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Jean Michaud

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Hmong infrapolitics: a view from Vietnam

Jean Michaud

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Abstract

Drawing upon notions of indigenization of modernity, agency and resistance in the context of an egalitarian society – the Hmong in northern Vietnam – I explore whether agency that is directed at diverting modernization is automatically intentional and patent, whether under certain circumstances it becomes resistance, and whether it is necessarily a project. I suggest the Hmong in Vietnam use infrapolitics while being tactically selective about modernity. I note that agency and the power to act appear and evolve in context and must be studied in relation to the specific circumstances that have formed the acting subjects. My argument relates to Sahlins' proposition that 'Local societies everywhere have attempted to organise the irresistible forces of Western World system by something even more inclusive – their own system of the world, their own culture.'

Keywords: Infrapolitics; agency; resistance; modernization; Hmong; Vietnam.

Hmong infrapolitics: a view from Vietnam

Infrapolitics, in James C. Scott's work, refers to forms of political activity brewing beyond the gaze of authority. Scott (1990, p. 200) wrote: 'If formal political organization is the realm of elites [...] of written records [...] and public action, infrapolitics is, by contrast, the realm of informal leadership and nonelites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance.' Infrapolitics is a space where individuals and groups outline covert agendas to maintain themselves and, hopefully, thrive.

However, a number of studies have been critical of Scott's infrapolitics (Sivaramakrishnan 2005a) and some believe that the notion has lost much of its explanatory potency (Li 2005). Instead of replaying this debate, I propose to return to the original propositions made by Scott and put them to work in the context of 'Zomian studies'

(Michaud 2010), and in light of recent scholarship involving other notions that have the potential to enrich Scott's suggestions. In other words, this paper is not about critiquing infrapolitics and everyday resistance per se; it is a fresh, ethnographically rooted take on it.

I suggest that Hmong in Vietnam,¹ a kinship-based society, are being tactically selective about modernity. This analysis calls upon manifestations of infrapolitics such as indigenization of modernity, agency, resistance and intentionality. Of these, the notion of resistance is the most controversial. Abu-Lughod (1990, pp. 41–2) had confessed that 'in some of my earlier work [on Bedouin women's resistance], as in that of others, there is perhaps a tendency to romanticize resistance', reading in some behaviours 'the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated'. Mahmood (2004, p. 20) likewise stressed that a risk exists to 'dream resistance' when projecting an emancipatory model of agency onto dominated groups. This occurs, she says, when we would like to think of such groups as subjects that *should* resist the undesirable diktats of modernity. Mahmood (2004) emphasizes that pitching domination and resistance as two polar opposites exposes a reductionist binary by which modernist observers project onto subjects an innate will to fend for self-realization.

In this article, in the context of an egalitarian society such as the Hmong, I want to explore infrapolitics, in particular whether agency that is directed at diverting the course of modernization is automatically intentional, whether under certain circumstances it can truly become resistance, and whether such resistance is necessarily a project.

Key debates

Indigenization of modernity and agency

In 1995 Ortner (1995, p. 182) declared:

To some extent, and for a variety of good and bad reasons, peoples often do accept the representations which underwrite their own domination. At the same time they also preserve alternative "authentic" traditions of belief and value which allow them to see through those representations.

In this vein, the notion of indigenization had been in use for some time in sociology (Sanda 1988) when Sahlins (1999) coined the specific phrase 'indigenization of modernity' (p. ix). Sahlins sought to suggest that we should accept that economically and politically weak societies facing outside pressures are no doubt changed by these, but they also creatively use what power they have to interpret, adapt and even

subvert these pressures (Sahlins 2005; Babadzan 2009; Engel Merry 2006 and Michelutti 2007 on ‘vernacularization of modernity’).

The anthropological considerations of how global edicts are invested locally with fresh meaning point to agency as a pivotal notion. Ortner (2006, pp. 143–4) explains:

In probably the most common usage, “agency” can be synonymous with the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control in their own lives.

Mahmood (2004, p. 29) adds:

Foucault’s work encourages us to think of agency: (a) in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions; and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed.

Ortner (2006, p. 186) corroborates: ‘Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction. [...] Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency.’ The lesson to draw here is that agency, the power to act, appears and evolves in context and has to be studied in relation to the circumstances that have formed the acting subjects (Gaonkar 1999).

Infrapolitics and resistance

Infrapolitics is the background against which more specific activities such as agency and resistance can be placed. If we accept that agency is, in essence, the way by which subjects can face change and, within the range of their ability, determine a course of action, one consequence is that some of these actions can involve resisting change. However, how can a notion of resistance consistent with this proposition apply to a society such as the Hmong in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, customarily devoid of political institutions beyond kinship? Over the last three decades, the recurrent ways resistance has been addressed in the social sciences have been linked to social movements. Typically in such works, dissatisfied subjects devise action to change or even topple an unequal situation (c.f. Mittelman and Chin 2005; Caouette and Turner 2009; Kerkvliet 2009). With a focus on action, whenever non-confrontational resistance strategies have been scrutinized theoretically, it has mainly been through the lens of Gramscian counter-hegemonic wars of movement and wars of position, with the latter representing milder types of resistance that some associate with non-violence (Fegan 1986).

