

Patterns of Precarity: Historical Trajectories of Vietnamese Labour Mobility

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Abstract

In past and present Vietnam, the dialectic of precarity and resilience shapes the everyday lives of mobile labourers. Vietnamese labour mobility is characterised by an interplay between precariousness ‘at home’ and the uncertainties of migration. The paper aims to highlight continuities and contingencies in the longue durée of Vietnamese work migration through a historical contextualisation of precarious labour relations. Both colonial ‘coolie’ workers and present-day labour migrants share similar experiences, for example socioeconomic marginalisation in the regions of origin, opportunity and risk, and emerging translocal identities.

KEYWORDS: Migration, Labour, Vietnam, Laos, Colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese labour migrants are a familiar sight on construction sites in neighbouring Laos. They are part of a large transnational network of migrant workers, itinerant traders, recruitment agencies, and other actors. Already during the French colonial period, the colonial administration engaged Vietnamese ‘coolies’ to work in the mining, plantation, and construction sectors in other parts of Indochina. While most contract labourers moved from the Red River Delta to plantations in Cochinchina and Cambodia, some found themselves in the distant nickel mines of New Caledonia. This article investigates patterns of Vietnamese labour mobility and precarity from the colonial period to today. By comparing colonial and present-day labour migration patterns, the present study traces transformations and continuities in migrant workers’ experience of precarity.

In this analysis, the concept of precarity is not restricted to ‘neoliberal’ employment relations. Instead, it encompasses a range of precarious aspects of life, including experiences of socioeconomic marginalisation, structural violence, and uncertain futures. More generally, precarity comprises experiences of vulnerability, insecurity, and uncertainty – lives lived beneath historically and culturally specific decent-livelihood standards and lives held in “someone else’s hands” (Berlant 2011: 192; see Hewison and Kalleberg 2012; Neilson and Rossiter

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2008; Piper *et al.* 2016; see as well the general introduction to this special issue). The miserable ‘coolies’ of colonial Indochina’s plantation economy faced many different types of misery and precarity (Aso 2018; Slocomb 2007; Tully 2011). Yet ‘free’ labour migrants, both past and present, have also experienced diverse patterns of precarity that call for a *longue durée* perspective on Vietnamese labour mobility (see Derks 2010; Hardy 2003).

Precarity has arguably been the normative condition of labourers in the Global South throughout history (Munck 2013). It is therefore important for views and analyses of labour conditions to shift toward a focus on dialectical patterns of precarity and resilience, of opportunity and risk. This study questions the degree of insecurity and violence that a mobile workforce will accept in the workplace, with regard to the alternative of rural precarity in their home regions. How do Vietnamese labour migrants perceive and evaluate different conditions of precarity, and how do expressions of agency and resilience – understood as adaptability to insecure or even hostile conditions – help to alleviate precarity?

Rather than defining the precariat as an emergent class in the Global South (cf. Standing 2011), this article aims to trace patterns of precariousness that have shaped the everyday lives of mobile Vietnamese populations. The populations include contemporary migrant workers seeking their fortunes in developing Laos, as well as the indentured labourers of colonial times, who were led to unknown worlds beyond the village. Many workers conceive of labour migration as temporary and cyclical. Taking into account their perceptions, desires, and translocal lifeworlds casts light on the workers’ own experiences of mobile and precarious existence (see Nguyen 2014, 2018; Oakes and Schein 2006).

Not merely as victims of global capitalism, but also as active and future-oriented agents of mobility, migrants use everyday tactics to challenge sources of precariousness. Such tactics, as detailed by Michel de Certeau, provide flexible and opportunistic responses to specific power configurations in unknown and potentially hostile settings (de Certeau 1984: 34–39). A future orientation must encompass both precarity and resilience, which appear to be two sides of the same coin. Following Hardy (2003), this study argues that both personal aspirations (for individual well-being as well as the social reproduction of a family/village) and risk-affinity lead to migration. Existing translocal networks and knowledge transfers also play a significant role.

After providing a brief historical overview of historical patterns of Vietnamese labour mobility, this study explores precarity in the context of colonial indentured labour. Based on colonial literature and archival research in the *Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer* (Aix-en-Provence/France), it focuses on the structural and affective dimensions of the coolie labourers’ experiences of precariousness, investigating displacement, legal bondage, and coercion in the workplace. The second section focuses on the interplay between precarity and resilience in present-day examples of Vietnamese labour mobility, drawn from ethnographic research carried out in Laos – a favourite destination of Vietnamese work

migrants, on account of its labour demands, proximity, lax border regimes, and long-standing networks. Precarious and impoverished conditions in the migrants' home regions have driven mobility in both contemporary and colonial cases.

Various methodological and empirical approaches, ranging from archival studies to anthropological field research, are used to explore patterns of precarity among Vietnamese labour migrants of the past and present. While the two main sections may seem loosely connected, this type of *longue durée* perspective offers many benefits. Juxtaposing two (historical) variants of labour migration reveals commonalities and differences in the precariousness of Vietnamese labour migrants in contemporary and colonial settings – including the shifting dialectic of opportunity and uncertainty.

VIETNAMESE LABOUR MOBILITY IN A REGIONAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Precolonial labour relations in Southeast Asia included various forms of (captive) slavery and bonded servitude (Derks 2010; Reid 1983). One feature of early Vietnamese society was the huge gap between the landlord class – the mandarins – and their dependent peasants. The sociopolitical organisation was built on systems of *corvée* labour and peasant mobilisation during periods of warfare. Nineteenth-century peasants were obliged to undertake heavy labour in the mandarins' rice fields, digging irrigation canals and dykes, in some cases for 48 days per year (Bunout 1936: 28; cf. Taylor 2013). New land legislation under the Nguyễn dynasty aggravated asymmetries in agricultural labour relations, resulting in exploitative latifundia capitalism under French colonialism (Brocheux and Hémerly 2009: 121).

After the abolition of slavery, variants of servitude and coerced labour persisted in French-Indochina. The category *coolie* referred to three forms of bonded labour: 1) the *ad hoc* recruitment of porters, often uplanders employed by force; 2) 'traditional' *corvée* requisitions (e.g. for colonial public works), directed against lowland Vietnamese, Lao, and Khmer peasants as well as upland shifting cultivators; and 3) indentured labour, mainly in the plantation and mining sectors of the colonial economy, with Chinese and Vietnamese labourers working under three-year contracts. The category of coerced labour that the French called *corvée*, the obligation to work for the state, resembled earlier relations of servitude between landlord and serf (Jennings 2011; Tappe 2016).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the French colonial administration in Indochina expressed concern about "the labour problem" ("le problème de la main-d'oeuvre"; see the title of Pasquier 1918), in particular the recruitment of workers for the new, labour-intensive plantation and mining economies. A system of indentured labour – mainly Vietnamese labourers from Tonkin

working on three-year contracts in southern Indochina, Laos, and the Pacific Islands – was established to meet rising labour demands; it also provided a solution to the alleged problems of poverty and overpopulation in the Red River Delta (see Aso 2018; Bunout 1936; Gourou 1955; Hardy 2003).

