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## Exploring women's mobilities and family transformations in Laos. Historical perspectives and mirrored ethnographic insights

*Mobilités des femmes et transformations familiales au Laos. Perspectives historiques et éclairages ethnographiques*

PASCALE HANCART PETITET ET SOUVANXAY PHETCHANPHENG

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### Résumés

English Français

In Laos, mobility was mainly a male practice. Social codes traditionally assigned to women have limited their long-term movement away from their families. In recent decades, the feminization of migration has been observed and its social and societal impacts need to be examined. Female migration has changed intergenerational dynamics and has a profound effect on family structures and relationships. How does the change in the organization of work affect daily life and challenge the family model that dominated until the early 1990s? How does the growing increase in the mobility of some women in the workplace alter the roles traditionally assigned to women? Ethnographic data invite us to revisit kinship and gendered norms under the emergence of globalized economies and its localized social forms.



Au Laos, la mobilité était principalement masculine. Les codes sociaux traditionnellement assignés aux femmes ont longtemps contribué à limiter leur déplacement à long terme et loin de leur famille. Au cours des dernières décennies, la féminisation de la migration a été observée et

ses impacts sociaux et sociétaux doivent être examinés. La migration féminine a modifié la dynamique intergénérationnelle et a un effet profond sur les structures et les relations familiales. Comment le changement dans l'organisation du travail affecte-t-il la vie quotidienne et défie-t-il le modèle familial qui a dominé jusqu'au début des années 1990 ? Comment l'augmentation croissante de la mobilité de certaines femmes dans le travail modifie-t-il les rôles traditionnellement assignés aux femmes ? Les données ethnographiques nous invitent à repenser la construction contemporaine des codes familiaux et des normes de parenté induites par la localisation des économies mondialisées.

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## ***Entrées d'index***

**Mots-clés :** femmes, mobilité, famille, changement social, Laos

**Keywords:** women, mobility, family, social change, Laos

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## ***Texte intégral***

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## **Introduction**

- <sup>1</sup> In recent years, South-East Asian communities have undergone significant transformations. Transnational migration has grown and has become increasingly feminized since the 1960s [Malhotra et al., 2016]. Investigating migration within the Global South is widespread, however studying women intra-national migratory movements in South-East Asian countries receives a limited attention. Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), remains one of the least known and least studied countries in Asia today. Its geographical position nevertheless makes this small nation state, officially communist since 1975, a crucial piece on the regional political spectrum. Over the last decade, this lower-middle income country enclosed between influential



neighbours, China, Vietnam and Thailand, has experienced high economic growth with the shift to a more liberal economy. While most of the population still reside in rural areas, internal rural-urban migration contributes to this rapid urban growth. After the war for independence, and the 'Liberation' of the country in 1975 which brought the Lao People's Revolutionary Party to power<sup>1</sup>, the political change in 1986 resulted in an opening up of the market [Bouté and Polsena., 2012].

2 Various studies have examined the diversified social effects of development policies on internal migration in Laos. Scholars have described the different types of migratory movements from forced resettlement of people from the forest by the State to the moves to cities for work. [Evrard & Goudineau., 2004; Petit., 2008; Stuart-Fox Martin., 2006; Baird and Shoemaker., 2007]. They have shown how the development processes, the exploitation of natural resources, the share of State wealth by a very restricted number of individuals often leads to exclude many people from supports that may be available to them. They have as well pointed out how migratory movements often stand as the consequences of the social metamorphoses generated by development.

3 Since the opening of Laos to the market economy in the 1990s, then at the time to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, the Lao Government has indeed focused on developing the country at the regional level. However, this regional integration does not always consider the needs of local populations. In the Economic Quadrangle, a transnational region roughly corresponding to the Golden Triangle, new roads facilitated the influx of Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese investment. Commercial and tourist activities have thus developed in border areas that have become Lao special economic zones. Nevertheless, local populations do not benefit much from the economic growth of those regions. Because of village resettlement, many families lost their land. This impoverishment forced families to operate various strategies to escape precariousness. Escaping poverty, combined with the desire to live differently, is leading the urban migration process of young people. Rural families are decreasingly engaged in agricultural activities due to a lack of arable land. They therefore tend to be part of new professional activities, specifically by increasingly finding employment in wage labour. [Rigg., 2005; Bouté et Pholsena., 2017]. Rural families now no longer rely on land for their future, but on training and social networks adopted by the youth. The observation made at a large scale that historical construction and the contemporary dynamics of social networks strongly determine the population mobility patterns [Guilmoto & Sandron., 2000], is, according to our own data in some specific contexts, also true in Laos.

4 How these mobility patterns tend to rearrange social organization? How women internal migration yields social changes? The lens we are suggesting adopting in this article is to examine especially on how women's mobility induces various social transformations including the reconfigurations of the traditional norms related to kinship and family organization. We aim to explore the determinants and the interdependencies between the social and environmental changes in Laotian context, the metamorphoses of kinship and family and the rise of the feminization of migration. At first, we look at some patterns of the traditional Lao family as described by anthropologists over these past few decades. Secondly, we questioned the contemporary reconfiguration of the Lao kinship and family organization under the emergence of the global economy and its localized social forms.



## A. Some patterns of the traditional Lao family

- 5 Before examining how women's mobility is no longer restricted to the social space of the village and local area, we wish to draw attention to the distribution of power among family members.

