, two mothers testified that they were broken-hearted when seeing unfortunate images of her sons working hard and eating bad meals. For this reason, she prefers using non-visual phone calls or getting away from Facebook to avoid seeing her sons' difficulties.

In addition, with telecommunication, migrants' parents also find it easier to visit their children in Thailand because the local taxi is more convenient and cheaper than in the past. It takes less than six hours to go from Kandal or Poy Samrong to Bangkok. The road infrastructure is convenient in the same way as legal proceeding. Several parents visited their children in Bangkok at least two times and their stay lasted at least two weeks according to visa allowance. Purposes of visit can be both for relaxation and family reunion. For the first, migrants want their aging parents to get relaxed and have fun by going to places like Bangkok and Pattaya. For the second, the migrants miss their children so much that they ask their parents to bring the children to Bangkok for the sake of family reunion.

³² One transmitter in Kandal receives only 20 THB for 10,000 THB because she has neither network in Poi Pet nor a Thai bank account. She partners with another money transmitter in a different district who can access to a counterpart in Poi Pet. Actually, the sender pays 60 THB for 10,000 THB, but because it has to go through three transmitters, the 60 THB is split to 20 THB equally for the three transmitters.

Socioeconomic Logics of Remittance Flow

In order to sustain the flow of remittances, both sending households and community play a key role in creating socioeconomic contracts that determine how migrants maintain their ways of being and ways of belonging with home; hence, the migrants are obliged to send remittances to the sending households and community accordingly.

At the household level, there are various socioeconomic contracts that support sending households to forge invisible but sturdy relations with migrants in Thailand, upon which the migrants are obliged to send remittance regularly. The contracts appear in forms of housing modernization, assets accumulation (i.e. land, gold), agricultural intensification, and education and childcare. First, amongst extremely poor households, the working migrants' parent often must upgrade their house in the home country from a broken wooden structure to a concrete structure. Since the parents cannot afford to build the house, they ask their migrant children to send money for the house construction. Second, other households need money to enlarge their economic income by investing the remitted capital into their domestic businesses (i.e. growing rice and buying lands). It is found that households, where the migrant children are still single, receive remittance to buy plots of land and buy new farming machines. These assets, though bought with migrant remittances, are

registered to the parents' ownership. Third, migrants have an economic obligation to send money to their parents to look after the little children; otherwise, they cannot have the time and space to work in Thailand. This is considered to be a source for aging parents who cannot earn any income but monthly remittance for childcare. Children's education takes much attention from migrant parents because the amount of remitted money depends on the children's school performance at school. They send more money for their teen children to go to school and buy new motorbikes or smartphones for them if they get good grades at school.

At the community level, the other locals who do not have any migrant family members but have remittance-related businesses also formulate socioeconomic determinants that regulate the importation of remittances into their revenue. Those determinants include: (1) informal banking system, (2) installment system, (3) loan and borrowings, and (4) informal real estate intermediary.

First, the local folks connect themselves to remittances through a traditional game that functions as a "shadow bank" which is joined by migrants' parents who secure monthly remittances. It provides informal savings, financings, and investment vehicles to a group of people without being regulated by the government.³³ The game is called in Khmer "*tong-tin*". Initially, it needs a trustee who has stable income and permanent residence, and who

³³ Kellee Tsai, "The Rise of Shadow Banking in China: The Political Economy of Modern Chinese State Capitalism," *Thought Leadership Briefs* 10, (2015): 1-4.

gathers a group of players. Because there are 42 players in total, the game will last 42 months accordingly. In the first month, all players, excluding the trustee, contribute an agreed amount of money (i.e. 3000 THB) into a common pool that secures communal accesses to the raised money, so in total it accounts for 123,000 THB (3000×41). Then, the trustee is the first to withdraw the raised money for any uses upon his wills, but he has to repay in monthly installments over consecutive 40 months. Technically, he pays 3000 THB per month. For the next consecutive 40 months, there are serial auctions in which all players, excluding the trustee, compete for the right to withdraw the money from the pool. In every auction, the winner can withdraw the raised money, plus the repaid installment from the trustee. However, the losing players contribute a different amount of money, minus the amount of winning offer in the auction. For example, if a player wins the auction with 200 THB offer, he gets only 115,000 THB in total [formula: $(3,000 - 200) \times 40 + 3,000$] because each losing player pays only 2800 THB. The next auctions are carried out in the same way till the last 42th month. To note, the winner in the prior auction cannot join in the next auctions; he only has to return the withdrawn money back to the team in installment system as the trustee does.

The game has an implication that players in urgent need of investment capital will win the auctions, while a villager in less urgent need just waits for the “final deal”. The final deal means he can accumulate all fully repaid credit from

previous players. He would finally get 123,000 THB. He gains money because he has paid to the monthly auctions in this formula [$3,000 - \text{winner offers}$]. Supposed that the offers rank 200 THB equally, the final player would gain 8,200 THB [formula: 200×41]. Mostly, the migrants’ parents prefer not to win the auction but to accumulate the final deal since they can gain. The migrants’ parents compete to win the auctions only when they need the money for building houses or investing in daily life. Instead, non-migrants in the community are more likely to win the auctions because they can access to investment capital without going to the formal bank which has higher interest rate and risks of foreclosures. Therefore, non-migrants in the community prefer to play the game with migrant households because their income from remittance is considered stable to reserve securitization. There are at least four or five groups of *tong-tin* game in Kandal and Poy Samrong, joined by migrants’ parents.

Second, in the wake of housing updates amongst migrants’ households, the local businessmen of construction supplies allocate a predatory payment method that incentivizes the households to buy their products with easier financing alternatives. The method is “installment sales” in which the households are allowed for partial deferral of payments. It requires the buyers to make regular payments or “installments” on a monthly basis, plus a certain interest rate of at least 20%. The households mostly accept this method because they trust in the regularity of remittances from their children in Thailand. Likewise, the businesses can

maximize their income in the long-term. Therefore, I argue that not only the migrants' parents but also the local businessmen pave the ways for attracting remittances into this revenue by offering easier financial systems, namely the installment sales. However, there have been cases of installment defaults amongst migrant households too as evident in the following cases:

Case 1: In 2009, Sothea ran a construction supplies shop near Kandal village. He chose the business because of the emergence of housing modernization amongst remittance-receiving households in Poy Samrong and Kandal. 80 % of his buyers are homeowners while 20% are the building contractors. He estimates that most buyers could afford about 70% of the total deals, leaving the rest 30% for installment payments. The buyers have to pay an extra 20% of interest for the monthly installments. His business saw the increase in daily revenue from 6,000 THB in 2009, to 20,000 THB in 2012, and now 80,000 THB. Out of 80,000 THB, he gets up to 30,000 THB in profit.³⁴

Case 2: Samnang began a building supplies business in 2014. Initially, he went bankrupt for several reasons, one of which was installment defaults. Admittedly, because he wanted to tie up loyal customers, he allocated installment method to migrant households in a contract that they had to repay with monthly remittances. The

installment debt of each household was estimated to be between 20,000 to 30,000 THB. Unfortunately, they broke the contract and left for Thailand without paying back. From that experience, he became more cautious with installment to migrant households, though he still practices installment sales. Afterwards, his business recovered and was extended into money transmissions and farming supplies, earning monthly revenue of about 5000 USD. An estimated 90% of the total revenue relates to housing constructions amongst migrant households.³⁵

Third, the regularity of remittances also encourages the non-migrants to allocate loans and borrowings more easily and in a predatory manner. The non-migrants concentrate giving loans to remittance-receiving households due to the fact that remittance-sending is stable and obligatory. To some extent, non-migrants who give loans and borrowings to migrants' parents absorb more fruition of remittances if compared to the migrants' households as seen in the following case:

Case 3: Navy's son and his wife are working in Thailand, leaving three children in her care. The monthly remittance Navy receives is not enough to deal with daily expense, so she needs to ask for loan from villagers. Navy indicated that loan givers in the village prefer migrant households because they value the regularity and reciprocity of remittances. She said, "We

³⁴ Interviewed with Sothea on January 31, 2018.

³⁵ Interviewed with Samnang on February 8, 2018.

*took the loan [20,000 THB] from others. We just worked to pay off the interest. That is because we migrated to Thailand. If [we] hadn't migrated to Thailand, they wouldn't give us loan.... If we take a loan for doing business in our country, they will not grant it."*³⁶

In addition, when migrant households have reached a certain level of material accumulation, such as a modern house, a new motorbike, or jewelry, their rich neighbors will recognize their prestigious status. Therefore, the mutual interactions between these two groups become more active and vibrant that borrowings and loaning are more possible. This is explained in the following cases:

Case 4: Saren had 5 children in burden. Being a widow with many children and living in helpless conditions, Saren was discriminated against by her neighbors. Her social interactions were poorly-received. Things have changed after her children grew up and migrated to Thailand. She built a new house and bought assets like land, gold and motorbikes. When asked whether she finds differences in social interactions now, Saren says, *"Today, since my children have been migrating, I have become better off. Life's different now. They [the neighbors] get to know me. They invite me to weddings and other celebrations, unlike the past when people discriminate against*

*me. They hated that I was poor and sick. When I needed loan, no one gave it to me. Today, no matter how much I want, they will grant it to me. I can get it from everyone.... Indeed, they wait for me to take loan from them."*³⁷

Case 5: With remittances from the children, Sitha upgraded her old house to be taller and bigger. She bought and upgraded new motorbikes. She now wears nice clothes and gold jewelry. With such material wealth, she feels more comfortable to interact with richer villagers and especially to ask for financial relief from them. The financial relief can be both loans and borrowings.³⁸

Fourth, the role of the village headman has been extended into a real estate intermediary who facilitates cross-border purchases of assets such as land and gold. His facilitation can take various forms, including investment consultancy and paperwork process. The headman looks for plots of land and then informs either the migrants in Thailand or the parents at home about the purchasable land. Several households follow the village headman's consultancy to buy land. Phanny, for instance, used the remitted money from her children in Thailand to buy a plot of land (38×40 meters in width) which cost her only 350,000 THB. The land now is estimated to cost at least 450,000 THB because the headman had proposed to the district government to build a country road that

³⁶ Interview with Navy on December 1, 2017.

³⁷ Interviewed with Saren on November 9, 2017.

³⁸ Interviewed with Sitha on December 2, 2017.

connects Phanny's land to farmland areas and to the main road.³⁹ Additionally, when some households need money from the bank to buy land, the headman also helps issuing certificate letters to get loan approval from the bank. Then, he helps the loan takers deal with their loans every month by making sure that the remittance is sent regularly.

Socio Cultural Logics of Remittance Flow

As important as socioeconomic logics, sociocultural logics play a crucial role in determining the regular flow of remittances to the sending households and community. At household level, the amount and frequency of received remittances depend on various cultural norms and narratives that circulate from households to migrants. For instance, because of patriarchy in marriage norm, migrant-son households enjoy less benefit of remittance if compared to migrant-daughter households. The reason is that the cultural norm expects the sons to relocate to live with the daughters' family, meaning that the migrant-daughter households will receive more labor forces after marriage. Also, when they have children, they tend to keep their children with the wife's family, so they have to send more remittance for childcare. In the meantime, migrant-son households complain that they receive less or no benefit because they have to keep the remitted money for the bride price for when their sons marry. Some households make uses of remittance for buying land only when the

sons are still single. If they get married, they will no longer send money to the parents since having their own family to take care.

Besides marriage norms, households create various remittance-induced narratives based on the fact that parents have dedicated themselves to bringing up children. Parents and siblings at home maintain and circulate those narratives in order to alert the migrants to take care of family in reciprocity. The migrants, therefore, have to be thrifty to save and send money to support the aging parents. If migrants fail to send remittance, they will insight moral sanction from family and society as they have taken the image of bad children. For instance, in Vuthea's family, there are 4 children working in Thailand. Upon being informed that her brothers bought a new smartphone, the oldest sister called to plead her brothers in Bangkok. She told them to resist their impulse towards modern materials. Vuthea repeats his daughter's preaching: "*Do not be so obsessed in buying new smartphones. Do not just think of getting fun. Please think of mom and dad. They have no one to count on. They have only you... You have to work hard. Do not neglect your responsibilities...*"⁴⁰

Vuthea also teaches his migrant children about Buddhist principles in gratitude: (1) *katannu* and (2) *katavedi*, which emphasize moral obligation of migrants to remit money whenever parents need. The first principle, *katannu*, means

³⁹ Interviewed with Phanny on December 18, 2017.

⁴⁰ Interviewed with Vuthea on December 01, 2017.

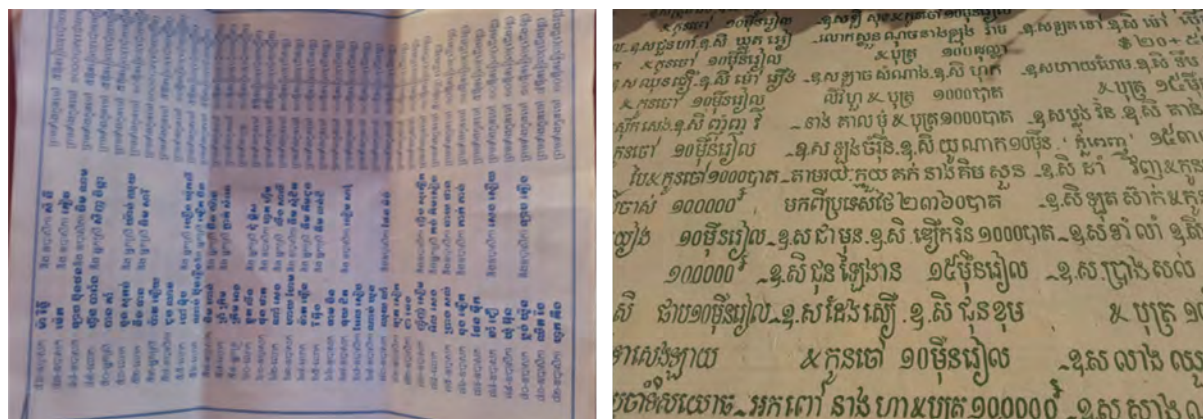


Figure 2: Names of contributors in the printed paper (left) and on the wall of crematorium (right)

that children need to be “aware” that they owe great gratitude to their parents for giving birth to them and for raising them. The second principle, *katavedi*, means that children have to “pay back” for parents’ dedication to children’s well-beings. Interestingly, he combines the two principles together as he expects his children to not only be aware of their parents’ dedication but also to pay them back for that dedication, so sending remittance is considered a mechanism of paying for the parents’ dedication. He reminds his children of this on big occasions like New Year, *Pchum Ben*, and other blessing rituals when migrants generally visit their homes.

At the community level, the local religious institution also plays a crucial role in developing the ways of being and ways of belonging between home and migrants, in pursuit of more possible means of remittance. Its role is to make it possible for what I call “transnational merit-making” in which migrants in Thailand donate money to the local temple in various ways. Firstly, the local monks sustain the faith in

Buddhism amongst transnational migrants so that they carry on donating merit-making money to local temple. When asked how to keep migrants spiritually connected to home villages, the local abbot highlighted three Buddhist teachings in Pali. They include (1) gratitude or obligation [*kataññu*], (2) patience or forbearance [*khanti*], and (3) trust or faith [*saddha*].⁴¹

The first means that children, no matter where they are at any circumstances, have to bear in mind that they will always owe gratitude to their parents who have brought them up. Also, they have to give offerings to parents when they are in need. The second has an implication that migrants have to work hard with patience and forbearance in order to save money; otherwise, they will not find jobs or save money back home. The third has specific implication on husbands and wives who live distant from one another due to migration. The husbands or wives have to sustain truth and faith in each other so that their long-distance relationship remains solid, regardless of spatial disconnection. The local

⁴¹ Interviewed with the abbot on January 11, 2018.

monks always preach with these three teachings either on the occasion that migrants and parents go to the temple on Khmer New Year and *Pchum Ben*, or on the occasion that they invite the monks to do blessing ceremony at home.

Secondly, the local temple committee⁴² calls for merit-making donations by spreading copies of an invitation letter to villagers. When migrants' parents receive the invitation letter, they inform their children in Thailand whether they want to make merit. Sometimes, the informed migrants gather their peers in the same worksite and raise donations for making merit. For instance, Navy informed her son in Thailand about *Kak-Then* ritual in the village. Her son then spread the information to other migrants and collected about 1,000 THB later sent for the merit-making to the local temple.

The raised money is used for general development both in the temple and in the village. The money raised for the temple may be used for entrance gates, crematoriums, restrooms, and common houses for monks, while the raised money for village may be used to build or repair roads as well as support to needy villagers. According to the local abbot, it is necessary to translate merit-making donations into development because doing so ensures accountability and philanthropy of the local temple which sustains faith of people especially overseas migrants in Buddhism. Even when villagers experienced a crop crisis, the amount of

merit-making donations did not see any decrease because migrants and their parents continue to make merit with remittances. Their names appear publicly in order to recognize their contributions development in the temple and community (Figure 2).

Thirdly, transnational merit-making appears to be more collective and larger in scale, involving local government and local religious institution. One instance is found in Poy Samrong. There an association called Poy Samrong Union which functions both as an association of senior citizens and as donation center has emerged. Its history began in 2000 when a local NGO named International Age International sponsored to construct a wooden structure serving as a center of senior citizens in Poy Samrong; it is well known by the villagers as "resting house" or "*sala-chor-tien*". The house serves as a public space where senior citizens gather on religious occasions such as Sila Day because the local temple is located a bit far. Since it was getting old, the village committee and temple committee ran a fund-raising campaign to raise money to build a new structure. As a result, in 2004 the old wooden structure was demolished and replaced with a new concrete structure. Then, the local governor named it "the Poy Samrong Union".