‘Coolie’ labour became a crucial aspect of French economic development strategies and inadequate French attempts to create a cost-effective colony (Klein 2012; Murray 1980). A program of economic development (*mise en valeur*; see Sarraut 1923), especially in the plantation, mining, and infrastructure sectors, gained momentum under the administration of the *gouverneur général*, Paul Doumer (1897–1902). Economic development was part of the colonial *mission civilisatrice*, which set out to modernise economic practices, modes of thought, and social relations, in part by disciplining the minds and bodies of labourers, in accordance with the norms and requirements of industrial production (Brocheux and Hémerly 2009; Conklin 1997).

During the early twentieth-century rubber boom, cultivated acreage in southern Indochina skyrocketed from 1,800 hectares in 1910 to 61,000 hectares by the 1920s (Bunout 1936: 12). The rubber industry employed some 70,000 coolies, mainly contractual workers from Tonkin and Annam. Labour migration reached a peak in the 1920s, with an annual average of more than 12,000 Vietnamese moving from densely populated Tonkin to the south, and around 2,000 Vietnamese moving to the Pacific islands (Delamarre 1931; Tully 2011). In Cochinchina and Cambodia, rubber was cultivated on small plantations run by local notables, with Vietnamese corporals (*cai*) supervising groups of workers. Rubber was also grown on large estates, with more than 1,000 hectares of land, owned by French companies such as Michelin (Aso 2012, 2018). In Tonkin, the administration identified high labour demand for irrigation and dyke construction, recruiting between 50,000 to 60,000 labourers in 1927–28 (Bunout 1936: 33).¹

The construction of roads, canals, and other infrastructure, including the famous Hanoi-Kunming railroad (25,800 workers in 1907 according to Bunout 1936: 32; cf. Del Testa 2001), required a large workforce, drawn from populations of Vietnamese peasants and artisans, Chinese coolie migrants, and indigenous groups inhabiting the Lao-Vietnamese upland frontier. Here, a combination of taxation, *corvée*, and arbitrary labour requisitions, sometimes implemented through sheer force, was justified by the alleged reticence of local labourers. As Jennings (2011: 4) has dramatically illustrated, using the example of the Dalat hill station in the Central Vietnam highlands, the colonial

¹Unsurprisingly, some functionaries in Tonkin complained about the mass recruitment for the southern plantation economy, while southern business interests protested against any regulation or restriction of labour recruitment (Letter 20 February 1928, M. Cotin, Chambre Mixte du Nord-Annam, au Président du Syndicat des Planteurs de caoutchouc de Cochinchine; ANOM, FM/AFFECO 26).

infrastructure “was literally built on the backs of Vietnamese and indigenous minority laborers and peasants”.²

Vietnamese mobility was fostered by a policy that encouraged “Annamese colonisation” (Goscha 2012: 24) of the fertile Mekong basin, populated by Lao (and Khmer) peasants (cf. Ivarsson 2008). The French administration viewed the Vietnamese ‘race’ as more industrious and intelligent than the Lao or Khmer peoples.³ Racialised stereotypes and colonial economic-development strategies encouraged Vietnamese migration within French Indochina. The colony witnessed both spontaneous, uncontrolled migrations and state-organised ones, as in the case of the plantation economy.

The reasons for Vietnamese (im)mobility during the colonial period are manifold. Although the peasants’ precarious livelihoods were a key factor, rural poverty cannot explain everything, as Hardy (2003) points out in his seminal study of Vietnamese mobility. Vietnamese “cultures of mobility” (Hardy 2003: 100) incorporated optimism and the hope of attaining increased social status, wealth, and education, as well as an adventurous spirit. Labour mobility was and remains a way of earning resources to start a family, buy land or a house, and gain higher status after returning to the village. The combination of precarious socioeconomic conditions at home, and alternative livelihood options under colonial capitalism, enticed many young men (and far fewer women) to leave their villages, risking new situations of precarity, as will be discussed below.

While the colonial period was characterised by organised indentured labour and relatively small-scale spontaneous migrations, internal migration in Vietnam increased after national independence. Hardy (2003) has demonstrated how the First Indochina War eradicated previous colonial-administrative barriers to migration; this change led to large-scale and organised migration to new economic zones in the 1960s and 1990s. Emerging labour relations and migration patterns in Vietnam produced new forms of precariousness.

As market liberalisation began to increase in the late 1980s, while economic reform policies (*đổi mới*) reduced state subsidies, new incentives for internal and transnational migration emerged (Anh *et al.* 2012; Chan 2011; Luong 2010;

²Construction sites for mountain roads and railroads had notoriously high mortality rates, due to malaria, accidents, and simple exhaustion. After 1897, labourers constructing the Hanoi-Yunnan railroad, in particular, suffered an immense death toll, despite French claims of improved medical support and work security. As many as 12,000 of the 60,000 Vietnamese and Chinese workers are reported to have died along its tracks (see Del Testa 2001; Brocheux and Hémerly 2009; Aso 2018 on questions of malaria prevention and treatment in French Indochina’s plantation economy).

³See also Aso (2018: 132) for the connection between scientific racism and tropical medicine, with race as the key organising category and “practical tool for plantation management” (Aso 2018: 132). According to Brocheux and Hémerly (2009:192), “...the Lao was represented as heedless and sensual, the Cambodian as passive and not particularly sharp, the Annamese as intelligent, proud, and secretive, the Chinese as active and shifty, and the Malabar as deceitful. Whatever the variants within this typology, they all tended to place Asians in a lower position that justified French tutelage”.

Nguyen 2015). However, obstacles, including the socialist household registration system (*hộ khẩu*), remained; neoliberal tendencies toward the informalisation of labour produced new precarities (Arnold 2012; Tran 2013). Neighbouring Laos, meanwhile, became an alternative destination for Vietnamese labour migrants facing poverty, competition, and precariousness at home. Currently, the booming Laotian construction sector is intensifying labour demands and creating new opportunities – and risks – for Vietnamese workers.

