

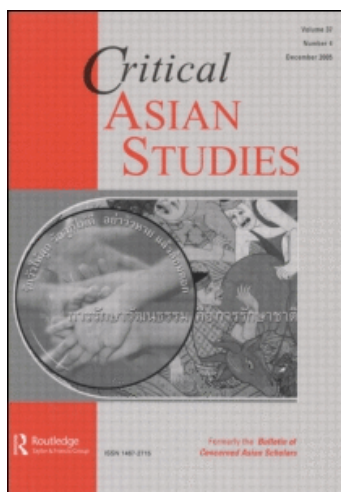
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## INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT IN LAOS

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**DEBATE**

A reply and rejoinder concerning the article “The Implications of Aspirations: Reconsidering Resettlement in Laos,” by Holly High, published in *Critical Asian Studies* in December 2008 (vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 531–50).

## INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT IN LAOS

### Reading too much into aspirations: More explorations of the space between coerced and voluntary resettlement in Laos

*A reply to Holly High, by Ian G. Baird, Keith Barney,  
Peter Vandergeest, and Bruce Shoemaker*

**ABSTRACT:** In this response to an article by Holly High, “The Implications of Aspirations: Reconsidering Resettlement in Laos,” published in *Critical Asian Studies* in December 2008 (vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 531–50), the authors do not dispute the notion that many people in Laos have aspirations for modernity and development. However, they are at odds with High in two key ways. First, she only presents a selective reading of authors who have written critically about highland to lowland resettlement in Laos, thus misrepresenting some of their ideas. Second, the empirical evidence High provides is insufficient or inappropriate to support her argument that people who are being resettled from the uplands to the lowlands in Laos are supportive of these state-sponsored schemes because they fit with their aspirations for modernity. The authors are concerned that High’s article may inadvertently serve to justify the views of those who advocate and fund centrally planned resettlement of ethnic minorities in Laos and who believe that non-participatory and top-down resettlement is acceptable if increased funding is available and better planning is conducted, even when those targeted for relocation would rather not move.

In recent years a considerable amount has been written and published regarding the policies and practices, and livelihood challenges, associated with Government of Laos-supported internal resettlement.<sup>1</sup> This state-sponsored resettlement program targets mainly ethnic minorities for relocation from the uplands to the lowlands and along major roads. The program is consistent with other

state-sponsored resettlement in Southeast Asia (for example, in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, China, and Vietnam), although there are important differences to the Lao program that are specific to the social, political, and geographical context. Most, if not all, of the academic and development policy literature on Lao internal resettlement points to significant harm caused to vulnerable ethnic minority and upland communities as a direct or indirect result of resettlement, although for the Government of Laos, rural development strategies linked to internal resettlement have long been a priority.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, Holly High has joined the debate on this issue, with a 2008 article published in *Critical Asian Studies*, entitled, "The Implications of Aspirations: Reconsidering Resettlement in Laos." High's main argument is that "Resettlement taps into deeply held aspirations for poverty reduction and modernity among Lao rural residents."<sup>3</sup> High argues that internal resettlement is not actually as problematic as has been depicted in previous analyses, because even those who experience state-sponsored resettlement maintain personal and collective aspirations, which are largely associated with escaping poverty and becoming more modern (*thansamay*).<sup>4</sup> High concludes that, "[A]spirations for a recognizably modern future are the key to understanding the motivations of residents of Development Village."<sup>5</sup> In High's analysis, the primary issue seems to be that these projects have been underfunded and have not been well implemented. The corollary is that if more resources and planning efforts were put into supporting resettlement efforts, the situation could end up being quite acceptable. In the interest of clarifying some points, and advancing the debate regarding internal resettlement in Laos, we believe that a response to High's arguments is justified.

There is no doubt that many rural people in Laos are critical of the government, less because of the government's increasing role in their lives per se and more because of their exclusion from many of the benefits that could be available through the state.<sup>6</sup> This disgruntlement is heightened by evidence that the benefits of many development projects, and of Laos's valuable natural resources, are seen as accruing to a limited number of individuals, while the vast majority of people remain poor. This is well illustrated by the situation in which rural people frequently do not even have access to the electricity produced by dams that have displaced them.<sup>7</sup> We have no argument with the idea that the thesis of original affluence of people prior to resettlement rests on shaky empirical grounds. We would add that this assumption is not necessary to support the

1. See, for example, Vandergeest 2003; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Ducourtieux et al. 2005; Baird and Shoemaker 2007; and Petit 2008, as well as a considerable amount of grey literature including Daviau 2001; Daviau 2003; Alton and Rattavong 2004; Ducourtieux 2004; and Gonzales et al. 2005.

