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***Yaan het bô dai*: Encountering fear, doubts, shame and success in research with young Lao migrants**

Roy Huijsmans, Senior lecturer Children and youth studies, Institute of Social Studies, the Hague, the Netherlands (r.b.huijsmans@gmail.com)

In this paper I suggest that in the growing body of work on child and youth migration the place of emotions may, thus far, be characterized as an absent presence. Migration is an emotional experience, and oftentimes so is researching migration. This is particularly true in relation to child and youth migrants. In this light, it is somewhat paradoxical to note the relative absence of discussions on emotions and affect in the child and youth migration literature.

In an attempt to address the above I ask the simple question of where and how emotions surfaced in my research on child and adolescent migration as well as where the emotional remained absent. For this I return to material obtained in field research conducted between 2007 and 2009 with children and youth from a predominantly ethnic Lao village in central Laos. This comprised following some young villagers to their place of work in Vientiane (the Lao capital) or into Thailand, telephone contact with young migrants away from their village and interviews with migrants when returning or visiting their village. In addition, I reflect on the presence of the emotional in Lao policy discourse on young people in migration.

In my work with young migrants, three instances of emotions are noteworthy. This is firstly the expression of '*yaan het bô dai*' uttered by some young female migrants (never by young male migrants) when recalling their migration decisions. It refers to a fear that they were not able to manage life outside the village, yet simultaneously it conveys a desire to prove themselves as being able to succeed beyond the rural and agrarian world. The second instance was an example of research going wrong when visiting a village girl in the northeastern Thai city of Udon Thani where she was working as a nanny. The third instance is a case of migration gone wrong, where a girl from the village found herself in a karaoke bar in Thailand despite the promise of decent work. She escaped and found her own way back to the village where she would have preferred to keep her story a public secret without mentioning a word about it, were it not for the foreign researcher interviewing her. These last two instances in particular underscore that emotions are seldom just research topics but rather signifiers of some research encounters

In revisiting these feelings and expressions I ask what attending to emotions has to offer for furthering the field of child and youth migration.

Introduction

Emotions and affect are characterized by their *absent presence* in the fast-growing body of research on children and migration. Some of the emotions expressed by children affected by migration make it into published work. Perhaps this is more often the case in work on children as ‘left behind’, itself an emotionally laden construct, than in work on young people as migrants where the onus is often on showing their competency in migration. Indeed, where we encounter emotions in the literature on young people and migration it tends to negative ones rather than positive ones.

Migration is one of the ‘moments where lives are so explicitly lived through pain, bereavement, elation, anger, love and so on that the power of emotional relations cannot be ignored’ (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7). Hence the relative absence of emotions in the literature on children and migration is surprising. Furthermore, where emotions are discussed they tend to reinforce the representational data rather than explored as for what they are and might tell.

-to be developed further-

Theorising emotions

In this section I present a brief review of the literature on emotions (and to a lesser extent affect). In do this by drawing on writings on emotions in the field of human geography.

The 2001 editorial by Kay Anderson and Susan Smith (2001) in *Transactions* is by various scholars considered as a marker of the discipline’s return to the appreciation of the importance of affect and emotions.¹ Their call departs from a sense of frustration. They see the human world as constructed and lived through emotions, whilst with the emphasis on policy relevant research the emotional is increasingly silenced in social research and public life at large (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7). Anderson and Smith attribute this to ‘a gender politics of research’ in which ‘detachment, objectivity and rationality’ is valued, and ‘engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire’ are implicitly feminised and seen as clouding vision and impairing judgement (ibid 2001: 7).

Anderson and Smith problematize the binary between ‘objective’/‘rational’ analyses and ‘subjective’ ones by citing examples which show that these spheres of thought typically interpenetrate (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 8). Yet, capturing the emotional better requires approaches to knowledge ‘associated with being and doing, with participation and performance, with ways of knowing that depend on direct experience...more so than reflection, abstraction, translation and representation’ (ibid 2001: 9).

