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Studying Non-commercial Transfers from Fields in Southeast Asia and Beyond

Explorer les transferts non marchands à l'aune de terrains sud-est asiatiques et au-delà

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Explorer les transferts non marchands à l'aune de terrains sud-est asiatiques et au-delà

Vanina Bouté, Stéphen Huard and Emmanuel Pannier

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- 2 This publication is the result of a series of workshops organized by CASE (CNRS-EHESS-INALCO) and UMR Paloc (IRD-MNHN) on the forms and expressions of non-commercial circulation in Southeast Asia and beyond. This concerns the transfer of goods and services as well as the transmission of symbols or aesthetic acts that follow other logics and channels than commercial or state flows. Our initial observation was that non-commercial transfers, which are intense and structuring in Southeast Asia, had been until now little studied from the perspective of the anthropology of exchange and value.
- 3 The importance of non-commercial transfers in Southeast Asia was first considered in the ritual domain, notably through pioneering works such as that of the anthropologist Thomas Kirsch. Strongly influenced by the sociology of Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, T. Kirsch demonstrates, in *Feasting and Social Oscillation* (1973), how, within the mountain societies of continental Southeast Asia, the accumulation of surpluses (agriculture, livestock) and their subsequent redistribution during largescale

ceremonies—“feasts of merit”—allow individuals to increase their prestige and consolidate their social position, and more broadly, create the conditions for distinction between kingship units. At the same time, James Scott (1976), based on research carried out in Burma and Vietnam and influenced by Edward Palmer Thompson’s work in modern history, revisited the concept of “moral economy.” Drawing on the economic analyses of Karl Polanyi and Alexander Chayanov, he attributes “moral economy” with two dimensions: the right to security for the satisfaction of needs and an ethic of reciprocity. The latter consisting of a system of exchanges of goods and services, but also of a system of norms and obligations between peasants and large landowners, making it possible to understand how a system of exploitation can hold together when local principles of justice prevail.¹ Other researchers in turn drew on this concept to explore agrarian transformation in Southeast Asia and the modalities of exchange and transfer of goods. This was the case, for example, of the anthropologist Grant Evans, who considered that in socialist Laos:

No form of cooperation can exist on the basis of purely rational, economic exchange relationships. All must have elements of social and symbolic exchange in order to persist. In other words, it is impossible to entirely expel substantive calculations from economic action. (Evans 1990: 218.)

- 4 In the following decades, the interest of social anthropologists in this type of non-commercial transfer of goods or services will become rarer and often limited to religious fields. Some collective works have tried to jointly reflect on non-market exchanges within the religious field, whether it is the question of gift and merit within Theravada Buddhism,² donations and charity practices in Islam,³ or the intertwining of the moral economy and the liberal market economy in new religious expressions (Koning & Njoto-Feillard 2017). However, such studies are difficult to mobilize for comparisons with other forms of non-commercial transfer in Southeast Asia or elsewhere.
- 5 More recently, monographs have been published addressing forms of non-commercial transfer in this region by revisiting the notion of the gift, this time outside the religious domain.⁴ Other studies focus on the circulation of goods, services, and of value taking into account non-commercial transfers, but without isolating them from other forms of transactions. They analyze how the economic is inscribed in the social, and vice versa, and seek to show the articulation of the non-commercial sphere with the commodification of relations, the monetarization of society or the development of credit under the effect of capitalism.⁵ A significant academic literature has also emerged on the transfer of resources and goods by South-East Asian migrants to their countries of origin, with particular emphasis on the social obligations that motivate these transfers.⁶ Finally, some studies have revisited the concept of moral economy focusing on the non-material dimensions of material exchanges in order to analyze the social norms, values and obligations that are inseparable from relationships and transactions in situations of economic inequality.⁷
- 6 These recent studies, often compartmentalized, make it difficult to consider them in a comparative manner. The absence of common terms and categories to designate and apprehend transfers obstructs comparison through any shared conceptual framework. Indeed, anchored in the Southeast Asian area, they sometimes seem disconnected from the conceptual, terminological and epistemological advances concerning the analyses of non-commercial circulation, in particular those proposed by some French scholars

(Godbout 1992; Godelier 1996; Caillé 2000; Lécivain 2002, 2007; Silber 2004; Weber 2000, 2002, 2007; Testart 2007; Athané 2011; Darmangeat 2016).