Its functions deal not only with senior citizens but also with fundraising campaigns for infrastructure development in Poy Samrong. The funding source largely relates to remittances from Thailand,

⁴² Temple committee here means something more than physical structure of temple lived by monks, but it refers mainly to an institutional organization of Buddhists which aims to deal with merit-making donation and the general development in the village.

according to the headman's estimation. There are two success stories that depict the fund raising campaigns by Poy Samrong Union for local development. The first story was a project which constructed a small road linking Poy Samrong to the main road. At that time, the temple committee and village committee launched fund raising activities. Then, migrant parents contacted to their children in Thailand in order to encourage them contribute to the project. The migrants donated to the project by remitting money to their parents. Also, the headman sent the announcement of the campaign to migrants in Thailand so that they can raise more funds from other migrants. In total, the raised fund reached three million KHR, but it did not fully compensate the whole expense which cost up to four million KHR in total. To fulfill the unfilled fund, the Poy Samrong Union hosted another campaign which raised extra one million KHR. According to record from the headman, about 50 % of the fund came from remittances while the rest was from non-migrants.

The second success story occurred in 2011 when there was restoration of a pond. The pond was getting shallow resulting from landslides. This had negative impacts on water resources for farmlands surrounding the village. At this time, the fund-raising campaign was done in a way that villagers were expected to buy the removed soil after the restoration finished. They could use the land for any purposes. Accordingly, the more people bought the removed soil, the deeper the restoration could go. Finally, the budget from soil

purchases reached 693,000 THB, and the pond was well-restored. Based upon the two cases, it is possible to say that the economic aspect alone cannot explain the regular flow of remittance because what does matter is something about cultural and religious rationality embedded to individual migrants who are morally obliged to send remittances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the first point of the introduction mainly highlighting that migration studies have received far more attention for rupture and assimilation conceptualizations. Transnationalism scholars have only paid attention to how immigrants formulate transnational relations and networks with home. To complement the existing literature, my study highlights that non-migrants in the sending ends also play active roles in forging transnational linkages and ties with the migrants in an attempt to regulate the remittance flow. These transnational linkages have wider implications on migrant-sending governments to the extent that people's local knowledge of remittance circulation cannot be taken for granted because the people already have their own mechanisms in dealing with transnational linkages and remittance beyond state intervention. They, the people, know how to stay connected with their family members in Thailand. Therefore, to keep the momentum of formal regionalization going, the government of Cambodia should also pay attention to the co-existing structures and

mechanism made by the people in sending villages.

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Explaining Cambodia's and Vietnam's China Policies

National Security and Regime Survival?

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Abstract

This paper aims at explaining how Cambodia and Vietnam responds to the rise of China by looking at national security and regime survival dimension. While Cambodia opts to pursue “soft bandwagoning” policy, Vietnam in contrast chooses to go with “hedging” strategy. As for Cambodia, this strategy has enabled the country to gain much of the Chinese support to fight against its former aggressor – Vietnam – in case it chooses to pursue its future invasion and to serve as a backup while confronting pressures from the international community in regard to its record of human rights abuses and declining democracy. As for Vietnam, the country pursues an intelligent hedging policy because China is able to provide support that Vietnam needs to guarantee its regime survival while facing the on-going external pressures on its human rights violations and communist rule. However, Vietnam views China and its expansionist policy at the South China Sea as a credible threat to its sovereign territory.

Introduction

The rapid rise of China has attracted tremendous debate about the short-term and long-term intentions of its capability. John Mearsheimer, Political Science professor at the University of Chicago, is arguably one of the most vocal scholars to argue that the rise of China is not going to be peaceful.¹

As he points out, China will likely turn its economic might into military capability and dominate Asia, that is, what he terms “offensive capability”. On the flip side of the argument, Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University in Beijing reiterates that the rise of China is and will be peaceful; and would bring about common economic prosperity

¹ Mearsheimer, John J. *Can China Rise Peacefully?* October 25, 2014. <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204> (accessed March 10, 2018).

for the region and the world.² China has been viewed by the US, as a newly assertive superpower given its ambitious actions in the South China Sea.³ Its assertive behaviors have posed grave concerns to the countries in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Such growing concerns among some ASEAN member states have been ameliorated through China's tactical confidence-building measures.⁴ As Michael Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel explain, China has chosen to pursue bilateral negotiations with the countries with which it has territorial disputes in order to avoid conflict.⁵ Among other recent developments, the Philippines, under Rodrigo Duterte, has radically shifted its foreign policy direction in favor of China by pursuing an accommodation policy. However, for small states⁶ like Cambodia and Vietnam, their approach to China is a critical question, requiring viable foreign policy options to make sure that their survival can be assured in the context of a rising China and a greater power rivalry.

Cambodia has been seen as a client state of China.⁷ This is, in part, due to the fact that it blocked the 2012 ASEAN joint communiqué that intended to criticize China on its assertive behavior in the South China Sea.⁸ In the meantime, Vietnam is one of the claimant states over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, warning that it has to meticulously map out its foreign policy strategy to deal with China. The aim of this paper is to conduct a comparative study which investigates the discrepancies and similarities between Cambodian and Vietnamese foreign policy towards China (within national security and regime survival dimensions) and elucidate why these two Southeast Asian countries pursue such policies.

Defining Key Terms: Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Hedging

Traditionally, small states do not enjoy much room for maneuvering. Their conventional foreign policy strategies include “balancing” and “bandwagoning”.⁹

² Xuetong, Yan. "The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes." *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2001): 33-39.

³ Johnston, Alastair Iain. "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 7-48.

⁴ Townshend, Ashley, and Rory Medcalf. *Shifting Waters: China's New Passive Assertiveness in Asian Maritime Security*. 2016. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/shifting-waters-china-s-new-passive-assertiveness-asian-maritime-security> (accessed March 10, 2018).

⁵ Michael, Swaine and Fravel, Taylor. "China's Assertive Behavior: Part II: The Maritime Periphery". *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 35 (2011): 1-29.

⁶ For the discussion of the meaning of the term “small state”, please refer to Leng, Thearith. "Small state diplomacy: Cambodia's foreign policy towards Vietnam." *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 3 (2016): 328-347.

⁷ The term “client state”, as described by John Ciorciari, refers to the conditions under which “the weaker partner typically repay aid and protection by supporting the stronger power's diplomatic agenda, economic interests, and often its projection of military might”. For further detail analysis, please refer to Ciorciari, John D. "A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (May 2015): 245-278.

⁸ Ciorciari, John D. "A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (May 2015): 245-278.

⁹ Schweller, Randall L. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72-107.

However, hitherto, another novel approach – hedging – exists and gains much attention from International Relations scholars. Likewise, it is vitally important to define these concepts in order to have a sense of what it is and why small states decide to choose one over another.

From the realist perspective, the term “balance” or “balancing” refers to an act of allying with others against the prevailing threat and/or of building up internal military capabilities as a deterrent, in which the concept can be categorized into “internal balancing” and “external balancing”.¹⁰ The former means that a small state may choose to bolster its defense capability by raising defense expenditure and strengthening military weaponry to counterweight a threat. Meanwhile, the latter means that a small state may ally with another state, which shares a perceived common threat, in order to counter the rival state.¹¹ This implies that the internal balancing is costly for small states and pursuing the external balancing by joining other states to form security alliances or partnership to countercheck the imagined threat may be another option. As Stephen M. Walt contends, these small states come

to the conclusion that their survival is at risk if the potential hegemon becomes too strong.¹² However, the unpredictability of the future balance of power compels states not to rely on one form over another, but rather to combine these approaches to avoid future catastrophe.

Unlike balancing, “bandwagoning” denotes that the small state “gives in” the rival power in order to avoid being conquered¹³ or opts to align itself with the victor to earn economic benefits.¹⁴ Robert Ross contends that relative state power is the determinant factor of how states engage with one another, implying that the more powerful states, either economically or militarily, in the international system will dominate the weaker ones.¹⁵ In this sense, smaller states in the Southeast Asia region can mitigate the threat of the larger, more powerful states by balancing against or bandwagoning with them.¹⁶ But there are divergent interpretations about bandwagoning logic. For Walt, even though jumping on the most powerful hegemon’s bandwagoning costs small states an uneven exchange, it has to do so to eschew attack and protect its national security.¹⁷ Unlike Walt, Randall L. Schweller argues that the

¹⁰ Walt, Stephen M. *Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

¹¹ Ibid.,

¹² Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Schweller, Randall L. “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In.” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72-107.

¹⁵ Ross, Robert S. “The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century.” *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 81-118.

¹⁶ Chen, Ian Tsung-Yen, and Alan Hao Yang. “A harmonized Southeast Asia? Explanatory typologies of ASEAN countries’ strategies to the rise of China.” *The Pacific Review* 26, no. 3 (2013): 265-288.

¹⁷ Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*.

goal of bandwagoning is simply motivated by the potential economic gains such as trade and investment as an exchange for its political and security compliance to the hegemon.¹⁸

As for “hedging”, the term can be referred to “a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality but rather cultivating a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another”.¹⁹ For Cheng-Chwee Kuik, hedging can be understood as “a behaviour in which an actor tries to mitigate risks by pursuing multiple policy options, which would produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes”.²⁰ He further illustrates that hedging enables small states to “keep open more than one strategic option against the possibility of a future security threat”.²¹ Even though the concept of hedging sounds logical for small states to pursue, some still opt to go with bandwagoning, like the case of Cambodia. The following section will elucidate this difference.

Brief Overview of Sino-Cambodian Relations

The relationship between these two countries can be dated back eight centuries ago when the Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan paid an official visit to Cambodia in 1296, initiating bilateral cultural and commercial contact.²² However, the relationship between Cambodia and China has not always been romantic, as seen recently, but rather waxed and waned. In 1956, Prince Sihanouk paid his first visit to China and was warmly welcomed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. Prince Sihanouk during his visit was granted a “free and unconditional” gift for the amount of US\$ 22.4 million, which was the first ever Chinese grant to a non-Communist country.²³ But between April 1975 and January 1979, China was the main external partner to the cruel “Democratic Kampuchea” government, which was responsible for the killing of 1.7 million people under its leadership. Even after the collapse of the regime, China still continued to support Pol Pot with weaponry along the Thai-Cambodian border between 1979 and 1990.²⁴

Cambodia’s internal conflict ended with the first general election in 1993 that resulted in forming a coalition government,

¹⁸ Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In.”

¹⁹ Goh, Evelyn. “Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies.” *Policy Studies* (East-West Center Washington) 16 (2005).

²⁰ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 3 (2008): 159-185.

²¹ Ibid., 166.

²² Daguan, Zhou. “A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People.” Chiang Mai. Silkworm Books, 2007.

²³ CIA. *Prince Sihanouk and the New Order in Southeast Asia*. May 2007. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/esau-25.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018).

²⁴ Pheakdey, Heng. “Cambodia-China Relations: A Positive Sum Game?” *Journal of Current Southeast Asia Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2012): 57-85

consisting of the FUNCINPEC party led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the son of King Sihanouk and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen, a former prime minister in the Vietnamese-installed People's Republic of Kampuchea during the 1980s. Because of the Chinese suspicion that the prince might have close contact with Taiwan, China withdrew all its support from him. Afterwards, in 1997, Hun Sen staged a bloody coup to oust Prince Norodom Ranariddh to tighten his grip on power. The international community responded to the coup by issuing a condemnation letter and cutting its aid programs to the kingdom. Desperate for international support, Hun Sen turned to play the China card by promptly expelling Taiwan's unofficial liaison office in Phnom Penh. The Chinese government was very pleased and, accordingly, applauded this decision. Since then, both countries have started to move closer to each other in terms of political, economic, security, and cultural dimensions. In addition, as Cambodia tilts even closer to China, the country as one of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members blocked the issuance of the 2012 ASEAN Joint Communiqué and the words referent to the South China Sea in the 2016 ASEAN Joint Communiqué. The following section will answer the question why Cambodia chooses to bandwagon with China.

Cambodia's Foreign Policy Towards China

This paper adopts the term “soft bandwagoning” put forward by Leng Thearith to delineate Cambodia's China policy.²⁵ There are several driving motives behind this strategy. First, Cambodia's relations with Vietnam are critical in determining the country's foreign policy towards China. Cambodia needs China as a hedging tool against Vietnam. Moving closer to China grants Cambodia strong support that can magnify its confidence to stand against the aggressor and maintain its national security. During the 1800s, Cambodia was conquered and divided by Siam, known as today Thailand, and Vietnam. The country was later united with French help. Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia at the end of 1978, justifying its actions with the excuse of liberating the country from the Khmer Rouge regime and its infamous genocide. Subsequently, because of the friendship between China and Cambodia under Pol Pot leadership, China invaded Vietnam in 1979 as a response to its invasion of Cambodia.

Even at the present time, Vietnam has been trying to encroach on Cambodia. One of the examples can be found in 2015 when a group of Vietnamese, without any legitimate authority, dug five ponds at the northeastern province of the Cambodian territory. If China remains an engaged regional actor, it would play a significant

²⁵ Leng, Thearith. "A New Small State's Foreign Policy Approach towards a Great Power: The Case of Cambodia's Foreign Policy towards China." *Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies* 02 (May 2016).

role in preserving Cambodia's sovereign territory as Cambodia needs China to hedge against Vietnam.²⁶ Furthermore, to modernize its defense capability, Cambodia has strengthened military ties with Beijing. This is evident in the recent joint military exercise, known as "the Golden Dragon", along with the Chinese military assistance. The prominent Cambodian scholar Chheang Vannarith notes, "The continued provision of Chinese military support is likely to make Cambodia's army feel more secure in its dealings with its much more powerful neighbors Thailand and Vietnam."²⁷ As long as Vietnam is perceived to be hostile, Cambodia is not likely to abandon its bandwagoning policy towards China.

Second, while Cambodia is an authoritarian country, in which Hun Sen has ruled for over 30 years,²⁸ Hun Sen needs China as a source of economic and diplomatic support in times of crisis. The forms of the crises may include the reduction of foreign aid from the West, the increasing tariffs on Cambodian exports, or any domestic unrest derived from the dissatisfaction of the people. When

pressured by international bodies on allegations of human rights abuses, oppression, corruption, and misuse of power at high government levels, Cambodia can always turn to China as the giant dragon has no hesitation in stepping up and reciprocally supporting its "little brother".²⁹ This is because, as Veasna Var observes, the aid from the West and the United States carries with it strict conditions on human rights, good governance, and democracy. Conversely, the Chinese aid policy has "no-strings attached", meaning that China does not require any documented proof for the use of funds and does not interfere in Cambodia's internal affairs.³⁰ Another renowned scholar on Southeast Asian affairs, Carl Thayer also observes that "Cambodia's decision to bandwagon with China is aimed at insulating itself from Western pressures to maintain a liberal, multiparty democracy and to respect human rights. Cambodia knows that if it hews to China's line, there will be little or no interference in its domestic political affairs."³¹

²⁶ Leng, Thearith. "Small state diplomacy: Cambodia's foreign policy towards Vietnam." *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 3 (2016): 328-347.

²⁷ Chengpor, Aun. Cambodia Joins China for Military Drills as US Relations Cool. VOA. March 18, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-china-joint-military-drills-us-relations-cool/4302875.html> (accessed March 20, 2018).

²⁸ Un, Kheang. "Cambodia: Moving away from democracy? ." *International Political Science Review* 35, no. 5 (2011): 546-562.

²⁹ Burgos, Sigfrido, and Sophal Ear. "China's Strategic Interests in Cambodia: Influence and Resources." *Asian Survey* 50, no. 3 (2010): 615-639.

³⁰ Var, Veasna. Holding Balance Between Two Superpowers: Cambodia's Strategic Choices For Foreign And Development Policy. Eurasia Review. July 27, 2016. <http://www.eurasiareview.com/27072016-holding-balance-between-two-superpowers-cambodias-strategic-choices-for-foreign-and-development-policy-analysis/>(accessed March 15, 2018).

³¹ Chengpor, Aun. Cambodia Joins China for Military Drills as US Relations Cool. VOA. March 18, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-china-joint-military-drills-us-relations-cool/4302875.html> (accessed March 20, 2018).

The effective implementation of the rule of law and allowing the people to vote in free and fair elections can pose a threat to Hun Sen's regime. The 2016 general elections have proved that the level of the people's discontent is rising, seeing declining popularity of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) but growing threshold of confidence in the opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). Because of the trepidation of losing power, many analysts have observed that the ruling party has to dissolve its opponent and jail the president of the CNRP by using the judiciary power of the court. Once again, while the international community strongly condemns such moves taken by the ruling party, China seems to be pleased to announce that it supports and will continue to support Cambodian struggles to maintain peace and stability and pursue its own path of economic development. This clear commitment from Beijing encourages Cambodia to believe that its leaders could rest assured and continue ruling Cambodia, while China is and will always remain available in case the Cambodian government requires assistance.

However, given the fact that Cambodia seems to be so close to China, Cambodia is reluctant to enter into the subordinate client state of the giant dragon. At the same time, the country is seeking to diversify and to cement its relations with other major powers.³² After the elevation of Cambodia's relations with Beijing to the

status of a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in December 2010 – the highest level of cooperation Phnom Penh has ever reached with a foreign government – Cambodia also upgraded its relations with Tokyo to a "Strategic Partnership" in December 2013. As for the United States, Cambodia has become one of the Southeast Asia countries that strongly back the US policy of fighting against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. Cambodia has committed to cooperating with the US in searching for soldiers gone missing during the Second Indochinese war from the 1960s to the 1970s. Cambodia also supported the elevation of the US-ASEAN partnership to a "Strategic Level" in November 2015 – a move not warmly received in Beijing. However, the relationship with the U.S. has deteriorated since 2017 because of the government's crack-down on the opposition party, civil society, and free press. As Sophal Sek observes, this is not because of Cambodia's close relation with China, but rather the shift in America's Asia strategy under Donald Trump.³³ In relation to Vietnam, Cambodia is striving to maintain the benign friendship with Vietnam to resolve the mistrust between the two countries through several state visits and bilateral trade and investment agreements.

Cambodia moves closer to China in order to gain its security protection from external threats and to obtain Chinese unconditional aid without having to address

³² Ciorciari, John D. "A Chinese model for patron–client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership."

