

Sustainability Research on Human Beings as Part of the Geosphere in Rural Laos: Focusing on Daily Goods among Shifting Cultivators

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Place of fieldwork: Lao People's Democratic Republic

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Research background

Lao People's Democratic Republic (below Laos) has been working to reduce poverty since the first half of the 1990s, as it is thought that poverty is a leading factor in natural environment destruction and drug cultivation. Despite these efforts, Laos currently suffers from a "poor rural" outlook. Previous research examines the effectiveness of initiatives such as the adoption of alternative commercial crops (Neef et al. 2010), utilization of non-timber forest products (Sunil 2010), financial support for livestock breeding, and the introduction of fertilizers (Phinseng 2006). However, research has not revealed how these issues affect individual households, such as crop failure due to drought, pests and diseases; illness or injury; and labor shortages filled by school-aged children. These previous studies have not included a social mechanism to reduce risks by themselves; rather, the aim of poverty resolution has often been to only improve household livelihoods.

Research purpose and aim

This research examines how and on what scale people living in rural Laos promoted restructuring. During this reorganization, I wondered what challenges were faced by the villagers. Sugihara et al. (2010) proposed the new concept of survival foundation, defined as "the basis of livelihood catering for survival, reproduction, and subsistence." One object of this study is to re-evaluate the techniques used by farmers to remain independently viable. Taking into account the distribution and production according to tradition and customs, this research emphasizes the viewpoint of survival in such a way that it does not exclude consumption and reproduction. As such, through investigation of the holdings and loan situation of life equipment by people in rural Laos, I would like to clarify a singular technique to control the variations of life. By focusing on the combination—or the diverse functions—of life instruments, this investigation should lead to the reassessment of Laos' "poor rural" outlook.



Photo 1. Toward the survey village

Results and achievements through fieldwork

Compared with a previous survey in 2012, the main residential area of the village was moved to West about 2 km, due to the government's immigration policy. In March 2013, the households of Mr. M. were settled, followed by a total of 29 households moved one after another, over a period of two years. Currently, only two households remain in the old village area, though these two households are also planning to emigrate. The new settlement, which is a merger with the next nearest village, is almost double the former population. Some of the old villagers are still using the slash-and-burn cultivation method for their lands as they did before the migration, and while some households became nearer to their farms, others were then located even farther away. Last year, Vietnam-based companies cultivated corn in rented farmlands near the new village; however, most have withdrawn due to a lack of profitability. Corn price in the market has since fallen, but there were households that experienced an increased income by providing labor to these companies. On the other hand, pumpkin price in the market is rising. In anticipation of the expansion of pumpkin cultivation, Mr. T. began pumpkin cultivation for the purpose of selling the seeds.

It was possible to engage in follow-up interviews with 28 of the original 32 households from the previous 2012 survey. Two of the other households moved away a great distance: one (a single mother) emigrated in order to get remarried, and the other emigrated to become a laborer in Bokeo Prefecture, close to the Myanmar border. Disappearance of two households was also observed: one due to the death of the husband, remarriage of his wife, and sending the children to live with relatives; and the other due to divorce, where the wife went back to her hometown with her children, and the husband has returned to his parents' household.

Since the time of its original establishment in 1982, the village has been resettled twice due to the government's immigration policy. The villagers currently need to buy not only machinery such as motorcycles, farming machines, and mobile phones, but also agricultural tools, household appliances, and clothes, the latter of which they previously had made themselves.



Photos 2. Landscape of survey village

Implications and impacts on future research

I rely on the native Lao language for all research, as I have studied this language used by mainstream ethnic Lao people. However, its limitations were not able to capture the actual daily life situations of mountain people. As such, I have to learn the Hmong language, which is used in the survey villages.

From this survey, life tools used for consumables have been re-identified. Two years ago, life tools consisting of 137 items (or 2,488 points) were individually identified in the village. I tried to do a follow-up survey in the new village settlement, but there were almost no original tools left except for durable consumer goods. To understand the changes in the holdings of life tools as well as the level of daily exhaustion, it is necessary to carry out the investigation within a shorter span of time. In order to foresee future challenges, it is necessary to capture the constraints of daily life and how they differ across a few weeks and a few years. What should be considered as a point-of-life tool will also need to be considered again.



Photo 3. Pot made from an unexploded bomb found in the forest



Photos 4. Foot-punches

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