The following two sections investigate articulations of precariousness, agency, and resilience in the everyday lives and experiences of Vietnamese labour migrants in the *longue durée*, from colonial coolies to contemporary transnational migrants. This approach aims to explore “the dialectical interplay between human agency and structural forces in specific labor migration settings” (Kitiarsa 2014: 130). By adopting a comparative historical perspective, this article develops new insights into the ways in which migrants perceive and endure precarious conditions and face insecurity and uncertainty as they carve out spaces of protection and autonomy in potentially hostile environments. The discussion begins with the precarity of colonial coolie labourers and then provides an ethnographic analysis of contemporary patterns of precarity and resilience among Vietnamese migrants in Laos.

PART I: COOLIE PRECARITY

The coolie system became a key pillar of the French colonial economy and a means of social control and discipline; in this, it was similar to the labour systems employed by other colonial powers (Brocheux and Hémery 2009; Klein 2012; Tully 2011). Although indentured labour, unlike chattel slavery, was considered legal and ‘voluntary’, it entailed a tremendous amount of unfreedom and coercion (Behal and van der Linden 2006; Derks 2010). Commercial colonial interests saw coolies as disposable, racially inferior labour – “indolent children” in the words of the notorious labour recruiter, Alfred Bazin (Brocheux and Hémery 2009: 192).⁴

The inherent violence of this system was a key factor in the precariousness of coolie lives. The precarious lives of Vietnamese peasants provide a historical context for migrant labour precarity under French colonialism. According to French administrators, the Red River Delta was particularly overpopulated and poverty-stricken (Gourou 1955); for this reason, the region was targeted by the mining and plantation economies, located in less populated regions, where labour recruitment was difficult. French policies promoting latifundia capitalism (Brocheux and Hémery 2009) produced and intensified precarious

⁴Bazin was a well-known profiteer from the system; he was killed by Vietnamese nationalists in 1929 (Vann 2006; Aso 2018: 123).

conditions in rural Vietnam, despite being promoted as a ‘solution’ to the region’s urgent economic and demographic challenges.

Pre-colonial Vietnam was a feudal society consisting of a land-holding aristocracy and a mass of small tenants. French administrative interventions, including a new land code that privileged large landowners, aggravated the situation (see Cleary 2003; Hardy 2003). Wealthy Vietnamese landlords collaborated with the French and accumulated farmland, while a growing, subordinate class of tenant farmers emerged, often working under sharecropping contracts with detailed conditions imported from France. The class of poor Vietnamese tenant farmers was dispossessed, often hopelessly indebted, and thus open to signing coolie contracts (see Brocheux and Hémery 2009).

The extensive documentation produced by various colonial surveys (*enquêtes*) in the 1920s and 1930s, most prominently the Guernut Commission, includes accounts of socioeconomic conditions in colonial Indochina. For example, one undated petition submitted by the inhabitants of two villages in Annam explicitly complains that “the peasants are exploited by the landlords and usurers”.⁵ The report accuses landowners of renting out land for certain sums of silver as well as 50–66 per cent of the harvest. Tenants were obliged to work for their landlords for a specified number of days and to offer diverse services and benefits during holidays and anniversaries (cf. Bunout 1936). If peasants borrowed rice or capital from a landlord during a rice shortage, the latter could demand excessive interest rates of up to 50 per cent.

This example illustrates the conditions of rural precarity in precolonial and colonial Vietnam. Many peasants became indebted to their landlords, ending up in a situation of debt bondage and extreme dependency.⁶ The precarious conditions were aggravated by climatic hazards, including floods, droughts, and resulting famines. As peasants also owed money to moneylenders who roamed the countryside, they were easy targets for professional recruiters – “a parasitic industry” (Monet 1930: 41; translation by author) – working for plantation and mining enterprises.⁷ Attracted by good salaries (by local standards) and cash

⁵“Voeu émis par les habitants de Phu-Lôc et Phu-Vag (Annam)”, n.d. (1937); ANOM, FM/GUERNUT 24.

⁶“Résidence Supérieur du Tonkin, Rapport sur le niveau de vie des travailleurs agricoles au Tonkin”, n.d. (1938); ANOM, FM/GUERNUT 24.

⁷“Voeux de M. Tran Duc Tranh, Conseiller provincial à Yen-The”, n.d. (1937); ANOM, FM/GUERNUT 24. Tran Tu Binh (1985: 12) notes how recruiters exploited the situation in the Red River Delta, where recruitment stalls mushroomed at intersections and marketplaces: “When they were unable to recruit enough labor, the French colonialists threw in Vietnamese contractors to coax and con farmers in the Red River delta who had lost their land and were down on their luck with no opportunity to escape their lot. There was an abundance of recruiting activity everywhere. The contracting gangs tried to outdo each other in spinning fantastic images of the out-of-this-world way of life on the rubber plantations, because they received two piasters [four times the daily wage for coolies; author’s comment] for each person they handed over to the French.” For details on formal and informal labour recruitment practices in French Indochina, see Kalikiti (2000).

advances, Vietnamese peasants became ‘coolies’ who were legally tied to their employers and subject to strict regulations and arbitrary, racialised violence.

Jennings (2011), in his seminal history of the Dalat hill station in the highlands of Central Vietnam, provides numerous disturbing examples of abuse carried out within allegedly ‘traditional’ labour regimes, which were used to justify the relentless exploitation of indigenous labour, indicating a colonial “culture of violence” (Tully 2011: 252). Structural violence was inherent in the logic of colonial relations, which “favored arbitrary and brutal conduct toward the natives, whether they were coolies, peasants, laborers, or white-collar workers. A European might believe he had the right to beat, sometimes fatally, a worker whom he perceived to be lazy or rebellious” (Brocheux and Hémerly 2009: 193).

Tran Thu Binh’s book, *Red Earth* (1985 [1965]), is one of the best-known first-hand accounts of precarious coolie existence. Like other famous examples of this genre (cf. Lulofs 1993), the book illustrates racialised forms of colonial discrimination, humiliation, and violence. Binh’s narrative also reveals an anti-colonial, communist ideology (the author later became a leading party functionary), showing how the precarious coolie experience shaped new perceptions of the world and fostered radicalisation (cf. Ngo Van 1998; Tai 1992; Truong 2000). Other insightful, non-ideological contributions to this genre include the novels of Jean Vanmai (1980; 1983), which are dedicated to the history of Vietnamese coolie migration to the Pacific Islands of New Caledonia.⁸ Such sources provide valuable insights into the everyday challenges faced by coolie labourers in search of a decent life. They complement archival sources, which rarely reflect the coolies’ own perspective.

Binh provides dramatic descriptions of the various corporal punishments that coolies endured at the hands of their overseers, “the terrible, cruel demons of this hell on earth” (Binh 1985[1965]: 24). The labourers were forced to work from six to six with only one short break. Many suffered from exhaustion, injuries caused by workplace accidents, relentless beatings from overseers, malaria, and dysentery. A large number of coolies died, becoming “fertilizer for the capitalists’ rubber trees” (Binh 1985[1965]: 27).⁹ According to the anti-colonial pamphlet, *Les Jauniens*, suicide rates were high among the miserable coolies, with up to ten suicides per month on certain plantations (Monet 1930: 26).