In a review paper, Steve Pile (2010) discusses ‘how emotions have been explored in emotional geography and...how affect has been understood in affectual geography’. He notes three common grounds between the geographies of affect and the geographies of emotions, which are nonetheless developed differently within the respective fields. This is firstly a relational ontology which ‘privileges the fluid over the fixed’ because

¹ This follows work on emotions and affect in the humanist geographies of the 1970s and 1980s and the psychoanalytic geographies of the 1990s (Pile, 2010: 5).

emotions move and affect circulates. Second, Pile notes that this relational ontology also 'privileges proximity and intimacy'. Third is a shared privilege for ethnography as methodological approach (ibid 2010: 10-11).

Despite these common grounds Pile notes some important differences between affect and emotions. Firstly, emotions refer to 'expressed feelings, being both conscious and experienced' (Anderson, 2006 in: Pile, 2010:9). Geographers have embraced emotions as a manner to move geographical knowledges beyond the representational (i.e. visual, textual and linguistic domains) by 'recognising the emotions as ways of knowing, being and doing in the broadest sense' (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 8). Affect on the other hand is 'the medium through which bodies sustain and transform each other' (Woodward and Lea, 2010: 157). Affect in this sense is beyond the cognitive; a bodily 'capacity to be affected, and to affect' and thus transpersonal (Pile, 2010: 12). This suggests that the geographies of affect is more concerned with theorising power, whereas the geographies of emotions are more concerned with going beyond representational registers of knowledge.

Affect and emotions have not been absent from children's geographies (e.g. Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Blazek and Windram-Geddes, 2013). Yet, it is my impression that this is largely limited to research with children in the Global North. This includes work on children and migration, even though migrant lives typically generate plenty of 'moments where lives are so explicitly lived through pain, bereavement, elation, anger, love and so on that the power of emotional relations cannot be ignored' (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7). Indeed, Olga den Besten (2010) usefully incorporates a sensitivity to emotions in her research with immigrant children living in Paris and Berlin.

So why don't we see more on emotions as a register of knowing in the literature on children as migrants? Perhaps the answer is already alluded to by Anderson and Smith (2001: 8-9) when they note that 'more critical approaches are not necessarily more 'sense'itive'. Work on children and migration, in its diverse forms, is a critical literature which is either pointing at what was long a blind spot in migration research (those that do not migrate, i.e. left behind children) or the lack of attention to children as active agents in migration. Where emotions enter this literature, it is largely following a pattern identified by Peter Kraftl (2013) of reinforcing 'voice' and 'agency' and their political dimension, rather than how a sensitivity to emotion could take the scholarship precisely beyond such ways of knowing.

Emotions in the Lao child migration debate

At first glance there appears little space for the emotional in policy discourse in contemporary Laos. The current bureaucracy was built up during the period of high-socialism (1975-mid 1980s) and large numbers of high-ranking civil servants still in office today were trained abroad in other socialist countries. Perhaps more so than in countries without such socialist pasts, there is a great emphasis on the rationality based on disembodied data in Lao policy discourse. This is evident from state-censored English language daily the *Vientiane Times* which often reduces deeply embodied experiences such as poverty, resettlement, and farming to disembodied figures which are then mobilized to legitimate policy responses.

A 2007 ‘opinion’ article by Viengsavanh Phengphachan (2007) serves as the case in point. The article illustrates the conceptual confusion between human trafficking and migration in the Lao context when it comes to minors involved in migration (Huijsmans, 2007; Huijsmans, 2008). It starts by clearly framing the phenomenon of young Lao nationals leaving for Thailand to work in terms of migration: ‘Each year young people head off to Thailand, both legally and illegally, with hopes of finding jobs and earning a high income’. Next it lists a number of common problems these young migrants too often face, which, according to unnamed Lao officials can be mitigated if these young migrants would know better ‘how to protect themselves’. The solution presented for solving this problem is: more information about human trafficking. This assertion is *made* scientific by stating and visualising a range of figures generated through a survey asking young people whether and how they had heard about the phrase ‘human trafficking’ and knew what it meant.



