A Study of the Lao Agrarian Economy: A Society Living in-between Economic Development and Heritage Conservation

Rie ODAJIMA

Introduction

Security in everyday life is the most serious concern for those whose household economies can only meet their basic needs. For such families, however, economic development may be a double-edged sword: while many people may theoretically enjoy consumer life, which is concomitant with having easy-to-access goods at marketplaces, they may, at the same time, become frustrated by the fact that they lack the funds to fully capitalize on product availability. This happens in contemporary agrarian communities in southern Laos. Following the endorsement of the market economy in the late 1980s, rural development became one of the most important state agendas. Shortly after the adoption of this policy, agrarian communities were introduced to another program in the early 2000s, namely, the heritage conservation program. Since then, these different programs have influenced agrarian communities to promote economic development and advocate for the conservation of traditional customs and landscapes. Each movement has its basis in a different ideology—developmentalism and preservationism, respectively. The two thoughts are oppositional in terms of the ways that the ideas and methods associated with each one influence living beings. However, both are similar in the sense that they have risen together in rural Lao society as important state themes for the modernization period.

A number of agrarian Lao families who are living under these complex, inter-related ideological programs have different views on development and conservation and often find themselves wandering in-between (Nishimura 2004, 2006). In recent years, as far as I observed during my fieldwork, many families, young families in particular, wish to have more financial and intellectual resources available in order to “upgrade” their standard of living. They believe that such resources typically come from foreign countries, and they view traditional ways of life as outdated customs. Paradoxically, those same families also find the market economy’s
approach to investment and consumption too risky; they believe that expansive capital use is most prudent because they think that using what they already have too optimistically could destroy their lives and result in poverty.

Although the above-mentioned atmosphere represents a very recent phenomenon, the same tenet was seen when economic development programs and the heritage conservation program launched together in southern Laos about two decades ago. This begs the question of what life was like in agrarian society when this phenomenon began. If, recently, families have claimed that they need to make changes in their economic lives that will transform their society from agrarian to market-based, or if they cooperate with preservationist thought by hesitating to ride on the new wave, in what ways or to what extent do they consider these options?

In the recent decades, developmentalist and preservationist ways of thinking (i.e., development-centered and counter-development thoughts) are circulating not only in southern Lao agrarian society but also all over Laos (Evans 1995). Similar has happened in neighboring Asian states as well (Scott 1976, 1985; Gupta 1998; Pandian 2009). Some Asian farming populations have experienced and made complex responses to development and tradition; they not only showed either dissent with or consent for development and tradition but also exhibited wariness and struggle in facing and incorporating them (Gupta 1998; Pandian 2009). Similarly, in Lao agrarian society, since colliding with both development and conservation as ideas, people have long wondered how both would affect their lives in terms of positive and negative influences and resultant conditions. Hence, in this paper, I elucidate a practical situation for their society by describing how families such as these have made livings amidst the transforming conditions and environments that arise from the two different ideologies and programs.

**Data and Setting**

The present research is based on some of the data I collected during the first decade of the 2000s via my fieldwork in Champasak District, Champasak Province. Thus, the data show the situation of the agrarian society approximately ten years ago. Nonetheless, what follows is suggestive of present agrarian society because the relevant families are still situated in a similar environment. Presently, young villagers find the implementation of economic development programs more important, and more people are engaging in commercial or cash-based economic activities; yet, it is also true that multi-village awareness of the heritage conservation program is at a high. Thus, both development and conservation have maintained their greatly
influential status, just as in the previous decade.

Local administration divides the field site, Champasak District, into five groups (kums) that used to be called tassengs during the royal regime. The five groups are as follows: group one consists of muang (city, the capital, or the principality) or the former Basak area and northernmost villages; group two consists of the riverside villages and the central plain areas; group three coincides with the local marketplace Dontalet; group four is composed of villages located on the mountain side and the furthest area from muang; and lastly, group five is made up of the southernmost riverside villages (Figure 1). In this paper, I examine, among other groups, the data of groups two and three. Together, groups two and three include not only a large granary belt but also a thick distribution of important archaeological remains. In addition, both groups have relatively easy access to the marketplace, Dontalet, which has grown to meet the demands of paddy farmers and others, including minorities, for the exchange of special products (Nishimura 2008; Odajima 2005) given that there is a paved arterial road serving as a

Figure 1. An Author-Made Map of the District of Champasak and its Five Groups
connection (Figure 1). Those who live in areas that are part of groups two and three are, therefore, living in an environment that is more apt to satisfy both developmentalist and preservationist discourse. Although the majority of people who belong to the other groups also conduct paddy farming and are located near ancient remains, the regions occupied by groups two and three are, without a doubt, the central stage for the rural development and heritage conservation projects.

Across all five groups, the majority of families are what this paper refers to as *khopkhua khum kin* (families whose harvests satisfy self-consumption); there are also, in the minority, *khopkua dua kin* (families that have food for more than just self-consumption) and *khopkhua khat kin* (families that lack food). Up to the present, these families have experienced some watershed events, namely, the 1975 socialist revolution, agrarian collectivization, and the late 1980s adoption of market economic policy. Halpern (1960) stated, in his report for US aid programs, that Lao agrarian society is relatively independent and autonomous from official governance. Their economy is, as Evans (1995) stated, based on a self-regulatory system; the farmers have their own work ethics, morality, temporal cycles, and a sense of equality. The agrarian economy is inclusive of wealth redistribution (i.e., the rich families sponsor the repair of village temples and arrange music bands and other attractions for the sake of public amusement at village festivals, and so forth). This redistribution goes from the elders or the rich to the relatively younger generations, subsistence families, and/or the impoverished. In this respect, Lao agrarian economy is close to what Scott (1975) called a moral economy, which is based on the belief that everyone has a basic right to survive. However, the Lao case differs in that while the farmers often share their wealth with the others their provision is not wholly altruistic or done for the sake of others’ well-being; it is also because the farmers believe that the act of wealth sharing will assure their own good fortune. Thus, the moral redistribution of wealth is a heartfelt action that also aims to secure individual happiness. Living as they do—with notions of individual and collective welfare, profit-oriented and morality-based economy, and developmentalist and preservationist ideologies—how do agrarian Lao families find the most appropriate way of resolving these dualities in their daily lives? Given the environmental conditions, how do they utilize each family member’s capacity and knowledge? In the following sections, I describe the general features of groups two and three as well as these groups’ environmental and economic settings. In doing so, I show that families have their own living strategies, ways of thinking of the poor and the rich, and different views on and relationships with development and tradition.
1. Group Two: The Riverside and Plain Villages and Archaeological Remains