⁸Born in 1960, Jean Vanmai was not an eyewitness but the son of a coolie who worked in the nickel mines of New Caledonia. The title of his first book, “Chân dăng” (1980), refers to the self-designation of Vietnamese coolies, as *chân dăng* literally means ‘feet under contract’, i.e. contract labourers. His book is based on interviews with Vietnamese coolies but written in a fictional style. The Vietnamese community wanted to leave this aspect of its history behind, fearing the reaction of the French majority on the island. For this reason, the publication of this book caused heated debates about the dark heritage of New Caledonia and the island’s legacy as a penal colony and labour camp (see Do 2005; Angleviel 2001).

⁹Tran Tu Binh alludes to a folk poem that conveys a standard anti-colonial narrative, the hard life of rubber estate workers:

Coolie contracts specified severe punishments for ‘insubordination’, which could mean anything, even fainting from exhaustion. The least offence or mistake was “punished in a brutal way. [The coolies] are beaten with batons, with canings of the feet [...] and are obliged to pay fines in silver” (Monet 1930: 31–32; cf. Aso 2018: 102–3). Brutal foremen – some of whom were French army veterans or had worked in the Belgian Congo (Tully 2011: 107) – considered beating coolies a legitimate way to enforce labour discipline. The Belgian overseer Verhelst was particularly notorious for arbitrarily beating coolies with canes and whips (Ngo Van 1997: 412).

According to Marianne Boucheret (2001), the Ministry of Colonies opened a proverbial Pandora’s Box in 1926, when it began a large-scale inquiry into colonial labour conditions, covering both legal and social issues. Numerous reports revealed the plight of Vietnamese coolies, who endured scandalous sanitary and medical conditions, miserable housing, and insufficient nourishment; they also faced severe corporal punishment for the slightest offence.¹⁰ However, the legal reforms that followed tended to maintain and justify the coolie system, rather than protecting workers, despite increasingly critical public opinion in Indochina and the metropole (Aso 2018; Boucheret 2001, 2008).

Michelin’s Mimot plantation – where the brutal overseer Verhelst terrorised labourers – was notorious for excessive violence and cases of mass desertion that were severely punished (cf. Kalikiti 2000). One report described work conditions in 1927 as “still lamentable”¹¹, in spite of earlier attempts to implement labour protections. Even local Khmer notables complained about mistreatment of Tonkinese coolies at the hands of overseers, who acted like “buffalo herders”¹². When Verhelst was removed from the plantation for his countless transgressions (Tully 2011: 255), the Mimot company protested his dismissal.

Interestingly, cases of coolie counter-violence and spontaneous strikes seem to have increased during the years following the reforms, perhaps because they became more visible and were therefore recorded by labour inspectors and anti-colonial newspapers (cf. Aso 2012: 29). Moreover, Vietnamese workers were

“Rubber grows well in this place,

Every tree is fertilised with the body of a worker” (quoted in Aso 2012: 41).

Michitake Aso (2018: 111) specifies: “Contrary to French claims that plantation work would strengthen Vietnamese bodies, the punishing climate, long workdays, poor diet, and lack of medical care meant that almost every disease became life-threatening”.

¹⁰ANOM, FM/AFFECO 25 and 26. Some reports are included in the appendix of Ngo Van’s (1997) account of the early years of the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle. See also Tran Tu Binh’s report on the inspection of the rubber plantation of Phu-Rieng, where half of the labourers injured by beatings were shackled and close to starvation in dirty sheds (Binh 1985: 37; cf. Aso 2018).

¹¹Letter of 6 March 1929, Gouverneur Général d’Indochine to Minister of Colonies in Paris; ANOM, FM/AFFECO 26. The attitude of the plantation enterprises reveals the pervading racism of a colonial society that considered the *indigènes* to be second-class citizens; disciplinary measures, including occasional violence, were justified as the only way to guarantee a stable and dutiful workforce (see Jennings 2011; Aso 2018).

¹²Ibid.

increasingly aware of their legal rights and refused to accept arbitrary violence and exploitation. Reports leaked to the anti-colonial press about strikes, attacks, and sabotage against overseers helped to underpin coolie resilience. Between 1929 and 1937, colonial sources noted conflicts on various rubber plantations in southern Indochina, for example:

- 10 September 1929: Strike on the plantation of Song-Rây after the direction ignored new regulations concerning work schedules and did not provide the agreed rice rations. Numerous reports of violence between (both French and Vietnamese) overseers and workers.
- 6 March 1930, Quan-Loi: Worker dies after heavy canings by overseer.
- 11 October 1930, Thuân-Loi: Indigenous overseer pushes a worker who falls and succumbs to his injuries.
- 12 May 1933, Dautiêng: French overseer insults and beats a coolie who in turn stabs him to death.¹³

Counter-violence and strikes were a last resort, when the coolies were denied the legal security promised by their contracts and the new labour laws. One particularly large-scale strike occurred on 16 December 1932 at Michelin's Dautiêng rubber plantation (Thudaumot). The strike began after the company, affected by the global economic crisis, reduced coolie salaries; 1,500 workers left the plantation to complain to labour inspectors. The workers were stopped by militias, who killed three workers and injured four others. Three years later, a similar walkout of 400 workers occurred. This was solved without violence, as the inspectors negotiated a compromise.¹⁴

As Tran Tu Binh's (1985 [1965] account of the 1930 strike at the plantation of Phu Rieng illustrates, the coolies' resilience and hope largely depended on activist individuals and worker solidarity vis-à-vis the colonial enterprises and their (European and indigenous) henchmen. Small communist cells became key actors in mobilising workers, while the maltreated bodies of coolies became "excellent elements of anti-French propaganda" (Monet 1930: 25, translation by author; cf. Tully 2011: 266). The workers' resistance and unrest, as well as changing public opinion, gradually pushed the administration to redress the coolies' plight (cf. Aso 2018: 117–9, 158; Boucheret 2008; Delamarre 1931: 19–21).¹⁵

¹³“Inspection locale du travail, Rapport sur le régime de la main-d'œuvre engagée”, n.d. (1937); ANOM, FM/GUERNUT 24.

¹⁴“Inspection locale du travail, Rapport sur le régime de la main-d'œuvre engagée”, n.d. (1937); ANOM, FM/GUERNUT 24 (cf. Tully 2011: 255; Tran 2013).