Southeast Asian Societies through Theories of Non-commercial Transfers

- 7 In response to these challenges, we have, in this issue, chosen to bring together a set of contributions from various social sciences (anthropology, history, economics) in order to consider, comparatively via a common framework, different manifestations of non-commercial transfers of goods or services, based on different fields in Southeast Asia and beyond.
- 8 Prior to this initiative,⁸ we identified two key questions: Does the category “non-commercial” allow us to designate and encompass all the forms of transfers we observe empirically? What value regimes define the different forms of circulation of goods and services observed? In addition, we considered how formalist and substantivist economics define “commodity” and the debates surrounding the anthropology of value. In this respect, we have drawn on the pioneers works of Max Weber (1949) and Clide Kluckhohn (1951); on those produced in a structuralist approach by Louis Dumont (1966, 1983) and Joel Robbins (2012, 2013); and finally on the approach advocated by the Chicago School (Turner 2003, 2008; Appadurai 1986; Weiner 1985, 1992; Graeber 2001, 2013). This re-reading convinced us of the need to move away from economic conceptions which make value an intrinsic property of goods and services, or the result of the abstract encounter between things. Instead we choose to focus on the socio-political and extra-economic dynamics that shape both the modalities of exchange and the value of goods that circulate (Warnier 2008). In doing so, the close links between social relations, transfer and value appear, both in the commercial sphere and in non-commercial systems. It is then necessary to study not only the transferred (or inalienable) things, but also the subjects involved, their actions, identities, statuses, ideologies, imaginations, emotions, as well as the evolution in their social relations.
- 9 Following these readings and reflections, we developed a terminological, methodological, and conceptual framework to designate and study all the transfers presented in this issue. This common grammar has made it possible to bring to light distinct modes of operation and singular logics, while remaining attentive to the existence of principles or properties that unite them in the same field and make it possible to reflect on them collectively. In order to put the different contributions into perspective, we have also identified five main crossing-cutting themes: naming, expressing, and signifying non-commercial transfers; classification of non-commercial transfers; transformations of non-commercial transfers; articulations of non-commercial transfers within commercial and state spheres; identification of stakes of non-commercial transfers.

A Collective Gathered around Five Themes

- 10 The issue opens with Emmanuel Pannier’s introductory article whose conceptual and methodological scope defines what non-commercial transfers of goods and services can be in the light of the literature on the subject. It develops a common terminology and

conceptual framework for qualifying transfers. The author notably proposes the category of “interpersonal circulation” as a subset of non-commercial circulation to specifically designate transfers carried and conditioned by the existence of a personal relationship; those where the idiosyncratic characteristics of individuals are directly at stake and determining. Then, six case studies (Indonesia, Laos, Burma, Vietnam, North India) which fall under one or more of the following themes are presented.

Naming, Expressing and Signifying Non-commercial Transfers

- 11 This first thematic entry proposes to uncover the frameworks through which transactions take on meaning for the actors. The aim was to examine the lexicon—what are the terms for “gift,” “loan,” “exchange,” “sale,” etc.—as well as the different procedures for qualifying the transfer and the normative and cognitive registers mobilized to define it. Attention is also given to the analysis of the performative dimension of speech and, more generally, to the rituals of transfers and the material devices that give meaning *in situ* to exchange interactions.
- 12 Dana Rappoport’s article presents, in the context of rituals in Indonesia, a plurality of terms qualifying transactions addressed to non-humans: “to pay,” “to buy,” “to replace,” “to feed,” “to take one’s share,” “to give,” etc. She examines the meaning of these material and immaterial transfers, their nature, the beneficiaries, and the different modes of relationship between humans and non-humans. Stéphen Huard also analyses an important religious ceremony—the ordination of young boys as monks in Burma—from the perspective of non-commercial transfer. Huard studies the multiplicity of Burmese terms used during the transfers that take place on this occasion (“religious donation,” “gift of food,” “merit,” “help money,” etc.) and is interested in the various interpretative frameworks to which these notions refer for the villagers. He thus shows how misunderstandings can emerge when several normative registers become entangled in a particular social scene. In her study of humanitarian projects implemented by the Laos of France in their native country, Isabelle Wilhelm also highlights misunderstandings; those that arise from the interpretative and normative shifts in the meaning attributed to these acts of aid. Her article explores the ways in which each party names and perceives the positions and responsibilities of donor and recipient and considers how subsequent reciprocal relationships diverge to the point of creating tension.