Group two includes 19 villages\(^2\) in total. These villages occupy an area south of group one and north of groups three, four, and five. A mountain chain, including the mountain called Phu Kao (Figure 1), lies on the western side of group two. From the foot of the mountain to the eastern side, the wide plain stretches all the way to the Mekong River.

It would not be an overstatement to say that the plain is the most fertile sector in the district. During the rainy season, the mountains preserve rainwater beneath the forest’s roots. Preserved water and moisture springs out and flows into small streams, and then into the Mekong via the plain. The abundance of water in the plain allows all creatures to thrive. Around groves and streams, wild animals gather, plants and herbs grow, and human beings are given opportunities to acquire daily food, fuels, and materials for housing.

The richness of these water resources also enables people to cultivate wet rice using only rainwater (Nishimura 2008). Therefore, paddy farming is the most prevalent economic activity in the plain. During the rainy season, the landscape of the plain is covered with growing paddies, and this gives every visitor the impression that the district is one of the richest rice fields in southern Laos. The inhabitants’ dependency on market commodities and their households’ tendency to trade agricultural products at marketplaces have significantly increased in recent years, but the practice of paddy cultivation and acquiring supplementary food and materials from the surrounding natural environment are still the most substantial strategies used by inhabitants to make a living.

According to the data that the village chiefs of group two compiled, the majority of group two families are *khopkhua khum kin* (i.e., families that have a harvest of paddy to meet the end of self-consumption). The chiefs as well as the villagers perceive *khopkhua khum kin* families as average in terms of economic life. Falling into the category of an average family means reasonable household management, subsistence, and not-so-luxurious livelihoods.

Many group two households wish that they could make their lives more secure. They often believe that they should store more in savings in preparation for emergencies. Most villagers firstly wish to stabilize their livelihoods, then increase their paddy surplus for sale, if possible. Though many farming populations use natural manure by spreading buffalo and cow excrement on fields, some farmers expend funds toward the improvement of field fertility by buying and using chemical fertilizers with the aim of increasing their harvest, and many more want to save money for this purpose.
The fundamental motivation for farmers’ efforts to increase their harvest is fear and a related desire to safeguard against falling into a state of *khopkhua khat kin*, which translates to “families that lack in food.” The most disastrous conceivable problem is a lack of food, so in order to avoid food poverty, many families take careful stock of their agricultural field practices from year to year with the goal of repeating practices that yielded positive results or large harvests and discontinuing practices that led to negative results, smaller harvests, or, worst of all, food shortage or an absolute lack of food. In this endeavor to maintain security and stability, farming families refer not only to their own experiences but also to their neighbors’. Indeed, there are some often-highlighted lessons. For instance, in the past, the fear of famine was realized with floods and droughts. As a result, farmers took stock of disastrous meteorological information by exchanging experiences. Labor shortage and livestock epidemic (particularly of buffalos) are also disastrous events that may occur abruptly and will significantly reduce harvest yields. The farmers thus have a number of livelihood-related concerns, and all these worries act as driving forces for communal knowledge-sharing.

Situated at the center of the paddy-farming area, group two families hold to a careful and fear-driven living strategy. They believe that each family should take responsibility for their own socio-economic security. Healthy relations with others can be constructed only under this circumstance. If different families share this idea, alliances between them are reinforced. They share work and emotion, and this is a source of joy and social security in the agrarian economic life.

Attitudes of carefulness and keenness with regard to social security also impact ways of viewing archaeological remains. Archaeological remains are important community objects, particularly for those living close to the remains, because they are indicators of the existence of guardian spirits and gods (*phbis*). Local communities have long held ceremonies at archaeological sites in order to pay their respects and communicate with spiritual entities, which transcend time and live beyond the capacity of human beings, just as archaeological objects do. Wat Phu is the symbolic place where the supreme gods dwell, and so the villagers have “protected” the building of Wat Phu by conducting ceremonies and rites in the precinct. By paying respect to archaeological/spiritual sites, farmers prayed to the guardian spirits for life protection. Presently, however, not all farmers participate in the ceremonies held at the sites of the archaeological remains, and some people do not know that the archaeological remains are linked to the local myths about gods protecting humans; but even such people may not neglect the experiences of their neighbors if their neighbors tell the stories of the guardian spirits.
Despite people’s relationships with the archaeological remains, all stories of spirits do invoke fear; the villagers of group two cannot escape from the spirits because all group two villages house important archaeological buildings, and so, these are included by the heritage conservation program’s zoning system.

Despite their close proximity to the archaeological remains, the group two villages can be further classified into two sub-groups in terms of their different natural environments: 1) villages along the riverside, and 2) villages in the central plain. In what follows, I describe these environmental differences as well as life strategies for each sub-group.