¹⁵Labour inspector Delamarre perceived a change of public opinion in 1928, when emaciated returnees from the plantations – “sans ressources et dans un état de santé précaire” – became visible emblems of colonial violence and supported the arguments of “agitateurs” (Delamarre 1931: 16). Concerns about anticolonial and communist agitation also shaped discourses about labour rights and medical services on the southern rubber plantations. The uprisings by hungry peasants in the Nghe-Tinh Soviets of the 1930s unsettled planters and administrators, threatening potential worker unrest on the plantations (Aso 2018: 124; see Bernal 1981).

The living conditions of coolie labourers included various elements of precariousness, including bad housing, unsanitary conditions, and insufficient nourishment. Food and clothing allowances were usually guaranteed by contract. However, the rice and dried fish provisions were often meagre and of poor quality. Binh (1985: 43) notes that progress was made when “the salted fish was not so often rotten” – although workers still had to buy additional rations in local shops. These shops were run by the companies (Binh 1985: 27), Chinese contractors,¹⁶ or the wives of the *cai*, the indigenous overseers (Monet 1930: 27–28).

Plantation stores sold items such as needles for sewing clothes; they sometimes turned into gambling halls after payday. Many coolies bought supplies on store credit, gradually accumulating debts that forced them to sign consecutive contracts, which literally bonded them to the plantation (Boucheret 2001; see Maurer 2010 for the case of Javanese plantation workers in New Caledonia). As in many plantation economies, debt was a crucial aspect of the unfreedom inherent in indentured labour (see Derks 2010; Tappe 2016).

Corporal punishment or imprisonment could sometimes be avoided by paying penalties ranging from one to six days' wages (Monet 1930: 32). Such penalties added to a labourer's already existing financial burden, increasing the risk of indebtedness. The Vietnamese *cai* overseers also incurred such debts, a fact that partially explains their often relentless beatings of subordinate workers.¹⁷ Indeed, the position of the *cai* was ambiguous: some were former coolies, embodying resilience and opportunity within precarity, while simultaneously contributing directly to the brutal conditions of the colonial plantation economy.

The wives of the *cai* constitute another example of social mobility, in their attempts to reduce precarity. Generally, female migrants were particularly vulnerable, as they were often subjected to sexual harassment, or given as sex slaves to loyal foremen (see Binh 1985[1965]: 24; Vanmai 1980: 100). If married to Vietnamese *cai* – whether involuntarily or tactically (cf. Bahadur 2014) – women could secure a certain measure of protection, although they were often forced to do domestic labour for a small salary. In the 1930s, the French administration promoted female migration “to fix labour” (Bunout 1936: 35) in permanent villages. In 1929, the female-to-male ratio was only 1:5 in both Cambodia and New Caledonia (Delamarre 1931: 36, 44).

To summarise the aspects of precarity among labour migrants brought to labour-intensive sites of colonial development – plantations, mines, and infrastructure construction – the everyday experience of labourers included structural

¹⁶“Inspection locale du travail, Rapport sur le régime de la main-d'œuvre engagée”, n.d. (1937); ANOM, FM/GUERNUT 24. This report emphasised the extent to which Chinese food vendors and petty traders were improving material living conditions, but ignored the risk of indebtedness among poorly paid coolies.

¹⁷Letter of 6 March 1929, Gouverneur Général d'Indochine to Minister of Colonies in Paris; ANOM, FM/AFFECO 26.

and physical violence and exploitation, forced immobilisation, legal insecurity, malnourishment, poor sanitary conditions, and the risk of indebtedness. Resilience could emerge either as violent resistance and anti-colonial agitation, or in the shape of various micro-tactics, designed to make life more bearable, such as everyday acts of solidarity or tactical marriages for female migrants.

Filial piety and (often vain) hopes of a successful return to the home region – “cruel optimism” (see Berlant 2011) – underpinned resilience and perseverance. As Do (2005: 20) has argued in her literary analysis of Jean Vanmai’s novels: “In the difficult conditions of exile, filial devotion not only safeguards the morality of the migrant but also provides him or her with continuity and an invaluable sense of belonging”. Arguably, contemporary remittances, as well as an annual visit home for the Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tết), have a similar function. Vietnamese labour migrants, both past and present, experience the ambiguities of a translocal lifeworld, between two worlds, as the following analysis of contemporary labour mobility illustrates.

PART II: CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE LABOUR MIGRATION TO LAOS

Vietnamese transnational labour mobility today occurs in the context of global capitalism, with increasing regional economic integration (exemplified by FDI from various Asian countries). After *đổi mới*, the Vietnamese government created a market economy with a ‘socialist orientation’ and neoliberal tendencies, associated with new forms of (informal) labour relations and migration dynamics (Gainsborough 2010; Hann and Endres 2018; Jandl 2013; Nguyen 2015, 2018). Market economy conditions engender new opportunities but also uncertainties and challenges (such as decreasing wages and worker protection) for the working population, as indicated above (Arnold 2012; Chang 2009; Tran 2013; Sasges 2013).

Workers in Vietnam face pressure from global capital and the socialist state. Some of them, like it or not, trade precarity at home for precarity abroad. For example, neighbouring Laos offers job opportunities in the booming construction and resource extraction sectors (Molland 2017). Transnational migration to Laos appears to be an extension of internal migration patterns in Vietnam. Lao-Vietnamese border regulations have been gradually relaxed in recent years, turning the shift from internal rural-urban migration within Vietnam to transnational migration to Laos into a relatively small jump. Decades of political and economic cooperation at the national level, as well as long-standing Lao-Vietnamese networks along the borderlands and across major Laotian cities, reduce barriers to cross-border movement (see Baird *et al.* 2018; Hanh 2014; Nguyen 2008).

Vietnam-Laos migration thus differs from cross-border migration with China or Vietnamese contract labour in insular Southeast Asia and further abroad. A full

comparative study, including all variants of Vietnamese labour mobility, would go beyond the scope of this article. However, a brief overview of present-day variants of indentured labour can help to contextualise the preceding observations on coolie precarity. In her informative study of Vietnamese contract labour in Malaysia, Lê Thu Huong (2010) describes aspects of precariousness under contract that reflect the colonial coolie experience described above. Female domestic workers, in particular, suffer from extreme dependency, violence, and insufficient legal protection.¹⁸ On the other hand, some legal regulations and state control may reduce uncertainty; these contracts imply better opportunities for sending remittances to alleviate rural precarity at home.