2. See, for example, Government of Laos 1998; Parisak 1999.

3. High 2008, 531.

4. See Mary Beth Mills's (2005) use of the concept of *thansamay* in a very different context, involving gender and rural-urban migration flows in northeastern Thailand (Isan).

5. High 2008, 548.

6. Ibid.

7. Khamin 2008; Barney 2007.

idea that there are new forms of policy-induced poverty. We agree that researchers cannot underestimate people's ability to experiment with finding ways of getting out of poverty and that, when forced into resettlement, they will do their best to find ways of making it work for them. We also have no argument with the idea that many rural people in Laos aspire to modernity and that the meanings and expressions of modernity can vary considerably as they are in High's words, "appropriated, interpreted, and misinterpreted in ways that can only be partly understood in terms of domination and resistance."<sup>8</sup> Finally, we agree by definition as well as by observation that resettlement almost always includes elements of voluntariness as well as coercion, although we qualify this by noting that given restrictions on expression in Laos, it is very possible to exaggerate the degree to which resettlement is voluntary.

We find ourselves at odds with High in two key ways. The first is her selective reading of authors who have written critically about highland to lowland resettlement in Laos. Our second objection relates to the quality of the empirical evidence in support of her arguments that people who are being resettled in Laos can support their resettlement because it fits with their aspirations for modernity.

Our differing interpretation starts with the ways that High's article creates areas of disagreement with critical authors through a selective reading of their work. In particular, she often assumes that these scholars hold binary ways of thinking that fail to capture the "vast territory between voluntariness and coercion, or between new poverty and old poverty." For instance, High's evaluation of Peter Vandergeest's 2003 article on land policy and displacement in Laos<sup>9</sup> is as follows:

Vandergeest describes resettlement primarily through its potentials for planned or unplanned "displacement." In Vandergeest's definition, "displacement" is a broad term referring to both forced resettlement and the resettlement that arises when people choose to move in order to take advantage of developments such as infrastructure and services, and his argument is that it should be prevented whenever possible. It is worth noting that by Vandergeest's definition, school graduates from rural Australia who decide to move to Sydney in order to attend university are "displaced" because the uneven distribution of government services such as tertiary education has made them choose to move closer to services.<sup>10</sup>

Vandergeest, however, does not argue that resettlement should be prevented wherever possible. Rather, the argument is that the element of *coercion* in resettlement (i.e., displacement) should be prevented wherever possible. We agree that it is possible to read Vandergeest in this unintended fashion. To clarify this definitional question we would direct readers to the edited volume that sets out in more detail the conceptual approach for the broader project on development and displacement in which this study was located. In their introduction to *Development's Displacements: Ecologies, Economies and Cultures at Risk*, au-

8. High 2008, 549.

9. Vandergeest 2003.

10. High 2008, 546.

thors Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose distinguish displacement from completely voluntary resettlement or voluntary migration by defining it in terms of the element of coercion: “In this volume, we have adopted the broad position that displacement is by definition coerced. To put it another way, we hold that when, on a *completely* voluntary basis, a person leaves one place or activity for another, this process would not be considered displacement.”<sup>11</sup>



Lao People's Democratic Republic (Source: UNDP)

More than that, the essay by Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose cautions that a careful examination of resettlement should take into account the real world ways in which attempts to produce voluntariness through incentives and restorations fail for the vast majority of resettled individuals and communities, who are usually marginalized to begin with and who generally are excluded from a significant share of development project benefits. Going back to High's example: It is certainly a stretch to argue that the Australian students were coerced into moving to Sydney. To the contrary, many new university students probably aspire to find modernity and freedom through their move away from home! By the position quoted above, these students would not be displaced. It is something of a stretch to compare mobile Australian students with resettled Lao farmers whose livelihoods are undermined through resettlement.