³³ Sophal, Sek. *US-Cambodia Standoff*. Bangkok Post. April 2, 2018. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1439187/us-cambodia-standoff>. (accessed April 3, 2018).

criticism of its human rights abuses and limited quality of democracy. Despite this, Cambodia also diversifies and upgrades its relations with China's current strategic rivals, namely Japan, the United States, and Vietnam. Cambodia's mistrust of Vietnam is rooted in the two countries' history of conflict. Nonetheless, Cambodia's leaders still believe that the country will progress faster economically as long as the country maintains friendly relations with its neighbors, including Vietnam.

Brief Overview of Sino-Vietnamese Relations

Unlike Sino-Cambodian relations, Sino-Vietnamese ties have more often been unfriendly than friendly. During the Second Indochina War, China was Vietnam's closest ally. China helped build Vietnam's economy while it struggled against the United States. Regardless, Vietnam has still viewed China as a serious challenge to its national security since the end of the Second Indochina War between late 1950s and mid-1975. This was subsequently followed by a 29-day Chinese intrusion into Vietnam in February 1979, after Vietnam invaded Cambodia. The broken relationship between the countries could be seen through the escalation of that 1979 conflict and its continuing diplomatic repercussions. Other factors include the maltreatment of the Hoa (Han Chinese in

Vietnam) community, the dispute over territorial waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, the construction of artificial islands, clashes in the South China Sea, and Vietnam's pivot to Russia.³⁴

In addition, China pursued a protracted policy of bleeding Vietnam white, keeping the northern border area tense, and offering arms and other assistance to anti-Vietnamese resistance forces, the Khmer Rouge in particular.³⁵ The purpose of this policy was to make Vietnam's Cambodia venture so costly that it would be forced to withdraw its troops, to end its special relationship with the government in Phnom Penh, and to give due recognition to China's regional preeminence.³⁶ During this period, the efforts for relationship normalization with Vietnam had been brought to the center due to the fact that border security and stability were vital to facilitate China's economic growth.³⁷

The changing global milieu after the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union offered opportunities for establishing diplomatic ties between China and Vietnam in 1991, marking the outset of a new era in Sino-Vietnamese relations after a decade of estrangement. Even after normalization in relations between the countries, a number of maritime and territorial issues were left unresolved and would later come to awaken Hanoi's historical distrust of Beijing.

³⁴ Chakraborti, Tridib. "China and Vietnam in the South China Sea Dispute: A Creeping 'Conflict-Peace-Trepidation' Syndrome ." *China Report* 48, no. 3 (2012): 283-301.

³⁵ Thayer, Carl A. "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest." *Asian Survey* 34, no. 6 (1994): 513-528.

³⁶ Ibid.,

³⁷ Storey, Ian. *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China: The search for security*. 1st Edition. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.

Vietnam's Foreign Policy Towards China

Given the historical experience with and the current economic rise and military buildup of China, Vietnam opts to pursue the hedging strategy against the giant dragon living next door after the normalization of the relationship.³⁸ First and foremost, Vietnam's China policy is shaped by the South China Sea feud, later internationalized by the great power rivalry between China and the United States in Asia.³⁹ Because of geographic proximity to China and its asymmetrical power, Vietnam has experienced numerous hurdles. It cannot antagonize China by publicly condemning its assertive and aggressive actions in the South China Sea. This trepidation can be epitomized by the Chinese invasion of its territory in 1979. In the meantime, it cannot pursue explicit security ties by jumping on Beijing's bandwagoning because this would be a sign of its subordination in a way that its perceived sovereignty over the South China Sea islands may be at risk. This is what some analysts call "the tyranny of geography".⁴⁰

To break out this dilemma, Vietnam has mapped out a "struggle and cooperation" policy with China in regard to fundamentally conflicted and cooperative areas, creating a "mature asymmetry" in the

bilateral relations.⁴¹ According to Carl Thayer, "Mature asymmetry exists when the weaker state gives deference to the more powerful state in return for the stronger state's recognition of the weaker state's autonomy".⁴² Moreover, the Vietnamese struggle against Chinese threats in the South China Sea has coincided with the great power rivalry for influence in Asia. Such rivalry can be seen through the United States pivot or rebalance to Asia under Obama, Japan's recent efforts to augment its political role in Asia under the Abe administration, and the Indian Act East policy under Modi, intensifying the strategic competition for sphere of influence. The United States under Donald Trump has announced a new strategic concept – the Indo-Pacific region – that tends to invite India to play an increasing role in the international affairs and Vietnam, no doubt, could stand to benefit from this new initiative. In the uncertain circumstances, Vietnamese national security interest can be best served through its diversification of relations with all stakeholders in the region.

In relation to the United States, the military-to-military ties have become friendlier since 1997.⁴³ In addition, Vietnam has called for an informal establishment of a naval coalition led by the United States with

³⁸ Hiep, Le Hong. "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35, no. 3 (2013): 333-368.

³⁹ Do, Thuy T. "'Firm in principles, flexible in strategy and tactics': Understanding the logic of Vietnam's China policy." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2, no. 1 (2016): 24-39.

⁴⁰ Thayer, Carlyle A. "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 348-369.

⁴¹ Ibid., 348.

⁴² Ibid., 348.

⁴³ Hayton, Bill. "Vietnam and the United States: An Emerging Security Partnership." The United States Studies Centre, the University of Sydney, New South Wales, 2016.

the hope that it will contain China's expansion in the South China Sea as Vietnam has viewed Chinese expansion as a threat to its national security. Vietnam has forged its military relations with Japan by allowing Japan Self-Defense Forces to station at Cam Ranh Bay which could signal a Japanese commitment to Vietnam in the South China Sea and herald a new chapter in bilateral defense cooperation with the purpose to keep the China's surge in check. As for India, the two countries have lifted their relationship status to "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". During his 2016 visit to Vietnam, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a new Defense Line of Credit for Vietnam of US\$ 500 million, aimed at facilitating deeper defense cooperation.⁴⁴ This combined assistance gives Vietnam more confidence in dealing with China at the South China Sea.

As seen in Vietnam's efforts to build stronger military relations with the United States, Japan, and India, three countries which are not militarily friendly towards China, Vietnam's China policy is hedging against China rather than balancing. The Vietnamese Prime Minister's recent 2016 visit to China has brought about nine documents to be signed, including the five-year development economic cooperation

plan 2017-2021, an agreement on non-refundable aid between Vietnam and China, a US\$ 250 million loan for the Cat Linh-Ha Dong metro line and other agreements on education cooperation and climate change mitigation.⁴⁵ The visit was also aimed at managing maritime differences and maintaining peace and stability amid simmering tensions in the South China Sea.

In contrast, Vietnam has sought to maintain good relations with China. This is because China has long served as Vietnam's ideological model that could contribute to the long-lasting survival of its communist regime. While Vietnam views China as an external security threat, Vietnam also views the American advocacy to promote human rights and democracy as a threat to its regime.⁴⁶ The act of promoting such values encourages the Vietnamese people to better understand or reevaluate their rights as citizens, potentially prompting them to demand more from their government in terms of economic and political freedoms.

In this sense, securing friendly ties with China is a top priority for the Vietnamese government to make sure that the survival of their communist regime is sustained and avoids the same fate of other communist parties in Eastern Europe.⁴⁷ Professor Carl Thayer categorizes the Sino-

⁴⁴ FirstPost. *India signs 12 agreements with Vietnam, extends \$500m for defence cooperation*. September 3, 2016. <https://www.firstpost.com/world/india-signs-12-agreements-with-vietnam-extends-500m-for-defence-cooperation-2989334.html> (accessed March 17, 2018).

⁴⁵ VTV. *Vietnamese Prime Minister visits China*. September 13, 2016. <http://english.vtv.vn/news/vietnamese-prime-minister-visits-china-20160929172118524.htm> (accessed March 18, 2018).

⁴⁶ Liu, Ruonan, and Xuefeng Sun. "Regime security first: explaining Vietnam's security policies towards the United States and China (1992–2012)." *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 5 (2015): 755–778.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 756–760.

Vietnamese ideological relationship as “close as lips and teeth”.⁴⁸ He further notes that even though the growing tension at the South China Sea still exists, the Vietnamese leaders have regularly conducted both formal and informal state visits to Beijing in order to exchange views on party-building and economic development.⁴⁹ Such act encapsulates Vietnamese top political elites’ significant recognition towards China as an ideological big brother. It seems that Vietnam’s approaches China is often fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, it does not feel that China can be trusted when it comes to the issue of national security because of the South China Sea dispute. On the other hand, it has to forge good relations with Beijing in order to secure its communist regime since China has a lot to offer in terms of developing economy with the communist ideology.

Conclusion

Cambodia approaches China with the soft bandwagoning policy. With this strategy, Cambodia stands to gain much of Chinese support to fight against its former aggressor – Vietnam – in case it chooses to pursue future invasions. Meanwhile, the authoritarian leader of Cambodia needs China to serve as a source of support while confronting pressures of the international community that stem from its record of human rights abuses and declining demo-

cracy. For Vietnam, the country pursues an intelligent multi-faceted hedging policy. This is because China can provide the support that Vietnam needs to guarantee the survival of its regime in the face of ongoing external pressure on its human rights abuses and communist rule. However, Vietnam views China and its expansionist policy at the South China Sea as a real threat to its sovereign territory. In order to navigate the situation created by these two security concerns, Vietnam has sought to make more friends, who have viewed China as their strategic competitors, to gain both economic and military support that could serve as a hedging tool against the rising dragon.

Cambodia’s decisions to hedge against Vietnam by soliciting help from China appears to be strategically promising. In the meantime, China has always been willing to accommodate Cambodia’s request. Nevertheless, the Cambodian government should exercise caution whenever it softly aligns itself with China as the country risks being trapped into Chinese sphere of influence, possibly undermining its foreign policy’s neutrality and later becoming a Chinese proxy. Cambodia should actively engage “in regional multilateral arrangements, particularly ASEAN and strengthening Cambodia’s relations with other major powers” in order to have room for maneuver.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Thayer, Carlyle A. "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest." *Asian Survey* 34, no. 6 (June 1994): 513-528.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 524-525.

⁵⁰ Chanborey, Cheunboran. "Southeast Asian Responses to Sino-US Rivalry: A Cambodian Perspective." *Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies* 05 (August 2016).

As for Vietnam, encouraging multipolar balance in sync with the major powers such as the United States, Japan, India, and Australia is critically important for the country to navigate through uncertain security threat. In addition, Vietnam should work closely with other Southeast Asian states to strengthen the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea that could possibly prevent China from taking any unilateral decisions through socializing it with these institutionalized norms. The options for Vietnam to deal with China remain limited/The country needs to push its military modernization as fast as possible if it wants to deter future Chinese aggression.

The theoretical lesson learned from this comparative study is that the primary objective of small states' foreign policy usually develops around maintaining their national security, which has been informed by the International Relations theory of "realism". Furthermore, both authoritarian and communist elites are concerned about how their foreign policy strategies help secure their regime. In the case of Cambodia, the current prime minister must

secure support from Beijing if he wishes to stay in power. If he loses the elections at some point in the future and stages a military coup to remain in power, he will require Beijing's cooperation. For Vietnam, the successful lessons from Beijing on how to open up economically and diplomatically and foster economic growth are vitally important. As Vietnam intends to move away from China, this shift may put their regime in jeopardy. The concerns over national security and regime survival of authoritarian and communist small states seem to be similar elsewhere. In order to theorize small states' foreign policy, the future study should look at other regions in Asia such as the Central Asian countries between Russia and China and the South Asian countries between India and China. The findings from these future researches are likely to contribute to the theorization of small states' foreign policy.

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The Balance Between Values

Cultural Tensions Surrounding Thai Comedy

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Abstract

Thai culture in general finds reasons to celebrate and have fun — anything can be turned into a reason to have a good time. Humor in Thailand, however, exists on a spectrum, and can sometimes be controversial. There is a marked tension between what is considered proper conduct and what is “sanuk” or “fun.” Of course, there is always a proper way to have fun, but Thai humor often finds itself reaching for the taboo. This paper aims to explore the cultural evolution of Thai comedy in performance, analyzing different contexts and forms, and tracing how the values of sanuk and being a proper Thai have influenced performance in Thailand over time.

Countless times, I’ve tried to share the delight of a Thai commercial with my American peers, only to be met with confusion. To be fair, I perceive some Thai humor as bordering on absurdity, so their reaction is not necessarily unjustified. For someone familiar with the Thai life and language, however, the Thai sense of humor has a unique charm and spirit that I’ve never encountered anywhere else. The best part for me, as a foreign expat who was born and raised in Thailand, was witnessing Thais poke fun at their own incongruities. Thai humor is filled with puns and social

commentary that would be considered rude if they were not in the context of entertainment. Set up a stage, however, and the rules change.

I lived in Chiang Mai, a bustling city full of art and culture, until I was 18. When I was young, I picked up the northern dialect quickly and would often translate for my mother. There were years during my childhood when my parents would provide housing for their Thai students in our own home — a lack of educational opportunities in rural regions often meant that young people would come to

the city without a support network, and few housing options. My parents would often take these young people in: at one point, we had thirteen students living with us. As I grew older, I attended an international school where I studied the Central Thai language and became friends with children of high-ranking diplomats and businessmen. This gave me a unique perspective on the social value systems of Thailand, having lived alongside people from both the lower and upper economic and social classes.

For an American, the Thai expression of comedy can sometimes flirt with political incorrectness — often too much for comfort. Take, for example, this 2007 commercial for Sylvania light bulbs. The scene opens with a family sitting outside having a picnic. A young boy asks his father a series of questions.

BOY (*pointing*): What's that?

FATHER: That's a Thai ghost called "Kra-Sue"; it's looking for things to eat at night time.

BOY (*pointing*): Dad?

FATHER: Another ghost called "Kra-Hung"; it always flies around.

BOY (*referencing a ghost holding a bunch of bananas*): Can I have that banana?

FATHER: No son, that belongs to the banana ghost.

BOY: So, that's a jackfruit ghost, right?

FATHER (*hushed*): No, that's a transvestite (*kathoe*).¹

BOY: Oh. Got it.

FATHER: Good.

BOY: Dad! A blue ghost!

The blue ghost runs. The camera pans to show two very long legs.

FATHER (*nonchalant*): Hey, a tall ghost. (*To the ghost:*) What the hell are you standing here for? We are having dinner. Go away!

The ghost walks away. The image shifts to a wide shot of the family surrounded by the ghosts.

FATHER (*ignoring the ghosts, throwing a rock at an off-screen dog who is barking*): Damn ... Shut up!

The commercial cuts to the light bulbs being advertised.

NARRATOR. Under the light, nothing seems to be scary.

The lights flicker off and the scene goes dark; the family starts to scream.

(JEH United Ltd.)

For many Americans, it might be unthinkable to make a joke regarding gender non-conformity; this is the jarring political incorrectness that I referred to earlier. This can be understood as an

¹ The Thai word *kathoe* used in this commercial refers to a character who is male dressed as a female. This word has been understood differently over the course of time and is often used to refer to a general "third gender" category, under which several identities might fall. (Taweewuttichai 9)

example of how “benign violation theories of humor” are subjective to the audience. Benign violation theory suggests that a violation of a rule can be humorous if accompanied by an element that suggests that its violation is benign. When a certain emotional attachment is formed to the construct poised for violation, however, an intended joke is not well received by its audience (Oring 57). Individuals carry varying emotional attachments to perceived norms, rules, and expectations; I propose that the same is true for cultural groups. Studies suggest that humor and joking function to establish a community — the joke being a way to determine if an individual is intellectually, socially, and emotionally compatible with the group while also establishing commonalities for cohesion (Fine and De Soucey 2). It would be an interesting line of inquiry to explore the Thai reaction to the joke from that particular advertisement. Even though Thais might demonstrate a higher tolerance for certain brands of humor than Americans, there is still a tension within Thai culture concerning what kinds of humor are appropriate inappropriate. This raises two ideas I hope to pursue further in this paper. The first is the emphasis placed on the importance of “fun,” or *sanuk*, in Thai culture. The second is the Thai value placed on proper conduct and appearance. There is a brashness in some Thai comedy that would be considered indecent or lewd by Thai standards. Comedy itself is a controversial form in many cultures, because it tends to push boundaries; and the same is true for Thailand. So while a good portion

of Thai comedy is charming, there is also an intriguing clash of value systems not just between cultures (such as the American reaction to some Thai humor) but also within the culture itself. These internal value systems at work are evolving, and responding to the modernization of a country rich in tradition. Contemporary politics, tourism, and trade collide with heritage, religion, and national identity, resulting in wide array of comic expressions. This paper will touch upon some of the ways in which value systems have either evolved or remained the same within Thai comic performance, giving specific focus to the two often-conflicting values of *sanuk* and respectable behavior for Thai people. The study will incorporate both Thai and non-Thai scholarly perspectives, as well as my own extensive observations and experience in Thailand.

It is a common understanding to those with any experience in Thailand that “fun” is an important part of Thai life (Kislenko, 175). Celebrations can last for days, weeks, or even months longer than they would in other cultures. There is at least one celebration observed each month of the year, if not more (166); I remember telling someone once that it felt as if the Thai invented reasons to throw parties. Historically, the value of *sanuk* permeated even some of the most serious of circumstances, including various religious rites. Some of the earliest accounts of Thai comic performance have been recorded as interludes between somber eulogies and rituals during funerals. These comedic performances are known as *suat Phra Malai*

(Polachan 440). Up until the reign of King Rama V (1873-1910), *suat Phra Malai* contained brash humor, such as jokes regarding male genitalia, to keep audiences engaged (441). This is already a stark contrast to the American system for mourning, in which coarse joking would usually be considered inappropriate at events such as funerals or venues such as churches. In Thailand, however, Buddhist temples were where the fun began. Temples historically supported the art of shadow puppetry, and are still renowned for their festivals (Tawalongsri 12) — I have childhood memories of lying awake at night with a pillow over my head as the temple next door blasted the neighborhood with music and laughter until sunrise.