Little Vietnamese labour migration to Laos is state-organised; it tends to be either spontaneous or related to pre-existing cross-border networks. Work migrants often follow in the footsteps of petty traders, soldiers, and political advisors who have moved to Laos in recent decades. Even in colonial times, Vietnamese labourers were recruited into labour-intensive sectors such as mining and construction. Given the chronic shortage of skilled labour in sparsely populated Laos – or, rather, the out-migration of skilled Lao labour to Thailand (Molland 2017) – today Vietnamese labour migrants are omnipresent in the country.¹⁹

Many workers enter using border passes or one-month tourist visas and are technically not allowed to work. Work permits can be obtained from local authorities, however, for certain ‘fees’, as well as legally when local labour is insufficient (Baird 2011; Baird *et al.* 2018; Molland 2017: 344). Vietnamese and Chinese investors in Laos prefer to hire Vietnamese and Chinese migrant workers, respectively. When work began on the new China-Laos railway in 2016, the provincial authorities of Oudomxay relaxed labour regulations and offered three-month work permits to improve migrant labour registration and management.²⁰

Lao employers find it difficult to assemble adequate, skilled workforces. As one Laotian contractor explained, it is much more efficient to ask his Lao-Vietnamese middleman to recruit, say, twenty builders and ten carpenters for his construction site within a few days, than to look for the same number of skilled Laotian workers. The middlemen working as either recruiters (Lao: *phu chat hang ngan*) or foremen (Lao: *hua na sang*) were once migrant labourers; they have established a stable network of potential workers that spans their home regions in Vietnam. Speaking Lao fluently, and often holding permanent residency status, which allows them to work and run a business, such middlemen constitute an important nexus of Vietnam-Laos labour migration.

¹⁸See Hoang (2016) for the case of Vietnamese women in Taiwan. For temporary work migration under labour-sending agreements from Vietnam to Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, and Japan, see Bélanger *et al.* (2010).

¹⁹Hanh (2014: 193) estimates that there are between 30,000 and 50,000 Vietnamese in Laos, while 300,000 Lao labour migrants work in Thailand (Kabmanivanh Phouxay 2017: 353), a high percentage given the 7 million inhabitants of Laos.

²⁰“Oudomxay legalises foreign workers”, *Vientiane Times*, 12 October 2017 (cf. Tappe 2018).

Such middlemen have helped to establish a system of labour recruitment marked by insufficient labour legislation and legal loopholes that provide migrants with a measure of wiggle room. Knowledgeable middlemen help to sort out legal issues between employers and the temporary workforce. However, legal insecurity and accident-prone jobs in the construction sector certainly produce precariousness. Long working hours and low pay make the jobs unattractive for many Lao, who often frame their reluctance by referring to the allegedly more skilled and industrious Vietnamese.²¹

This attitude revives old colonial stereotypes of the indolent Lao and the diligent Vietnamese, a cliché that is still prevalent in Laos among Lao and Vietnamese alike. For this study, I interviewed two successful Laotian businessmen who run various construction projects in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. In response to a question about the prominence of Vietnamese labour in the Lao construction sector, they laughed out loud and explained that “we, the Lao do not like hard work and prefer partying and drinking” (Interview conducted in Vientiane in December 2016). They still insisted that this was true, even when I mentioned the thousands of Lao migrants who endure arduous work conditions in Thailand’s garment industry.

There are many reasons why Vietnamese people accept difficult and precarious work conditions that many Lao seem to avoid. Rejecting the hard work, long hours, and low pay offered by the construction industry, many Lao prefer to work in the civil and service sectors. Moreover, a large part of the population still relies at least partially on agricultural work (time-consuming, depending on the season) for their household subsistence. Being far from home, the Vietnamese migrants lack the social obligations of local Lao. They are in the country simply to work as much as possible within a certain period of time before moving to the next job or returning home. Finally, as one Vietnamese worker in Vientiane explained, the exchange rate between the Lao Kip and the Vietnamese Dong makes even a lousy job in Laos more lucrative for Vietnamese than a comparable job in Vietnam, as long as the salary is paid in Lao currency.

Such aspects of Laos-Vietnam mobility are noted by Duong Bich Hanh (2014) in her study of Vietnamese migration to Savannakhet in southern Laos, a region characterised by increasing economic and commercial activity, and improved infrastructure connectivity through convenient bus services to coastal cities in Central Vietnam. Hanh describes how some workers make the decision to move to Laos spontaneously, after a call from a Vietnamese acquaintance in Laos or a potential employer. Others jump from job to job within Laos for years, sometimes working off debts caused by the initial recruitment costs or various “fees” for work documents, deducted from already

²¹As a recent study of rubber plantations in southern Laos demonstrates, Vietnamese investors and entrepreneurs not only privilege Vietnamese labour but also deliberately exclude Lao labour (Baird *et al.* 2018).

meagre salaries (Baird *et al.* 2018; Hanh 2014: 198–199; cf. Huijsmans and Phuxay 2008).

In Vientiane's booming construction sector, the main tool of Vietnamese labour recruiters is the smartphone. Depending upon the skills required, a recruiter assembles work gangs of people that he has worked with before, who live in Laos or neighbouring Thailand²²; they are often waiting for the recruiter's next call. This relationship is marked by mutual trust and dependency. The recruiter is responsible for organising visa extensions and other legal documents and must negotiate the lump-sum compensation offered by contractors for different kinds of work.

Either the Lao employer or the Vietnamese recruiter will register the band of workers with the local *nai ban* (head of the village or district) after obtaining temporary work permits from the police – for whom this widespread practice of “making law” (Endres 2014: 611) provides a good income. Although a few deliberate repatriations of undocumented workers do occur²³, they appear to be merely symbolic acts, designed to mask the deficiencies of Lao labour legislation and the country's continued reliance on and tolerance of semi-legal Vietnamese labour migration.

Thus, migration to Laos involves both opportunities and risks. Many of the informants who provided data for this study discussed precarity at home and the general difficulties of internal migration in Vietnam, including the residence system (cf. Arnold 2012). Labour mobility produces translocal lifeworlds, marked by temporary, serial employment and rare visits to families back in Vietnam, mainly for Têt New Year—when the bus companies increase their transport fees. According to Lao informants, Vietnamese workers often speak Lao (unlike most Chinese labour migrants); over the years, they have established networks within both the Vietnamese and Lao communities in Vientiane and other cities. The following migration history, provided by a man named Tuan, during an interview in Vientiane in December 2016, illustrates some exemplary aspects of Vietnamese labour mobility in Laos.

Tuan, who was 35 years old at the time, ran one of the numerous motorbike shops in Vientiane. There were many customers, who dropped by at all times of day and sometimes late at night, to have a flat tire fixed or a motorbike washed. Motorbikes are the main means of transport in Vientiane. Tuan shared the work with his Vietnamese wife, younger brother, and his brother's Lao wife, who, as a citizen, was the official owner of the business. The family literally lived on the shop floor – in a small separate bedroom at the back of the workshop. While Tuan and his brother did most of the repair work, the two women washed up

²²Some Vietnamese migrants try to move on to Thailand, where incomes are even higher but the environment is arguably more precarious, including police crackdowns (or higher police ‘fees’) and competition by Lao, Khmer, and Burmese migrants.