1-1. Villages along the Riverside

Villages of this group are located along the western bank of the Mekong. Among them are Wat Luang Kao, Phanon, Muang Kang, and Katup (Figure 1). Some historical documents say that Wat Luang Kao and Phanon were the birthplace of the southern Lao monarchy in the eighteenth century, and even before this Lao settlement, some villages, including Katup and Muang Kang, were already central villages of the region (Archambault 1961). The riverside villages were also the place where the French history of colonization and archaeology began in Champasak. The French Catholic mission arrived on the shores of Wat Luang Kao, created their base, including the church in Phanon, and began colonization and archaeological investigations. Although present-day villagers barely remember these past events, the Catholic Church and older populations would remind us of it. Likewise, not many villagers talk about the heritage conservation project. Some male villagers living in the area used to be asked to assist with surveys and excavations. They accepted, but only because they wanted to support their household economies and not because they were interested in learning about history; archaeological surveying could attract their interest not its own right but rather as part of a living strategy.

For many villagers, especially older generations who did not expose themselves to archaeological surveys, ancient remains were magically powerful objects possessed by spiritual entities. In some villages, these old objects are used as amulets or objects of veneration. One riverside village where powerful mediums who could speak with or possess spiritual entities lived was Katup, and there, a statue of lingam was treated carefully by both monks and mediums. The statue was originally housed in a Buddhist temple in some other place, but the Katup bonze transferred it to his temple because the bonze wished to bring magical powers to his village. In a social setting where many households hardly go beyond subsistence or khopkhua khum kin, causing some to live in fear of an abrupt decline in standard of living characterized
by a complete lack of food, the magical power of ancient remains was considered risk protection for the economic lives.

Fishing is the most remarkable activity that occurs alongside the Mekong. The villagers cultivate paddies too, but because their fields are located next to the bank of the Mekong, the soil is sandy and not ideal for paddy farming. Fishing in the Mekong is supplementary to paddy cultivation, but fishing remains the vital activity for many households. Fishing families sell their products at the marketplaces in DontaI or in the province’s capital city, Pakse; they also trade with mountain villages that hardly produce fish like the ones that come from the Mekong. If the wet rice harvest is not enough for self-consumption, they buy rice from other villagers or at the marketplaces using the cash that they earned mostly from fishing.

Although fishing is most actively practiced in the riverside villages, if a family lacks a male labor force, they can hardly run a fishing business. Instead, they plant vegetables in their yards or in fields since gardening is not necessarily hard labor for females. Gardening is also suitable for the sandy soil, and moreover, females are often better at trading than males. Therefore, gardening is an instrument of adaptation for households that are composed mostly of women.

Female-dominant households are rare, but they do exist throughout the district of Champasak. In many cases, the female-dominant households engage in selling vegetables or other foods at marketplaces or as peddlers, just as those living in the riverside villages do. This is an example of the adaptability of females, in general, in Champasak. The reasons why such households are formed is partly because of the institutional practice of marriage and inheritance. Traditionally, parents give daughters larger fields than sons who are destined to live with their wives’ parents. The females often stay in their natal villages permanently, taking on the role of managing inherited lands and other properties. However, this practice does not preclude the sudden disappearance of husbands, which means that all the responsibilities concomitant with household management are dumped on wives. As a result of husbands running away, abandoned wives find alternative subsistence methods, such as gardening and running a petty shop, that do not demand a male labor force.

In the riverside villages as well as in the other villages belonging to the different groups, when the villagers speak of a standard family, it means a family that can harvest enough rice to support all its family members and also one that has both a male and female labor force. This is essentially how people define *khophhua khum kin*, and most of the families in the district are included in this category.

Economic differentiation among households is not prevalent in the riverside villages.
However, after the official rural development program installed an irrigation system that made double-cropping possible in some of the villages along the Mekong, it became a point of contention in the district. For villagers who live inland and on the mountains, the limitation of the mechanical irrigation system to the area right alongside the Mekong is problematic because it is an unfair development; but, even a portion of the villagers who live in the riverside villages (some of whom would know that there are such complaints from inland villagers) could not enthusiastically take to innovative agriculture without expressing concerns. For such riverside villagers, like the residents of Katup Village for example, the concern is about the impact of double-cropping on the sustainability of the household economy. In the case of Katup Village, where a machine to pump water up from the Mekong was installed by the local government in 1994, mechanical irrigation gave villagers an opportunity to cultivate paddies not only in the rainy but also in the dry season. However, double-cropping was not practiced by the whole village straight away. In Katup in 2005 and 2006, for example, only 84 out of 193.5 hectares or about 43.4 percent of the total village field area was farmed during the dry season. According to the village chief, the reason all fields were not used during the dry season was because the villagers did not have a sufficient labor force and enough experience with double-cropping.

Thus, the villagers learned the following lesson after the installment of the mechanical irrigation system: it is not enough to have up-to-date, agriculturally innovative machinery; farmers ought to change all customs related to the new method of farming, including the organization of laborers who are not family members. If they do not create a farming organizational system that suits the innovative agricultural cycle, they will only exhaust themselves. It follows that because some villagers could not organize the required labor force, they did not practice double-cropping.

Nonetheless, in Katup between 2005 and 2006, the total harvest of paddies was 684.25 tons, which is an amount approximately 1.5 times more than the total harvests of Khokkhong Village (Figure 1, Table 1) for the same years. Khokkhong is a village that belongs to group two, but unlike Katup, it is situated on the inner plain. Despite their residents’ wish, Khokkhong cannot have a mechanical irrigation system because the local development program prioritized the installment of irrigation for the riverside area.

Double-cropping and the mechanical irrigation system affected Katup in terms of the category occupancy of *khopkhua khat kin*. Though Katup’s village chief had not updated the village data for several years, he said that Katup has a much lower number of *khopkhua khat kin* or families that lack food when compared to neighboring villages, such as Khokkhong (Table 1).
Table 1. Village Data, Group 2 (Katup, Khokkhong, and Nongthon)  
(Data Taken by the Author at Katup, Khokkhong and Nongthon)

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>683 (M346/F292)</td>
<td>908 (M502/F406)</td>
<td>422 (M205/F216)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Family</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Family Size</td>
<td>4.9 person/family</td>
<td>5.04 person/family</td>
<td>5.9 person/family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khopkhua Dua Kin</td>
<td>30 (21.5% of the total families)</td>
<td>45 (25%)</td>
<td>17 (23.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khopkhua Khum Kin</td>
<td>104 (74.8%)</td>
<td>120 (66.7%)</td>
<td>41 (56.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khopkhua Khat Kin</td>
<td>5 (3.6%)</td>
<td>15 (8.3%)</td>
<td>14 (19.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families That Own Fields</td>
<td>138 (99.3%)</td>
<td>161 (89.4%)</td>
<td>58 (80.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families That Do Not Own Fields</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>19 (10.6%)</td>
<td>14 (19.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1-2: The village chiefs of Katup and Khokkhong could not provide the author with accurate data. They did not update the data for several years. So the above data indicate approximate numbers and percentages.