It is important to note that joking and laughter associated with traditional Thai Buddhist ritual was not necessarily separate from the power or potency of that ritual. To employ humor was not to suggest that the ritual was not sacred; in fact, some scholars have noted that humor was an important part of the ritual vehicle. Peter Vandergeest and Paritta Chalernpow-Koanantakool refer to a term called *saskit*² in their article reviewing the historical contexts of Thai shadow puppetry. According to Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool, *saskit* was a kind of potency available to the lower class, associated with healing, midwifery, and performance (315). Men who practiced rituals with this potency often obtained their knowledge from their time spent as novice

monks during childhood; they would leave the monkhood at an appointed time, but would still offer their knowledge as a service to the community. The events or rituals requiring this potency were not to be taken lightly: they were regarded as events attracting evil spirits that posed a significant threat to the safety of those involved. The Thai shadow theatre, commonly known as *nang tulung*, often accompanied spiritually significant events such as a *kae bon* ceremony, the formal releasing from a vow (Koanantakool 45). Other instances would include the rites associated with cremation, wake ceremonies, or ordination into the monkhood (47). Potency usually involved a formula or incantation performed by the puppeteer; but according to Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool, the comedy of the clown characters found in *nang tulung* was also a vital component of this potency (309). Other scholars have noted that many highly revered puppeteers have claimed that the comic element is one of the most important experiences of a shadow play, second only to music (Dowsey-Magog 191). How exactly humor is linked to potency is largely speculative in my current research. Some scholars note the potency of the clown puppets in *nang tulung*, giving reference to the order in which they are stored: below the *rusi* (wise men or teachers) but above the heavenly beings. They also speak about certain clown characters from other traditions that are considered potent, such as *Semar* in

² The authors do not provide the Thai spelling of this word, and there is reason to question its transliteration. In my research, I found no other source using the term “*saskit*”; but I am aware of a similar word “*sakti*,” which is commonly translated to mean “power.”

Javanese shadowplay, who is said to be a god born on earth (Vandergeest and Chalermkow-Koanantakool 313). While this does little to explain why such a value is reserved for the clown characters, it does indicate that their potency is acknowledged.

One potential explanation involves the timing of these rituals. Certain milestones or situations in the human lifespan might attract the attention of an evil spirit, according to the Thai-Buddhist worldview (Kislenko 37). Ways of diverting spirits from inflicting harm often involve tricking the spirits. For example, someone might call a baby ugly to make the child seem less of an attractive target for a spirit wanting to inflict harm (38). If humor is indeed part of the potency of a ritual, perhaps it functions as a distraction or even a pleasurable experience for the spirits as well. Or perhaps a good sense of humor accompanies potency as a general rule. This topic certainly warrants further research.

How is it possible for humor to infiltrate sacred spaces and events in a manner that maintains respect and proper conduct? Another significant Thai value that is just as strong as the value of *sanuk* is the value of proper conduct and appearance. Though there are several words that could define the parameters of propriety, there are two key terms that I will focus on to examine what it means to be a respectable Thai. “*Maw-som*” refers to respectable behavior, while the term *riap roy* refers to modest attire, polite manners, and refined speech (Zefreys 71). My experience growing up in Thailand leaves me with the impression that propriety is twofold,

presenting itself in both behavior and appearance.

An example of *sanuk* conflicting with *maw-som* is seen with the ascent of King Rama V into power. The king viewed *suat Phra Malai* as religiously irreverent and banned any form of coarse humor connected to religious practice, threatening to decommission monks who violated his ban on comedic performance during religious ceremonies. Many monks chose to retire from religious life as a way to keep those comic traditions alive (Polachan 3). This illustrates a cultural tension that continues in modern Thai culture.

Since the early incarnations of comic performance, Thai comedy has branched out from its Buddhist roots. Though it now operates in the secular world of political and social satire, the tension between *sanuk* and respectful conduct is just as much of a concern as in the days of King Rama V.

One example of comedic forms that challenge the concept of proper conduct would be *talok café*. This form of comedy rose from the migration of workers of lower social standing from the Isan provinces to Bangkok. Today, *talok café* has a tendency towards obscene sexual humor — but Wangkawan Polachan comments in her article “Buddhism and Thai Comic Performance” that the lewdness of *talok café* has often prevented the presence of respectable Thai women in the audience (446). This would be an example where the Thai concept of proper conduct, and the idea of what it means to be a respectable Thai

woman, clash with certain comedic genres of performance.

Another prime example of how cultural expectations for propriety battle the presence of fun in Thai comedy is evident in the treatment of a well-known clown character in *nang tulung*, Theng. There has been a recent movement to popularize the clown character by making him appropriate for children. However, Theng has traditionally been anything but child-appropriate; his original form as a shadow puppet involves one of his fingers being shaped like a penis. The tamed rendition of Theng excludes his vulgar sense of humor and presents him without physical deformity. Known as “Uncle Theng,” his presence in children’s literature reinforces cleanliness and personal hygiene, which is an element of *riap roy* (Vandergeest and Chalermkow-Koanantakool 324).

Within Thai comedic forms we also see a light mockery of Thai society, which is incongruent with the value of proper conduct. A “proper” Thai is expected to have a strong command of the Thai language, with clear pronunciation. Yet Vandergeest and Chalermkow-Koanantakool point out that although there is a central dialect that is regarded as the correct way to speak Thai, there are dialects of Thai that are vastly different from each other; this often results in miscommunication between native Thai speakers from different regions. A foreigner learning to speak Thai might notice that different Thai people vary in their pronunciation of words. Sometimes a rolling “r” becomes an “l” sound; and though this is a widely

understood way of speaking, it is not uncommon for this manner of speaking to become the butt of a joke in Thai comedy (323). There are even tonal differences between dialects that contribute to humorous moments of confusion: the Southern Thai dialect can have up to eight tones, which may confuse those who speak the Central Thai dialect, which only has five tones (Dowsey-Magog 200). In addition, just as Thais have no qualms about mocking their own dialectic differences, they have no qualms about mockery of foreigners. In the days when *suat Phra Malai* was banned by King Rama V, there was a verbal type of humor known as *o’k phasa*. This humor mocked foreigners’ pronunciation of Thai words (Polachan 441). From the American point of view, such mockery might be seen as racist or ethnocentric and generally unacceptable; to the Thai, however, there are two functions to this kind of jesting. The first is the creation of a group identity — separating the foreign from the collective and reinforcing group cohesion (440). The second is that light mockery is considered good-natured in regards to language in general, Thai or otherwise; and it would not be uncommon to find, say, someone from the Isan province willingly doling out jokes about his own pattern of speech and cultural idiosyncrasies (441). It would be hard to justify the mockery of a foreigner to an American, however, which makes this aspect of Thai culture distinctly different.

There are other elements found in Thai comedy that are generally viewed as benign and acceptable forms of entertainment, but which challenge the limits of what

is appropriate from an American standpoint. There are various comic characters that are popular among the Thai, such as characters with unique physical attributes or lower intelligence, *Khatoey* characters, or persons with Down Syndrome (Polahan 446-447). This is something that might shock the common American audience, where it would be considered inappropriate to make any person with different qualities the punchline to a joke. As with the Isan comedian making light of his own linguistic idiosyncrasies, however, it is not uncommon to find a person with Down Syndrome as a willing actor in his role (447).

As previously discussed, one group that is often targeted in Thai comedy is the LGBTQ+ community. Milagros Expósito-Barea speaks to the level of acceptance versus tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community in Thailand. On the one hand, Thai cinema has made the effort to increase empathy for the LGBTQ+ population by creating stories that show the struggle of being tolerated, but not accepted, by society. For the most part, however, transgendered or homosexual characters remain popular comic relief characters, which Expósito-Barea suggests is a huge component in reinforcing stereotypes (193). Polachan, however, while addressing the same issue, claims that such joking is not meant to mock transgender people or homosexuals, but rather to make fun of the comedian who is in the role (449). These differing analyses are an excellent example of the ways in which scholars from different cultures might have different perspectives on the same social issues. Both scholars speak to the

misconception that Thailand is completely friendly toward the LGBTQ+ community, but Expósito-Barea is more critical in assessing the nature of Thai tolerance. He explains that, although Thailand is known for its “ladyboy” cabarets and its sex trade industry, the status of being homosexual or transgender is not necessarily celebrated. Buddhism, though the largest reason for tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community in Thailand, also contributes to a stigma against members of that community. Since Buddhism’s main goal is to control desires, having sex at all is seen as a barrier to achieving enlightenment — even more so if the sexual behavior seems to violate a “natural order.” Expósito-Barea also points out that Thai Buddhists will often contend that if one is attracted to the same gender, or feels as if their gender identity does not “match” their physical biology, it is because they are working out bad karma from a previous life (192-193). So there seems to be a negative stigma attached to same-sex attraction and transgendered people, even though the country boasts a high tolerance of people identifying as LGBTQ+. Expósito-Barea also makes a connection between traditional identities and modern progress in the representation of LGBTQ people in the media:

A very common theme in Thai cinema is the opposition of urban versus rural. Rural areas are presided [*sic*] by a series of connotations such as the traditional idea of the foundation of Thai society on basic principles of harmony

between man and nature. Conversely, in the urban environment of the city, people forget their origins and set themselves free from tradition, embracing the influence of modernity and extravagant behaviors. In most of the films mentioned above, *kathoey* migrate from the countryside to cities where they come out of the closet and freely express their so-called sexual deviation (200).

This poses the question: is the idea of proper conduct changing in Thailand to reflect an inclusivity of various sexual orientations and identities? If this is so, how much longer will the existence of a transgender or homosexual comic relief character be an acceptable source of humor?

Polachan, however, speaks to the ways in which the portrayal of transgender people and homosexuals is not congruent with how these demographic groups present themselves in Thai society. The comic characters are known to be lewd and brash, but Polachan contends that transgender people and homosexuals usually strive to be polite members of Thai society (449).

If this is the case, then which scholar is more accurately representing the issue? Does cultural proximity to the issue necessarily mean a clearer perspective? Does an outside perspective necessarily have a full understanding either?

Though the function of such characters in Thai culture is debatable,

different interpretations such as this could point to the idea that taking offense or perceiving certain social injustices might be a cultural construct. If, in a culture, the making of jokes based on physical features or cognitive shortcomings is a way of integrating, accepting, and celebrating the different, it may not in fact inflict the same harm as it would within a culture that makes these jokes as a way of exercising power. Thai comedy tends to challenge oppressive forces or authorities of power. This could inform the tensions between what is fun and what is proper.

There was a time when the Thai government responded to the unabashed humor of *nang tulung* by trying to regulate its content. Pamphlets were distributed giving detailed instruction for the proper exercise of shadowplay (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 325), and government officials would honor the more traditional and “proper” puppeteers — an example would be the designation of Nang Kan, a famous traditional puppeteer, as “Folk Artist of the Nation” in 1985 (328). It could be said that the concept of *riap roy* holds strongly with the elite, whereas the value of *sanuk* finds a stronger footing with the working class. That does not mean that there is not a presence of both values among each class; but it may suggest that the distribution of power influences the nature and content of comedic performance — the ebb and flow between proper conduct and fun.

The comedic elements in *nang tulung* also rely heavily on improvisation, which allows for a special kind of

communication to take place between the performer and the audience — dialogue can be fluid enough to remain relevant and respond to the social dynamics of the community without disrupting the story line (Koanantakool 43). For jokes of this nature to fly, it would require that the puppeteer be familiar with the culture of his audience and the issues that apply to their lives. This might also have contributed to the government's need to enforce stricter rules regarding *nang tulung* performances, since improvisation is not scripted and therefore cannot be held accountable to any set standards prior to a performance.

Another aspect of *nang tulung* that may also demonstrate the tensions between humor and conduct would be the nature of the genre's clowns. Clown characters are prominent in Thai shadowplay, driving much of action with their comedic dialogue. There are six clown characters that are constant across all variations of *nang tulung*. A distinctive feature common to all six clowns is their rough appearance and association with the working class in Southern Thailand. All clowns speak in the southern dialect and are primarily concerned with their basic human needs. This provides an excellent opportunity for satire to develop, as the actions of the clowns are contrasted with the refined actions of noble characters (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 312-313).

Issues surrounding the *nang tulung* performance style provide another example of the tensions between having fun and being proper. There are two schools of thought in the making of *nang tulung*. There

are more traditional performances, known as *nang booran*, where the focus is on the potency of the ritual and the didactic elements of the story (Dowsey-Magog 186). Nang Kan, for example, is a puppeteer who attributes his success to being “gentle, good mannered, and avoiding impropriety” (Koanantakool 50). Then there are performances, referred to as *nang samai*, that strive to keep up with modern progress (Dowsey-Magog 186). These performances are produced for their entertainment value, and puppeteers often prioritize creating content that sells (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 319). Modern forms of *nang tulung* also have more of a tendency to follow the stories and characters of film and literature. Nang Phrom Noi, for example, draws much of his inspiration from comic books and Indian television (Dowsey-Magog 189). A subcategory of *nang samai* is known as *nang kan muang*, translated as “political shadowplay.” Nang Phrom Noi was a significant contributor to the genre during the time of the 1976 coup; common themes in his work included corruption among government officials, and the younger generation teaching the older generation about modern progress (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 319).

The concept of the “younger teaching the elder” was something I found surprising. To understand my reaction, one has to first look at the three pillars of Thai national identity: language, religion, and the monarchy (317). Social behavior toward anyone embodying these symbols observes a strict code of conduct. For example, I was

raised with the knowledge that the position of my *wai* – where I placed my hands when I greeted a person – should change based on their status in society. Growing up, I was told that should I ever be granted an audience with the King, I would have to approach him on my hands and knees, placing my *wai* above my head. It was emphasized to me that to challenge or mock any office that carries symbols of national identity is a bold action with severe consequences, punishable by law. I was also raised with the notion that ruling authorities are regarded as “fathers” or “mothers” of the nation. I’ve made the observation, over my time spent in Thailand, that this reverence trickles down from sacred national identity to roles executed within the nuclear family. It has been my experience that fathers and mothers within households are expected to be given a reflection of the kind of reverence one might have for a governing authority; so the idea of the “younger” educating the “older” could be seen as counter-cultural. This takes the often-didactic role of the puppeteer into new waters. Traditionally, Thai culture looks to these art forms as educational resources, which leaves audiences vulnerable to the influence of a modern performance intended to provide commentary rather than education. Traditional artists argue that shadowplay is losing its identity, and they accuse Nang Phrom Noi for disrupting the unity of their nation (Vandergeest and Chalernpow-Koanantakool 321-322).

This speaks to the tensions that exist between the role of teacher and entertainer in *nang tulung* performance. As previously

stated, though comedy enhances the entertainment value of a performance, in many cases it also has a didactic element (Koanantakool 44-45). This is important to understand within the context of Thai culture. Harkening back to my previous discussion concerning codified behavior towards people of status, I was taught that there were certain levels of rank in society for various vocations. A teacher, for example, was regarded with the same respect as a doctor; and it is my experience that teachers are given a higher status in Thai society than in American society. So to say that a performer also carries the responsibility of a social and moral teacher would carry a significant weight for the Thai people. This could be why the conversation about what is appropriate for *nang tulung* carries so much significance for those who value the art form’s traditional role.

Lastly, it would be a mistake to neglect the most popular form of folk theatre known to Thailand: *likay*. Some scholars claim that *likay* has religious roots, stemming from the Malaysian Muslim tradition (Smithies 36). It is said that as the Malay tradition progressed, jokes were interwoven with prayers and that the Thai people saw this as an opportunity for entertainment and started to imitate the Malaysian form (Maha HH Prince Dhaninivat Vajiravudh and Bibyalabh 3). If this is true, it demonstrates that the value of *sanuk* has had a long-standing influence on the development of Thai entertainment over the course of history.

Other scholars, however, contend that *likay* may have Indian origins, and are reluctant to fully support theories tying the form to Malaysia (Smithies 37). *Likay*'s form today, however, is a far cry from its origin as a form of worship. Michael Smithies describes it as a bawdy form of improvisational theatre with loose choreography and musical elements (35). Interestingly, however, the modern *likay* audience is largely comprised of women, with plotlines designed for their interests. This is an interesting contrast when compared to *talok café*, which is geared toward a largely male audience. *Likay* has not necessarily been described as appropriate or proper by authorities on the subject; it is referred to by Prince Vajirāvudh as “vulgar” (9), while Smithies notes that the actors involved in *likay* are typically seen as “morally loose by the upper class” (60).

Likay is in decline due to the rising popularity of television. Smithies suggests that this could be because *likay* produced for television has been cleaned up from its thrown-together and low-budget aesthetic to be more polite and respectable (61). It is unclear whether this shift is due to the attempt to appeal to a wider audience, since the improvisational nature of *likay* doesn't translate well to scripted television, or if this is because there is a cultural expectation for television programming to maintain a certain level of decorum.

Regardless, all forms of traditional Thai performance, whether comedic or not,

face the threat of extinction as film gains popularity. *Sanuk* is a value that seems to carry over well into modern forms — comedic elements keep audiences engaged. *Nang tulung*, for example, has survived into the modern era because many puppeteers have decided to cater to audiences drawn to spectacle and comedy. By no means does this imply that the Thai are abandoning their values of proper social conduct in favor of what is popular and fun; it is simply an observation regarding what elements seem to be contributing to the perpetuation of traditional forms in the modern era, when film and television are major competing industries.

One element of culture that will always remain true is that its forms will change — culture is not static. Change is bound to happen, creating a cycle of losing culture, preserving culture, and making culture. The value of being “a proper Thai” assists in preserving art forms through traditional performance styles with sacred significance, while the value of *sanuk* assists in preserving the forms through reinventing the content and engaging audiences in an entertainment context. As society changes, newer art forms also arise — borrowing from their predecessors on occasion, but standing alone with unique conventions. In all cases, however, it is clear that in Thailand these two values remain constant, with their natural tension creating dynamic avenues for comic relief.