Classification of Non-commercial Transfers

- 13 A second entry distinguishes and then classifies transfers. This involves associating them with “types of transfers” (gift, exchange, loan, tax, compensation, offering, extortion, etc.) defined according to criteria that can be applied to transactions within different contexts. Alain Testart’s (2007) theoretical proposal, distinguishing types of transfers according to their enforceability (“*exigibilité*” in French⁹), provided a useful basis complemented by the analysis of hybrid situations (Darmangeat 2016) and of various forms of obligation (Lécrivain 2002). This typological effort enables to detail the modes of circulation at stake and the social logics they carry. It also appears to be a condition for comparing the diversity of forms of non-commercial circulation according to historical and socio-cultural contexts (Silber 2004).

- 14 It is in this spirit that Delphine Ortis follows the path of cloths offered to Muslim saints worshipped in Indo-Pakistani shrines to show how the same good can circulate through different types of transfers: offerings, gifts, non-commercial and commercial transactions. Her analysis of the chains of transfers between the worshipper and the saint reveals a “compound transfer” (Darmangeat 2016), whereby ingredients of the gift are mixed with elements of non-commercial exchange. In her study of Indonesian rituals, “paying for the words” and “buying the harvest,” Dana Rappoport identifies a form of compensation. Transfers of words and food, required by the spirits without return, consist of redressing an upset order or compensating for wrongs that may have upset the spirits. These offerings, which fall under the heading of reparation, indicate that compensation is the basis of the relational dynamic between humans and spirits. From a similar perspective, Valérie Lécrivain proposes to return to the types of transfers that take place in South Pacific societies. Starting from the observation that the ceremonial exchanges of Melanesian societies have often been analyzed in a homogenizing manner in terms of “gift exchange,” she shows a more accurate analysis. Based on the observation of a ceremonial exchange among the Enga in the highlands of New Guinea, she shows the variability of the non-commercial circulation modalities present within this society, which are not all related to gifts. It is also in a reflection on the very manner of classifying transfers in Northern Laos that Pierre Alary shows the need to focus on the logics of production, even if these precede the transfers. In this context, Pierre Alary asks, can a commercial exchange be considered as exclusively commercial among societies where production relations are not organized to produce a good that is sold in a commercial mode?

Transformations of Non-commercial Transfers

- 15 Non-commercial transfer is not a fixed phenomenon: transfers, their modes of circulation, their logic and the social relations at work evolve over the course of socio-historical contexts. The objective of this thematic is to take these transformations into account to describe and analyze the lines of continuity, innovation, renewal, reinvention, and permanence according to the different periods during which these transfers took place. Christophe Vigne shows the evolution, from 1975 to the present day, of transfers made by overseas Vietnamese to their families back in Vietnam, which are first current consumption goods, then foreign currency, and finally capital to support investment projects. The form, logic and function of these transfers vary according to the socio-economic and political contexts. Based on the logic of intra-family mutual aid, diasporic giving is gradually becoming associated with the national construction and economic development of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Articulations of Non-commercial Transfers within Commercial and State Spheres

- 16 Non-commercial transfers are not always located outside the commercial and state spheres. The same good can change status during its circulation according to the spheres it passes through, and the modes of transfer mobilized by the actors (for example, a commodity that becomes a gift). Non-commercial transfers can take place within the market sphere (courtesy invitations between commercial partners) or within the State (corruption, solicitation gifts, favors). Non-commercial transactions

can even be governed by logics characteristic of commercial exchange (equivalence, requirement to pay back, profit-seeking, coordination by price). One perspective proposed to contributors was therefore to observe the different articulations (opposition, competition, combination, complementarity, porosity, coexistence, separation, etc.) between non-commercial forms of circulation and commercial and state circulation regimes.