High has also produced an unintended and selective interpretation of Ian Baird and Bruce Shoemaker's critical analysis of state-sponsored resettlement, sometimes portraying it as advocating a one-sided anti-migration perspective that would lock or constrain upland farmers inside village territories.<sup>12</sup> Baird and Shoemaker wrote about “anchoring” people in the uplands through providing existing villages with development support, but they did not intend this to be read as also implying that this might entail *preventing* upland people from

11. Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose 2007, 17. Emphasis added.

12. Baird and Shoemaker 2007.

moving when they wish to do so. Baird and Shoemaker's position, clearly presented in the paper, is simply to support uplanders who have themselves expressed the strong desire not to move and to assist them with the support that they require to make their case to the government. The use of the anchor metaphor was not meant to suggest an anchoring of villagers against their will. It rather referred to NGOs helping to develop more viable livelihood options for communities wishing to remain in their ancestral upland locations, with the anchor of upland development thus being a tool communities could employ as a strong justification for resisting government-initiated resettlement.

High rests her argument upon the idea that many people in rural Laos, whether in the uplands or the lowlands, hold aspirations associated with modernity and development. As far as we know, none of those who have written about resettlement in Laos have explicitly stated or implied that resettled people do not have aspirations for a better life. The vast majority of rural people in Laos and elsewhere hold these sorts of aspirations, although they may often be conditional, qualified, and only partially realized.<sup>13</sup> Aspiring for a better future is probably a basic aspect of the human condition. Even those who have been forced against their will to move to the lowlands have aspirations about what the eventual outcome of resettlement might be. When people feel that they have no other options, they do, of course, still hope for the best, and try to achieve it.

People in Laos have undergone many hardships through recent history. Rural farmers in all ethnic groupings in Laos are generally aware that they are unlikely to do well if they constantly oppose the state. But the fact that peasant farmers have aspirations for development and modernity does not justify the mobilization of the full power of the state to coerce rural people into resettling to areas that they have not chosen themselves and do not believe to be suitable. That, we believe, is a very different matter, which distinguishes the Lao upland resettlement program from the migration, aspiration, and modernity processes discussed by Mary Beth Mills, Rebecca Elmhirst, and Rachel Silvey in other contexts. The element of state coercion directed towards politically disempowered and vulnerable upland minority groups has been a central point associated with the internal resettlement debate in Laos.

Indeed, one of the blurry aspects of High's analysis is the apparent conflation between the internal resettlement and migration literatures in constructing the study's conceptual framework. Prior to High's intervention, the debate regarding internal resettlement focused on the issue of ethnic minorities moving from the uplands to the lowlands as a result of state-initiated efforts to eradicate opium production and swidden agriculture, increase access to services, integrate people into the nation state, and combat against security problems associated with antigovernment rebel activities. High has made use of the migration

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13. For discussions of local agency, farmer aspirations, and migration in the Indonesian context, see Elmhirst's (2002) analysis of a transmigration zone in Lampung, Sumatra; and Silvey's (2000) research in Sulawesi, Indonesia.



and agrarian change literature in Southeast Asia to engage with issues involving very different kinds of population movements, namely, government-imposed and government-enforced coercive resettlement. Furthermore, the types of aspirations that people tend to have when they move to new agricultural land, or to find employment in towns or in neighboring countries such as Thailand, are generally not the same as when state agencies demand and enforce the movement of ethnic minorities from the uplands to the lowlands, or along major roads. There may be some differences of interests within communities, particularly along generational lines, and of course every individual situation and family is somewhat independent, but such differences should be placed in social and political context.