## 1) The Lao Matri-System

- 6 The matrilineal system in Laos<sup>2</sup> widely spread and mostly found in the Lao ethnic group belonging to the Lao-Tai ethnolinguistic family is the population among which we conducted our study. Many ethnic minorities living in mountainous and hilly areas, such as the Hmong who are a Tibeto-Burman speaking population living in northern Laos, obey mainly patrilineal-social kinship patterns. However, some ethnic minorities also follow a matrilineal system such as the Brao, Tay Oi or Kathang in the south of Laos. In the matrilineal system, the husband moves in with the wife's (relatives) parents after marriage. Consequently, women benefit a relatively high status as the house, land, homestead, and paddy fields belong to her group. According to Schenk-Sandbergen [2012], the young migrant and/or divorced women are then very eager to invest in their parents' livelihood resources to improve and secure their future. Similarly, to what has been stated by Taylor [2005] in Thailand, young women migrants sending remittances, would sound as perfectly fulfilling Lao cultural family imperatives, and thus contributing to enhances the vitality of the Lao matri-system and its institutions.
- 7 Additionally, to this frame of analysis, we need to examine the notion of *piep*, a central concept in interindividual or intergroup exchanges. Analysing how *piep* and migratory paths' representations and experiences are interrelated is not new. Lebar (1967) observed that at the end of the 19th century Khmu young men from Laos went to work in Siam to make a fortune and gained the status of wealthy men in the village. Nowadays, do young villagers have the same aspirations and continue to migrate towards cities for reaching a better status associated to prestige and honorability. Before to look at this specific issue, let us examine more in details what stands behind the concept of *piep*.

## 2) The Concept of Piep and Family Social Practices

- 8 *Piep* (ປຶບ - face, prestige) is a central emic concept in the Laotian culture. Reinhorn [1970] gives the following definition: 'Honor, personality, rank, fame, consideration'. According to Doré [1972] *Piep* determines and regulates the (couple) social relations and behaviour between husband and wife, between the elder-younger- and between the parent-child relationships. *Piep* refers to 'the whole of the living heritage of a person or a family. Physical, social, and behavioral determinants can cause or reduce a person's or family's *piep*. Those determinants embrace the body appearance (health, beauty or the skin colour), or to the mind (intelligence, courage, wisdom, education and altruism). *Piep* is also related to economic capital such as wealth, land, property, movable, agrarian, households (family, domestic, animals, materials) or linked with social capital such as the social status and the reputation. One will say 'dai *piep*' (ໄດ້ປຶບ) of an individual who wins prestige and 'sia *piep*' (ເສຍປຶບ) of an individual when discredited.

(...) Inside the village, each inhabitant gains a part of this patrimony: the personal status or the family status is defined by the part of the vital inheritance which he received from his ancestors, by his ability to preserve and enlarge it' [Doré 1972: 25].



- 9 More recently, Mariani [2012] examined the concept of *piep*, as a reference and a

reference value. According to him, *piep* is not a 'vital heritage', but rather its projection on the social forms of interindividual relations, which the centrality, the variability and the dynamic need to be considered.

'The sources of pride in money, material, physical, intellectual, or any other lasting benefit, therefore, do not necessarily win favor, although they are likely to do so over and over again. They are only likely to provide occasional gain in play, providing an advantage to their owner in a particular interaction. Thus, the *piep* is a dynamic element which is always defined in relation to one or more individuals. We will have (gain) *piep* only in a singular situation and in relation to one or more people<sup>3</sup>.' [Mariani 2012: 95].

- 10 How *piep* both shapes and is shaped by the marital and by the younger/elder relationships within the traditional Lao family? How then does migration contribute to maintaining, to challenge and to interrogate its determinants? In order to pursue our reflexion, key information related to the relationship within the Traditional Lao Family need to be examined.

### 3) Authority and Marital Relationships Within the Traditional Lao Family

- 11 In this section, we aim to provide a broad view of the studies conducted by male anthropologists between the 1960s and the early 1990s on the authority in marital relationships within the traditional Lao family<sup>4</sup>. However, the reader must take these notes critically. Feminist anthropologists have pointed out the androcentric bias in anthropological research regarding male prejudices, ethnocentrism and stereotyping perceptions concerning the role of women as only housewives [Devreux., 2016, Harding., 1987].
- 12 Until recently, young Lao people married in the same village and community members were mostly distant relatives. After wedding the inheritance of the house usually reverted to the youngest daughter. An ideal family in the 1970s features parents, daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren [Barber., 1979]. A (woman) mother should live with her youngest daughter and preferably with all her daughters [Condominas., 1962]. G. Condominas noted: 'It is also admitted that the youngest daughter received the largest share. Her brothers having gone to marry elsewhere and her older sisters having married before her and having built their house, the youngest daughter remained to live with her elderly parents. She provided for their livelihood when they became old. As for the rest, this is only an ideal commonly contradicted by the facts' [Condominas 1962: 10]). A division of labour and a different distribution of social roles between men and women in Lao-Tai rural society has often been observed [Condominas., 1962, Barber., 1979, Doré., 1972, Keyes., 1984, Kirsch., 1985, Trankell., 1993]. Until the end of the twentieth century, travelling far from the village was mainly a male practice in Laos, outside migration for marriage and in certain areas, women involved in long-distance or trans-border trade [Walker, 1999]. Whereas men regularly worked outside the house, women were housebound [Condominas, 1962; Barber, 1979; Trankell, 1993]. I-B. Trankell [1993:22] notes that this is: 'often stated that women's lives opportunities were hampered by the fact that rules of decorum restricted women's freedom of physical movement beyond what was recognized as the social space of the village'. But this trend must be nuanced. As portrayed by A. Pavie in 1887, women from diverse ethnic groups were active in trading activities that resulted in regular trips to local markets of the district or province [Pavie, 1995 [1921]:118-119]. Even if women have always travelled for trading, the distances travelled were limited to the local area and the time of



separation with the family was not long.