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Collective Memory and Embodiment of the Naga in the Northern Thai Cultural Landscape

An Introductory Observation

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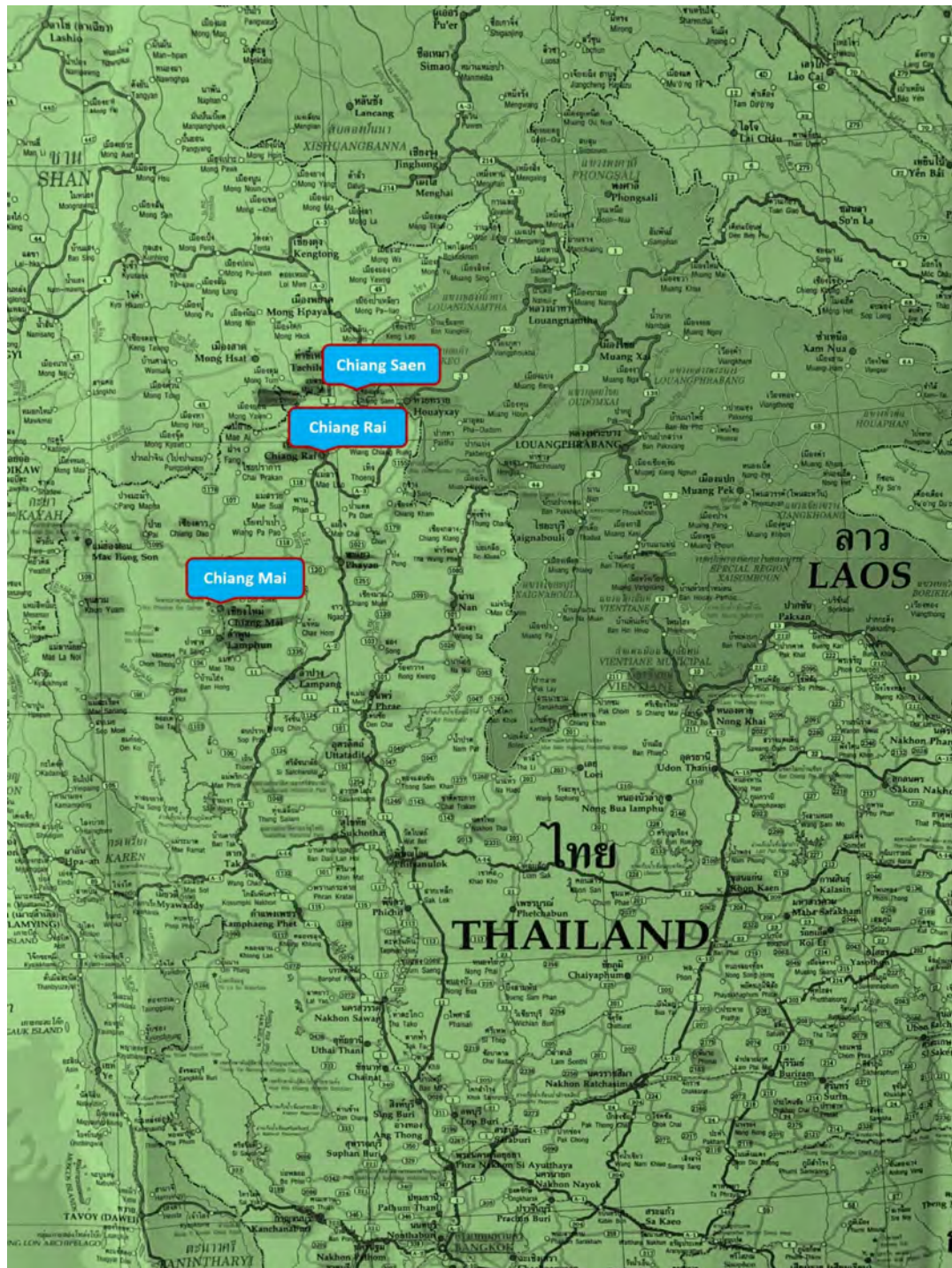
Abstract

A powerful myth tells of the naga, a serpentine spirit or deity, which came to destroy the town known as Yonok after its ruler became unrighteous. Despite this divine retribution, the people of the town chose to rebuild. In many Buddhist traditions, the naga is seen as the guardian of the land and the creator and protector of rivers, lands, villages, and towns. The naga myth is used to understand the changing landscapes. Moreover, it frequently gives people the agency to act, feel, and reflect on their self-embodiment. This paper argues that the myth is an agentive element for people to initiate action. The myth is used as a referential knowledge by the people to interact as well as modify the physical landscapes. It is also seen as a source of knowledge for people to negotiate individual and communal identity within the larger social space.

Prologue

I grew up in a Theravada Buddhist environment. Every week we went to the temple to participate in religious ceremonies and to cherish the Buddha. We observed Buddhist practices such as offering food to the monks, praying to Lord Buddha, and accepting the monks' blessings. During the chanting ritual, people sit on the floor of the *sala* (an open villa and common building where people perform most religious

activities at the temple) with their palms put together by their chest, in gesture we call '*phanom mue*', to pay respect to either the Lord Buddha or the monks. Each time as the ceremony progressed, I always felt some enormous energy enveloping us. The energy, which I could not easily identify, emerged either from the atmosphere generated by the collection of people in the *sala* or the space inside the *sala* itself. It seemed as if the space within the *sala*



Map of the studied area, Northern Thailand and Laos

Image: Piyawit Moonkham

released this energy, making people act in a certain way: the ways in which people have been practicing for generations or what they developed from their immediate understanding.

The differing reactions of people are not limited to the chanting process. They also vary from one space to another, such as the spaces adjacent to the Buddha statues and other religious figures, namely naga staircases, or the distance from those items. I came to realize that certain materials and objects could affect people's actions, especially animated objects that are related to religious beliefs. As Bautista and Reid suggest "faiths have social, public lives that are lived in and through the believer's engagement with tangible things and spaces."¹ Thus, the relationship between people and those spiritually significant objects also somehow reflects their interactions and behaviors. It helps people maintain a sense of understanding the external world and internal self. This engagement creates meaning through the process of living in addition to the practices which are involved with space and things at all times. Furthermore, through the process

of living and cultural practices, people also create the sense or sensation from those living spaces. These living spaces, such as buildings and material elements, in turn, affect the ones who are dwelling through religious practice within that space as well.² This paper will mainly discuss and illustrate this theoretical picture through analyzing particular religious practices and beliefs in the Northern Thai cultural landscape. This region's broad floodplain, ringed by its misty mountains and rivers, has landscape features that are seemingly perfect as a natural abode for spirits. Historically, beliefs in spirits pervaded all aspects of religious life and daily activities of the people in Northern Thailand. Many oral traditions are believed to originate from such spiritual beliefs, many of which predate the introduction of Buddhism. In this region, the mythical serpent, or the naga, is seen as a protector and guardian of the land and rivers. Some scholars believe that the naga may have been one of the local beliefs which were practiced by the local people long before.³ However, the naga eventually became a part of Buddhist tradition and belief as there is an abundance of their

¹ Julius Bautista and Anthony Reid, "Introduction: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia," in *the spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia*, ed. Julius Bautista (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), 3.

² Rebecca Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 134-142.

Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 152-174.

Anna Kallen, *Stones Standing: Archaeology, Colonialism, and Ecotourism in Northern Laos* (California: Walnut Creek, 2015), 25-30.

³ The estimated time that Buddhism was introduced into Southeast Asia was around the third century C.E. according to many Southeast Asian Chronicles or *Tamnan*. However, according to archaeological evidence, the earliest form of Buddhist practice appeared in the region around the seventh century C.E., see Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995); and Charles Higham and Rachanie Thosarat, *Prehistoric Thailand: From Early Settlement to Sukhothai* (Bangkok: River Books, 1998).

figures in most Buddhist temples and stories in Buddhist texts.⁴ It also became a significant actor in some of the major stories of the Buddha's past lives and other related stories. Perhaps, its most important role is in its protecting of the Lord Buddha after he reached an enlightenment. Accordingly, the naga was later adopted to be the guardian of the Lord Buddha's followers.⁵

This paper examines two aspects of the naga myth. First, I argue that the naga myth itself has an agency to initiate people's actions and that it can be seen as a figure which partially acts on their behalf. In other words, the naga myth and individual actors influence one another to initiate the same action to fulfill the same purpose while the action is in motion. As such, the naga myth also reflects an individual's self-embodiment, regardless of their actual belief. Second, the spaces which have been created by the naga myth represent the contestation and negotiation between local belief and mainstream Buddhist concepts.⁶ In other words, the naga myth plays a role as an alternative space for people to relate their self-embodiments to the myth in order to understand how the world functions and to

reposition themselves within the larger social space. To emphasize the argument, this paper also discusses the agentic elements of the naga myth which have influenced northern Thai people's perceptions and understandings of self and embodiment. By emphasizing people's worldviews of the naga myth, it can also demonstrate the way in which people are interacting with their community and their physical environment and space. Furthermore, it seeks to illustrate how people's worldviews and understandings have transformed the cultural landscapes to become their monumentality.⁷

The Body of the Naga

Apart from the scenic picture that begins to develop with the ideas of mainstream monastic Buddhism, people in my village incorporate other forms of practice which involve animated objects, including a window ghost's amulet and the story about naga.⁸ I first came across the naga when I was young. My grandmother told me the story of this mythical creature every night with a full moon, recounting tales of how some of them have certain

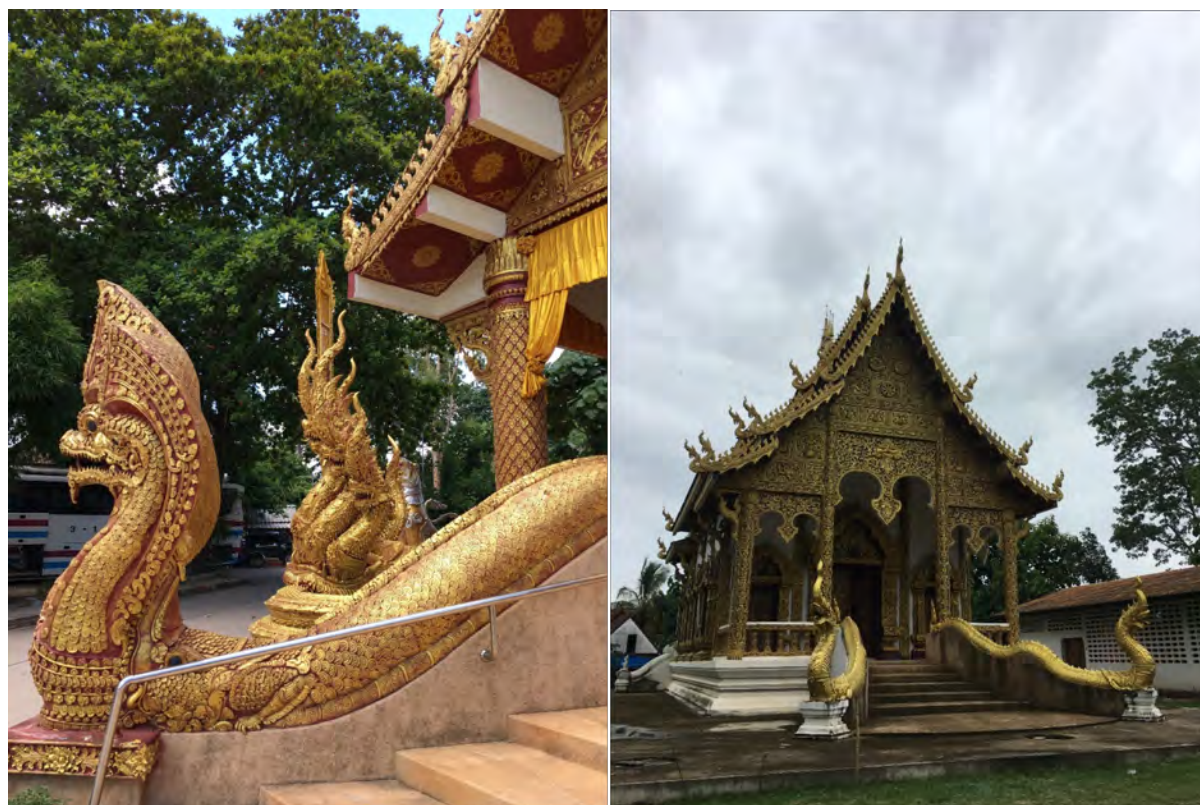
⁴ Promporn Phakkham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics in Mekong Basin and Upper Northeastern Thailand*. (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 2007) in Thai.

⁵ Phakkham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics*, 33-38.

⁶ Or state-sponsored Buddhism, see more Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461-487.

⁷ The notion of "monumentality" refers to the production, or reproduction, and transformation of collective memories in relation to the landscape. Monumentality attempts to understand what kinds of memories were given "permanent material form as monument, and why particular versions of the past were privileged over others," see Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 237.

⁸ This practice is also common in the rural area in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, see more detail on Mary Beth Mills, "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 244-273.



Naga staircases in front of the *vihan*.

Image: Piyawit Moonkham

magical or supernatural powers that can either bless or harm people. However, from what my grandmother told me, the naga are best understood as good supernatural beings and that the figure of naga is always connected to the Buddha statue of my birthdate (I was born on Saturday which people believe that the *nak prok* Buddha, the Buddha under the naga, is the designated Buddha image for the people who were born on Saturday). People often believe that some power can be generated through this figure of the naga.⁹ I cannot help but notice certain reactions, like pausing, speechlessness, or even idleness, when people hear about the naga. This is what I am interested in observing: peoples' self-embodiment

within certain spaces. While I conducted interviews with informants from Northern Thailand, although some of them are not originally from the region, they have heard stories about the naga since they were young. For those who come from outside of the region, they have come to feel a closer affinity to the story as they now live closer to Northern Thailand where the stories remain prominent.

The naga, or '*nak*' in Thai, mostly refers to the serpent-like mythical creature which is believed to possess a certain supernatural power to give protection and wealth. In Buddhist belief, they are considered to be the guardian of the

⁹ Peerach Likhitsomboon, *The Nowadays of Buddha Image Under Naga* (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, MA Thesis, 2005) in Thai.

religion.¹⁰ The naga is strongly connected with many sects or schools of Buddhism and Hinduism as well as features in religious texts, such as the Vedas, but none can trace its origin.¹¹ Although it is believed to have emerged from the ritual worship of serpents or serpentine deities in many places, such as Egypt, Greece, Roman as well as the Iranian Plateau, none of these traditions can link to the naga in Southeast Asian region or in the West Pacific.¹² With particular social and communal contexts, people in much of Southeast Asia have developed their own belief of this serpent creating their own unique 'naga.'

In Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, I still go to the temple at least once a week to make merit by either releasing live fishes, which were about to be killed at the market, or offering some practical gifts to the monks. I usually walk mindfully past the staircase in front of the main hall or *vihan* (*vihara* in Pali) where the figures of the naga are often located. With their sparkling skin in various colors and the extra pointer head(s), and the way that their bodies lay down on the staircases, it alludes to the meanings of the sacred, powerful, pure, and

wise one. It indeed becomes the protector of the place.¹³ They are often seen as the ones who are without sin and equal to the Buddha.¹⁴ The naga play many important roles by appearing in many stories from the life of the Buddha and, periodically, as the individual who aims to enter into Buddhahood but who was later refused by the Buddha because they are not human.¹⁵ Despite the fact that they cannot be ordained as monks, they requested that the Buddha used the term '*nak*' to refer to the liminal stage of a person when they are about to be ordained as a monk prior to the ordination ceremony.¹⁶ These are common stories that have frequently been told and practiced in Thai Buddhist communities, including my own community. In Chiang Saen, a small town in the far north of Chiang Rai Province, people often have different stories and beliefs surrounding the naga.

My parent was always telling me stories about the naga when I was young. That they are guardians of the lands and rivers. They are always watching us in order to see if

¹⁰ Promporn Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics in Mekong Basin and Upper Northeastern Thailand*. (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 2007) in Thai.

¹¹ Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics*, 6-7.

Phasook Indrawooth, *Mahayana Buddhist Iconography*. (Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 2000).

Julia Shaw, "Naga sculptures in Sanchi's archaeological landscape: Buddhism, vaisnavism, and local agricultural cults in Central India, first century BCE to fifth century CE." *Artibus Asiae*, 64, no.1(2004):5-59.

¹² Sumet Chumsai, *Naga: cultural origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Bangkok: Chalermnit Press and DD Books, 1997).

Promporn Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics in Mekong Basin and Upper Northeastern Thailand*. (Bangkok: Silpakorn University (BA Thesis, 2007), 12-19.

¹³ Phakham, *Naga: The belief and Sculptural Characteristics*, 23-25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai, *Phratripidok Phasathai*. [Thai Tripitaka] Chabap Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai, 1997)

¹⁶ Mahachulalongkorn Rachawitthayalai, *Phratripidok Phasathai*.

you are a good person or doing something good for other people. I always behaved after I heard these stories.

Tan, a middle-aged university professor from Chiang Rai, shared with me one of her experiences about the naga. There are numerous types of these beliefs and stories which people have told their children concerning how sacred and powerful the naga are. In most Tai language family communities, which now live across mainland Southeast Asia and southwestern China and form the majority populations in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar's Shan State, people believe in this magical serpent.¹⁷ This belief is embedded within communal daily life as a symbol of water and as a guardian of the lands, rivers, and rain.¹⁸ As such, in all activities and changes that occur in or involve physical environmental landscapes and weather, people habitually perceive naga-related actions.

The Naga's Space

The notion of human agency has appeared in anthropological research and

theory for decades.¹⁹ Agency, in a general sense, tends to move toward progressive changes or evolves in the form of a progressive line.²⁰ In Soba Mamood's attempt to offer another perspective on agency, she argues that agency is not always the power to resist the dominant power within a particular cultural context, but it is also the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist in some circumstances as well.²¹ In other words, agency could emerge in any circumstance, situation, time, and place in which people happen to be. However, some scholars argue that the agency people act upon, many of them involved non-human entities and those agencies, can be concerned with either objects or narrative.²²

Every time that I heard about [the naga], I always wanted to go and see them and prove that they are real.