Yet, one could postulate that resistance that is neither overt nor aimed at toppling the conditions of domination can still somehow be labelled resistance. This point has been made for over twenty-five years now. To accept it, we have to envisage a form of resistance unfolding within the realm of everyday infrapolitics as theorized by Scott (1985, 1990) and Scott and Kerkvliet (1986).

The Scottian paradigm of resistance has been examined and critiqued (Sivaramakrishnan 2005b). From a Marxist viewpoint, it is just another case of false consciousness. For others, it has been made extraneous in the face of more ‘exciting’ ideas revolving around Foucauld’s governmentality. I do not have sufficient space here to address these critiques with the seriousness they deserve. I will instead take a shortcut and propose that with the recent publication of Scott’s (2009) *The Art of not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, in which he proposes to read the history of these highlands as a narrative of state escape and refuge, the notion of resistance amongst dominated groups is given a new lease of life.

In a nutshell, to theorize concealed resistance, Scott has proposed to talk of a hidden transcript encompassing the debates, dealings and strategizing performed outside the gaze of the powers that be. To the latter’s face, subjects wave a public transcript, a front expressing, sometimes staging, the submissive position the powerful expect the powerless to take. Such covert resistance is more concerned with maintenance than with triggering drastic change. Subjects thus utilize subtle tactics coherent with their disagreement while avoiding becoming targets of retribution: foot dragging, buying time, playing stupid, all sheltered behind the smoke screen of overt compliance. As Scott (1985, p. 28) puts it: ‘To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does “between revolts” to defend its interests as best it can.’

Resistance, intentionality and habitus

Fegan (1986) asks, if there is no deliberate intention to resist, is the act still one of resistance?

To answer no to this question, one has to be of the opinion that resistance is in a tight binary with domination, and that domination must be actively opposed. This is a step that many authors are reluctant to take. Like them, my position is that it is the subjects’ viewpoint that is key to understanding whether resistance is at play or not, and to what degree.

Hmong individuals in rural communities of Lào Cai province picture themselves neither as resisting nor as the submissive victims of domination. Their view is more down to earth, many being keen to give the appearance of conformity simply to avoid problems. Over the

years, whenever I want to confirm this impression and ask why they act in this or that way, the familiar answer is: ‘Because that’s the Hmong way.’

This apparent lack of consciousness summons up the problem of intentionality. As Ahearn (2001, p. 115) rightly remarked, oppositional agency is only one of many possible forms of agency. But what project can clandestine agency and resistance serve? Ortner (2006, p. 134, 136) answers that:

Intentionality as a concept is meant to include all the ways in which action is cognitively and emotionally pointed *towards* some purpose. [...] It is the strong role of active (though not necessarily fully “conscious”) intentionality in agency that, in my view, differentiates agency from routine practices.

If Ortner is right, intentionality, with or without the subjects being fully conscious of the processes at play, could then be the key to understanding how routine, reflex and atavism are catalysed into genuine agency and possibly resistance.

Probing further, Ortner (2006, p. 134) wrote that ‘intentionality in agency might include highly conscious plots and plans and schemes; somewhat more nebulous aims, goals, and ideals; and finally desires, wants and needs that may range from being deeply buried to quite consciously felt.’ As I will illustrate next, Hmong individuals and households in Vietnam do not strategize collectively about the ways they can indigenize modernity or resist unwelcome forces. At least, they do not do so in ways we normally consider strategy to operate. Hmong individuals in Lào Cai are part of a lineage society without indigenous script nor archives, often with a dispersed habitat (Tapp et al. 2004).² Yet, despite this lack of political formalism, and being scattered over the highlands of Vietnam, analysts of the Hmong, myself included, have observed that political behaviour is remarkably consistent across space and time. Examples recorded about 100 years ago confirm that the Vietnamese Hmong’s infrapolitical universe is a rich and vigorous one.³

How do Hmong farmers succeed in producing coherent responses while remaining a society unfamiliar with the workings of centralized politics? Hmong individuals themselves would be hard pressed to explain. I would risk suggesting that Hmong resilience might actually operate like a *habitus* – in the sense of Elias (1991) more than Bourdieu. Building upon Ortner’s (2006) suggestion that wants and needs at the source of agency could be deeply buried, I propose that the notion of *habitus* may contribute to theorize how agency can include ways of responding to challenges and seizing opportunities consistent across a large number of individuals while no formal

coordination takes place. A Hmong habitus would point to a cultural capital shared by all, but owned by none.