13 Male authority and female subordination are reported as the dominating models in pre 1975 Lao society. Until recently the dominant family model described by anthropologists appeared as follows: the husband heads the family and his role was to seek food and work most often outside the family space [Condominas., 1962]. His wife had to stay home most of the time to look after the children and cook. The father was called 'pho na' (ພໍ່ນາ – the father of the rice fields) and the mother 'mae huean' (ແມ່ເຮືອນ – the mother of the house). The mother had a relatively high status. She managed the finances of the family and deals entirely with the house matters [Doré., 1972]. Besides Huaphan Province, where the patrilocal residence stands as the norm, the matrilocality residence model in Lao society prescribed the husband to live with his in-laws. The couple could build their house next to that of the parents-in-law after the birth of the first child. The ideal standard was for the woman to marry a man of higher status [Doré., 1972]. As a result, she gained more *piep* while the *piep* of the man decreased. The marriage lasted because his wife and in-laws treated the man with respect. Also, the woman avoided marriage breakdown because she could lose her capital of *piep* and it would become difficult for her to remarry a man of higher status than her. Secondly, the man had to give his earnings to his wife, who then distributed the money between the home, the monastery and the extended family. If the husband neglected to respect this, the separation could hold. In case of divorce, the woman had to receive two parts of the couple's property and one only was lent to the husband. However, if a symbolic regression of the status of the man occurred during his marriage with a woman of lower status, he won an affluent position in his home. For example, he was exempted from executing tasks considered 'low' such as doing the laundry. Besides, he could maintain his sexual freedom while his wife who most often had to observe strict fidelity. It appears that the wife tolerated her husband's escapades as long as they stayed discreet. The *piep* gained by his wife was then the result of these sexual compromises.

14 On the contrary, a marriage with a man of inferior status didn't result in a gain of *piep*. Accordingly, no sexual concession was allowed to the husband [Doré 2000]. M. Barber [1979] mentioned that the husband-wife relationship looked much more unstable than the one between parents and children. He stated in the 1970s that many concessions and arrangements contributed to making marriages last. As he observed in the 1970s, matrimony was a quotidian challenge, tension daily exacerbated by economic precarity, or often hindered by cases of adultery, jealousy, violence, alcohol addiction, quarrelling with the mother-in-law or simply because of friction within the partners. Beyond couple relations, anthropologists have noted the opposition between elder and younger as characterizing the interactions and the conventional relationships and social practices in the family and in the village.

## 4) The Elder-Younger and the Parent-Child Relationships

15 The submission of the younger to the *piep*, the prestige and authority of the elder mostly shape the relationships between family members. The younger have to observe *kan khaolop* (ການເຄີ າລິ ບ - respect), *kan suea fang* (ການເຊື້ອ້ອມຟັງ - obedience) and *khre: ngcai* (ເກີ້ ງໃຈ - the fear of hurting self-esteem of a superior). In exchange, the older one must protect (*pok pong* - ປົ ກປ້ອງ) and help (*suai luea* - ຊ່ວຍເຫຼືອ) the youngest ones [Formoso., 1990]. The principles of submission and respect toward elders aren't limited to a moral contract. The body attitudes and practices (postures, gestures, tones, words of address, lexical register) also define the 'informal code of conduct' [Terwiel., 1984].



These principles of interaction determine the parent-child relationship. Children highly respected their parents. In return, parents are inferred to ensure life (liang – ລ້ຽງ), protection (kan pongkan - ການປ້ອງກັນ) and justice (ñuttitham – ຄວາມຍຸດຕິ ທ າ). Liang (ລ້ຽງ – nurturing), ‘nurture’ or ‘foster’, is one of the main tasks of both parents toward their children and of children toward their parents [Keyes.,1984; Van Esterik, 1996; Collomb, 2010].

- 16 The economic transformation from a central-planned economy to market-oriented under New Economic Mechanisms (NEMs) reform in 1986 combined with a dependency on overseas aid, and the market opening to foreign investment and private companies has had measurable impacts on people’s daily lives. These social changes complicated the intergenerational dynamic and has a profound effect on familial structures and relationships. Indeed, since the era described by Condominas [1962], the social construction and practices related to the distribution of conventional roles within the Lao family have undergone various changes. How the shift in the organization of labour and capital impacts on everyday lives and questions the family model that dominated until the early 1990s? How women’s increasing mobility in work leads to influence and challenge the traditional gender roles?