Soi, a 50-year-old local librarian originally from Mea Hong Son now living in Chiang Mai, told me. I asked her what her reaction was when she hears about the naga. Soi told me that she does not reject the possibility that they are real, but merely

¹⁷ Sumet Chumsāi, *Naga: cultural origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Bangkok: Chalermnit Press and DD Books, 1997).

¹⁸ Ibid., 21-23.

¹⁹ Soba Mahmood, "Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival," *Cultural Anthropology*, 16, no. 2 (2001):202-236.

Katherine Frank, "Agency," *Anthropological Theory*, 6, no. 3 (2006): 281-302.

James Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Craig W. Gruber, Matthew G. Clark, Sven Hroar Klempe, and Jaan Valsiner, *Constraints of Agency*. Vol. 12. *Annals of Theoretical Psychology*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015).

²⁰ Soba Mahmood, "Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival," *Cultural Anthropology*, 16, no. 2 (2001):202-236.

²¹ Ibid., 220-222.

²² Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications" *Soziale Welt* (1996): 369-381.

that she just wants to see a real one. Later, she also told me that when she thinks about the naga, she has to concentrate harder while she engages with or performs religious activities.

I mostly follow the Budd-hist ways to make merit when I go to the temples.... I always go to pay respect to the Buddha image inside the *vihan* But at the same time, I always feel in between preparation of being ready, to be more behaved when I see the naga. I feel like I have goosebumps just a little bit.

Some scholars suggest that agency primarily concerns human actors since they initiate the actions.²³ On the contrary, most actions that humans initiate are partly influenced by non-human actors, such as cars, chairs, mobile phone, and, in this case, the naga myth.²⁴ Most importantly, these connections or networks, or ‘actor-networks’ are supposed to flow in order to keep this function alive and meaningful.²⁵ Although the Actor-Network Theory does not explicitly mention what really is the

non-human being discussed and the theory is more concerned with technological objects, we should not deduce this critical theoretical approach to solely focus on those objects. The theory itself “offer[s] a rich repertoire of concepts and ideas, but also a profound rethinking of how we do scientific analysis,” which in this case includes anthropology as well.²⁶ As such, in many cases, the narratives or myths (which are non-human entities) can play an important role in human actions. In these cases, the narrative and myth have a particular agency for humans to act for either to brutally initiate the warfare or construct the religious building.

Fai, an employee at local company in Lamphun province in her mid-forties, is always excited when she hears the mythical stories of various non-Buddhist or Buddhist magical creatures. She told me that the naga figurines at the temples come from myths and narratives which have been told for generations:

I did not really understand why they were always there until my parents told the story about them. I was surprised to learn that the

²³ Most scholarly works on the theory and notion of agency extensively discuss behaviors and performativity of human actors. These performances and actions conceptualize identity and gender that dictate human behaviors to either endure, resist, or abide by in a particular social movement. For this reason, the discussion tends to overlook that within certain social circumstances, non-human actors also play an important role in enhancing these human behaviors, see Butler, Judith. “Performative Agency.” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 147–161, McNay, Lois. “Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory.” *Feminist Theory*, 4, no. 2 (2003): 139–148, and Gruber, Craig W.; Clark, Matthew G.; Klempe, Sven Hroar; Valsiner, Jaan. *Constraints of Agency*. Vol. 12. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015.

²⁴ Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications” *Soziale Welt* (1996): 369–381.

²⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Christian Bueger and Jan Stockbruegger, 2016. “Actor-Network Theory: Objects and Actants, Networks and Narratives.” In *Technology and World Politics: An Introduction*, ed. Daniel R. McCarthy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1.

figures of the naga and all of these buildings were built in accordance with those stories.

Fai also mentions that these figures somehow give her a particular sense that informs her behavior, namely the speed and fashion in which she enters the *vihan*.

I think they tell me to not move too quickly, not to rush in, and should walk with *sati* because you are about to enter the sacred place.²⁷

Unlike Fai, Boom, a 40-year-old local employee at the Fine Art Department in Chiang Saen, seems to have a different reaction when I asked her how she acts when she approaches the naga staircase.

I do not really change my reaction or my bodily movement or anything there that much.... this is just the product of the old stories which people created.

However, she also admitted that the naga is a part of Buddhism, which she believes in, and that she would act differently in order to not offend them. Boom also said that they are symbols of the liminal world, those in-between places which demarcate a sacred space from the regular human space.

You are sort of ... you have to prepare yourself a little bit

before you enter the sacred space.

Although Boom is a devoted Buddhist and attempts to ignore this non-canonical belief, she is open to belief in naga. Within this realm of thoughts and context, the naga's figures, stories, and space tend to reflect on local people's bodily movement and self-performativity in various degrees: the degree to which different sets of narratives affect their understanding of their religious worlds. Furthermore, the narrative indeed has agentic elements which encourage people to perform in a certain way.

Negotiating Space with the Naga

Fai likes to go to the temple and make merit as many times as she can over the weekend, no matter how much available time she actually has. She told me that every time she goes to the temple, she feels calm and peaceful at some point during her time there. Yet, she also admitted that she does not feel fully relaxed and comfortable.

You have to behave very neatly and politely in there, and do not let other people laugh at you regarding the way you walk or act in the *vihan* or at the temple, because it's a sacred space ... I feel sort of uncomfortably calm, yet peaceful. When I walk through the staircase, I always pause a bit

²⁷ *Sati* translates into English as 'Mindfulness' which means to be able to recall their actions at every moment for their bodily movement, see more detail at Julia Cassaniti, *Remembering the Present: Mindfulness in Buddhist Asia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2018).

.... As I see the naga...it kind of reminds me of what I should do or not do in the temple...or outside sometimes, I guess.

However, when I asked Fai about the naga or the places that have stories related to the naga, she suddenly changed her demeanor to be more relaxed. She became more comfortable talking about the subject. Tan also reacted quite similar to Fai when she heard about them and told me that the naga stories seem like another world or space apart from the canonical Buddhism, even though they are related.

It is like another folktale that my grandparents and parents use to tell stories to the children to tame their naughtiness. And most of the time it works It has nothing to do with Buddhism that much, I suppose.

In this context, I did not come across any anthropological works that attempt to distinguish this binary set of ideas in Buddhism. For this reason, we should look at both sides of the narrative and identify the range of its variations in order to

understand their functions and spaces. In doing so, we can better understand these religious phenomena, as James suggests, “religious phenomena must be compared in order to understand them better.”²⁸

Regarding spaces, Lester argues that they and material objects also play a significant role on the individual space and self-embodiment.²⁹ New environments or places with new rules, which people learn and abide by, depict another world of understanding for that person.³⁰ In that world, people learn how to feel, behave, react, think, dwell, and negotiate their self in a new realm of thoughts.³¹ In that world, people attempt to recognize their embodiment and “to discover a common ground where self and others are one, for by using one’s body in the same way as others in the same environment.”³² Thus, in the cases of the informants, they attempt to negotiate their self within these two spaces of understanding by relating themselves to either one side of the narrative or both. This process of negotiation also reflects how these informants create and maintain their social relationships as they have learned how to understand the world around them or learn how to live with it.³³ Fai also mentioned that if she has a chance to go to

²⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 41.

²⁹ Rebecca Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 132-160.

³⁰ Ibid., 132-160.

³¹ Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space*. (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Tim Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape.” *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 152–174.

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³² Thomas J. Csordas, 1993. “Somatic Modes of Attention,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1993), 151.

³³ Nancy Eberhardt, *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006).

the river associated with a naga tale, she would act differently than in the temple as she thought that the naga at the temples and those at the river to be of different kinds.

I would feel different when I am there.... I do not know what I will feel or act, but I think I would act or feel differently.

As Lester suggests "social relationships... are not simply ephemeral abstractions. They are often materially (re) created through the positioning of an actual bodies in space."³⁴ This might not represent an entire picture of this particular phenomenon, but it shows how these two worlds of conception have developed among individuals within their social and historical contexts.³⁵

The binary set of beliefs or religious worlds as Tan and Fai attempt to understand are the production of a historical phenomenology of the place which many Southeast Asian scholars have discussed and debated for many decades.³⁶ Mean-while, it seems

that the naga has offered a set of understanding that comforts people who practice Buddhism. There is no evidence nor oral tradition that can be traced back to the collision of these binary concepts. Nonetheless, this contestation suggests that the naga myth has been a process which local people use to negotiate with the mainstream religious system and its rigid concept of the world.³⁷

I think the naga, as most people see from the temple, come from Buddhism ... and the naga that have supernatural power were created by the people who live around the river...for myself I do believe they are real andit might be more real for those people.

Soi reiterates her position on whether she believes the naga might have supernatural powers.

³⁴ Rebecca Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 134.

³⁵ Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 236-71.

³⁶ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults in north-east Thailand* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

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³⁷ Mary Beth Mills, "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 244-273.

The Place in Memory

In the Chiang Saen basin, Northern Thailand, one naga myth still resonates and plays a significant role in the community's daily life activity. The story portrays that the naga who first came to build the city of Yonok (later calls Wiang Nong Lom) later came and destroyed the city after the king and the people mistook and offended the naga.³⁸ Although the destruction from this incident may have caused tremendous damage to the cultural landscapes in Wiang Nong Lom, people still reside in the area and have continued to connect with the naga myth. They reconsider the area as a "communal" monumentality.³⁹ According to archaeological surveys, the artifacts and structures that have been found at Wiang Nong Lom and recent communities at Chiang Saen Noi and Chiang Saen indicate a continuous series of developments.⁴⁰ These practices are still seen in the modern community in all activities that relate to temple construction. The naga figures still appear in the same locations of the building, and people still observe their ceremonies and beliefs.⁴¹

At Wat Pamaknoh in the Wiang Nong Lom area, there is a structure that depicts Wiang Nong Lom's incident. Some people visit the site and perform certain ceremonies to commemorate the sacredness of the place. Judging from the visitors' reaction and the performances, it may be assumed that these people see those areas as monuments intended to remind them not to perform bad deeds or offend the naga. Although people in recent years are less attached to the naga story, this story remains as their monumentality. Monumentality in this context is filled with a new story that blends with the old stories and local people apply them as their communal identity.

I met Phor Phu [the naga] in a dream one night, ... I never thought that he would come and talk to me, ... Phor Pu Phanthu Nakkharat [the naga name Phanthu], ... the statue over there in front of the hall, ... is the main naga that I can talk with really, ... He also tells something to me through the stone (she handed me the yellow gem-like oval shape stone while

³⁸ Phra Lakkhawutthajan. 1973. *Tamnan Muang Chiang Saen (the Chronicle of Chiang Saen)*. Chiang Saen: Wat Chedi Luang.

³⁹ The term "communal" in this context means the local community reproduced their own version of the collective memories that provide the monumental form to the landscape, and created their own understanding of social space, in this case, the naga myth, see Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 245.

⁴⁰ Nootnapang Chumdee, *The settlement patterns and development of ancient communities in the Chiang Saen sovereignty during 13th-18th centuries* (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 2006).
Sawang Lertlit, *The Management of Archaeological Resources in Thailand: A Case Study of the Historic Town of Chiang Saen* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 1997).

Michel Lorrillard, "Souvanna Khom Kham ou Chiang Saen rive gauche? Note sur un site archéologique lao récemment," *Aséanie*, 5, no.1 (2000): 57-67.

⁴¹ Sumet Chumsai, *Naga: cultural origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Bangkok: Chalermnit Press and DD Books, 1997).

she was telling me the story), ...he is the one who brought us here, even the reason that you came here too,...People who came here have some connection through him, we all somewhat relate to him or the naga,...We are the children of the naga,...this land is the land of him, he built it and he destroyed it because some people offended him and became immoral. I think it's the reason why he came to see me.... to guide us of course, to not doing some-thing that offended him or something bad.

While the story of Mae Wanna, an elder local business owner and farmer in Chiang Saen, implies a different social dynamism from other informants, it seems that she is more attached to the myth and created her own identity from the myth. The myth, in this case, is the legitimized narrative that one can rely on to get a sense of oneself and become a part of it.⁴² In this sense, it seems that the naga myth is not only influential in Mae Wanna's life, but also in the lives of those around her.

For these reasons, the location of Wiang Nong Lom today is perceived by local people as a sacred space and marked with communal monuments where spatial meanings are accumulated. Experiences

within these places can be "conveyed, compared and contested through storytelling."⁴³ As such, the center of such powers can be modified, adapted, or completely changed when the new generation of people started to reside there. Similar to the knowledge that people collected over time, it is also diachronically subject to change. The changes, however, initiate new journeys and link the relationships between the former residents and later communities through spatial meanings. This new collective memory of naga (as we see from the modern community), thus, is reinterpreted from the previous cultural landscapes by the later community. This later community comes to regard it as the lesson in paying proper respect to the local spirit of the place and creating their communal identity.

Conclusion and A Further Discussion

Within the Northern Thai cultural area, the people in the Chiang Saen Basin have come to understand places through embodied experiences of every moment of their daily social life. These experiences can be acquired from all aspects of their personal self within their social, cultural, and religious contexts. Within their personal self, they have learned to project, represent, reflect, and understand individual and communal identities through these experiences. Additionally, they have also used the

⁴² This process has been seen throughout mainland Southeast Asia in many Tai ethnic groups. A good example in this case would be the Shan in Mae Hong Son province, see more detail on Nancy Eberhardt, *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

⁴³ Neill Wallis, "Networks of History and Memory - Creating a Nexus of Social Identities in Woodland Period Mounds on the Lower St Johns River, Florida," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2008): 245.

myth as a tool for negotiating with unknown external spaces and places, which in turn creates a new set of knowledge for individuals to comprehend these unfamiliar spaces. These spaces have also historically provided meaning to a person through narrative form. It does not matter how people experience the past, their experiences will manifest in the form of myth and then pass along from generation to the next one.⁴⁴

The myth has agency for people to initiate their performance and action in certain ways within their historical and cultural settings. In other words, agency can emerge from cultural dynamism or social relationships between people within that particular culture. In the case of Northern Thai communities, the naga myth provides agentic forces and elements for local people to think, act, feel, and reflect on their self-embodiment between different sets of knowledge, location, time, and space.

Within the contestation and negotiation of the two narratives in a Northern Thai context, the naga myth is an element for the people to use as a common knowledge in order to understand how the world functions. The world of the mainstream religious system sometimes fails to provide a full picture of their individual life within the larger social and communal spaces. Furthermore, the naga myth serves as the alternative concept and

space in which local people employ a set of referential knowledge for understanding. They reflect on their self through the process of negotiation and the contestation of narratives.

In terms of the cultural landscape, the naga myth is one of the reasons that people remain in the area despite its unpredictable landscape changes. The naga myth also plays a significant role in which people create the meaning of the place through its narrative and the perception of its monumentality. The monumentality has existed through time from early historical settlement until today in Chiang Saen eventually becoming a communal landscape. It emerged from the natural landscapes created by the people who lived and continue to live within or nearby the places where particular spatial meanings were embedded within daily social life. And it accumulates like Ingold's timeless taskscape within the Northern Thai cultural contexts reflecting their social dynamism and individual space throughout the landscapes.⁴⁵ The naga myth can be utilized as an important area in understanding how Northern Thai communities and individuals adapt and modify the cultural landscapes in order to protect, prevent and negotiate themselves from a further unpredictable landscape change.

⁴⁴ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, colonialism, and the wild man: A study in terror and healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 368.

⁴⁵ People tend to create meaning about the surrounding landscape from daily experiences; therefore, meaning is constructed from routine activities within that landscape, which Ingold refers to as a "taskscape," see Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape." *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 152–174.

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Insider Dilemmas

An Ethnographic Study on Community-Based Medical Education in Aceh, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article draws upon two dilemmas which I encountered during my fieldwork in post-disaster areas and regencies (kabupaten; second-level administrative subdivision in Indonesia) in Aceh, Indonesia twelve years after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed more than 230,000 people and left more than 600,000 persons injured and displaced from their homes. I highlight two persistent challenges regarding my position as an “insider” in this research: navigating between multiple identities (researcher, educator, and medical doctor), and gaining trust from medical colleagues.

Hold My Hand

I was in the middle of an observation on a group of sixth-year medical students practicing at a health center¹ in a tsunami-affected area when a fisherman walked toward us. His clothes were dirty and the small, the under-equipped emergency room quickly filled with the smell of fresh fish. Sitting in the room, the fisherman told us that his right foot was wounded by the sharp edge of a shell while he was coming down from his boat to the

shore. It was a very deep wound. He showed us.

The students tried to stitch the wound, but the man kept moving his foot. He looked terrified and both of his hands were waving in pain when the needle pierced his skin. As a participant observer conducting PhD research, I was there as a researcher. Yet I am also a trained doctor, and a medical educator.² I could not stop myself from trying to calm him down by standing beside his bed and offering my

¹ Healthcare in Aceh was one among several sectors affected post-tsunami due to a huge loss of human life, as well as physical resources.

² I have been a medical teacher for ten years.

hand. “Hold my hand, sir, it won’t be long. The pain will be gone after a while.” He squeezed my hand very tight, as if it could ease the pain. It was painful for me, both because of his tight squeeze, and because of the smell from his clothes. I could barely keep myself from vomiting. However, holding his hand worked and he was able to keep his foot still until the procedure was done. I remember the smile from his face as he left the health center and he nodded to me. It was rewarding for me to see him smiling; saying “thanks” is not common in our culture.

The Conflict of Multiple Identities: Researcher, Teacher, or Doctor?