The story behind Hmong infrapolitics

To weave these considerations into a rooted narrative, some context is needed. I consider the case of Hmong (*Hmong/Mong Leng*⁴) communities of northern Vietnam on the Chinese border. In Lào Cai province, the Hmong total 146,000 individuals, i.e. twenty-four per cent of the province's population, and fourteen per cent of all Hmong in Vietnam (2009 census). Through time, these highlanders have realized that their powerful neighbours were leaving them with few options: to keep a safe distance, or to be absorbed or eliminated.

Just prior to European colonization in the late nineteenth century, northern Vietnam could schematically be divided into social zones corresponding to three altitude strata: the high region above 1,000 m incorporating the somewhat inhospitable mountains bordering China; the stratum below 500 m comprising the fertile and heavily populated *Sông Hồng* (Red River) delta; and between these, a zone of well-irrigated plateaus and high valleys (Condominas 1978.)⁵

The political organization of the highest dwellers, partly sedentarized agriculturalists that I call highlanders here, has been based on kinship and neighbourhood. These were egalitarian, lineage societies. In the intermediate stratum, more numerous neighbours who virtually all belonged to the Tai linguistic family were organized in a feudal system leaving much political latitude to local rulers. In the delta lived the majority, the *Kinh* (or *Việt*), forming the core of the Imperial nation.

The highest ranges have been inhabited for two centuries by Hmong settlers from China (Culas and Michaud 2004). French colonial archives show that these became embedded into the economic system of the Tai lords, particularly the White *Thái* of *Sip Song Chau Tai*, the *Tày* and the *Nùng*.⁶ Most Tai-speaking lords held a vassal position to lowland powers (Kinh, Siamese, Burmese, Lao, Chinese), while being in competition with each other (Condominas 1976). All had in common to extort payments from the highlanders embedded in their domain, made possible by superior military organization compounded by an intermediary commercial position between highlands and the delta. There could be abuse on the part of the Tai rulers, but colonial archives show that most of the time, the Hmong would elect to move on rather than rebel or retaliate.

Prior to French colonization, these Hmong practised swidden agriculture while a minority was sedentarized. Commerce played a lesser role in a household-based production model focused on subsistence through agriculture, hunting and gathering.

With the installation of French administration in the late 1880s, the highlanders' dependence on the Tai speakers was curtailed. For France, taking firm control of the highlands was a priority to ensure the security of the frontiers and to increase trade. The conqueror's physical presence in the mountains short-circuited the older exchange networks, replacing the Tai middleman position with a new situation putting highlanders, Tai, Kinh and colonists on a more even plane.

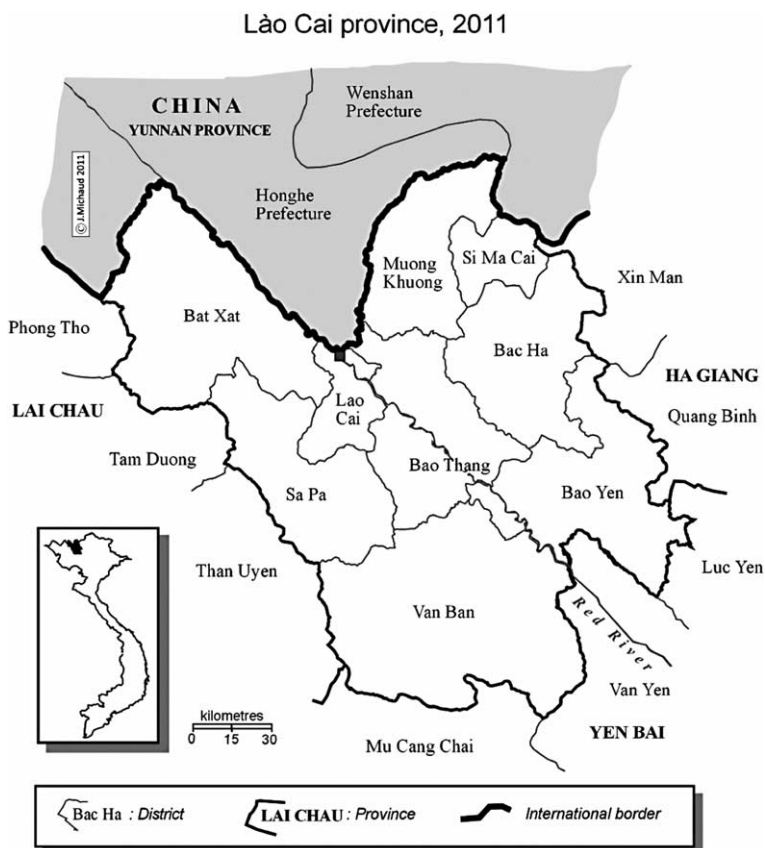
For the Hmong, bar a few local flare-ups (Culas 2005; Lee 2005), the colonial period was a time of relative peace. Gradually, trade increased as the local economy became more incorporated into the national system, thanks in particular to opium.