## B. Methods

- 17 The findings reported in this article are based on ethnographic research. We rely on two corpora. We collected the first set of data within the project entitled ‘Migration, Mobilities and HIV/STI Vulnerabilities. An Interdisciplinary and Community Based Participatory Research in Lao PDR.’ This multidisciplinary, community and participatory research was broken down into five ethnographic studies and an epidemiological study. The qualitative research was built and conducted with women, men, junior and senior, researchers and non-researchers. Everyone was invited to shed light on a question and on already familiar ground and in which a network of knowledge was in place [Hancart Petitet., 2020]. This ethnographic research was carried out among 100 participants: Vietnamese construction workers in Savannakhet the second-largest city in the country [Phetchanpheng and al., 2020], migrant women working in garment factories in Vientiane, the capital [Miramond, 2021]; young women from the provinces who had come to continue their studies in Vientiane and who worked in the evenings in restaurants promoting beer brands [Sychareun et al., 2021]<sup>5</sup>. This sample also included migrant women living with HIV in Champasak [Tilakoun., 2017], and people living with HIV in several provinces [Viphonephom et al., sous presse]<sup>6</sup>.
- 18 Our second corpus is pertained to the research entitled, ‘Social Factors Affecting Secondary School Completion Among Adolescent Females. Research in Hmong, Khmu, Phong, Lao and Iu Mien cultural contexts’ [ChildFund Laos, 2018] conducted by S.Phetchanpheng for an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) in their beneficiary populations of central and north-east Laos, among 302 participants, over one month of 2018. Here we use the data on the roles in the family, gender relations in the villages and the experiences of female adolescents’ migration to urban centres for educational purposes. The research targeted five groups: 97 teenaged females in secondary school (from 14 to 20 years old), 90 parents (of the adolescents from Group 1), 47 adolescents and young women who dropped out of secondary school (from 16 to 25 years old), 16 former migrant women seen as good examples or influential models in their communities, 16 Village Education Development Committees (VEDC) made up of 53 participants.
- 19 The study participants were living in the districts of Khoun (18.9%) and Nonghet





(20.2%) in Xieng Khuang Province, Huamueang (18.5%) and Sam Neua (18%) in Huaphan Province, and Pak Ngum (12.2%) and Sangthong (12.2%) in Vientiane Capital Province (Figure 1). The research was implemented through interviews and focus group discussions in 19 beneficiary villages made up of 8 Hmong communities, 4 Khmu communities, 3 Phong communities, 3 Lao-Tai communities, and 1 Iu Mien community. Although the sample includes a great diversity of ethnic groups, it was not the aim of this research to establish cultural differences but more to find common trends across geographical and cultural backgrounds. We conducted a deductive and inductive thematic analysis based on pre-formulated and emerging topics.

## C. Female Migration and Family Transformations Nowadays

20 In 1975, the Pathet Lao promoted gender equality and women were involved in economic productivity outside the home. The newly formed government launched the child-care collectivization program to lessen the conflict between household maintenance and the requirement of economic production. In areas administered by its authority, the Pathet Lao provided kindergarten and paid maternity leaves to female workers [Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2004]. In 1976, family planning was banned and replaced with a pronatalist policy. Birth control stood as a threat to the culture to the national demography. Medical training and services were stopped. Consequently, fertility and maternal mortality rates in Laos remained among the highest in the world throughout the 1980s and 1990s [Sweet, 2017].

21 The implementation of the New Economic Mechanism in the mid-1980s enabled rural women to trade and sell their products in rural areas. In the late 1980s, better relations between Laos and neighbouring countries including China and Thailand also promoted the economic opening of the country and in the 1990s, the industry and service sectors contributed to strengthening the country's economy. The tremendous transformations of the ways people find their means of subsistence have greatly impacted lifestyles. It represents the underlying factors shaping the feminization of migration. The regional push for cross border economic activities, the improvement of road access and infrastructure development have attracted local and surrounding communities to participate in various economic activities. Local businesses such as restaurants and beer bars have flourished along major and transnational routes. These gathering places for both women traders, workers and men who are away from home doing business are also connected with transactional sex [Lyttleton, 2014].

22 Various factors have contributed to modifying the traditional organization of the Lao family. At first, the rural monetization of Laos since the 1950s and the emergence of nonfarm activities over the past decades brought various changes in the organization of economic activities within families. Also, the resettlement of mountain villages to the lowlands operated in 1980-90 and the introduction of Western values induced various shifts [Evrard and Goudineau, 2004]. Lastly, the introduction of cultural and technological innovations and the dislocation of the family group from the same village generated by migrations impacted the family organization [Barber; 1979]. Industrial development has pushed many young women from villages to migrate to Vientiane or other urban centers to pursue their studies or work in factories. Many of them activate their personal networks based on kinship and friendship and post-war networks created in the 1960 by the elders facilitate their migration [Phouxay., 2010; Vallard., 2017]. Let us examine some effects of the women migration for educational or job purposes on



family structures and relationships.

## D. Women Higher Education as an Opportunity to Challenge Rules

23 Until the Civil War, schools were reserved for the Lao elite [Chagnon and Rumpf, 1982; Pholsena, 2017]<sup>7</sup>. From 1975, the education system implemented by the new regime sought to make education accessible to the greatest number. Built in large numbers in all provinces, schools then became respected institutions representing the outside world, progress and a model of social advancement<sup>8</sup>. When elders and monks traditionally held most of decision power, the school, as a symbol of progress, emerged as the main authority in education. Travelling to study stands first as a male practice that dates to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays, the school system also allows several young women to leave the village and pursue their studies in urban centres. Migration for educational reasons counted for 15% of migrants nationwide. This is higher than migration pertained to the search for employment (13.1%) [Population and Housing Census., 2015].