The village chief of Khokkhong could not give accurate data either, but this does not negate the possibility of different economic situations between the two villages. As seen in Table 1, only 3.6 percent of Katup households are *khopkhua khat kin* while in Khokkhong, which has a larger population and more families than Katup, about 8.3 percent of the households are *khopkhua khat kin*. Furthermore, when comparing Katup with Nongthon (Table 1), which is another group two inland village that does not have a mechanical irrigation system, Katup has only about one fifth of Nongthon’s families of *khopkhua khat kin*. Thus, Katup has a far lower number of families that lack food for consumption, especially rice, than other inland villages where there is no double-cropping system.

According to a combination of historical information and the narratives of elderly villagers who live in the district, Katup has a much more extensive history than other villages, like Nongthon, which was created relatively recently by short-distance Lao migrants. So, Katup villagers, in general, are of the thinking that even though their fields are covered by sandy soil, they have begun to open up and cultivate more field area than new villages like Nongthon, and as a result, most households can inherit paddy fields and establish self-sufficient economies. If this is taken as true, irrigation and double-cropping contributed to Katup’s economic advantages over the other new (and disadvantaged) villages, which means that development programs have bolstered Katup by giving it more opportunities to produce rice.
Khokkhong and Katup have basically similar geo-economic conditions; villagers say that the former is one of the older settlements in the district because earlier villagers settled down in Khokkhong due to its favorable environment for paddy farming. However, according to the villagers’ oral explanations, familial populations increased with every new generation, making it more difficult to divide fields as inheritance among children in order to set them up for self-sufficient living. As a result, the various descending generations of Khokkhong villagers tended to move away from their native village in pursuit of new fields and opportunities to earn cash, and it was this exodus that formed new villages, including Nongthon.

Irrespective of the historical background of each village, which, in turn, brings advantageous or disadvantageous conditions, the rural development program did not work as well in Khokkhong as it did in Katup. This has highlighted the image-related differences between the two older villages. For instance, although Khokkhong used to be regarded as a very good site for farming, many people say that the village is quite poor and lacks paddies to be eaten. When I conducted my fieldwork, there were no electrical facilities in Khokkhong, unlike the riverside villages, including Katup. So, it was true that rural development program officials could not install a mechanical-pump irrigation system in Khokkhong, and because of the double neglect the inland villages suffered under the rural development program; the inhabitants of the district, in general, think that Khokkhong is a less modern and much poorer village. The data from Khokkhong (Table 1), however, do not necessarily indicate that the village as a whole suffers from a lack of food. Nearly 70 percent of Khokkhong households are self-sufficient, as seen in Table 1. Khokkhong even exceeds Katup in the percentage of *khopkhua dua kin*, which means “families that have food for more than self-consumption.” Khokkhong is in a much better situation than Nongthon, which has soil that is much less suitable for paddy farming. It seems to me that although there are families that lack food to eat in Khokkhong, the rumor about Khokkhong seriously suffering from poverty is not accurate. Rather, poverty is an imagined issue or a relative product that comes out of comparing Khokkhong with villages like Katup that already have modern facilities. We therefore have to identify which families are poorer through close scrutiny of the economic states of each Khokkhong family. Also, if one intends to redress economic differentiation between villages such as Khokkhong and Katup that have similar environmental and historical conditions, it will be necessary to first identify what specifically is needed in each village, and then make development plans that focus on maintaining equality between villages instead of concentrating on one or the other. Otherwise, development plans will only reproduce relative poverty and promote enmity between different villages and
peoples.

On the other hand, as already mentioned, Nongthon is a new village created by migrant inhabitants who used to be residents in older villages like Katup and Khokkhong. Actually, the village area of Nongthon used to be the fields of the Khokkhong and Katup villagers. Because of demographic expansion, the families from the older settlements sent their children and let them convert farming fields into housing plots. However, because the fields were no longer fields, the migrant residents in Nongthon had to find landowners who could rent them paddy fields. In this way, in Nongthon, the percentage of field-less households is higher than in villages such as Katup and Khokkhong (Table 1). Inhabiting new villages, like Nongthon, therefore means contending with worse living conditions.