- 17 In this vein, Delphine Ortis shows how cloths offered to saints in Indo-Pakistani shrines pass from the status of merchandise to that of offerings, finally becoming a counter-gift charged with the power of the saint, a gift redistributed by shrine officials to important personalities in the city, or a commodity sold to shopkeepers. Christophe Vigne analyses the interlocking of the non-commercial, commercial, and state spheres by showing how the remittances sent by overseas Vietnamese to their families is directly or indirectly reinjected into the market economy. This is particularly the case through the incentive policies of the party-state, which tries to appropriate these resources for the service of its economic and political objectives. Pierre Alary looks at the articulation between non-commercial production dynamics and the development of commercial exchanges in northern Laos. He shows that although the commercial relationship has become more important, it has not supplanted the non-commercial logics that permeate and allow the development of commercial transactions.

Stakes of Non-commercial Transfers

- 18 A final, and most transversal, theme consists of examining the social relations at stake when people exchange, give, receive, transmit, lend, or help. As per the work of M. Mauss, these transactions tell us something about the nature of social relations and the ways in which people actualize and negotiate them. In this perspective, it was necessary to question key concepts for Southeast Asia such as mutual aid, patronage, clientelism, recognition, dependence, debt, prestige, face, hierarchy, charisma, or hospitality from the perspective of non-commercial transfers. In other words, by analyzing what is at stake in the transactions, the authors of this collective issue shed light on aspects of being and acting together, or on the making of politics in the local Southeast Asian societies they study.
- 19 Stéphen Huard address this using a scene of discomfort during the banquet of a Buddhist initiation ceremony. He illustrates the complexity of social relations in Burmese village communities by showing how a transfer of food can become a political act. Through the multidirectional circulation of cloth, Delphine Ortis documents not only the material and spiritual relationships between visitors and Muslim saints in Indo-Pakistani shrines, but also the relationships between shrine officials and the members of their networks (professional, kin, political-economic). Dana Rappoport analyses the unfolding of reparations rituals in Indonesia, where words and offerings help human to avoid evils and misfortunes repairing the misdeeds that may have offended the spirits. Yet, behind these transactions between humans and invisible entities, she shows that the relationships between clans and their sovereignty over the territory are also at stake. Christophe Vigne starts from the relationship between overseas Vietnamese and their relatives in Vietnam to examine the ambivalent and evolving relationship that the Vietnamese state has with its diaspora. Isabelle Wilhelm brings to light the misunderstandings that animate the relationship between Lao of

Laos and Lao of France when the latter implement humanitarian projects in Laos. She emphasizes the complexity of the relationship that the emigrants maintain with their native country behind these transfers. Pierre Alary starts from commercial exchanges between individuals to analyze the social relations of production and to show how inter-individual transfers must be understood in the logics of production that make possible and shape the circulation of goods.

- 20 To put the Southeast Asian examples into perspective from a South Pacific and Africanist perspective, the issue concludes with an “opening” by Valérie Lécivain and an afterword by Catherine Baroin. The first applies the method of identifying types of transfers according to the kind of obligation that govern them in the case of ceremonial exchanges in New Guinea. The second brings an Africanist's approach to the contributions of the issue by opening the focus to analyses from African pastoral societies.

- 21 The primary ambition of this collective work was to illustrate the diversity of non-commercial transfers in Southeast Asia, through empirical cases anchored in the singularity of their social and historical context. The works presented here affirm the heuristic interest of analyzing non-commercial transfers, based on specific ethnographies. These case studies unveil value regimes, relationships to the world, forms of relations, and social logics and practices, in other words, ways of being and acting together that could not be grasped otherwise.
- 22 We hope that the reflections and themes proposed in this issue will make it possible to address questions relating to economic and political anthropology in general, and to the study of non-commercial transfers in particular. By studying a diversity of expressions of non-commercial circulation and by adopting a common terminology and conceptual framework, this issue joins Ilana Silber's (2004) project of comparative historical anthropology, which consists of drawing up a repertoire of the different forms of non-commercial transfers through historical periods and cultures.
- 23 Finally, we hope that the terminological and thematic clarification provided in the introduction and implemented in the case studies will invite other researchers on Southeast Asia to reconsider this field of study originally opened by M. Mauss. Although it has been revisited since then, this field, at least in Southeast Asia, is often overlooked because of the many pitfalls of essentializing as well as certain univocal conceptions of “the gift” as a social force opposed to the market sphere.¹⁰ By affirming simultaneously the existence of the field of non-commercial transfers, its intrinsic heterogeneity, and its constant interconnection with other fields, such as the commercial, capitalism, the State or religion, we believe that Mauss' intuition, namely that these transfers constitute one of the “human rocks on which our societies are built” (Mauss 1999: 148), remains fertile for exploring what occurs and is expressed in social interactions.