This leads us to our key empirical issues with High's "The Implications of Aspirations." The article argues that internal resettlement in Laos is not so bad, or at least it should be understood as a very complex issue, because people have aspirations when they are resettled. But the empirical basis presented for drawing these sorts of conclusions rests on questionable grounds. High uses two ethnographic examples to support the conclusions of the article. Both case studies appear to be problematic in that they consist of examples that are not directly relevant to key issues of concern identified by critics of internal resettlement in Laos. One example is derived from local-level research in southern Laos, involving a group of lowland, ethnic Lao people who lived previously on an island in the Mekong River. These farmers were moved by the Lao state to another lowland, wet rice zone, on the mainland to the west. This case study does not speak to the issue of ethnic minorities in Laos who are most often conducting swidden agriculture being resettled from the uplands to the lowlands. High's case study is about ethnic Lao lowlanders moving elsewhere in the lowlands due to there being insufficient wet rice agricultural land in their previous village(s). There are fundamental distinctions between these two types of resettlement. In High's case, rural people are not being asked to completely retool their basic agricultural knowledges and ecologically situated livelihood practices, because the state finds them inherently unacceptable. Neither are the people that she writes of in this example ethnic minorities, with particular histories, customs, and cosmologies linked to upland places.<sup>14</sup> Instead, High's southern Lao case study more resembles another type of situation, one that has a long history in heavily populated, rural lowland areas, whereby new settlements are established as population growth makes agricultural expansion necessary. While High's case study is interesting and certainly relevant for better understanding lowland to lowland migration, we suggest it should be considered as a sub-type of lowland to lowland state-sponsored resettlement. We question the application of this case study for drawing broad conclusions related to the majority of internal resettlement initiatives in Laos, which involve the coerced movement of ethnic minority highlanders to the lowlands or along roads.

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14. See Chamberlain 2001; Chamberlain 2007.



Houses of ethnic Brao families recently resettled from the uplands to the lowlands in Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province, Laos (2005). (Credit: Ian G. Baird)

The second, and shorter, supporting case study High presents does relate to an ethnic minority community in the uplands in northern Laos. There are also alternate possible interpretations associated with this case study, however. We find that the reader is not provided with enough information to clearly understand the local circumstances. The case study, drawn from research conducted in Houaphan Province, does not indicate how many informants were interviewed. It is implied in the text that the informant cited in the article identifies as an ethnic Hmong individual, but the reader is never explicitly told that this is the case. The reader is informed that this person was incarcerated by the Lao government for a year or more, just a few years prior to the interview. Yet, it is not indicated why the man was imprisoned, even though this point seems relevant for understanding the local political context and the relationship of this person with the government and with other rural inhabitants. Was the jail term related to swidden agricultural issues or was it possibly linked to the violent political uprising of Hmong communities that occurred in Houaphan Province in 2003–2004? This uprising occurred in Vieng Xay District,<sup>15</sup> the same district where High conducted her research. Whatever the case, it seems apparent that High's informant had come into considerable conflict with local government officials in the recent past, and it is reasonable to surmise that this individual may be under some pressure to defer to district and provincial authorities with their plans for himself and his fellow villagers.

More generally, High's description and analysis would have benefited from taking better account of how certain discourses are frequently presented within the Lao context. While we cannot know for sure what High's informant in Houaphan thought, our own experience in listening to similar stories suggests that it is possible that he constructed his comments to her in such a way as to protect himself from possible repercussions from government officials. The informant

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15. Baird 2004; Baird 2005.



may have held the understandable concern that his comments and opinions would find their way back to the local authorities. We make this argument because systematic patterns are evident in Laos around how Lao citizens articulate criticism of government policy. In Laos it is quite common to hear rural people say that they agree with this or that particular government policy, but that they wish it would be “better implemented.” In our different research sites we have all found that this is often a way for rural people to safely convey the message that they really do not like the policy, while not openly opposing the government’s policies. In the political context of many minority upland areas in Laos, opposing a resettlement initiative can be interpreted as being against the government, something that High’s informant, a recent ward of the state, might have had good reason to be concerned about.

Our diverse experiences in Laos all point to the existence of a code, or acceptable discourse, that is commonly used with respect to politically sensitive issues, for example involving local practices of swidden agriculture or fisheries and wildlife use. It is similar to the type of situation described by James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak*.<sup>16</sup> In Malaysia, Scott showed how rural people may not be willing to risk facing sanction, or worse, for seeming to be against the established order. The authoritarian political environment in Laos presents considerable concerns in this regard. Ian Baird has observed this scenario frequently in relation to state resettlement in the upland areas of southern Laos, in particular with ethnic Brao communities in Attapeu Province. For instance, during interviews that he conducted in Phou Vong District in 2003,<sup>17</sup> in communities that have experienced resettlement initiatives, a number of Brao informants initially said that they supported the government’s policy. Over time, however, Baird heard many very different stories that contradicted the initial statements.