However, although Nongthon, which is a badly-conditioned village, was born from older and richer villages, such as Khokkhong and Katup, these same older villages also help Nongthon villagers. Katup and Khokkhong villagers used to provide Nongthon villagers with opportunities to rent fields, and today in Katup, double-cropping provides tenant Nongthon farmers with opportunities to harvest rice. Many Nongthon households are tenant farmers to Katup villagers, who have mechanically irrigated fields. Some Nongthon families who are tenant farmers in Katup are even rich families or khopkhua dua kin because they can afford to share more harvests with their landlords in Katup. Katup’s modern irrigation system gives influence on the percentage of khopkhua dua kin in the Nongthon. Out of fourteen field-less Nongthon families (Table 1), ten are doing tenant farming in Katup and maintaining self-sufficient economies. On the contrary, the other four field-less families remain khopkhua khat kin because their relatives or friends who live in Katup do not have large fields or because they were not able to rent fields. The reason why poor families remain poor is thus not only because of a lack of resources but also due to an incapacity to find persons who can offer assistance. The people in Champasak, in general, say that there are more reasons why families become poor: 1) the unsuitability of the soil to paddy farming; 2) field sizes that are too small to support subsistence; 3) too many children to feed; 4) the inability to breed livestock; and 5) insufficient inheritance (of fields, buffaloes, and so on). But as the case of Nongthon village shows, human networks are crucial to securing livelihoods. Also, the application of new technology, such as mechanical irrigation, may support field-less families in Nongthon. New facilities thus have two aspects; on one hand, they promote economic differentiation, but on the other, they may support poorer families. Whether new technology works to positive or negative effects depends on how it is used.
Considering that the rural development programs gave priority to installing new irrigation systems in some riverside villages, it can be said that the official development plans have two aspects: success in reducing the percentage of poor families in several villages and failure in balancing development between the inland and the riverside regions. This failure would develop into a serious concern of some villagers living in the inland villages who earnestly hope to have innovative agricultural programs. Because the core archaeological sites are located in the inland area, it has to be very careful to install agricultural development programs like mechanical pumping irrigation systems in the inland plain area. It is necessary for the official programs, both the economic development programs and the heritage conservation program, to watch different situations of the villages carefully and to discuss with villagers about designs for each village’s sustainable development.

1-2. Villages in the Wide Plain

The second cluster of group two is situated in the wide plain area. The major villages are Nongsa, Nongvien, and Thangkhop (Figure 1). This area includes the core archaeological sites of the heritage conservation program (The Government of Lao PDR 1999), namely, Wat Phu and Ancient City. The villagers who live in this area live alongside the most significant and valued archaeological remains.

Because foreigners who are interested in archaeological remains have frequently visited this area from the French colonial era up until today, we can see the villages of this cluster in the records of the French colonial explorers. Through analyzing some French historical materials, we understand that the habitation pattern has been transformed between the colonial era and present times. About a century ago, the landscape appears to have been made up of rice fields, villages, and Wat Phu, spread among thick vegetation and connected by vaguely made roads; however, there are no indications for Ancient City as it had not yet been identified. By contrast, some villages recorded on the old French map (Lunet de Lanjonquière 1907), such as Ton Tu and Tong Ngia, have disappeared from the present landscape. Meanwhile, people are now more densely located along the roadside village Nong Katu, which has had its name changed to Thangkhop. As transportation methods developed and traffic became busier, demographic concentration took place in Thangkhop. Located on the approach to Wat Phu, movement into this village has been more prominent in recent years.

By contrast, Nongsa and Nongvien remain as they were in the century-old French materials, although the foundational dates of these villages are not exactly known. The two villages
are in a similar situation since they are closely tied with the two important archaeological sites, Wat Phu and the Ancient City, despite the latter not having been identified yet on the early twentieth century French maps. Nongsar is situated right next to Wat Phu, and so, some archaeologists consider Nongsar as old as Wat Phu. On the other hand, Nongvien’s location coincides with that of Ancient City, and people can see brick and pottery fragments on the ground on house compounds and in fields. There are also artificially made ancient ponds called barrays. However, oral tradition reveals that Nongvien is a relatively new village. Although it is indicated in the early twentieth century French materials, an elderly villager says that Nongvien was not populated until about a hundred years ago. It was not until the Lao royal families ordered people to move to the present site of Nongvien that the village became a human settlement. In addition, the elderly villager says that the princely house ordered the early settlers to form a village in order to haksar (protect) the antiquities and to take care of the magical powers emanating from them. Even though there is no way to confirm the truth of this narrative, oral tradition informs us that, in all likelihood, Nongvien would not exist at the present site without the distribution of archaeological artifacts. As if supporting the villager’s narrative, the villagers have conducted rituals around barrays that are located within Nongvien where cracked jars, bricks, and stone statues are scattered. The villagers say that these ritual sites are the spots dwelled in by phi, the guardian spirits. All households are expected to participate in making feasts for the spirits at least once a year around these sites. To this day, feasts for guardian spirits have never been completely abandoned.

The connection the villagers have with the ancient remains was apt to be forgotten by archaeological surveyors because there is no evidence showing that there were Lao farmers in the remote past. The villagers’ expansion of their living area without consulting the heritage conservation program also frustrates archaeological conservators because the villagers’ activities could cause serious damage to the archaeological remains. Some Nongvien villagers are not reluctant to support state planning in the form of the heritage conservation program as they regard it as good for community development. Although they are not really familiar with the words, “heritage” and “conservation,” their awareness of the heritage project gradually increased. Several have begun to anticipate the project’s contribution to “modernizing” the village as evidenced by some families that have renovated their houses and opened guesthouses; but not all households were able to find new business opportunities through the heritage conservation program due to financial and technical limitations. However, some do expect the heritage program to facilitate new jobs, hopefully, non-agrarian ones, for them. The chief of the
Nongvien village, who is relatively young, comments on the reason why some villagers have such a wish, saying that non-agrarian jobs are not exhaustive and that they imbue people with positive images, so much so that many want their children to engage in such prestigious work.

Although there is a tendency to see the heritage conservation program as one of the rural development projects, it also evokes development-related skepticism. More than a few villagers seem to ask themselves: “If we have been able to manage our lives using our hands, why don’t we just continue to follow our way?” Although the villagers seldom voice this question, they appear to wonder what kinds of lives are most compatible with them. Such thoughts can sometimes be seen in the way they view foreign visitors. Some villagers look at visitors with envy and wish to be like them because they think that because foreigners can afford to make the trip they must be richer than locals. Others, however, think that since foreigners come from completely different countries a comparison is ridiculous. Therefore, in the villages, there are different opinions on whether traditional or modern life is better, but no one has the right answer.