The case presented above offers a depiction of my struggle with the multiple identities that I had during the fieldwork. On the one hand, as a medical teacher I need to give the students opportunities to work independently. I should not interfere too much with their work. On the other hand, as a medical doctor, I feel responsible to provide appropriate service for the patient. Furthermore, as a researcher, I am curious to know how the students and the patients progress through their imperfect interaction. From that I will be able to analyze and synthesize a recommendation for curriculum improvement in the future. The juxtaposition of the three roles creates a dilemma: whether I should interfere or limit myself and sit there as a pure observer. I decided that during participant observation,

I would work alongside at least one of the students. I tried to obtain as much information as I could while sometimes assisting the preceptor to “teach” the students, as the preceptor could not be around all the time due to administrative tasks. Nevertheless, as a medical teacher in work-based learning, I kept reminding myself that I should not interfere, frequently, with the performance of history taking, physical examination, or procedural action, and that I should enable the students to have greater opportunities to manage common conditions to make mild mistakes.³ The access to common conditions is an exclusive advantage of community-based medical education as it is rarely provided in hospital-based rotation due to highly filtered cases; most of those cases are of high severity and complexity.⁴ However, due to their limited exposure to those commons conditions, the students were not aware of the ways to manage them; and they needed further instructions from a teacher as a role model. In the case above, I was trying to be conscious of the teacher role that I was playing.

I am also aware that there are many ways to perform bedside teaching, including a patient-centered model, an apprenticeship, grand rounds, business ward rounds, teaching ward rounds, the report-back model, clinical conference, and the training ward model. In order to give greater opportunities to see physical signs, hear aspects of the case history, and perform

³ See Clinical Education and Training Institution (2010).

⁴ See Worley, P. et al. (2000).

procedural actions, I avoided the “demonstrator” model of teaching and took an “observer” model.⁵ This model allowed me to distance myself from student-patient interactions and provide feedback to all students at the end as they discussed their findings and clinical interpretations. It also helped me to decrease “tensions in the learning environment” by making myself open to any of their questions. I also occasionally played the role of indirect observer for other students who I was not able to observe directly, as this is also a possible way to conduct teaching in ambulatory care settings. Regardless, the role of teacher sometimes conflicted with the role of researcher.

Research that employs participant observation as a method situates the researcher in a dynamic position. In other words, the position of the researcher is never static; it shifts among total insider, partial insider, partial outsider, and total outsider roles. At the same time, the position of the researcher also shifts among total participant, partial participant, partial observer and total observer roles, back and forth in a “continuum of participation.”⁶ During my field research, I tried to navigate my position among these different quadrants according to the changing situation. When the students performed adequately, I positioned myself more in an outsider/observer position. Still, when I felt

that they were in need of suggestions or considerations, I positioned myself as a member of their team and acted accordingly. Despite the dynamic shifts, I insisted on avoiding a total insider role, in order to prevent the effect of “going native”⁷ and losing my ability to “make the familiar strange.”⁸

From the ethics point of view, I would also argue that the principle of “beneficence” in ethics should be applied in this case; this means that the researcher should act in ways that benefit participants.⁹ Since the local community and medical students were both my participants, I considered that my interference benefited both sides, as opposed to the situation if I had not participated. The patients benefited from better medical care, and the students were able to observe an example of practicing emotional care -- as well as practical help in calming down a patient during the stitching procedure. Therefore, holding the patient’s hand provided a better quality of research in terms of paying respect to every person involved.

The White Coat and Collegiality: Privilege or Disadvantage?

When I was trying to answer one of my research questions: how experienced doctors (with 10 to 12 years of practice) interact with post-disaster communities in health centers, I faced the challenge of

⁵ See Worley, P (2005).

⁶ See O’Reilly (2009).

⁷ See O’Reilly (2009).

⁸ See O’Reilly (2009).

⁹ See Watts (2010).

recruiting them. Most of the doctors I wanted to recruit as participants had moved to hospitals or other provinces outside Aceh after their two years of post-graduation mandatory service in disaster-affected areas (Aceh and Nias) were completed. Only a few of them decided to keep working in those devastated, ill-resourced, and remote areas. Fortunately, through the snowball recruitment method, I succeeded in locating some doctors who were willing to spend some of their precious time for one or more interviews.

When trying to obtain consent, some of the doctors turned down my request to be a participant of the research due to time constraints. My identity as a medical doctor did not necessarily help me in attaining the consent: the doctors asked that I understand the reasons for their rejection, assuming that I was capable of understanding how busy they were with their work as it involves intense emotion, constitutes a high workload, and entails great responsibilities. Hence, I treated them as “busy informants.”¹⁰ I waited until they offered me a time to meet. Despite the challenges of locating and setting the interviews (for some interviews, I needed to travel more than 600 km¹¹ to reach them), it was worth spending time talking to them since most of them were able to raise the issues that I considered central to my topic of research.

Some other doctors asked me to wait and provide some time for them to deal with

the potential emotional discomfort caused from remembering their experiences in the aftermath of the traumatic events of the tsunami. Talking about experiences regarding disaster, death, and suffering is almost always considered a “difficult conversation” in the medical world that needs a careful mental preparedness.¹² I expressed my understanding and patiently waited for their consent because I realized that gaining access to disaster-affected participants is indeed one of the challenges encountered by disaster-focused researchers. Most of my participants eventually agreed after we discussed the information statements and they understood the risks and benefits associated with their involvement in the research. Nevertheless, the recruitment of these busy informants requires constant commitment and persistence.

Then I searched for another opportunity to obtain consent by contacting other medical colleagues to facilitate the encounter with my targeted informants. I found a very senior medical doctor and had a meeting with her. She agreed to help me out. Finally, I succeeded in establishing some interviews with my targeted participants through the help of the doctor who acted as a gatekeeper. It is important for an ethnographer to have a gatekeeper’s help in ethnographic research, such a position held by the ‘Doc’ in the classic ethnography piece ‘Street Corner Society.’¹³ The

¹⁰ O’Reilly (2009).

¹¹ 600 km is 373 miles (1 kilometer = .62 miles).

¹² See Souza (2007) and Indah (2018).

¹³ See Whyte (1996).



A medical student with artistic effect to ensure anonymity.
Image: Rosaria Indah

facilitation provided by key persons within the context will give a researcher an easier entry to the field. In my case, the doctors admitted that they conducted “research” on my identity and credibility before granting their approval in setting up the interviews.

Doctor P, one of the participants, told me:

I have to apologize for my belated confirmation for the interview scheduling. I admit that I have researched your identity before deciding to have this interview. I have not heard your name before. Some of my colleagues and also my daughter -- in fact, she is one of your students -- have told me that you are a good teacher in the local university. That information made me decide to connect with you and agree to have this meeting.¹⁴

This “research on a researcher’s credibility” is partly due to the assumption that I might be obtaining financial gain from the research or that I might be a “spy” investigating their best practices, which commonly happens when the researcher comes from a similar workspace.¹⁵ Fortu-

nately, my experience as a teacher provided me with a network of former students. They acted as gatekeepers and, thus, verified my identity and credibility. Therefore, I succeeded in obtaining consent from most of my planned participants.

Conclusion

Researchers who immerse themselves in studies within their community, or insiders, may face challenges. In this paper, I argue that being an insider does not mean these researchers automatically have an easier identity formation or easier access.¹⁶ However, it is possible for a researcher to navigate through the challenges presented by employing certain strategies, including dynamic positioning and involving influential key informants/gatekeepers. Being aware of the dilemmas experienced by other researchers, such as the two dilemmas presented in this paper, may help researchers to improve their preparation prior to their fieldwork, thus leading to successful data gathering.

¹⁴ Doctor P, female, 56 years old, personal communication.

¹⁵ See Simmons (2007).

¹⁶ See Labaree (2002).

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Studying a Cross-Cultural Community in a Post-Conflict Society

A Marketplace as the Setting

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Abstract

This "notes from the field" depicts alternative approaches to study a cross-cultural community and is based on hands-on experiences during 10-month fieldwork in Ambon City, Maluku Province, Indonesia. This piece tries to explore different possible roles for an ethnographer to take on, to grasp the dynamics of an ethnically and religiously diverse community, namely at Mardika market, a traditional marketplace in post-conflict Ambon.

“Wasn’t it the first house that was burned during the conflicts?” said the motorcycle-taxi driver as he dropped me in front of my boarding house. I smiled, not knowing how to react to this and not sure whether or not I should follow up on his statement. For a split of a second, there was an awkward silence between us; then he turned away his motorcycle heading to the main street. I remember it happened during the first weeks of my fieldwork, that I envisaged lasting for four months long yet ended up as 8-month stay in the city where communal conflicts once broke out and forced their residents to live in religiously-fractured villages within Ambon City. I

headed to my room with thought, full of questions: When did it happen? During the night? Did the family manage to escape from the house? Or were they burned alive? Who did it? Why? And once again, why?”

As I revisited my first-month field notes, I came to understand that my confusion to the situation in Ambon was merely because I was not mentally ready to research a post-conflict society. I thought I was reasonably well-prepared, professionally and mentally, to conduct research there as I have worked for a peacebuilding project for two years in Ambon, before doing my dissertation research. Although I am aware that severe conflicts once



Fish sellers at Arumbae market

Image: A. A. Wardani

happened in this area and that, in some parts of the city, people are still living in an uneasy social-religious environment, I realised that I am not *well* aware of it. I barely know anything about how *severe* the conflicts were except the general statistical figures of the number of dead victims, displaced people and internally displaced people. Primarily I had theoretically understood the public debate on the *on-going uneasy* relation within Ambonese society, but had no realization or practical knowledge on how it was rooted in most of the everyday activities, that as most of the

literature on Ambon depict that the perpetrators of the conflicts were ordinary people whom you'd probably have crossed paths with. They could be your *former* neighbours, your *old* friends, etc.

My research aims to analyse the dynamics of the traditional marketplace, particularly the case of Mardika market, in fostering reconciliation in the aftermath of conflicts, let alone serving as a meeting point of diverse community members in Ambonese society. In doing so, I focus my fieldwork on mapping out the roles of the marketplace through chronological order:

before the communal conflicts, during the disputes, transformation periods and in the so-called contemporary post-conflict scenario.

Before I describe further about the actors at the Mardika market, let me start with a brief description of the research setting. The marketplace is home to at least 2,700 traders and is integrated with mini-bus terminal, commonly known as *angkot*, located in Sirimau sub-district. The Mardika market area hosts Muslim traders as the majority, both native Ambonese and migrant traders from outside islands, whereas the Mardika village is statistically predominantly inhabited by Christians.

This piece showcases three possible roles in doing observation when dealing with large, dense, complex, and dynamic research setting taking the case of a traditional marketplace.

As I recall, my third and fourth month in the field have been more productive compared to the first two months. Although, honestly, I am still struggling to define what productivity in ethnographic research is while all I did was sitting down at one corner of the market and watching people do what they do. I guess I was still wrestling with the very idea of doing ethnographic research at this point, but it got better. It would get better, hopefully, as of now, I have learned a significant amount of knowledge about the market and its actors and better understandings on the situation in Ambon prior, during, and after the communal conflicts broke out. As my take, I have gradually become more confident with the subject I

am dealing with, set aside all the unexpected and unintended setbacks during fieldwork which I believe that most ethnographers might as well had to face.

To capture the dynamics of the market, during observation, I changed roles from a) full observer, b) market actor, and c) participant observer. Being an observer means that I went to the market and walked through every alley and observed the selling and buying scenes as a third-person outsider. This role helped me when doing the mapping out and getting the general ideas about the research setting. It took me almost four months to get familiar with most of the alleys of the market.

Second, as a market actor, I would refer to when I went to the Mardika market for shopping as a (real) buyer to fulfil my daily needs. I did this purposively to get more sense of the logic of the buyers at Mardika market. In doing so, I came to the market from various entry points, bought different kinds of commodities and tried to get out of the market from different sides of the market each time and taking different modes of transportation (motorcycle taxi, minibus, pedicab, or walked back to my place).

Third, as a participant observer, I usually helped sellers to sell their goods and allowed other people to recognise me as an outsider. Nevertheless, other sellers mostly realised that I was an outsider, and sometimes buyers also noticed that I was not the real seller at Mardika Market. It can merely be explained by my physical traits of having lighter skin than what Ambonese people usually have. In addition to that,



Main street of the Mardika Market
(integrated with the Mardika minibus terminal)

Image: A. A. Wardani

having Javanese (Malay) face contour is quite distinguishable in broad daylight at the market. The decision to let people recognise me researching the market was to follow the idea of ethnographer as 'a fly on the wall'. I believe it worked two ways, by doing the selling and fully participating in the respondent's activity, I experienced the challenge of the sellers at the market, and it helped me to reach the 'going native' phase of my fieldwork. On the other hand, for the people surrounding the trade stall, as they became familiar with my presence, they did

not feel weird being observed by me anymore, at least lessened their uncomfortable feeling by the presence of a stranger in their daily sights.

These three roles allowed me to reflect on the various perspectives to analyse the dynamics of the Mardika market. I saw marketplace functions as economic income generation for traders and other market actors, as well as a place to fulfil daily needs for the buyers. On the other hand, it serves as a meeting point for people with various backgrounds, con-



Female buyers and traditional seller (*papalele*)
in one of the corner of the Mardika market
Image: A. A. Wardani

sciously or not; such contact did improve social interaction within segregated communities. Marketplace arguably played a role as information ground during the conflict period.

Meanwhile, when taking the role as an active buyer, I could see that the physical condition and arrangement of the market contribute to user's behaviours. Mardika market as a wet market is known for its dirty state especially during and after the rain, the existing potholes create puddles, and one needs to walk while avoiding: the holes, the cars, the other buyers, the moving sellers, etc. It somehow felt that you are on

a Mario Bros video game that you have to navigate yourselves to overcome and avoid obstacles ahead of you. In short, it is always a very chaotic situation. Choosing which sellers to buy produces is more of a random act, leaving aside any identifying marks or commonly established relationship with the traders.

As a participant observer, I tried to define the interaction between seller and buyer, among sellers coming from a similar ethno-religious background, among sellers from a different ethno-religious background, seller and other market actors.

In short, I saw that the unpredictable situation at the market contributes to what is called "Random Walk Theory," but in a more physical sense. Chaos at the marketplace urges buyers to take a random and unpredictable path in choosing and buying the offered merchandises. Their past purchase path or experience at the market does not necessarily inform their current and future choice of sellers at the market, but sometimes it does. They might get off from the minibus at a different point of the market every single time they went to the market. They might get on to the minibus at a different end of the market too. The order of the goods they would buy also differ every given time. The weight of their grocery also influences their economic

behaviour. In some cases, if the buyers have favourite sellers at the market where they usually purchase goods from, they might make extra efforts to come to those sellers to get a better deal. But it often happens only when the buyers will buy in large quantities for a party or special events. This way, it undermines the assumption that people would consider ethnic and religious background when they do the economic transaction at the market. By taking up three different roles to observe the Mardika marketplace, I found a more encompassing perspective on how the marketplace functions socially, economically, and culturally.



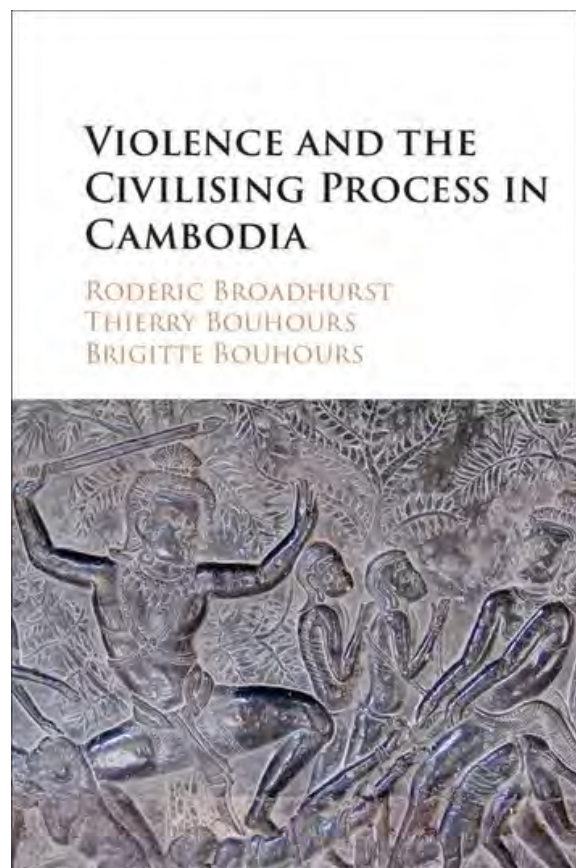
BOOK REVIEW

***Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* by Roderick Broadhurst, Thierry Bouhours, and Brigitte Bouhours
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015**

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“Violence,” Soviet-born author and biochemist Isaac Asimov wrote, “is the last refuge of the incompetent.” We as a human species are undeniably a violent one, and since time immemorial, we have yet to co-exist without violence. The theme and study of violence is at the core of *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* by Australia National University researchers Roderick Broadhurst (Professor of Criminology), Thierry Bouhours (Visiting Research Fellow), and Brigitte Bouhours (Visiting Scholar), who present us with a criminological analysis of patterns of violence in Cambodia. Their temporal scope spans the era of French colonization (1863-1945, 1945-1953), anti-colonial conflicts, and beginning with independence, Cambodia’s civil war (1967-1975), years under Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) rule (1975-1979), and post-conflict development (1979-present). To determine whether



certain key transitions in Cambodia over a one hundred and fifty year period have played a role in the prevalence and forms of

violence, the authors draw from English and French archival sources, constabulary statistics, victim surveys, and newspaper reports. By applying German sociologist Norbert Elias' theses from his 1939 work *The Civilising Process* to the Cambodian case study, they seek ultimately to assess the "utility of civilising processes in understanding the forces driving societal and individual change" (34).