All information obtained through interviews is best considered as produced in contexts of unequal power, through an interaction between a situated researcher and the research subject. It is thus crucial to understand how that context shapes the information that is produced. Unfortunately, High’s article provides insufficient information about her research methods. Especially with respect to the Houaphan case study, we do not know whether the account is based on one or more interviews; whether she conducted interviews with other informants in the site; or how she obtained other contextual information. This kind of information would go a long way to helping the reader assess the conditions under which this potentially instructive story was produced. A careful consideration of the ways that local responses might be influenced by various factors, including fearfulness of being exposed as disagreeing with particular state policies, might present alternate interpretations of apparently straightforward informant statements concerning their support for resettlement.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Scott 1985.

17. Baird 2008.

18. High 2008, 543.

To summarize, we find ourselves in agreement with High's comments that most people in Laos believe that they have been excluded from the benefits of state development. But High's article obscures this point with arguments that implicitly or explicitly downplay the coercive aspects of resettlement and the kinds of "new poverty" associated with these policies. Her arguments rest on selective readings of other authors who have written on resettlement and on limited empirical evidence with respect to the broader situation of resettlement in Laos. With respect to her account of other authors, at least in our cases, we do not see many of the areas of disagreement that she believes exist; these were produced by reading into various publications a dualistic approach that was not intended.

More important, though, are the areas where there are differing interpretations, specifically around the degree to which resettlement is coerced and whether resettlement can be justified. Here we find that High's case studies are either marginally relevant to the internal resettlement debate in Laos, or are insufficiently contextualized and reflexive with respect to the political context around upland to lowland internal resettlement. We are not given the information on the research methods that we would need to assess how the narratives she presents were produced in a context where fear of retribution either restricts what people say or causes them to translate open opposition into a code that hides this opposition. In this sense, High's notion of an ethic of "experimental consensus" obscures more than it illuminates regarding the politics of upland resettlement and community-state relations in Laos.

Finally, we are concerned about the implications of High's conclusions. Although we do not think that this was her intention, nevertheless High's article holds the potential to help justify the views of those who advocate and fund centralized planned internal resettlement in Laos, without the adequate participation of local people. The article could be used to justify policies and practices that are discriminatory against highlanders. We would support the process of organizing and helping highland communities in Laos moving to the lowlands for improved opportunities if this was truly their desire, and if they were not being coerced or otherwise manipulated to move under false pretences. But the idea that people have aspirations for modernity, as truthful as that may be, should not be used as a rationale for justifying or supporting the idea that highlanders should be moved en masse to the lowlands in situations where it is not something that they truly desire to do. The recognition that people have aspirations should not be presented as a reason for tolerating top-down development interventions or for emboldening the prejudices of development agents as to why highland communities should move to the lowlands.

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## Complicities and complexities: Provocations from the study of resettlement in Laos

*A rejoinder to Baird et al., by Holly High*

ABSTRACT: In this rejoinder, Holly High summarizes the arguments she presented in “The Implications of Aspirations” (*Critical Asian Studies* 40 [4]) and shows how they offer an escape from the limiting binaries that characterize the position framed in the reply by Baird et al. High defends the ethnographic case study approach by showing its unique usefulness in capturing the complexities of everyday political activity that might otherwise be missed. Grappling with manifest complexities rather than editing them out for political purposes or resorting to simplistic binaries, High argues, results in a more well-founded and honest political position.

In “The Implications of Aspirations: Reconsidering Resettlement in Laos,” published in *Critical Asian Studies* in December 2008 (vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 531–50), I presented two ethnographic case studies that demonstrate the need to move beyond binary understandings of resettlement that pit “coercion” against “voluntary” resettlement. I show how the complexity of everyday aspirations and motivations makes such a distinction impossible to maintain and unproductive for understanding the everyday political activity through which resettlement takes place. I offer conceptual tools such as the Lao political mode of “experimental consensus” as a way of thinking through these complexities.