In the village of Nongsa, too, there are various opinions about heritage conservation and economic development. The difference between Nongsa and the other villages is that Nongsa villagers have sharpened their senses to assess the quality of incoming programs. The reason they are so keen is because Nongsa is the village that bore the negative impact of the heritage conservation program when some families’ houses were forcibly moved. These houses were built in very close proximity to barracks and other buildings of Wat Phu, and so, when the heritage conservation program started, Wat Phu was fenced off from Nongsa. Some villagers were seriously concerned about their separation from Wat Phu because they used to conduct rites to worship spirits there, and they considered themselves the guardians of Wat Phu. The mediums and many other villagers think that ritual ceremony at Wat Phu should not be abandoned as it is the local way of living with and protecting the antiquities. The heritage program’s and socialists’ attitude towards spirit worship are discouraging local values, but still, the villagers have not completely thrown away their traditions.

For many Nongsa villagers, the separation of their village from Wat Phu could be labelled privatization of public space. Wat Phu was not only the site for state festivals but also a natural store of resources for the Nongsa villagers who were provided with herbs, bamboo, animals, fish, and ponds for bathing. The new regulations restricted access to this rich, resource-laden environment that has contributed to Nongsa and other villagers’ subsistence. The fencing of Wat Phu in order to restrict public access was not different from taking away public space and
remaking it into private space for the use of heritage conservation and tourism. The heritage program was seen only to reduce the benefits enjoyed by locals.

Such negative views towards the heritage program were fueled by fears about economic life. Some people say that Nongsa is a poorer village than many other villages in the district. The data support this perception because the percentage of khopkhua khat kin is high (Table 2; see Table 1 for comparison). The percentage of khopkhua khat kin in Nongsa is close to Nonthon village (19.4 percent between 2005 and 2006), which is also considered a poor group two village.

Table 2. Village Data, Group 2 (Nongsan)
(Data Taken by the Author at Nongsa)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village Data, Group 2 (2007-2008)</th>
<th>Nongsa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>1024 (M490/F534)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Family</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Family Size</td>
<td>5.3 person/family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khopkhua Dua Kin</td>
<td>20 (10.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khopkhua Khum Kin</td>
<td>140 (72.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khopkhua Khat Kin</td>
<td>34 (17.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families That Own Fields</td>
<td>96 (49.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families That Do Not Own Fields</td>
<td>98 (50.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some villagers who live in the district say that Nongsa should not be poor because it is located at the foot of the mountains, so the environment is richer in natural resources. They also say that Nongsa is rich in water since water flows down from the mountain slopes, and so, the village is good for paddy farming. With these statements in mind, some may wonder why, then, the people of Nongsa are poor when they are located in such a rich environment.

From the viewpoint of “richness in natural resources,” it is unreasonable to consider that Nongsa is poor in the way that Nonthon is. As already noted, Nonthon is poor mainly because it is a new village located in a disadvantageous setting for paddy farming. But, unlike Nonthon, as many villagers living in the district point out, Nongsa is one of the oldest agrarian villages where people in the past settled down because they recognized the area’s wealth in terms of natural resources. If this belief is true, it is strange to consider that Nongsa, an “old and rich” village, is poor.
There is, however, another viewpoint concerning Nongsa and the older villages. Relatively young inhabitants often assert that close proximity to the mountains no longer provides people with benefits. They say that such an environment was a treasure trove and provided people with elevated well-being during the once-upon-a-time periods when people lived only on farming. Indeed, today, many families favor the roadsides where they are better connected to marketplaces. In the context of this social setting, it is correct to call Nongsa “poor.”

Even if the village’s location and environment are no longer advantageous, how, in practical terms, do households fall into poverty in Nongsa? Although Nongsa is located next to Wat Phu where many visitors go, the fence separates the villagers from accessing the tourism industry. Many of them have never engaged in jobs other than paddy farming, and so, it is almost impossible for the majority of the villagers to even realistically consider opening touristic facilities. Even after the arrival of the heritage conservation program, most Nongsa households continue paddy farming as their main economic activity, except for a small minority who opened restaurants and guesthouses. Some Nongsa families even have larger fields (i.e., about three to five hectares) than the average field dimension (which is about one hectare) owned by the other families in Nongsa as well as in the district.

Because people (and, by extension, families) have continued to settle in Nongsa for generations, the village has developed one of the largest populations in the district (Table 2; see Table 1 for comparison). Thus, due to demographic expansion, the village has borne high population pressure, and families have encountered difficulties in ensuring that all their children can inherit lands and fields for farming. As seen in Table 2, in Nongsa, almost half of the total families do not own rice fields. According to the villagers, many of these families are too young to inherit fields from their parents, so they farm their parents’ fields and share crops with their parents’ households. Some of these young families are categorized as “poor” or khopkhua khat kin since some do not own any fields to cultivate and or any lands for housing because their parents did not have enough land to share among their children. Many of these young families are tenant farmers to landlords who have large fields in Nongsa. The poor families are “helped” by the other villagers, and so, the aforementioned problems are resolved within Nongsa. This is the village morality of mutual assistance at work in Nongsa.

Yet many tenant families often lack rice to eat for a few months out of the year. In some cases, the fields that they rent from their parents or other villagers are too small and meager to produce enough rice for consumption. This circumstance is so because their parents and landlords only have small, meager fields available. Not all parents and landlords have good
fields because it is no longer easy for villagers to inherit good fields and there are no more lands left uncultivated. In some other cases, the poor, young, tenant families lack rice to eat for a few months per year because they would rather sell the rice in order to have cash that they can use to buy educational goods for their children.

In Nongsa, therefore, a harsh cycle continues; the tenants often rent smaller and poorer fields, and after giving the landlords the harvest of rice, or selling it for cash income, they lack rice for consumption. What is worse, even if they seek job opportunities to earn cash, they are physically far away from the routes that would connect them to environments capable of providing them with job opportunities. Due to this negative cycle, some people in the district and even the Nongsa villagers themselves do not consider Nongsa rich, as already stated. The rural development and heritage conservation programs leave this negative cycle untouched or worsen it by restricting access to naturally and archaeologically bountiful areas.