The book consists of eleven chapters that proceed in chronological sequence from the French colonial advent in the 1860s to the present-day autocratic rule of the Hun Sen regime. The second chapter applies the comparative method in its examination of rural banditry in early twentieth century Cambodia and similar issues in Early Modern Europe. Chapters three and four highlight colonial-era crime and crime control, outlining Protectorate administrative and judicial reforms and how they effected crime and violence (32). Chapters four and six examine two "golden years"—of the French Protectorate and of Sihanoukism, respectively—with the fifth chapter in between placing focus on a spike in violence both characterizing and accompanying the anti-colonial war. Subsequent chapters analyze the Civil War (1967-1975), Democratic Kampuchea (DK, 1975-1979), and Vietnamese occupation (1979-1991) years, periods that could not be greater contrasts with one another. The tenth chapter covers the early Hun Sen years to 2012, noting a continued decline in interpersonal violence carrying on with the end of Vietnamese rule. The final chapter returns to the book's theoretical approach,

evaluating whether civilizing and/or decivilizing forces may help us to make sense of rises violence over the past one hundred and fifty years of Cambodian history.

The study is from a criminological perspective, so one ought not to be overly critical of its attempts at historical analysis and theoretical application. The authors' empirical question, for one, seems to discount—whether wittingly or unwittingly—the nature, form, and legacies of violent colonial exploitation: "[are] trends in non-Western societies, particularly in a developing country such as Cambodia, similar to those in Western societies that show an overall progressive decline in interpersonal violence starting as early as the fifteenth century?" (2). There is no comparison between what occurred in the Kingdom of France and in its own Protectorate of *Cambodge*. A secondary theoretical question asks whether "Western-developed macro-social theories of crime and violence may apply in non-Western contexts" (2). Much like with the first question, the binary here is false. Can we truly discuss Cambodia from the French occupation to the present without the "West"? French efforts to preserve Cambodia as a geographic space that it could rule while imposing nationalistic images of domination (French superiority over Khmers) spurred the Cambodian national consciousness and "Cambodia" as a discursive construct. France's routine exploitation of its Khmer subjects fueled the very fires of radicalism that characterized DK, as the CPK's intellectual thrust lived and studied in France and sought ways to end French

colonial exploitation. To discuss violence in Cambodia, then, is precisely to speak of France. The authors also disclaim that their core sociological concepts of “modernisation, modernity, and development,” which raise “suspicions of Eurocentric, Orientalist, colonialist, or neocolonialist value judgments and discourses,” are not merely reproduced in their work “in a normative sense but as descriptors of observed sociological phenomena” (11). But often, the language that the authors use to describe Khmer practices seems to betray such attitudes without the requisite nuance. It is equally difficult to discuss the violence in DK without acknowledging the deep French cultural/historical imprint on the CPK leadership, with the notorious Pol Pot, and Khieu Samphan, among others, listing French revolutionaries (Pol Pot in his own handwritten 1952 article) as inspirations.

In addition, the authors’ somewhat problematically use of “hemoclysm” (187) instead of genocide to describe the mass killings of the DK era. The CPK targeted, with intent, to “destroy in whole or in part” (hemoclysm neither denotes intent, nor a final solution) all ethnic minorities in Cambodia in its pursuit of Khmer ethnic purity. Ben Kiernan’s *The Pol Pot Regime* (1996) and subsequent work makes a convincing case (with Khmer sources and interviews with survivors) that the CPK sought to exterminate ethnic Chinese in what he later characterized as “the worst disaster ever to befall a Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese community.” Alternatively, the authors might have made a compelling argument that the CPK pursued a form of

ethnic cleansing, per Norman Naimark’s definition in *Fires of Hatred* (2001), as he analyzes nongenocidal examples (deportations and excessive violence). “Hemoclysm” falls a tad short, containing neither the important emphasis on intent and totality in Raphael Lemkin’s 1948 definition, nor its flexibility and explanatory value.

Attempts by Broadhurst, Bouhours, and Bouhours to get at the semiotic significance behind types of violence leave a bit to be desired. Alexander Hinton’s anthropological study on the Cambodian cultural model of disproportionate revenge (“a head for an eye”), for instance, receives due attention on pages 216-217, but in far too brief a compass. What were the patterns of *sângsoek* (revenge), *karsângsoek* (disproportionate revenge), and violence in Cambodian history over the century-and-a-half under examination? Or the cultural semiotics of meaning behind corporal punishments? One problem of approaches concerns how the authors critique Hinton’s anthropological premise in *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (2004) that cultural models are often internalized differentially, vary in distribution and saliency, and have disparate degrees of motivational force for people. After a summary of his positions, they criticize his approach for its “ethnocultural explanation” and argue that “disproportionate revenge and associated affective and cognitive processes have been observed almost everywhere in the history of humanity and are more likely associated with sociogenetic and psychogenetic

development than any particular ethnic culture” (217). But Hinton does not discount these factors in his quest to uncover previously unacknowledged cultural roots of genocide in Cambodia, nor does he state that disproportionate revenge is a uniquely Khmer phenomenon. Broadhurst and company, by contrast, rely on theories of Emil Durkheim and Norbert Elias, which do indeed have their place in the discussion. But Hinton, in fact, pays homage to like scholars, stating that choices to practice revenge or to hold grudges are not made in isolation, as human behavior is at once enabled and constrained by sociocultural structures that include cultural models. He references Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” Anthony Giddens’ notion of “practical consciousness,” and Michel Foucault’s “discourse” in his 1998 article “A Head for An Eye,” which became a chapter in the 2004 monograph. But Hinton does not defer to these concepts at the expense of a nuanced cultural anthropological analysis of disproportionate revenge and, thus, it is rather unfair for Broadhurst et al. to characterize his approach as “ethnocultural.”

Some smaller issues are also worthy of mention if only to clear the record. Although completely understandable in light of their book’s overall goal, the authors have presented a study on Cambodia *without* Cambodian sources, preferring instead to rely on French and English ones that foreground colonial perspectives. This reviewer would have liked to see the authors reference the relevant Khmer language sources in the chapter on DK

instead of English and French secondary sources and translated Documentation Center of Cambodia (DCCAM) findings. The authors’ mention of the practice of liver eating as corporal punishment without explanation of its ritual symbolism in Khmer lands appears out of context as if to highlight an inherent Khmer barbarity (clearly not the authors’ aim). Scholars have explored ritual violence successfully in Asian nations: *Death By Thousand Cuts* (2008) by Timothy Brook, Gerome Bourgon, and Geoff Blue provides one such example that succeeds in presenting a nuanced picture of violent practice—this one state-sanctioned corporal punishment—without *apologia*. They succeed in providing proper context and taking seriously the semiotics of violence behind *lingchi* (“death by a thousand cuts”) while remaining highly critical of the Euro-American fetishistic gaze toward *Others* and their supposed barbarism. Lastly, the authors rely a bit too heavily on former ambassador Kenneth Quinn’s 1989 chapter in Karl Jackson’s 1989 *Cambodia 1975-1978 Rendezvous with Death*, which, although a useful part of the discussion, is hardly the final word or the most authoritative on CPK ideological origins.

To sum up, what the *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* authors produce is no doubt a social sciences perspective on the suitability of Elias’ theory to the 1863-present period of Cambodian history. Readers ought to expect that when consulting this piece, and might benefit from reading *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* in con-

junction with, or alongside, the most recent historical and anthropological scholarship on Cambodia. Excellent companion readings include Penny Edwards' landmark *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation* (2007), John A. Tully's *France on the Mekong* (2002), and Geoffrey Gunn's *Monarchical Manipulation in Cambodia* (2018).

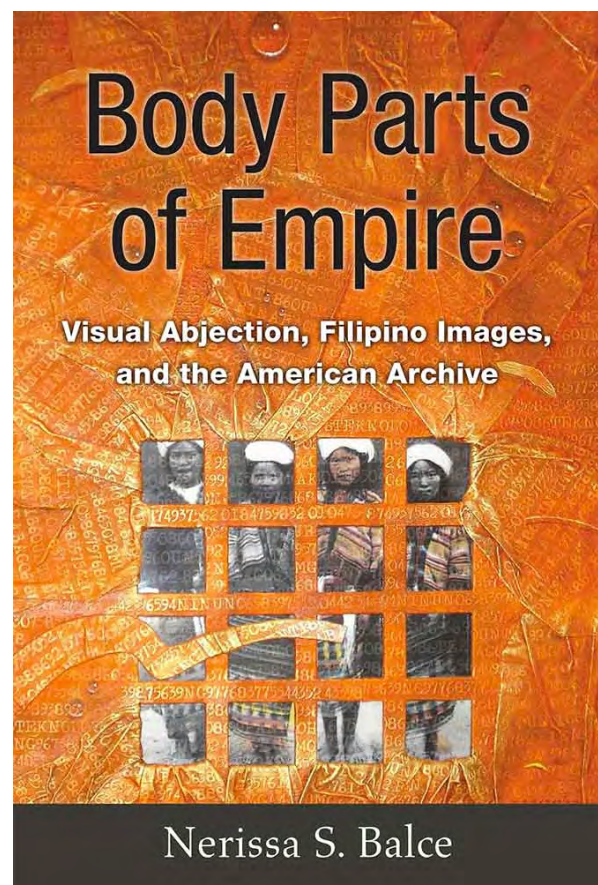


BOOK REVIEW

***Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* by Nerissa S. Balce
Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017**

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Although the quest for a one-sentence summary of Philippine imperial history seems futile, a common Filipino saying exists: “300 years in a Spanish convent followed by 50 years in Hollywood.” The association of American imperialism in the Philippines with Hollywood and visual representations of empire may appear charming, but some would beg to differ. Nerissa Balce’s *Body Parts of Empire* deals with issues of race, gender, and imperialism in the context of American-administered Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century by analyzing contemporary language and media. *Body Parts of Empire* represents an important moment in the historiography of the Philippines in the early twentieth century and American imperialism in the Pacific because its analysis centers on corporeal aspects of empire— how physical Filipino



bodies were understood, manipulated, and subjugated.

Balce looks closely at a historical moment when the popularization of visual media such as photography and film made the creation of new conceptions of Filipino natives possible, and how these conceptions transferred to the larger collective consciousness of the American people by relying on the promise of an imperial future with the mission of benevolent assimilation. Besides these sources, Balce also analyzes texts such as contemporary fiction, music, advertisements, and memoirs—forms of representation often romanticized and disparate from the realities of empire. Balce accesses questions of masculinity, femininity, race, and sexuality by utilizing tropological analysis, which refers “to the production of figures of speech in American fin de siècle culture that drew on earlier racial and gendered grammars from the histories of U.S. wars.”¹ Tropes associated with indigenous populations such as savagery, docility, and domesticity also draw a link between the rhetoric and treatment of Native American and black people in the United States to Filipino natives.

Balce’s first chapter, “The Abject Archive of the Philippine-American War,” introduces the concept of abjection “as a discourse and theory for understanding how race...and gender frame the narratives of the history of the Philippine-American War,

the Philippines colony, and, by extension, the global Filipino diaspora.² In this chapter, Balce asks readers to consider how representations of Filipino natives drew upon corresponding notions of “inferiority” and “savagery” applied to African-American and Native American populations.³ Chapter 2, entitled, “Face: Necropolitics and the U.S. Imperial Photography Complex,” covers the popularity of stereoscopic cards—mounted photographs which, when viewed through a stereoscope, appeared to be three-dimensional.⁴ The rise in popularity of stereoscopic cards, photographs, and postcards of war corpses and the aftermath of battle is, according to Balce, indicative of how the American public understood the Philippine-American war.⁵ This visual mode of consumption allowed Americans to conceptualize the structure of imperial power in place.

The third chapter, “Skin: Lynching, Empire, and the Black Press during the Philippine-American War” considers the experience of African American soldiers in the Philippines during the war, as well as how homeland ideas surrounding race influenced the American approach to war and their interactions with Filipinos. Balce draws connections between how African American and Filipino people were characterized based on the color of their skin.⁶ Balce’s inclusion of African American

¹ Nerissa S. Balce. *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive*. (Manila, Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 17.

² Ibid, 21.

³ Ibid, 23.

⁴ Ibid, 45.

⁵ Ibid, 90.

⁶ Ibid, 92.

perspectives on how white soldiers characterized Filipinos in their personal letters and the press provides a unique view into how ideas of race were transported from the mainland United States to its overseas holdings. Finally, Balce's final chapter, "The Bile of Race: White Women's Travel Writing on the Philippine-American War" explores how white American women were "both agents and critics of empire."⁷ Balce asks readers to consider what can be gleaned about Filipinos from texts written by white women. In doing so, Balce argues "we encounter what has been repressed and forgotten in official narratives of the empire."⁸

Balce writes, "the term American empire has lost much of its charm."⁹ In doing so, she draws from and contributes to a greater historiography that aims to analyze the repercussions of American empire. Prominent historians in this field such as Alfred McCoy and Paul Kramer attempt this feat by analyzing the history of torture methods, drug trading, surveillance, and capitalism. McCoy's *Endless Empire* (2012) and *Colonial Crucible* (2009), as well as Kramer's *The Blood of Government* (2006) in particular speak to these topics. Yet, perhaps Balce's most significant contribution to the existing historiography is the scope of her analysis. By placing the native body and its representations at the center of this work, Balce deconstructs the façade of empire. She does not reintroduce the story of Filipino natives into their own history in

a misguided attempt at redistributing agency but instead demonstrates how understanding individual bodies is helpful in accessing larger narratives of race, gender, and American imperialism.

⁷ Ibid, 129.

⁸ Ibid, 157.

⁹ Ibid, 10.



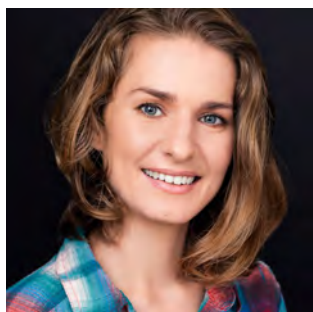
Visitors in the Terrace of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar
Image: Soksamphoas Im



Meet the Authors



Samantha Cabusora earned her master's degree in History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a focus on Southeast Asian History and War and Society. Her thesis, entitled, "So You've Got a Furlough...!: Manliness, Disease, and Military Control" focuses on relationships between American servicemen and Filipino women. By examining how the U.S. military attempted to combat venereal disease, her research analyzes the regulation of manliness, femininity, and sex through policy and visual media in the aftermath of the Second World War in the Philippines. She earned her Bachelor's degree in History from the United States Air Force Academy. Her research interests include discovering ways in which war and society intersect, and the stories of women in the Pacific Theater during and after WWII.



Born and raised on the other side of the world, **Rachel Filbeck** hails from Chiang Mai, Thailand. She studied theatre at Harding University for her undergraduate degree, and then completed her MFA in Scenic Design and Theatre for Young Audiences at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Rachel currently works as an exhibit designer for the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawai'i.



Dr. Matthew Galway is a former Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, and a future Senior Lecturer, Chinese History, at the Australian National University. He completed his PhD in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia in 2017. His book, entitled *Global Maoism: China's Red Evangelism and the Communist Movement in Cambodia, 1949-1979*, is under review at Cornell University Press. His research focuses more broadly on post-WWII Chinese and Cambodian intellectual history and the global spread of maoism. Currently, he is authoring a book on "Mao-merabilia."



James Guild is a PhD Candidate in Political Economy at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. His research focus is economic growth and infrastructure investment in Indonesia during Jokowi's first term. His writing on energy policy, infrastructure and land use has appeared in *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, the *Indonesian Journal of Energy*, *New Mandala*, *East Asia Forum*, the *Diplomat* and the *Jakarta Post*. You can follow him on twitter with @jamesjguild.



Rosaria Indah is a PhD student at the University of Sydney's School of Education and Social Work. She currently researches doctor-patient-student relationships in post-disaster areas in Aceh, Indonesia. Before starting this research, Rosaria worked as a rural general practitioner at an armed conflict-affected area in Aceh for two years. She also worked as a medical teacher at Syiah Kuala University for ten years. Rosaria is interested in collaborating in research concerning conflict resolution, disaster risk reduction, and health profession education. You can follow her on twitter with @rosariindahzak.



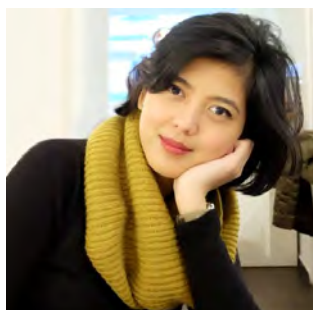
Piyawit Moonkham is a Ph.D. student in Archaeology at Washington State University. He earned his M.A. in Cultural Anthropology at the same university in 2017, his thesis discusses the connection of myth and folklore to historical landscape change and modification in Northern Thailand. He is currently developing a theoretical approach that integrates archaeological and cultural theories to understand patterns of interaction and relations between human, objects, and the environment of early historic settlements in Northern Thailand and, more broadly, Southeast Asia. His current research interests also include the social networks involved in collective memory, spatial configurations, and soundscape of early Northern Thai temples.



Sovinda Po is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Griffith University, Australia and a Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP). His articles have appeared in several journals and media outlets such as *Issues & Insights*, *East Asia Forum*, *New Mandala*, *IPP Review*, *The Diplomat*, *The Interpreter*, *The Australian Outlook*, and *Khmer Times*. His research interests include foreign policy of small states, and China's relations with mainland Southeast Asia.



Veng Seang Hai received his Master's Degree in Development Studies from Chiang Mai University in 2018. He also graduated from the Royal University of Phnom Penh with a Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in 2014. He conducted ethnographic field research in the northwestern Cambodia for his dissertation which delved into transnational mobility of (social-cultural) capital and its influence on social mobility in a migrant-sending community. Furthermore, his research interests include transitional justice, regionalization, and sustainable development with respect of local-knowledge integration. He wrote articles for newsletters of the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, and assisted the Documentation Center of Cambodia with Khmer Rouge history documentation and genocide education.



Abellia Anggi Wardani is PhD candidate in the department of Culture Studies at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on understanding the dynamics and roles of traditional markets in reshaping post-conflict society. She is an experienced consultant in conflict mediation and reconciliation with a demonstrated history of working in international non-governmental organizations. She holds a Master of Arts (MA) in Management of Cultural Diversity from Tilburg University.