In their reply to my article Baird et al. write “High argues that internal resettlement is not actually as problematic as has been depicted in previous analyses, because even those who experience state-sponsored resettlement maintain personal and collective aspirations.” In fact, my main argument is that internal resettlement in Laos *is* problematic: “almost unimaginable suffering” is the phrase I used.<sup>1</sup> I dwell on the repeated imprisonments of Mentur and the begging and near starvation of the residents of Development Village. But my question when observing people’s suffering is: why. Why not just leave? Why put up with this? And why seek it out? What can explain the “rush” of lowlanders and highlanders alike *to* resettlement villages, when there is so much suffering there? When I presented these questions to settlers, they spoke of their aspirations and ambitions for the future. They expressed much disgruntlement, too, but this was typically directed at the lack of adequate government or donor funding and support and their own persistent poverty, rather than the resettlement itself. People stressed that they were not opposed to moving *per se*: to the contrary there appeared to be a valorization of mobility. In light of this, I conclude that the settlers I encountered participated in resettlement — despite the suffering it entails — in significant degree because of the strength and depth of their aspirations. Baird et al. imply that acknowledgment of such aspirations is banal as aspirations may be a human universal. But I ask readers to reflect for a

moment: how many dreams do you have for which you would risk such danger, poverty, hunger, and the threat or actuality of imprisonment? My argument remains that the particular formation and compulsion of the aspirations at play here are deeply held cultural products and hold not only anthropological interest, but insights into contemporary engagements between state and society in Laos.

While the structure and wording of the opening lines of Baird et al. may make it seem as if I am a lone voice on this point, I would like to acknowledge (as I did in my original article) that I have been inspired by the detailed treatment given to this issue by Jonathan Rigg and Olivier Evrard and Yves Goudineau (and more recently by Pierre Petit).<sup>2</sup> Each of these authors has taken a different line on this issue, yet all premise their investigations on the inadequacy of perceiving resettlement as simply a matter of coercion. They detail the motivations that people have for engaging in resettlement, including seeking to attain land,<sup>3</sup> access to services such as hospitals,<sup>4</sup> or “simply to change their lives.”<sup>5</sup> Despite these valuable contributions, attention to aspirations and particular experiences of resettlement remain underrepresented in the literature, and my case studies are an effort to provide such attention.

Baird et al. question the usefulness of my case studies. They suggest that the cases I offer are not directly “relevant” because they are too specific (dealing with a particular ethnic group, agricultural situation, informant, and so on) and that, in any case, listening to what people say in Laos is dubious because people may just say what they think is safest. Yet close-grained studies of particular examples do have the capacity to speak to larger themes, despite their specificity: indeed, particular cases offer insights *because* of their specificity. The ethnographic method does not aim to capture the whole via a bird’s-eye view, but rather to understand particular instances, because it is only through the particular that generalities are actualized. The ethnographic method is similar to peering through a keyhole: up close, a vista opens that would have been invisible to the schematic glance. This is a path to reaching general truths distinct from surveys or policy overviews, but no less valid. As for Baird et al.’s complaint that the case study drawn from lowland settlers is irrelevant because lowlanders have not typically been described in the literature on resettlement, my response is that the neglect of lowlanders in the literature to date only provides further impetus for publication on the topic.

Baird et al.’s objections to my ethnography are very revealing of the closed circuitry that informs their particular critique of resettlement: evidence that confirms their view is eagerly and uncritically embraced while counter-evidence is dismissed on one pretext or another. One wonders if the authors would have criticized my fieldwork if I had phrased the results as merely consistent with

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1. High 2008, 548.
  2. Rigg 2005; Evrard and Goudineau 2004, 947; and Petit 2008.
  3. Rigg 2005, 122.
  4. Petit 2008, 127.
  5. Evrard and Goudineau 2004, 947.