Some families expect the incoming projects to give them more business opportunities. They have such expectations because they feel their economic lives are unstable since their eviction from the treasure trove environment of Wat Phu. But, they wish to begin new businesses only if they are equipped with enough capital and knowledge to tackle such an undertaking. They are very careful to maintain their economic well-being, and their wariness reshapes their vision, allowing them to see that paddy farming is a stable and reliable means of making a living. Their insight is appropriate in the ongoing setting of tourism heritage in Champasak because the tourism business provides district residents with little profit as most of the tourists come to the district accompanied by travel agents and are transported in vehicles that were hired in the provincial capital city, Pakse. Heritage tourism only rewards the city people, not the agrarian families who live much closer to the archaeological remains. Living in the above-mentioned setting, rural, agrarian villagers rarely envision a bright future.

2. Group Three: Marketplace and Satellite Villages

This group lies in the central south within the district (Figure 1) and consists of 19 villages. Its landmark is the district’s largest marketplace, Donta lat, which is a market as well as a village. As a village, there are about 450 households. Donta lat has the largest number of households and the largest population in the district. Demographic expansion has been continuing in Donta lat since the period of the former regime. After the 1975 socialist revolution, the local government revised the village organization of Donta lat and divided it into four villages, namely, Donta lat, Sompasong, Sensuk, and Kamtui. But in 2005, the four villages were
reunited because the government declared that the Dontalat area be developed into the largest commercial center. The villagers accepted this new order with enthusiasm because they believe that each sub-village consists of phi nong kan (closely connected kinsmen).

One of the reasons the inhabitants of the four villages feel close to each other is because many households have travelled a similar life path. Dontalat was initially one of the smaller muangs that was under the governance of the relatives of the royal house at Basak (group one). Because the area around Dontalat is a frontier to Sukhuma (Figure 1), the southern district of Champasak where there are a number of minorities, the Lao influence over the area was initially not strong. But after one of the royal Lao families moved in from the northern area of the district and enshrined guardian spirits around a large pond for ensuring the development of Dontalat, Dontalat grew into a large Lao settlement and marketplace. Many Dontalat villagers say, in retrospect, that around the mid-twentieth century, Dontalat was still sparsely inhabited with only about 50 households. Since that period, however, migrant, resettling families from the northern area of the district drastically increased because the population in the old villages, like Katup, Khokkhong, and Nongsaa, was growing, and Dontalat had vacant land that could accommodate the surplus. The Dontalat area was attractive to young families who sought new economic opportunities apart from simple reliance on subsistence farming because a marketplace was growing there. Since the mid-twentieth century, Dontalat has been one of the newest, most geographically convenient destinations for relatively young populations to resettle.

The elderly inhabitants of Dontalat and the other district villages remember that the political upheaval and the massive flow of foreign aid into Laos during the 1960s and 1970s promoted people’s reliance on the market economy. As a result, the migrant populations into the Dontalat village/market increased. But this resulted in higher population pressure for Dontalat. So, new migrants began to move close to the frontier area towards the neighboring district Sukhuma. Those migrants bought lands in the frontier area primarily for farming. However, because of the poor soil quality, many migrant families gave up farming in the frontier area. One of the villages that was created through this process is the village of Chikhtangngo (Figure 1), which I will touch on later.

Around the Dontalat village/market, there are some other villages, such as Tomchan and Puay. These villages are believed to have continued a peasantry-oriented economic life. Since I could not visit these villages, the information I have on them is quite limited. However, it seems to me that these villages are distantly located from Dontalat. In the rainy season, only muddy
roads connect the villages of Tomchan and Puay with the marketplace, but the forests, rivers, fish, and wood materials remain available. Therefore, these villages can be described as “old and good” or independent and self-sufficient.

We cannot, however, view newer villages, such as Chiktangngo, in the same way. As noted already, Chiktangngo is located in the frontier area of Sukhuma, which has unsuitable soil for wet rice cultivation. The landscape of Chiktangngo is much like a savanna. In all likelihood, this is why the area was left unpopulated by the Lao people or the wet rice cultivators until about a half century ago.

As seen in the case of Chiktangngo and other villages, such as Nongthon, as far as the district of Champasak is concerned, new villages meant that new residents had to live in poor environmental conditions. On the contrary, southern Lao residents often say that the old villages were established in environments suitable for wet rice cultivation. In keeping with those narratives, we can assume that Lao agrarian families opened new areas in their pursuit of suitable land for their main economic activity, and in doing so, they came further south.

In order for Chiktangngo Village, which was never fit for paddy farming, to overcome environmental disadvantage, early settlers had to develop a survival strategy. One of the strategies that they developed was purchasing a huge tract of uncultivated land—that is, seven to eight hectares —and dedicating it mainly to rice cultivation. This size was much greater than the dimensions of the ordinary rice fields owned by other farming families in the district. However, according to the offspring of the early Chiktangngo settlers, productivity was still low despite this investment, and the lands barely allowed the early settlers to subsist. This was because even if they wished to produce more rice, it was hardly possible for one family averaging five to six members to clear vegetation from several hectares of land in order to create irrigated fields, and it was not feasible to complete this task using hired labor due to financial strain in the midst of the sociopolitical upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. For these reasons, the early settlers left their lands as they were. Instead of selling the lands, the early villagers and their descendants reconciled themselves to using about one or two hectares, which is an amount that fits well with family-enterprise rice cultivation.

There have been no official plans to install mechanical irrigation systems in the southern frontier area. Both the royalist and the socialist governments promoted mechanical irrigation and double-cropping in the villages along the Mekong, but neither intended to install such innovative equipment in the new and disadvantaged villages where there is poor quality soil. Likewise, some of the Chiktangngo villagers say that the main reason the irrigation system
was not installed in the Chiktangngo area was that, unlike the riverside villages, the inland, savanna-like area lacks rivers to provide water to the irrigated fields. Therefore, instead of outfitting the area with modern farming technology, the local government has plans to develop the frontier region’s marketplace.