24 In the villages of Xieng Khuang where we collected ethnographical data (ChildFund, 2018).), the normative rules related to marriage leads many families to marry their teenage girls at a young age and often before the age of 18. For example, the Director of Saphanxay Secondary School in Khoun District (Xieng Khuang Province) noticed: 'This year, 50 students have dropped education to work in the fields and to marry.' We found that 20% of the young women interviewed had to drop out of school to marry at around age 18. However, families invest gradually in their children's education to promote their social mobility. It remains true for the Lao and Tai speaking groups, mainly favoured by speaking the language of instruction, and for certain ethnic minorities as well. Seventy-seven percent of the secondary school girls interviewed wish to get marry after the age of 25. They explained their choice by mentioning they wanted to complete their studies and get a job first.

25 The table below summarizes some data collected about the marriage and gender relations in the target villages.

Information	47 female adolescents out of school (16–25 years)	97 secondary school girls (14–20 years)	16 former women migrants who have completed secondary school (20–35 years)
No boyfriend		73 %	
First boyfriend	15–18 years (82 %)	15–18 years (86 %)	14–16 years (50 %)
Average age of marriage	18 years	Not married yet	22 years
At which age did they expect to marry?	After 22 years (72 %)	After 25 years (77 %)	After 25 years (80 %)

26 The female students expect to get married later than the previous generations in order to complete their studies. For the majority of the secondary school girls (77%), the expected age of marriage (after 25 years) is older than the expected age of marriage of the majority of female adolescents out of school (after 22 years). It can be interpreted as



an increasing willingness from the families and their daughters to rely progressively more on the education system rather than to follow the traditional norms of the village.

27 In Vientiane, we documented the case of nineteen young women students who move to the capital to pursue their higher education [Sychareun et al., 2021]. Our findings show that as long as the girls pursue their studies, the greater is their wish to marry later than the normative age prescribed in their communities. In our sample, women migrants who studied in Vientiane or Phonsavan (capital of Xieng Khuang Province) marry at around 22. The higher age of marriage noticed recently in these communities indicates how young women gradually take part in the decision-making processes influencing their lives. Besides delaying the age of marriage, we found that mobility provides to young women an opportunity to escape from family obligations. For those wishing to leave their villages, having family members settled in cities represent a significant asset to receive the needed parents' approval to leave the village. We found that young women seek independence from family and parental authority during their studies in Vientiane. Sixty percent of young interviewed women lived with family members during their first year in Vientiane. Seventy-three percent of them decided to move out of their relatives' homes to share a rental with a friend after finding a job as a beer promoter.

28 Mi shared with us her experience in this matter:

'I finished high school in Pek District (Xieng Khuang Province), then I join the Banking Institute and I moved to stay with my aunt in 2015. She is a grocer in Xaythany District (Vientiane). My responsibilities when I stayed at her home were cleaning and helping her to sell products. I stayed with her for 6 months. I asked my aunt's consent to work as a beer promoter because I wanted to earn money to help my parents. After that I left my aunt's house and rented a room with a friend.'

29 This quote illustrates how and to which extent traditional modes of relationships between elder and younger are changing. Mi declared independence from her family very quickly. Following the obligation of nurture (concept of *liang*) she provided support to her aunt for several months. Later, after she left her aunt, she stopped doing so and shared a room with a friend. This example shows how distancing from the family allowed this young woman to escape from traditional authority and its social control. While not reported in her daily life by other family relatives, the obligations to follow normative conducts and safeguarding *piep* become less stressful. In the past, parents sought to hold their daughter's safe by keeping them at home. One of the main reasons was to preserve the family *piep*. Nevertheless, modernization of the countryside is now forcing families to put their *piep* into play as their economics are gradually more oriented to the outside village space. Indeed, many families rely on their children's training and the income they earn in the city.

30 Doré [1982] noted within the structural transformations undertaken to 'build socialism' in 1975 a tighter separation between the sexes and the decline in the date of marriage among young people. Today, sexual relation for the majority of young women surveyed does not come with a promise of marriage as required by tradition. This situational analysis of courtship and sexuality indeed shows a major change between the female youth with that of their mothers. Thirty-nine percent of the young women beer promoters interviewed for this study met their boyfriends in a bar, meaning their workplace, and this union mostly do not last long. Separated from parents and *pi nong* (elder younger or relatives) living in Vientiane, social control is much more relaxed. Therefore, the fear of losing *piep* (for example by having multiple sexual partners) is not an issue.


To resume, for the female students we met working as beer promoters at night comes



with a level of financial independence and facilitates more independent living and opportunities for sexual exploration [Syhareun et al., 2021]. Gaining independence from their families and village customs thanks to their position allows them to get out of the traditional role reserved to married women. These migrant women find a way to fill the traditional roles of girl, mother or wife and 'income earners', consequently meeting both family obligations and the need to cover the financial needs of their family. They have to negotiate their identities and preserve their *piep* both in town and in their villages. Contrary to their mother, for these young women having sex with a man does not mean a promise of marriage as mandated by the elders. Living far from their parents and *pi nong* (elder younger or relatives) gives enough space for these young women to experiment more freedom, less social control and less pressure of not losing *piep* as an informal sanction. The employment of attractive young females as beer promoters trained in how to interact with customers, intentionally sexualizes young women. It reinforces unequal power relationships as within such an environment, female beer promoters have to deal with sexual harassment and unwanted sexual attention by male patrons. However, moving to the city to study, work as beer promoters also comes with the introduction to a larger pool of potential sexual partners and for some their future husband.