their own critique of resettlement. This is particularly clear in their treatment of Mentur's narrative: they refer uncritically to his claims to have been incarcerated as if it is a fact, while they describe Mentur's statements in favor of resettlement as possible lies. They argue that fear of a rather shadowy-sounding Lao state could cause Mentur to lie about his sentiments toward resettlement to me (but not, apparently, lie about his incarcerations!). It would seem that Baird et al. stand ready to believe any settler's complaint about the state, but then doubt any statements in support of resettlement, even when they emerge from the same informant. This is apparent again in their claim that Brao informants had changed the views they related to Baird over time. The implication is that the informants were concealing their "true," critical views when they first met Baird, but revealed them later. But the opposite claim could be made with equal persuasiveness: perhaps these informants spoke openly with Baird at first, but over time came to trust him less, or learnt that he preferred to hear only accounts that were critical of the state. My point here is not to deride Baird and his experiences, but to point out that dismissing the evidence I have provided on the grounds of possible lying on the part of informants is a false play in academic debate because it allows for unfettered subjectivity in the interpretation of field reports: in this framework, those reports that agree with a preestablished stance are thought "true" while those that challenge it are cast as "lies" and thus dismissed. This play can be applied with equal (il)legitimacy *ad infinitum* to any report from the field, thus allowing fieldworkers or critics to choose to listen to only some of what they are told by informants and other fieldworkers. The deployment of this strategy here reveals how deeply Baird et al. are committed to shoring up a fixed position on resettlement in the face of contrary evidence, and this position is a binary one.

A final note on my narrative from Mentur: I was (and am) aware that the story Mentur divulged to me could put him in danger, and it is for this reason that his identity has been concealed, to the point of obscuring the context in which I gathered it. I offered his story in my article not as an account that is open to verification (and I will not endanger his safety by attempting to do so) but as a narrative that can be considered for the themes and attitudes it expresses. As for Baird et al.'s question if Mentur's original incarceration was linked to the Vieng Say rebellion in 2005, my reply is that given Mentur's original incarceration occurred — in his own description and as noted in my article<sup>6</sup> — in 1995, one would think not. I clearly stated in my article that he described his incarcerations to me as arising from his refusal to live in the resettlement areas he had been directed to: he was extremely disgruntled at this coercive intervention in his life. It is all the more striking, then, that a person who has suffered so much through resettlement schemes, and who was so openly critical of the Lao government to me, would nonetheless impress upon me with such ferocity his desire for more and better engagement with state services and *more* resettlement in the future. My conclusion is that Mentur's engagement with resettlement cannot be under-

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6. High 2008, 542.



stood purely in terms of coercion — as blunt and oppressive as the coercive means used against him were — and that his own aspirations and ambitions are a primary aspect of why he has participated, and continues to participate, in resettlement.

Baird et al.'s treatment of Mentur's narrative reveals their continuing tendency to think in binary terms, despite their claims to the contrary. The assumption they make is that Mentur is either "for" resettlement (and therefore all is well: the position they erroneously attribute to me) or he is against it and hiding this through lies (and thus all is not well: their own position). I suggest, by contrast, that Mentur's narrative shows how local relationships with state policy are a much murkier mix of desire and fear than such binaries can recognize. Mentur was seeking closer incorporation with the state through resettlement *and* he was vehemently criticizing the state, especially in terms of how his resettlements had been handled and how limited his access to state services had been.

Baird et al.'s commitment to an oppositional framework is clear throughout their reply. Another example occurs in their final paragraph, where they explain that they support the resettlement of people "if this was truly their desire," but not "where it is not something that they truly desire to do." The opposition between voluntary and involuntary resettlement is reasserted here in full strength.

As for the concern raised that I read Peter Vandergeest "selectively" I merely point out that Baird et al.'s defense of Vandergeest is based on an entirely different publication from the one which I engaged with. I invite readers to consult Vandergeest's "Land to Some Tillers: Development-induced Displacement in Lao" directly to assess if my reading of it was fair.<sup>7</sup> Vandergeest 2003 is a sole-authored piece dealing directly with resettlement in Laos that appeared in a leading journal, while the work Baird et al. refer to in their reply is a coauthored chapter (in an edited volume) on development "displacement" more broadly.<sup>8</sup> I maintain that it is legitimate, and in fact a requirement of scholarly endeavor, to seriously engage with articles on their own terms and merits, and this holds especially true for articles that appear in prestigious venues. Indeed, Baird et al.'s reply does precisely this: it engages with only one of my articles on its own terms without referring to the rest of my publications. I welcome such engagement, and suggest that it is perfectly valid that I likewise have engaged with Vandergeest's sole-authored publication.