Lastly, on the northwestern side of Dantalat, there are some more villages. Some are located along the arterial road that connects Dantalat with Nongte (Figure 1), which is a central village and a group four marketplace. Still, some other villages are located around the foot of the mountain Phu Kao.

The villages along the road bound for Nongte follow two different types of settlement patterns. One type consists of the Lao and the other type consists of non-Lao minorities. In the area closer to the mountain slope, which is covered with thick bushes, Lao inhabitants are not necessarily the majority. Some Lao villages were newly established by the socialist government under the collectivization program despite the fact that the soil in these villages is unsuitable for wet rice cultivation, causing low settlement rates among Lao farmers. However, the new government instructed Lao farmers to create new villages on the still uncultivated lands that were available for collectivized farming.

Along the road between Dantalat and Nongte, there are some Lao villages that have been formed not by the collectivization program but rather by the increase in population pressure on Dantalat. For example, the village of Donkong is one of these. Donkong villagers have a close relationship with the residents of the four villages around the marketplace. As the influx of people into Dantalat accelerated, Donkong, which became known as the “fifth” village of Dantalat, was established.

In contrast to the villages that are situated along the arterial road, there is a group of villages on the mountain side. One such village is Thatengtheung (Figure 1), which is located at the foot of Phu Kao. For most of the mountain villages, foundational years are unknown, but Thatengtheung is exceptional because people commonly understand that it is a Catholic village that branched off from Phanon where the French Catholic mission settled down.

In a mountain village like Thatengtheung, not all the inhabitants are Lao in their origins, but the Lao farming style is predominant. Many people whose ethnic origins are non-Lao even self-identify as Lao since they have become accustomed to the Lao farming style and language. When families produce wet rice, many utilize the slash-and-burn method alongside hunting and gathering in the mountains in order to supplement their daily diets.

A considerable number of the villagers in the district as well as the inhabitants who live
around the foot of Phu Kao consider the mountainous environment rich in soil, food, and other resources, just as some relatively elderly people consider Nongsa to be located in a good environment. As seen in the case of Nongsa, however, the younger generations do not like the traditional ways of life, and many have gone out to the lowland villages, cities, and marketplaces; in some villages at the foot of the mountain, then, the inhabitants are mostly elderly folks. This phenomenon has created an unfavorable image for the mountain villages.

Just as the chiefs of the other groups do, the village chief of Thetengtheung compiles village data that reflects the economic condition of each family. According to his data, most households are *khopkhua khum kin*. In an environment that is considered rich in water and resources, the average family harvests and gathers enough food for self-consumption. Villages that have a high percentage of *khopkhua khat kin* include the village of Nongkham. In Nongkham, 50 families (about 65 percent of the total number of families) are categorized as *khopkhua khum kin* or “standard” subsistence families, 18 (about 23.3 percent) are *khopkhua khat kin* or “poor” families, and 9 (about 11.7 percent) are *khopkhua dua kin* or “rich” families. The “poor” families in Nongkham do not have enough resources for a self-sufficient life; that is, they lack enough paddy fields, good soil, livestock, family members who can serve as a labor force, kinsmen, close friends, and so on. Such situations in Nongkham closely mirror similar situations in Nongsa and Chiktangngo in that although Nongkham is located relatively near to the foot of a rich mountain, the soil is not good for wet rice farming, and the village’s considerable distance from the arterial roads limits its residents’ access to the marketplaces and the job opportunities they offer, resulting in an outflow of young members of the labor force who rarely come back to the village.

In the four villages of DontaLat, many households sell commercial goods and agricultural products. However, it is interesting to note that according to the village chiefs the villagers’ main economic activity is still wet rice farming. There are an amazing number of vendors and stalls in the DontaLat market, especially on weekends. However, not all vendors and shop-owners live in DontaLat. Because DontaLat is the district’s central hub, people come from the other villages in the district to sell or exchange their products. Arriving from all the other areas, people coming to DontaLat bring different products that are unique to each place (i.e., the Mekong fish from the riverside villages and the mountain herbs and animals from the villages at the mountain foot) (Odajima 2005). Some of the families categorized by the village chief as “rich” families are factory or plantation owners, but these families are very rare. Even though DontaLat has been developing as a marketplace, the village is primarily a settlement where res-
idents’ agricultural activities and agrarian social systems and morality are closely interwoven into the fabric of daily life.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed, based on my fieldwork, the growth of agrarian Lao society and its daily living environments, organizational strategies, and value systems. The villagers used to find the mountain and riverside area resource-rich and the most suitable for paddy farming, but in recent decades, young families in particular have less wealth and are seeking new land and job opportunities. Due to these migratory movements and the changes in living strategy, the concept of rich and poor families and the values and morality of agrarian society have been shifting.

The social, economic, and political setting is transforming; people prefer to live near roads and marketplaces as opposed to living in “rich” mountains, and as a result, lifestyles that involve living far away from roads and marketplaces are thought of as “backward.” Although paddy farming is the main economic activity, it would not be exaggerating to state that a number of agrarian families are wondering whether agrarian traditions are the best choice; these families move between agrarian and commercial, and tradition and innovation against a backdrop of official policies and development programs that are also not static. Relationships between families and development programs as well as the heritage conservation program are, like people’s opinions, also diverse. Villagers’ present and future visions for security, development, and tradition are apt to be as dynamic as the social setting.

Notes
(1) In this paper, I examine the economic and social life of Lao agrarian society by re-analyzing the data that I collected in the first decade of the 2000s. I aim to contribute this study to the ongoing projects supported by the JSPS Grant-In-Aid for Scientific Research (C) 19K12590 and Grant-In-Aid for the Encouragement of Scientists 19H00020.
(2) The accuracy of this data is subject to the period 2005 to 2008 due to the government practice of periodically reorganizing villages according to population increases and decreases.
(3) The data is subject to 2005 and 2006 fieldwork.

References