## E. Women Migration for Economic Purposes

32 Several studies have shown that migration for economic purposes also allows a new generation of women to escape from their traditional roles as mothers and wives [Walker., 1999, Esara., 2004, Phouxay., 2010]. Especially the ethnography conducted by Huijsmans [2013] examines the negotiation of care work, mostly concerning child care, between mothers and their adult daughters in the context of migration. The study of Walker [1999] on female mobility during the Lao Civil War is significant. He observed that a generation of women traders (*mae kha*) emerged in the 1960s–1970s, notably in the import-export network between Chiang Khong (situated on the Thai border in front of Huai Xay), Pakbeng, Luang Prabang and Oudomxay. The War and Revolution between the 1960s and the 1970s gave them the opportunity to employ in trade and to experiment new mobility since women were up till then usually accustomed to living and working in the village. During this period, many young women from villages started to resettle to Vientiane or other urban centres to work in manufactories. Monetization of rural areas creating new needs such as material goods is one of the causes of the female migratory phenomenon. These migrations trajectories mostly depend upon networks established for decades by the village families and *phi nong* (ພີ່ນ້ອງ - relatives) who settled in urban areas. Phouxay [2010] and Vallard [in Bouté et Pholsena., 2017] point out that many factory workers migrated from the north and northeast of Laos to Vientiane and were recruited through their personal webs based on kinship, friendship and location<sup>9</sup>. The employing networks are then maintained thanks to the snowball effect as one successful economic migratory experience attracts other young women from the village networks to take a chance. For many of these women, migrating to cities and especially to the capital is a sign of social promotion and personal fulfilment.

33  How and to which extent do migrant women do manage to combine the objective to get more *piep* and gain begrudged social status? Getting more cash and owning goods increase *piep*. Also, the gain of *piep* is observable through a change in sole relation with

the body, including bodily appearance and body practises. The desire and the need to fit with the normative aesthetical criteria of femininity and beauty in Lao society push many young women from rural areas to move to the cities. Indeed, female villagers mostly express a link between poverty and certain body types. White skin stands with wealth and urban lives, black skin, refers to poverty, peasantry and rural lifestyles. In this way, living in the city sounds as the best option to escape the peasant condition for a certain time and get better chances to maintain or to improve both its economic conditions and look.

34 Beside bodily appearance issue let us examine the change in body practices in quoting what Lae, a young female migrant said. After she arrived in Vientiane, she found a position as a beer promoter and learned a new way of being while doing her job:

'My friend is a beer promoter. In 2015, she suggested I apply for this job because I needed money and I didn't want to disturb my parents. Also, I wanted to earn my salary. I applied and late I had an interview. The management team asked about my background, education, parents' occupation. One week later the Lao Beer Company called me to have a one-day instruction. The training was about techniques for pouring beer, skills to promote Beer Lao, and manners of talking and walking.'

35 At work or outside, the bodies of young Laotians from the countryside change their appearance as they gain access to an urban lifestyle and a regular salary. For example, tight pants often supplant the tubular skirt called '*sinh*', its material sticking to the skin and its flap snapping with each step of Laotian women.

36 Now let us draw attention on how the increasing migration of women to cities is challenging the predominance of the matrilineal residence model. In the past, daughter and son-in-law parent helped the parents. The whole family raised their children. How then the migration process is organized among family members? When young adults are migrating what about their children? Let us examine the case of Ping, 34:

'I was born in Paksong District. When I was 3 years old, my family moved to live in Pakse. We lived in Pakse for about 5 years, then we moved again to Oudomphan Village in Pathoumphone District. We moved to Pakse because we were poor. We worked in a rice field, so my parents decided to settle in Pakse and seek money. In Pakse, we lived with my aunt in Ban Phoukhoun. My parents sold vegetables in the market and grew rice. After that we built a house in Pathoumphone and moved there. In 1999, I wed at the age of 16. After my wedding I moved to Paksong with my husband. Ten years after our marriage, we separated. After my divorce, I left my children with my parents in Pathoumphone and went to Thailand with my friends. When I worked in a restaurant, I lived with my friend in a rented room. After I moved to work as a house keeper in a restaurant and a hotel. At that time, I lived alone in a rented room. I got 300 baht a day (about 8 euros). While I was working in Thailand, I sent money to my mum and my children monthly. I lived there until 2016 and I came back. Now I permanently live in my hometown and I do not go back to Thailand anymore.'

37 The story of Ping is not isolated. The decision to leave the children to the parents was very common among our informants. A recent study on Laotian migrants in Thailand also examines this issue. It shows that the majority of married couples migrate together (82.9%). Among married couples who have children under 15 (72.7%), more than half of them leave their children in Laos (58.2%) while 34% of them bring their children with them [IOM 2016]. Our ethnography, combined with these figures, also reinforces the idea that migration contributes to the reconfiguration of the nuclear family including the social role of the mother. Women in contemporary Laos must fulfil the role of income earners before their traditional role as wife and mother.