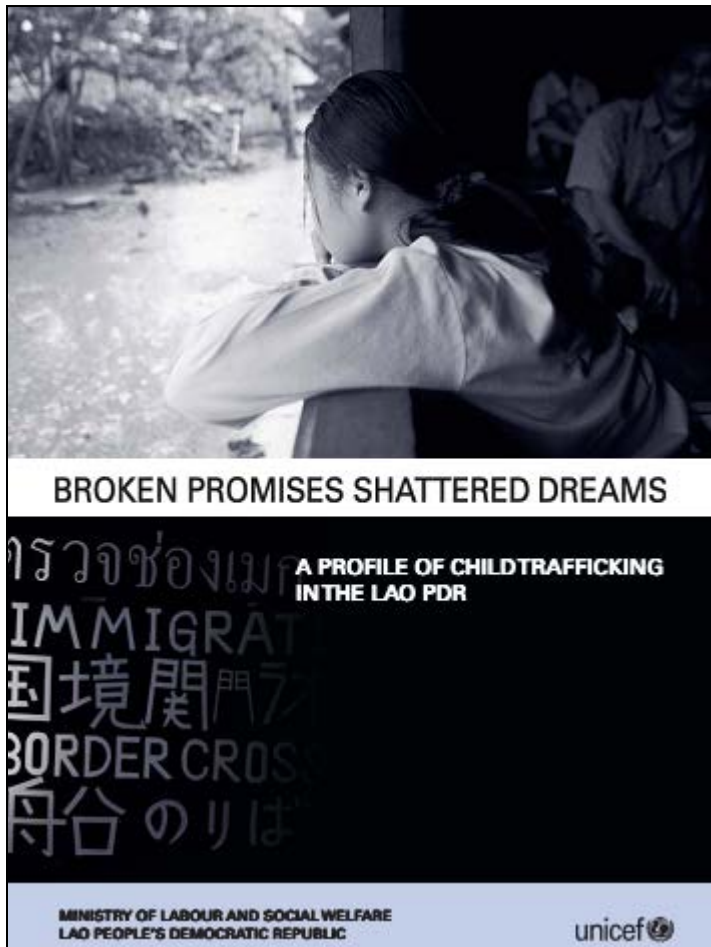
The visuals are nearly impossible to read in both the electronic and printed version of the article. Equally, the rationality derived from the figures presented in text is questionable. For example, it does not quite follow that there is a need for anti-trafficking information if ‘eighty-eight percent of the people interviewed in Champassak were aware of human trafficking from media reports’, and if ‘many people in Xayaboury province were familiar with the phrase “human trafficking”, but they were “not overly troubled” about it’. I hesitate to put these oddities down to incompetence or technological shortcomings.

Rather, it illustrates the effort to maintain the rationality of policy making as if based on such disembodied facts.

It is on the basis of such scientific rationality that something that at first glance appears squarely a question of migration and exploitation is reframed as human trafficking. Importantly, it is on the basis of disembodied figures that the emotional weight of the matter at hand is shifted from the more general question of migration to the highly emotive issue of human trafficking. At other times this may happen more bluntly. I have been to more than one policy workshop on young people as migrants and whilst the presentation of research findings is a near standard ingredient to such meetings, so is the public sharing of anecdotes. Whereas the former is typically presented in an objective and disembodied way with ample attention to sampling procedure and quantitative findings, the latter lacks all this as these are typically stories about distant cousins. Yet, it is these latter knowledges that move.