French rule ended in 1954. Following the partitioning of the country and the advent of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), the liberal economic period was over. The Communists implemented a programme of scientific socialism and worked to link the middle and high regions to the national project. The state put an end to 'retrograde feudalism', virtually ending what was left of the asymmetric relations between the Tai and Hmong. Soon, party rhetoric proclaimed that these 'little brothers' had attained the initial stage of the Socialist economy, superstition was decreasing and sorcerers were rejecting their backwards practices. Identity markers such as animism, nomadism, egalitarian politics, subsistence economies and linguistic, cultural and religious distinction had all become elements with which it was no longer palatable to identify openly.

In Lào Cai province, Hmong adapted to these changes by playing their expected role without great conviction but with enough diligence. Locally produced opium had become a source of wealth for highland farmers and was now traded in state shops for industrial goods, alcohol, rice and meat. However, living in the most remote reaches of Vietnam also meant that collectivization did not take as firm roots as elsewhere, and customary ways endured.

Then, *Đổi Mới*, the Economic Renovation decreed in 1986, put an end to thirty years of collectivization in the north and the market economy came back in fashion. In addition, 1993 saw a ban on forest cutting and a prohibition on growing the opium poppy, severely impairing the vitality of the mountain cash economy. With improved hygiene conditions and an influx of lowland settlers, such restrictions weighed down a population now too numerous to continue with its usual livelihoods. The often ill-adapted agricultural substitution programmes set up by the state only partly compensated for this economic decline, while a lack of financial capital prevented many from purchasing land use titles on the freed market.

The Kinh only account for fifteen per cent of the populations in Sa Pa, Bát Xát, Bắc Hà, Mường Khương and Si Ma Cai, the five mountain districts in Lào Cai province (Figure 1), but they control the

Figure 1. *Lào Cai Province, 2011* Source: author

district's and province's People's Committees and People's Councils as well as the local branches of the Communist Party, the three main arms of the Socialist state. Locally, there is now a two-tier society in which Kinh merchants, supported by the local authorities, dominate a flourishing commerce, while Hmong, without much support in the bureaucracy, are seldom able to rise above subsistence-level food production (Michaud and Turner 2003). Hence, in Vietnam's economic statistics, Hmong in the region stand among the poorest citizens. As the World Bank (2009, p. 184) puts it, for the Vietnamese regime, Hmong are little more than a backwards and marginal mountain tribe that the state has a moral duty to assist in its required progress towards economic, political and cultural maturity.

Meanwhile, in highland hamlets, where outside observers are rarely seen after dark, non-currency networks thrive, putting to use

reciprocity in lineage and neighbour-based exchanges, labour swapping, surplus food circulation and bartering of specialized services such as blacksmithing and shamanistic services. Animals are traded for work and are readily used for ritual sacrifices despite the state frowning at such counterproductive 'bad habits'. All these exchanges go unrecorded, a concealment that contributes to confirming the official picture of a population living in misery.

Infrapolitics in action

A few years ago in Sa Pa, Dau, a female Hmong in her seventies, expressed her philosophy in typical terms.⁷ She said:

Most Hmong stay in their villages to make rice fields and raise domestic animals. Many of them can afford to buy buffaloes, horses and motorbikes. They go to the market only in market days, when they have time and something to sell. While some other Hmong are lazier, they know only to go to the market, buying textiles, making clothing and selling it for money.

For Dau, to be Hmong is to be a peasant, and being successful at it is the apposite way to thrive. I do not advocate that Hmong in Vietnam are in love with the past and refuse change. Modernity, both in the sense of the Enlightenment project of growth and progress as well as the urge to break out from tradition, is occurring all over the Southeast Asian Massif. It is true, as Dau suggests, that the vast majority of Hmong households in Lào Cai are still busy with rural life. But they are also keen to take up changes and make their life easier. They try new farming techniques and experiment with new high-yield varieties, new cash crops and new trading networks. Moreover, outside the mainstay of farming life, across the Massif, growing numbers of Hmong are now selling their labour on construction sites, engaging in cross-border trade, reaching their friends on cell phones, guiding tourists, or even pursuing tertiary education abroad. As much as any other minority group in these highlands, Hmong will adopt modern ways as they see fit. However, concluding that modernity is progressing unimpeded would require to actively ignore the subtle signs of dissent embedded in such acts of perceptible conformity. Let us consider this for a moment.