²³See “3,000 Vietnamese labourers in Laos return home”, *Vietnam News Agency*, 17 October 2016.

to 50 bikes per day for 10,000 Kip each (US\$ 1.20). The location of the shop, next to a busy road leading to the city centre, made it a profitable business.

Having experienced exhausting work and a lack of job security in a gravel pit in Quảng Bình (Central Vietnam), Tuan did not hesitate in 2002 when his uncle, who was running a busy bar close to a construction site in Savannakhet (southern Laos), invited him to help with his business. After his uncle's tragic death in a car accident, Tuan moved to Vientiane province to join a large Vietnamese workforce at a local sawmill. The Lao mill owner hired many Vietnamese workers, who were renowned throughout the country as skilled carpenters. Tuan crafted furniture and lived in a compound next to his workplace, as did most of the other labourers. He saved most of his salary, sending it back to his family in Vietnam.

In 2007, Tuan started work at a Vietnamese-run motorbike shop, where he acquired new skills as a mechanic and continued to save money, with which he finally started his own business three years later. His Lao language skills, acquired at his uncle's bar, helped him establish important connections in Vientiane with the Lao owner of the building space he wanted to rent, the district authorities, local traders, suppliers, and crucially the local police.

Tuan started his motorbike repair business with his younger brother, who had worked in Laos for a few years as a trader. Being a specialist in spare parts for cars and motorbikes, and having accumulated some financial capital, his brother was an ideal business partner. Their mutual trust was, of course, the key. In addition, his brother's Lao wife enabled the business to have a less precarious contract than many Vietnamese business owners are forced into. The brother's Lao wife signed the contract in her own name, while Tuan and their Lao landlord cultivated a friendly relationship. As Tuan's brother invested in high-quality tools and parts, the family business earned a good reputation in the neighbourhood for its quality services.

According to Tuan, local networks in his Lao neighbourhood are essential for running a smooth business. The owner of the building is a high-ranking government official, who receives 80,000 Thai Baht per year in rent (US\$ 2,500). Although the contract is signed by Tuan's Lao sister-in-law, it is not permanent and must be renewed every year. Thus, despite running a successful business, the family status is precarious, since success depends on the good-will of the local *phu nyai* or "big man", a concept reserved for powerful individuals with efficient patron-client networks (cf. Rehbein 2007). The brothers are careful always to pay the monthly 'fee' to the district administration and the more informal 'contribution' to the *ban*; this totals 150,000 Kip. In addition, generous contributions to the local temple during Buddhist festivals strengthen the Vietnamese business owners' relationship with the predominantly Buddhist Lao community.

To extend their temporary documents (Lao: *nangsü*), they do not have to join the 'visa run' that hundreds of Vietnamese migrants must make each month, across the Nongkhai border. Another 'fee' to the local administration and police every three months does the job. The two brothers return to Vietnam

once a year to visit their parents and their elder brother's family in Quảng Bình. According to Tuan, the main reason for the infrequency of these visits is the cost of the travel, or, more specifically, the loss of income that results from leaving the business. Nevertheless, Tuan's brother generally uses his trips home to Vietnam to smuggle special spare parts that would cost several times more if bought in Thailand. Many supplies, ranging from tools and parts to paint and chemicals, must be imported or smuggled from Thailand, with hefty tariffs filling the pockets of customs officers.

To sum up, Tuan's life continues to be somewhat precarious; however, through regular services and various relationships, he has been able to create a measure of resilience. Like patron-client relationships, family networks play a significant role in alleviating precariousness. Tuan's story also reveals the everyday 'law-making' required to 'legalise' precarious businesses. The poorly implemented Lao law makes it difficult to distinguish between legal and illegal procedures in any case (for foreigners and Lao citizens alike). Trouble with the local authorities can jeopardise all accumulated social capital, according to other informants. A supposedly stable situation can become precarious if a *nai ban* or local policemen develops a grudge against a Vietnamese migrant.

One important aspect of Tuan's story is the seemingly minor reference to his previous job at the Vietnamese gravel pit. It is clear that translocal mobility within Vietnam is no less precarious than transnational migration to Laos or Thailand. Just like the colonial coolies, rural migrants compete for jobs in cities and labour-intensive industries (e.g. mines, plantations, and infrastructure). This competition – along with legal insecurity and other aspects of internal migrants' precariousness in Vietnam (see Arnold 2012; Nguyen 2018) – was mentioned by all interviewees in Laos, who also cited numbers: 90 million Vietnamese versus 7 million Laotians.

The shift from being a rural-urban migrant in Vietnam to becoming a transnational migrant in Laos appears to be a cunning move, especially in provinces such as Quảng Bình, which are much closer to Lao cities than to Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. There is no doubt that the precarious labour conditions for Vietnamese people in Laos, which involve legal insecurity and often difficult working conditions, manifest patterns of dependency. However, Vietnamese informants interviewed for this study argued that the environment in Laos was relatively friendly and convenient. As one shopkeeper in Houaphan said (Interview carried out in November 2016), Lao and upland Tai shopkeepers will smile and offer space next to their stalls, while Vietnamese competitors will draw their knives, sometimes literally, in marketplaces in Laos.²⁴ Despite some

²⁴According to Duong Bich Hanh (2014: 192), Vietnamese migrants also come to Laos for economic opportunities and can be found "taking advantage of what they see as Lao people's lack of work ethic and tendency to spend money rather than save".

indication of growing resentment among Vietnamese traders (who are sometimes considered deceitful and morally inferior), direct aggression is very rare – possibly due to the official pro-Vietnamese politics of the Lao government (cf. Baird *et al.* 2018).

Migrant resilience – or, rather, resistance – also includes unrest and spontaneous acts of violence against employers by workers who have been cheated. In Houaphan, Vietnamese workers took the car keys of a Lao contractor who tried to decrease salaries for construction work on a certain stretch of road linking Sam Neua to various remote areas – even sending Chinese thugs to intimidate the workers (Interview carried out in November 2016). As he was stuck in the middle of nowhere, the contractor agreed to restore the previous salaries. Later, he went bankrupt and the Vietnamese workers just disappeared. Eventually, they were contacted again by their middlemen to carry out some of the countless large and small construction projects in Laos.