38 Successful migration means that many migrants can save cash, send money to their



families and/or come back to create a small business. Scholars have shown the importance of the remittances sent by migrants working in Thailand to their families in Laos [Barney., 2012]. This is the case of Vanh, who says regularly sending saving to her parents living in Borikhamxay Province:

'When I became beer promoter, I got a salary of LAK 1,400,000 (140 euros) per month without including the tips from clients. I have already sent money to my parents 3 or 4 times. Generally, I send around LAK 200,000 (20 euros) each time.' According to IOM (2016) findings, the average of money remitted was THB 39,980 (around \$1,200) per migrant and per year. Remittances are highly significant for the families in Laos. In the IOM study, 44% of the 1,209 Laotian workers interviewed indicated that remittances were the main source of income for their families. 47.6% cited those remittances were an important means to improve family living conditions<sup>10</sup>. In contrast to the gain of piep, migrants might also lose face. An unsuccessful economic migration can occasionally lead to the isolation of migrants<sup>11</sup>. The failure to reach the family expectation can sometimes lead to non-return, a separation from the village and the disunity of the family. Due to lack of savings, only few migrants do return to their villages<sup>12</sup>.

- 39 Besides economic reasons, young people find difficult to return to their villages. Many of them no longer identify with the lifestyle and village's 'style of thought'<sup>13</sup>. Also migrating and staying away from the family contributes to releasing social control and to offer various opportunities to experiment freedom. Let us quote again Vanh, the student working as beer promoters.

'Initially, I worked and helped my sister without getting incentives. However, my sister provided free food and accommodation. Then I decided to live with my boyfriend'.

- 40 Tadam 23, from Champasak Province and former migrant workers in Thailand:

'My life living in Thailand and Laos was entirely different. Living in Thailand, I have freedom to do anything I want to do.'

- 41 This quote summarizes one of the main challenges our young informants faced while living from their parents. Standing far from the social control inflicted by the family and community and being less restricted by the fear of losing piep confers more space to explore new forms of courtship and sexuality. Here we would like to give a voice to Toun, a young woman who left her village at a young age to work in Vientiane.

'I fell in love with a soldier, but I loved another guy too. I hesitated between these two men. At the end, I decided not to choose the soldier. I felt I was not good enough for him.'

- 42 Toun history also offers a lens to examine how in a context of social and economic insecurity migratory paths take place on a series of encounters and chosen or passively suffered life events. These may enhance an individual's capacity for wealth-building strategies or, on the contrary reveal their social vulnerabilities. Toon said:

'In 2008, when I was 14, I left my hometown to make money in Vientiane. I worked in the garment factory for one and a half years. After that, I married. My husband was a worker, but I did not know how much he earned. We had one son and we remained together eight months. Then we divorced because my husband was an addict to amphetamines. I escaped from him to stay with my mother, and I asked my mother to take care of my son. Then I went to Vientiane to work in a garment manufactory again in 2013. After that, I left the garment factory to sell sex with my cousin. I received 300,000 kip (30 euros) for working overtime to wash the dishes in the shop the owner set up. At the shop, I served the guests by sleeping with them. The service for a quickie was 150,000 kip (15 euros) but it was



300,000 kip for an overnight outside.'

43 Within the limited space of this article, we have no room here to open the box related to the history and evolution of commercial sex in Laos. While questioning how migration shapes Intimate Economies, Lyttleton [2014]. documents the implicit economies of service and sex developed by young women migrants. These economies take place as these women seek to become active players in an increasingly in-your-face material culture spreading throughout Laos. We noted that in a context combining social violence and precarity, pressure to consumerism and conformity, young women migrants coming from poor families have pretty few alternative options to reach the young urban normative social practices and conducts. Make all efforts to reach the criteria of bodily appearance trends may sometimes provide an option to climb up the social mobility scales.

## Conclusion

44 This paper offers insights into some aspects of Lao family evolution and societal transformations through a socio-historic analysis. Those cultural shifts are influencing the cultural roots of groups and societies, including beliefs, social practices, values and worldviews. The findings highlight how and to what extent the cultural codex preventing women from moving or travel alone far away and for a long period appears less significant. The increasing mobility of young individuals from rural areas to urban areas, and hereafter the relaxation of social control wielded by the family institution on its members, is one of the family transformations determining factors. Seniors are downwardly consulted or listened to and young people as they try their luck in an almost unknown urban world. More social freedom may also go with social isolation and in some circumstances with greater exposure to high-risk situations.

45 Our exploration of female migration issue raises new questions about the social construction of gender and intergenerational relations and moving identities. Young women who constitute a greater proportion of labour migrants are adopting new cultural practices usually restricted to the male domain. Like young migrant men, they also experiment new forms of autonomy and sexual freedom. This aspiration to 'see the world', another motivation which was unthinkable several decades ago, now leads some women to try new ways when building social relations and interacting with new encounters. The hope for a better life, the struggle for independence and the desire for romance and more sexual freedom may come at a high price. In escaping from rules, systems, and prescriptive limits, they tend to reconfigure both the traditional modes of courtship, matrimony and parenthood and inherently challenge family and kinship expectations. Documenting women's agencies and their contemporary declinations in Laos needs more attention.

46 Migrating creates an opportunity to build physical, social and emotional distancing from the family and allows young people to explore new ways of living. Migrating come with the experimentation of new social situations relations and experiences in which young people put their piep into play within the leaving, schooling, working, entertaining environments. Whereas the piep of the family related to the young daughter's sexual behaviour and practices such as virginity before the marriage was to be preserved, the increasing migration of young women modify the way that family can gain or preserve piep. Families invest gradually on the economic future of their children at the expense of old practices and way of thinking conjugality.