In the rural communes of northern Vietnam, a majority of Hmong meet modernity with a range of reactions from acceptance, reluctant compliance, to diverse forms of everyday resistance. This process constitutes agency as project as proposed by Ortner.⁸ It is not in grand schemes that rural folks express their desires most clearly, but in the small acts of everyday life. Such actions often appear illogical from the

outside, especially when they are not aimed at maximizing economic profits and rapid modernization, with individuals acting according to a reasoning that does not easily overlap with the scientific project. For the sake of illustrating this, I select four activities that I find particularly informative: the modernization of agricultural practices through the input of enhanced seeds; the persistence of old ways of producing clothes; the selective adoption of new transport and communication technologies; and reactions to national education. A proper ethnographic presentation of these four activities would require more space than available here, so these mini case studies are only here to underline common trends.

Unlike China where the peasantry is steadily being turned into peri-urban labour, the vast majority of Hmong in Lào Cai still live off the land. Yet, the spin-offs of agricultural modernization across Vietnam have reached remote corners. In principle, all farmers across the country have now realigned their household economy along market imperatives and consumer demand.

In particular, as Turner (2011) and Bonnin and Turner (2011) show, Hmong farmers in upland Vietnam are now strongly encouraged to use state-subsidized hybrid seeds for rice and maize cultivation. After ten years of participating in such schemes, Hmong in Lào Cai have their doubts. They have come to distrust the delivery process due to the unpredictable availability of hybrid seeds in state distribution centres, which is often at odds with optimal local planting calendars (Figure 2). Many have had reduced harvests when planting has been delayed by bureaucratic miscalculation. Hmong farmers also tell that they dislike the taste of the new enhanced varieties, both as a food item and as material for rice alcohol distillation. Moreover, they are unhappy at being pressured into abandoning a dozen indigenous rice varieties planted for generations and appreciated for their taste and for ritual uses. Farmers acknowledge that cultivating varieties of lesser yielding species was not best for profitability, but they had long accepted these inconveniences in view of other values.

These Hmong farmers know well that there is no point in taking on the state about a product as fundamental as rice for the national economy. They also know that buying seeds on the market instead of waiting for the subsidized deliveries costs. But that is nevertheless what many now choose to do. Thus, many now elect to buy the seeds to obtain them exactly when they need. They assess that the security it provides is worth it (Elabor-Idemudia 2000). Regarding the collateral discarding of indigenous varieties, Bonnin and Turner show that families with land to spare – land that is not absolutely needed to ensure sufficient yearly yields for the household and its livestock – use this *not* to plant more hybrids and sell the excess production, but instead to continue planting the indigenous varieties. Less well-off

Figure 2. A state agricultural distribution centre, *Bắc Hà district, Lào Cai province, Vietnam* Source: author



farmers come to these neighbours to buy or barter small quantities of this customary production when they need it, especially for ritual purposes. In short, these Hmong farmers do not merely compute the lucrativeness of their choice; their equation also includes cultural preference.

In the second example, the Hmong in Sa Pa district have so far spurned the option of abandoning the customary and time-consuming production of their clothes. This demanding activity involves planting hemp and indigo, transforming the fibre, weaving it, dyeing it, pressing wax into it for a nice shine, stitching the pieces together and embroidering them by hand (Turner 2007; Figure 3). Instead, the rational choice would command to take advantage of cheap options now widely available on the market such as industrial T-shirts and trousers, which conveniently double as visible signs of modernity. As can be observed among other highland groups in the Massif – including a fast-growing number of Hmong in China, it must be said – industrial clothing has been adopted, rendering the distinction between minority and majority much less visible than before. Moreover, compromise options exist in other highland districts of the province where the making and wearing of traditional attire has receded, but not disappeared. There, the preference for customary styles has been partly maintained thanks to cheap industrial fabrics from China still showing distinctive patterns and colours. But the Sa Pa Hmong do not take up these replacement clothes either. Therefore,

why should 20,000 Sa Pa Hmong stick to an irrational and costly option?

When asked, Lan, a Hmong aged twenty interviewed in 2010, replies – while playing with her cell phone: ‘Because we have to.’ I ask: ‘You mean the Vietnamese want you to wear your traditional clothes for tourists?’ ‘No’ she says, ‘we have to because it is the old way.’ I insist: ‘But this is more costly in time and energy, isn’t it?’ She pulls a shy smile in return, having nothing to respond to that. Is this simply the sign of her and her peers being slow to realize the advantages of industrialized fabric? Is it a sign of a male domination forcing unnecessary labour on women? A composite of that? This is far from sure. Is it just that they are too poor to afford industrial clothing? Not really. Hmong peasants in Sa Pa are relatively well off. In Sinh’s words, a Hmong man in his seventies whom I talked to in 2004, ‘at Sa Pa market the principal buyers from minority ethnic background are Hmong; we buy food more than others.’ Indeed Hmong farmers at the market buy food, they buy shirts and trousers when needed and many can buy buffaloes, motorcycles and land-use titles. Part of the explanation at least lies elsewhere.