The construction boom in Laos supports a flexible Vietnamese workforce of builders, carpenters, engineers, and other skilled workers, frequently accompanied by traders and entrepreneurs. Female migrants (sometimes married to male workers) often work in service sectors, including petty trade, beauty shops, and restaurants. As Tuan's case illustrates, Vietnamese family businesses have emerged in Lao cities, as a result of spontaneous migrations initiated by connections to the Vietnamese diaspora, the product of multiyear cycles of migration.²⁵

At first glance, there seem to be differences between the old Vietnamese communities in urban Laos and more recent work migrants. Indeed, the 'new-comers' are sometimes considered rowdy, setting up mushrooming beauty parlours to compete with established Vietnamese entrepreneurs. However, there is a certain sense of solidarity between the two migrant communities (see Hanh 2014). When, several years ago, a fire destroyed a workers' compound in Dong Palan, a commercial centre with many long-standing Vietnamese businesses – the 'old' Vietnamese community – donated money to support the newer Vietnamese labour migrants (Personal communication with Kathryn Sweet, November 2016).²⁶

In addition to such precarity-reducing networks within Laos, translocal bonds to home villages play a more ambiguous role. Translocal life entails questions of belonging, emblematised by the Têt visits of migrant workers and their diffuse hopes of return. Social obligations compete with the economic significance of remittances. Vietnamese children born in Laos sometimes have only vague connections

²⁵Businesses such as beauty parlours often combine commercial and living areas to save costs. There are many different types of family structures, with some children living in Laos and others working in the family business or staying with the grandparents in Vietnam. Occasionally, grandparents are brought to Laos to care for children.

²⁶Workers' resilience feeds upon cultural identities, such as a common place of origin. Especially in times of crisis, workers rely on "the comfort and security derived from their cultural networks", as Angie Ngoc Tran (2013: 2) puts it.

to their parents' homeland; instead, they become part of an established Lao-Vietnamese community with its own associations, temples, and schools, which are held in high esteem by wealthy Lao families. Arguably, when Vietnamese migrant families finally settle in Laos, they enjoy a relatively privileged position, relative to Vietnamese families in Cambodia or Burmese families in Thailand, not to mention the ongoing precariousness of rural-urban migration in Vietnam.

Comparatively, coping with precarity in Laos appears to be easier than in other translocal networks. Key factors include mediocre law enforcement and good job opportunities for flexible workers. In comparison to Vietnam, Laos offers more space, less competition, and emerging economic niches. Although arbitrary laws engender latent uncertainty, Lao government policy tolerates Vietnamese migration in principle. In terms of vulnerability, knowledge, and mobility, today's Vietnamese labour migrants to Laos face far less precarity than the coolies once did, although various subtle patterns of everyday precariousness do persist.

CONCLUSION

In the context of this special issue on labour mobility in Southeast Asia, I have highlighted historical patterns of precarity and resilience in the lives of Vietnamese labour migrants, from the colonial coolies on Indochina's rubber plantations to present-day labour migrants in Laos. The case studies illustrate a dialectic of vulnerability and uncertainty on the one hand, and of agency and opportunity on the other.

Past and present patterns of labour mobility and precarity resemble each other, in the sense that both have produced the reserve armies of labour required by global capitalism (Li 2011). This is true for the colonial rubber plantations and nickel mines, as well as for the Lao construction boom fuelled by Chinese and Vietnamese investments. States encourage migration either through systems of indenture or through relaxed border regimes, as in the case of present-day Vietnam-Laos migration. All of these examples of labour mobility are shaped by interplays of precarity and resilience.

Precarity in the workplace includes outright violence and racial discrimination, as examples from colonial plantations illustrate. Nowadays, Vietnamese labour migrants face more subtle forms of marginalisation, for example, through legal insecurity. In the case of Laos, Vietnamese workers have developed broad tactics to cope with precariousness in the workplace. The inconsequential Laotian legal system and long-standing Lao-Vietnamese migration networks allow for leeway and flexibility. Although stereotyped attitudes persist, racial prejudice is mild in comparison to the discrimination faced by Vietnamese migrants in Cambodia or migrants from Myanmar in Thailand, as described by other contributions to this special issue (see Balčaitė and Groß in this issue).

This article expands the restrictive frame of precarious employment relations to include a broader conception of precarity, one which pervades Vietnamese society and arguably Southeast Asia in general. As discussed in the introduction to this special issue, focussing on both past and present labour mobility across Southeast Asia enables us to trace continuities with historical patterns of precarious production, investigating the roles of various state and non-state actors. This field includes social and legal precarity in the workplace, as well as different patterns of socioeconomic, environmental, and political precariousness in the migrants' regions of origin. Moreover, adopting a translocal perspective on mobility and precarity provides a more complex picture of the migrants' aspirations, perceptions, and negotiations of precarity.

The present study demonstrates the analytical advantages of adopting a broader conception of precarity. It transcends the formal-informal binary, incorporating aspects of institutional, legal, and affective precariousness. More generally, this conception captures the inherent uncertainty of mobility, not only in the 'neoliberal' present but also in historical contexts shaped by colonial capitalism, which gave rise to analogous problems of labour mobility and exploitation. However, I would caution against a one-sided perspective, emphasising either migrants' exploitation and victimisation or overly optimistic accounts of migrants' agency and self-empowerment. The dialectic of precarity and resilience embraces these two conflicting dimensions of labour mobility in Southeast Asia.

Precarity appears even more ambiguous in regard to household futures. A necessary but insufficient condition for precarity is a household economy that fails to achieve a decent livelihood and is marked instead by lack, insecurity, and uncertainty. Existing social networks and rumours of fortune may contribute to migration. However, insufficient livelihoods alone cannot explain mobility. Along with structural, institutional, political, and legal conditions, other factors, such as knowledge, aspiration, and an adventurous spirit seeking opportunity, must also be taken into account. Considering future aspirations requires an understanding of the various other reasons why migrants may take risks or accept new forms of precariousness.

While risk-taking implies vulnerability, it arguably also leads to potentially new sources of resilience. From armed resistance and labour strikes to the mobilisation of diaspora networks, resilient individuals demonstrate a considerable tactical potential to conjure agency from precarity. Tactics such as Tran Tu Binh's agitation in the coolie camp, or today's labour migrants to Laos negotiating 'fees' with policemen are small pieces in the diffuse and fragile picture of resilience, enabling vulnerable people to adapt to potentially hostile conditions. The dialectic of precarity and resilience cannot be dissolved; it is a force that produces mobile lifeworlds and futures. Even if this future orientation resembles Berlant's (2011) 'cruel optimism', which can be exploited and disappointed, it nonetheless fuels persistence and resilience.

Precarity provides a useful prism through which to explore the facets of labour mobility in Southeast Asia, as this case study of past and present patterns of Vietnamese labour migration illustrates. The interplay of mobility, translocality, precarity, and resilience constitutes the specific dynamics that shape the everyday experiences of labour migrants and their families, and their permanent calculation of past and present experiences of precariousness and future uncertainties.

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