Even today, when experimenting various forms of conjugality, the family unit settled



in its house is a major social aspiration of the young migrant women we met. The economic, social and political model of parents cared for and financed by their children is all the more meaningful when they send money to their parents and provide them with significant support. However, the transformation of heritage rules and practices has to be given a special attention as sometimes property documents tend to be recorded in men's names and discriminatory inheritance practices impede women's land access. [Somphongbouthakanh & Schenk-Sandbergen 2019] Also, in diverse Laotian provinces land eviction or expropriation is still tracked and denounced. How then do these determinants damaging the intergenerational allocation of properties and goods, the long-term relevance of wealth redistribution among family members and the survival of the matri-system rules?

48 The rise of Chinese investments in Laos, frequently comes with various social forms of structural violence and leads the migration paths of both young women and of many Chinese single men in Laos. On the one hand, single Chinese men are seeking a Laotian wife to settle in Laotian villages, and have a family. In another hand, young Laotian women may seek a Chinese husband, often perceived as a harder worker and in better economical position than the young men in their villages. How those unions tend to reconfigure the Laotian families and the various codes and regulations among the couple, the children and the elderly? Lastly, the transformation of the marital status and the inherent reproductive trajectories comes with a range of questions. Among Lao population divorce was deemed as not a difficult matter [Doré 2000]. However, from the viewpoint of young migrant women getting a divorce is not so simple. The wife's compulsion to refund all or part of the 'price of marriage' to their husbands so that they can leave them obliges them to maintain the spousal relationship and the community of life [Miramond 2021]. What about all the marital union occurring today outside marriage rules and laws? When considering the unmet needs for modern contraceptive methods still documented in Laos, we wonder what about the procreative choices and failures. And how in return do these reproductive events (wanted pregnancies/unwanted pregnancies) reconfigure the partner relationships, the family bonds and its inner and larger organization in the context of migration? It questions how migrant women understand, engage and react to the various disruptions brought about by migration, within the family and the couple, and birthing and child-care arrangements requirements. Pivotal to these explorations the attempt is to highlight women migrant's agencies, resilience and creativity in navigating between the rules, their roles and desires, and somehow to touch some traits of their intimate and inner mobility.

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## Notes

1 The Pathet Lao, a political party founded in 1950 by Prince Souphanouvong to fight against France with the support of the Viêt-Minh was renamed in 1957 the "Neo Lao Hak Sat" (Laotian Patriotic Front), communist, gradually controlled the north Laos. After the 1973 peace accord, creating a government of national unity, the People's Democratic Republic of Laos was proclaimed in 1975. Civil servants and military officers of the royal regime were interned in re-education camps [Bouté & Pholsena 2012].

2 Drawing a comprehensive picture of the Lao Matri system is a very challenging task as 'there are officially 49 ethnic groups in Laos, divided across three broad categories—(i) Lao Lum or "lowland Lao"; (ii) Lao Theung or "Lao residing on the slopes of mountains"; and (iii) Lao Sung or "upland Lao"—or into four "ethnolinguistic groups"—(i) Mon-Khmer (or Austro-Asiatic, mainly the former Lao Theung); (ii) Tai-Kadai (former Lao Lum); (iii) Tibeto-Burmese; and (iv) Hmong-Mien or Meo-Yao (former Lao Sung)' [Schlemmer in Bouté et Pholsena., 2017:253] parents' livelihood resources to improve and secure their future.

3 Translated from French by the authors.

4 Except Ing-Britt Trankell (1993).

5 An estimated 8,000 to 10,000 female migrants in Vientiane Capital work in the night-time economy in bars, beer shops and nightclubs, with a proportion working as beer promoters, earning commission on beer sales [Syhareun et al., 2021].

6 The performance "Live with It" has been developed as an innovative form to disseminate the results of this study. It combines theater and contemporary dance, and is performed in Lao, French and English [Livermoore et al. 2020].

7 Pholsena (2017) has retraced the different paths followed by former students in the mid-to-late 1970s in northeastern Laos. She noted that "Access to formal education, in a country where mass education was virtually non-existent, was very limited at that time and generally reserved for inhabitants of the plains and children of those who served under the French colonial administration."

8 It was through the school that all the staff of the new regime was trained. The civil service was



thus an alternative to farming. Administrative positions became very popular because, once integrated, public servants could rise to the ranks of the administration and obtain positions of political responsibility [Pholsena, 2012; Pholsena, 2017; Schlemmer, 2019].

9 The networks were generally established in the 1960s and 1970s by refugees settled in urban areas during wartime and after 1975s by many provincials who came to occupy positions as civil servants in the new administration.

10 The remittances were mainly used for family expenses (82%), children's education (24.5%), house repair (22%), family health (20.3%), paying off debt (8.5%) savings (37.3%) and buying land and properties (22%).

11 This trend is not only observable among Lao migrants but also among migrants from other ethnic groups in Laos. F. Lebar [1967] found that many Khmu from Laos who went to work in Siam at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to make a fortune never returned to their villages, especially because they feared losing face. While some of these migrants gained the status of wealthy men in the village, others lost their savings in gambling or alcohol consumption and remained permanently in Siam. Many Khmu never returned to Laos and gradually assimilated into Thai culture.

12 For respondents who did not plan to return to Laos, their primary reason was not having enough savings (36.2%). This reason is largely above the "preference for the living conditions and services in Thailand" (15.7%) and the "lack of employment opportunities in Laos" (8.8%) [IOM 2016].

13 L. Fleck [2008] defines the social group as a "collective of thought" with its own "style of thought", a style that influences the actions of its members.

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## ***Pour citer cet article***

### *Référence électronique*

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