In the third example, by the mid-1990s, most Hmong in Lào Cai province still used pack horses to take their goods to and from marketplaces and between villages. Today, horses are rare, all but replaced by motorcycles. The Hmong who can afford them use

Figure 3. *Hmong (Mong Leng) women processing hemp fibre while at the market, Sa Pa town, Lào Cai province Source: author*



motorcycles to do just the same as they did with horses; some motorcycles are even fitted with makeshift pack-saddles. This technological improvement in transport is not so much introducing new ways of doing things as it is tailored to fit the users' needs (Salisbury 1962; Sahlins 1999). New communication technologies follow the same pattern. DVD players are now commonplace in villages thanks to rural electrification. These are chiefly used to watch growing numbers of DVDs of fictions and karaoke available on market stalls and produced by Hmong in the USA, China and Thailand. Concurrently, these same viewers do not show much interest for the national TV channels, including VTV5, a specialized 'indigenous' channel the state strategically directs at them (Messier in press). As for cell phones, they are nearly as commonplace as in the rest of rural Asia. Hmong in Lào Cai use them to keep in touch, organize agricultural work across distance and trade more efficiently from one marketplace to the next. DVD players, televisions and cell phones are used to confirm the world order from a Hmong viewpoint and speed up the exchange of information throughout Hmong space.

Finally, education, perhaps the more contentious example. Law-abiding Hmong parents do tell their children to go to state-run primary school, but absenteeism runs high. When disgruntled state representatives come to Hmong houses to verify if parents are dutifully implementing the education law, or when communal meetings are called to enforce attendance in a school with a poor record, everyone shows up, nods and testifies regarding their best efforts to make their children comply. Regrettably, many add, children do not listen to their parents much and end up doing what they please. Hmong culture is a permissive one in which adults exert relatively little parental constraint, especially on boys. This is perceived by Kinh educators as a cultural flaw showing a lack of understanding regarding the Confucian moral ethics and the imperatives of formal education. In the end, the state's agents conclude that they have done their job in reasserting the rule of law, the necessary signs of compliance have been shown publicly by the guilty party, and a diagnosis of intellectual laziness and cultural incompetence is affixed to the highlanders – making moot the point of trying to enforce the law any harder. Conflict is averted, and the state resigns itself to the fact that educating Hmong in Lào Cai province is not going to be very successful. In the meantime, and beyond the mere functional explanation of absenteeism due to costs, need for labour in the fields or distance to school, I suspect many Hmong are not unhappy to limit in this way cultural dilution among their youth. They stick to what really matters: passing on ancestral knowledge through customary education, and limiting formal schooling to what is needed to learn some accountancy and become proficient enough in the national language to ensure good dealings.

I suggest that these examples are indicative of creative indigenization of modernity, perhaps even resistance. It is hard not to notice that this combination of decisions and actions either pass up or, at least, slow down a train of consequences associated with the uncritical adoption of national modernity, weakening a subsistence economy to move towards a market one. In this configuration, hanging on to customary agricultural practices instead of adopting enhanced inputs, sticking to time-consuming homemade clothing, tactically adapting new technology or remaining quietly defiant about national education can be interpreted as an unwillingness to toe the line of market integration unconditionally. I find these acts and many others intriguing, suggesting a profile of reservation towards standardization. Sahlins (2005, p. 58) talked of 'hybrid forms, some of them space-defying or using the latest technology in creative projects of indigenising modernity.' Robins (2003, p. 265) observed that local populations 'tend to deploy hybrid and highly selective and situational responses to development interventions. These hybrid responses can be regarded as *indigenous modernities*. Development packages are resisted, embraced, reshaped or accommodated depending on the specific content and context'. In Robins' South Africa, as in Vietnam, a kind of project is at play.

Hmong agency against the broader background

During the Socialist collectivization, and now the market economy episodes, the relentless rhetoric of social evolutionism, growth and development shared by both Marxist ideology and neo-liberalism has destined Hmong individuals and households to follow a linear progression towards national integration and global modernity. Like peasants the world over, they are given little say in the unfolding of these national and global trends and are often confined to reactive responses. For authors from the modernization school, it is only a matter of time before these 'under-developed' highlanders should begin to taste the fruits of progress and keep demanding more. China is an excellent illustration of this, where 'minority nationalities' are convinced by powerful state rhetoric that economic integration and 'Han-ization' are synonymous with a higher degree of civilization.⁹ On closer examination however, and despite Vietnam's state rhetoric on this being analogous to China's (Michaud 2009a), there are signs that the success of this 'evolutionary' transition among Lào Cai Hmong is less than convincing. Sahlins (1999, p. vi) sharply noted: 'Many of the peoples who were left for dead or dying by dependency theory we now find adapting their dependencies to cultural theories of their own.' Among the serious obstacles to a swift transition of these Hmong are cultural behaviour at odds with the ideal of economic rationalization,

a local structure of power that does not comfortably overlap with the state's administrative structure, and a locally rooted decision-making process that ill fits modern politics (Tapp et al. 2004).