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ENDNOTES

1. James C. Scott redefined his concept of moral economy more cautiously in another book, *Weapons of the Weak*, expanding it to include resistance rather than riots, and values rather than norms, which he described as a "moral context" consisting of "a set of expectations and preferences about relations between the well-to-do and the poor. By and large, these expectations are cast in the idioms of patronage, assistance, consideration, and helpfulness. [...] They imply that those who meet these expectations will be treated with respect, loyalty and social recognition" (1985: 184).
2. On gifting in Theravada Buddhism, see, among others: Cook (2008); Sihlé & Brac de la Perrière (2015); Kawanami (2020).
3. See for example the book edited by Mohammed Ariff (1991) on the meaning of giving in Islam and its manifestations through the mobilization of goods in the humanitarian sector.
4. On the gift and an occasionally critical rereading of M. Mauss in light of Southeast Asian terrains, see, among others, Sather (2002); Hughes (2006); Schrauwers (2009); Mariani (2012); Pannier (2015a, 2018a); Lương (2016); Retsikas (2016). For analyses that broaden the focus to other forms of non-commercial transactions, see Tessier (2009); Césard (2014); Pannier (2015b, 2018b); Huard (2018 and 2020).
5. On studies that deal with transactions and social relations located at the interface of the commercial and the non-commercial see, for example, Carsten (1989); Vandergeest

(1991); Sather (2002); Henley & Boomgaard (2009); Lainez (2014, 2018); Anu (2019); Mettra (2021).

6. With numerous works addressing this issue, see in particular Thai (2014); Katigbak (2015); Small (2018); Mariano (2021).

7. On the moral dimension of economic exchange in patronage relationships see, among others, Mc Elwee (2007); Simandjuntak (2012); Li & Lyttleton (2017); Bouté (2017, 2018).

8. Three workshops examined these questions and focused on a collective work of rereading and presenting the data in the light of the concepts identified as relevant. Entitled “Diversity of non-commercial transactions and dynamics of social relations in Southeast Asia and its periphery (China, Indian and Himalayan worlds),” they were co-organized by V. Bouté, E. Pannier, and S. Huard, on April 13 December 3, 2018, and February 26, 2019, EHESS, Paris.

9. In this issue, we use the terms “enforceability/enforceable/enforce”, “require/required”, “demand/demanded”, “due”, “payable”, “claim/claimable”, “compulsory”, “obligatory” to translate A. Testart’s concept of “exigibilité”. It refers to legally regulated obligation, i.e. one that allows to use constraint against the person who do not fulfil the obligation (Testart 1998, 2007, 2013). “Legal” does not refer exclusively to State law, but to the nature of the obligation (juridical vs. moral, social). A legal or juridical obligation can be enforced “by all legitimate means that exist in a society, including by violence, from the moment it is conducted in forms recognized as legitimate” (Testart 2013:257).

10. It should be remembered that Mauss never denied the existence of a plurality of forms of transfer and often insisted on the historicity of their manifestations. It suffices to take up the various empirical cases used by M. Mauss to attest that, despite a universalizing, transhistorical or even evolutionary tendency, he considered the diversity of the phenomenon and adopted a dynamic conception of its expressions.

AUTHORS

VANINA BOUTÉ

Vanina Bouté, anthropologist, is Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and co-director of the Southeast Asia Center (CASE). Her research focuses on the ethnohistory of Tibeto-Burmese minorities in Northern Laos and on the Chinese border, and on the emergence of new border urbanities.

STÉPHEN HUARD

Stéphien Huard, anthropologist, is a research associate at the Southeast Asia Center and head of the land tenure research program of the Technology Research and Exchange Group in Myanmar. His research focuses on village chieftaincies, the construction of authority and the political uses of the past in central Myanmar.

EMMANUEL PANNIER

Emmanuel Pannier, anthropologist, is a research fellow at IRD within the UMR Patrimoines Locaux, Environnement et Globalisation (Local Heritage, Environment and Globalization) and a research associate at the Southeast Asia Center. His work focuses on non-commercial transfers,

networks of personal relationships, and social and environmental changes in rural populations in northern Vietnam.