That said, the quotation provided from Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose does not challenge, but only reproduces the oppositional framework I observed in Vandergeest's 2003 article and in the Baird et al. reply. The quotation they provide reads: "In this volume, we have adopted the broad position that displacement is by definition coerced. To put it another way, we hold that when, on a *completely* voluntary basis, a person leaves one place or activity for another, this process would not be considered displacement."<sup>9</sup> The emphasis placed on "completely" (it appears in italics in the Baird et al. reply, though not in the orig-

7. Vandergeest 2003.

8. Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose 2007.

9. Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose, quoted in Baird et al., 608.

inal) leaves little doubt that the authors wish to convey the view that *only* mobility that is voluntary in *every* sense is to be considered acceptable (that is, to evade the negative nomenclature of “displacement”). This is an extreme definition of voluntariness. And when it is combined with Baird et al.’s insistence that no situation can be taken as voluntary in Laos even when it appears to be so (so clear in their questioning of Mentur’s positive statements about resettlement) the effect that I originally observed in their work is reproduced: truly voluntary relocation emerges as impossible due to all-pervasive fear, thus all resettlement is collapsed into the involuntary category, and is opposed on the grounds that it is coercive “displacement.” It is a social science truism that is not possible, or even desirable, to be *completely* free of any imposing context — political, economic, social, familial, cultural, dispositional, or psychological. Eric Wolf, arguing for the importance of a cultural and historical perspective, wrote: “As Marx said, men make their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing. They do so under the constraint of relationships and forces that direct their will and desires.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, and many others, none of us is truly “free.” A position that regards desirable outcomes as inhering in absolutely free choice runs into complications when applied to the simplest choices individuals make, but when it is applied to policy decisions affecting large-scale populations it is fantasy. Discussions about resettlement need sharper tools than such blunt binary oppositions.

My article pointed to directions that can be taken to move beyond such binaries. Both case studies demonstrate a context where rural desires conform closely to standard state discourses, allowing a form of “consensus” around the goal of poverty reduction.<sup>11</sup> Yet this consensus is contingent on the results that unfold on the ground: there is an experimental orientation here where policies and strategies are constantly assessed and revised in the light of outcomes. Where poverty reduction does not — as is so often the case — result, this consensus becomes a potent platform for rural critique of the state and also grounds for farmer-led modification or relinquishment of state policies. This creates a surprisingly flexible context for everyday politics, where — despite significant fear and coercion — maneuver and negotiation constantly take place. Motivating these negotiations is, for so many Lao rural residents, a set of remarkably ambitious aspirations that often far outpace the chances of many for attaining them. My article argued that it was not resettlement, but poverty, that was the primary cause of suffering in these contexts, and I noted that the causes of poverty in Laos are larger than Laos itself.<sup>12</sup>

I shall extend this last point to state more clearly its implications: insofar as the causes of poverty in Laos are larger than Laos itself, *we are all complicit in this issue*. We are all participants in a system by which some suffer and others (including many readers of *Critical Asian Studies*) benefit in an almost obscene fashion. It is tempting, when faced with suffering, to want to side with the angels

10. Wolf 1982, 386.

11. High 2008, 541 and 549.

12. *Ibid.*, 546.

who, hovering above, can perceive the “bad guys” out there and condemn them. Perhaps seeking to condemn a shadowy Lao state in order to champion the elusive goal of *complete* voluntariness offers the sensation of a brush with the angels. But this is illusory. The situation that we face today — in Laos but also globally — is a much more complex story because there are no angels, only us. And we are less than angels: academics, Lao bureaucrats, informants, Lao rural residents, and journal readers alike. What we must face is our mutual entanglement in a system that produces both extreme suffering and extreme privilege.

Baird et al. conclude their reply by expressing their worry that my article has the power to shore up funding and support for “non-participatory” resettlement schemes in Laos. Their concern with my work seems to be that I have forsaken the side of the angels and thus must fall automatically into the enemy camp of forced resettlement: if you are not for us you must be against us. This concern is perfectly consistent with their binary framework, but it misses the point of my article: I wrote of complexity, and I wrote of culturally embedded aspirations, and these are far from an endorsement of the non-participatory scenario they fear. Editing out my knowledge of the importance of aspirations and complexity would be a form of self-censorship, and though it might offer an illusory sense of a brush with angels, self-censorship is not a path to political effectiveness for academic work. One of its dangers is that — through the desire to side with the angels — writers may neglect both the complexity of the causes and consequences of inequality and our own complicity in these.

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