I propose that Hmong individuals in Lào Cai are reluctant to uncritically board the train of modernization, growth and development. Their reserve should be interpreted not as peasant stupidity, inertia or atavistic refusal, as the homogenous model of peasant evolution might suggest. Instead, it can be read as a tactical way of adapting to outside demands. Scott (2009) makes this point forcefully when, based on historical evidence, he argues that the political stance of highland peoples in the Southeast Asian Massif (his *Zomia*) constitutes a strategy of state-avoidance (Clastres 1977). Appadurai (1996, p. 145) concurs: 'Those social orders and groupings that were apparently passive victims of larger forces of control and domination were nevertheless capable of subtle forms of resistance and "exit" [...] that seemed to be not primordialist in any way.' It is clearly visible on the ground that a large number of local societies all over these mountains still manage to keep a distance from the state in a variety of ways beyond geographical isolation. These ways are contemporaneous, creative and fluid. Gaonkar (1999, p. 17) calls this 'alternative modernities':

In the face of modernity one does not turn inward, one does not retreat; one moves sideways, one moves forward. All of this is creative adaptation. Non western people, the latecomers to modernity, have been engaged in these manoeuvres now for nearly a century. Everywhere, at every national or cultural site, the struggle with modernity is old and familiar.

In Vietnam, beyond a state rhetoric celebrating the country's fifty-four ethnicities for political purposes (McElwee 2004), open cultural distinction is now largely unwelcome. In order to endure, distinctive cultural elements such as customary economics, animism, simple political structures and language differences, have beaten a retreat into the hidden transcript. All the necessary signs of obedience to the state and to the rule of law are expressed openly in forms such as compliance, avoidance of confrontation, dutifully attending agromonic, health and education training meetings, posting the right banners outside the house on given memorial days, wearing traditional attire when required to, and dancing on cue on 'Minority days' for the (mainly Kinh) officials to watch and applaud.

As I explain elsewhere (Michaud 2009b), the everyday resistance of Vietnam Hmong individuals and households has been crafted over centuries of proximity, quarrels, political and economic exploitation, rebellion, invasion, war and flight. Hmong rebellions have erupted

through time and across space, some taking the form of messianic movements, invariably to end in failure or bloodshed (Lee 2005). It would be rather astonishing if a society that withstood the test of time and fortitude in such a way, succeeding against the odds in maintaining itself to this day, had not in the process forged a spirit of resilience in the face of adversity and domination. This is a perceptive resilience, founded on an understanding that domination is a fact of life, that the stakes include cultural as much as physical survival and that with each action come consequences. In Scott's words (1990, p. 183) 'the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups [who remain invisible] in large part by design [is] a tactical choice born out of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.' As such, resistance to more powerful foes – the feudal state, Tai lords, French colonists, the Socialist administration – is not to be based on sheer force, which has proved futile. It is a resistance through finesse.

Conclusion: a localized Hmong signature

Ortner (2006, p. 190) pointed out that:

Resistance studies are thin because they are ethnographically thin: thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas.

Infrapolitical activity, as a local response to regional, national and global demands, offers an avenue for generating more grounded studies of everyday responses, including resistance, to globalizing processes (Mittelman and Chin 2005).

Such consideration of Hmong householders in Lào Cai province shows that they respond to the official policy of 'selective cultural preservation' with their own strategy of selective modernity acceptance (Michaud 2009a, p. 32). This should not come as a surprise. In 1934 in *Patterns of Culture*, Benedict saw a similar strategy among the Zuni, Dobu and Kwakiutl, as summarized by Rosenblatt (2004, p. 463): 'Although profoundly shaped by their culture, the people Benedict describes are active, thinking, and problem-solving creatures: The claim of cultural coherence is that there are certain recurrent themes in the solutions they find.' Similarly, Blaser (2004, p. 26), in the vein of Ortner's (2006, p. 147) 'agency as project', points to 'life projects':

Indigenous communities do not just resist development, do not just react to state and market; they also sustain "life projects". Life projects are embedded in local histories; they encompass visions of

the world and the future that are distinct from those embodied by projects promoted by state and markets.

Such visions highlight an unmistakable ability by a given population to deal creatively with constraints and sustain social dynamism despite the normalizing power of state and market.

In their day-to-day dealings amongst themselves as well as with other groups, Hmong individuals in Lào Cai operate through a kinship-based social organization. Yet, this is not at all contradictory with the fact that concurrently, they can also operate within a strong nation state such as Vietnam for various parts of their lives, or that they may abide by national standards when living in urban settings. Being included in a nation state does not magically erase a group's long-standing distinct form of social organization. These systems simply operate in parallel and they mingle at the fringes where contact is inevitable. That is, precisely, what Scott means by infrapolitics.

So, the novelty here does not lie in arguing that minority people adapt new inputs to their needs; anthropologists have done that for some time now. Following the call by Ortner, Sahlins, Mahmood and others (cf. Escobar 2001), what this research highlights is evidence of a specific signature to this creative process as it pans out with Hmong individuals and households in Lào Cai province. Such a signature is rarely spelled out by the subjects themselves, but remains decipherable through the symptoms of Hmong infrapolitics, especially via their agency. In Lào Cai, there is indirect evidence at the individual, household and clan level of Hmong vernacularization, Hmong hidden transcripts and Hmong resistance. Indeed, it seems that this syndrome can only be scrutinized through its shadow, partly because it operates in stealth mode and partly because Hmong subjects themselves may not be fully conscious of its existence.

In fact, we have not answered that question yet. Are the perpetrators here conscious of their 'strategic plan'? Is there even a plan? As Kerkvliet (2009, p. 229) judiciously pointed out, people need not be organized to be political. On the basis of the observable signs, the facts suggest that Hmong in Lào Cai province do have one or several life projects in the sense of Ortner and Blaser, visible in the degree of consistency across space and time in the ways they deal with the snares of adversity, the requests of modernization and the hardships inherent to being dominated. There is however little visible proof of this coping mechanism being designed. This, I believe, can be likened to what Ahearn (2001, p. 112) has termed 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' and, as suggested in the introduction, to habitus in the sense of a social imprint left on individuals by various systems of interdependence (Elias 1991). Hmong individuals in upland rural Vietnam, belonging to an egalitarian society, do not have a

home-grown device to coordinate as a group, to design collective strategies, and devise a deliberate and detailed roadmap for collective action. Being without internal political structure except kinship, their customary social organization lacks – is this the right term? – the tools with which to cluster politically and plan collective action. That, according to some, is a major weakness. For others, it is power in action.

Postscript

At the time of wrapping up this text, I am in southern Yunnan, China, interviewing Hmong/Miao farmers and urban dwellers. Do my observations from Vietnam travel smoothly there? I am less than sure. The massive modernization push in China is reaching the most isolated Hmong dwellings. Whole villages built in customary wood and adobe materials are being levelled as we speak and rebuilt with bricks and concrete in a standardized model. From our discussions it appears that older Hmong seem to want to stick to customary ways as much as they can, but the youth urgently want to become modern and successful – i.e. Han-like, sharing the national dream of economic success in the liberalized economy. Rural areas are emptying out of their youth. Little time is left for the ways of the past while cultural distinction becomes enshrined by the state in fixed forms suitable for mass consumption – ethnonyms, vernacular architecture, dress, songs.

The cultural fabric of local groups can clearly not absorb every possible form of change history brings to their doorstep. Given the necessary concentration of power and capacity of persuasion, the state can apparently chip away at everyday politics, undermine local agency and probably defeat the most intricate forms of resistance.

Notes

1. I use the ethnonym Hmong not as a bounded identity marker, but as a convenient label to refer to a group of people calling themselves by such name, in a specific locale, Vietnam, where some of these Hmong live and have developed particularities that may, or may not, be found in other Hmong communities elsewhere. No undue generalization is intended.
2. Even if diaspora Hmong in the West and most urbanized Hmong throughout Asia have now largely parted with this customary definition (Schein 1998, 1999).
3. My sources are unpublished ethnographic reports held in France and penned by the French military upon their arrival in Upper Tonkin at the turn of the twentieth century.
4. Current debates among specialists point to the preferred use of *Mong* when referring to the *Mong Leng* (Green Hmong) subgroup. To avoid confusion and remain consistent with academic preference to this day, I use Hmong here.
5. Such vertical social division has since been largely abandoned as promoting a binary opposing the lowlands to the highlands. It is used here with care, reflecting a still valid demographic picture in northern Vietnam, though populations nowadays actively mingle.

6. In this text, 'Tai' covers all the various Vietnamese groups of the Tai-speaking branches of the Tai-Kadai linguistic family. In Vietnam, the official spelling in *quốc ngữ* also includes the forms *Thái* and *Tày*, referring to two official, Tai-speaking national minorities (*các dân tộc thiểu số*).
7. Interview quotes are original and have been collected on location.
8. 'The distinction between agency-in-the-sense-of-power and an agency-in-the-sense-of-projects is that the first is organized around the axis of domination and resistance, and thus defined to a great extent by the terms of the dominant party, while the second is defined by local logics of good and the desirable and how to pursue them.' (Ortner 2006, p. 145)
9. Schein 1999, Tapp 2001, as well as interviews conducted in 2009 and 2010 with Hmong, Zhuang and Dong farmers and city dwellers, in southern Yunnan and southwest Guizhou provinces.

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JEAN MICHAUD is Professor in the Department of Anthropology, Université Laval, Canada.

ADDRESS: Department of Anthropology, Université Laval, Québec City, G1V-0A6, Canada.

Email: jean.michaud@ant.ulaval.ca