The interaction between the abstractly rational and the deeply emotional is also evident in non-government circles mobilizing policy agendas around the phenomenon of minors involved in migration. A UNICEF (2004) sponsored study on child trafficking is in the preface of the report heralded as ‘the first national survey of its kind in Lao PDR’. The objective scientific approach is further stressed in the methodology section where the study is described as ‘comprehensive’ because it ‘included all provinces of the Lao PDR with the exception of Saysomboune Special Zone’ (UNICEF and MoLSW, 2004: 15). Nonetheless, the implied scientific rigour is wedded to a highly emotive and suggestive title and image appearing boldly on the cover page. Again, I would suggest it is the emotive that gives the report the capacity to move something to which any scientific approach underpinning the report is merely style.²

² Note further that the subtitle *A profile of child trafficking in the Lao PDR* suggests a definitive focus on children. Yet, we read that out of the 253 ‘victims’ interviewed ‘63% were under 18 years of age [no further age-disaggregation provided], 33% were between 19 and 29 years of age, and 4% were 30 and above’ (UNICEF and MoLSW, 2004: 18). Although the UNICEF report doesn’t state so, the argument for including older respondents in the sample may possibly be based on reasoning that the concerned young people were children according to (inter)national age-based definitions when first migrating.



Encountering emotions in research with young migrants

In the next section I return to research material and experiences generated through a research project on young people and migration. The field research conducted between 2007 and 2009 with children and youth from a predominantly ethnic Lao village in central Laos. The research comprised studying migration decisions as they unfolded within the field of the household, following some young villagers to their place of work in Vientiane (the Lao capital) or into Thailand, telephone contact with young migrants away from their village and interviews with migrants when returning or visiting their village (for further details see: Huijsmans, 2010).

I revisit this material and experiences with a simply question in mind: where and how did emotions surface in my research on child and adolescent migration as well as where did the emotional remain **absent**?

Yaan het bô dai: leaving the village as more-than-rational

The literature on migration frequently reduces the analysis of migration-decisions to the rational realm. To be sure, rational considerations matter and the young migrants I worked with also often justified their decisions to leave in precisely such terms. They

would refer to limited employment opportunities in the village, higher wages elsewhere, or simply the chance to acquire skills by entering non-agricultural work beyond the village. However, especially in relation to adolescents often more is at stake. As discussed elsewhere (Huijsmans, 2014), leaving or staying put are events that unfold through the messy fabric of intra-household relations. Yet it is motivations setting in motion the workings of these relations. Reducing such motivations to the rational realm would gloss over the extent to which such motivations are emotionally charged, or outright emotional. For example, one young female migrant (16-17 years) explained her desire to leave the village for migrant work in the Lao capital Vientiane because ‘it was no fun staying in *Baan Naam* since most of her friends were working elsewhere’ (Huijsmans, 2014: 298).

Mary Beth Mills’ (1999) work on female adolescents leaving rural northeastern Thailand for factory work in Bangkok also makes a solid case for appreciating more-than-rational dimensions in youthful migration-decisions. She writes in this regard about young people’s aspiration to be ‘up-to-date’ (*thansamay*). This achieved status young villagers realise through factory work in Bangkok which allows them to participate in particular constructions of Thai modernity.

My work in the Lao village of *Baan Naam* affirms this aspirational dimension in young migrants decisions to migrate, but it also complicates it. This is captured by the phrase ‘yaan het bô dai’, which, emerged in precisely these terms in discussions with two young female migrants, but resonated in research encounters with several other young female migrants. Let me illustrate this with the example of Padu and Oy. Padu is a first-born child (with three younger siblings) of a teacher couple who left *Baan Naam* upon completing her secondary education at the age of 19 to start a nursing course in Vientiane. Since Padu has no relatives in Vientiane, she is staying with a family she is not related to. In return for board and lodging she does their housekeeping and helps out in their small riverside restaurant. These work activities indeed fill a much greater part of her day than the studies that actually brought her to Vientiane (for further reflection see Huijsmans, 2012). Oy is the fifth born (out of seven) and already out of school for some years (not completed secondary school) when she leaves the village for the first time at 17 or 18 years of age for migrant work in a popular Mekong site restaurant in Vientiane.

For both girls, leaving the village for urban Vientiane was an aspiration and something that excited them. In Mills’ terms, Vientiane was certainly regarded as more ‘up-to-date’ and these girls were looking forward to participate in this Lao version of modernity. However, the expression ‘yaan het bô dai’ complicates this desire in an important way. It literally means ‘afraid that one is unable [cannot] do something’. Padu, for example, explains that she had never really stayed in Vientiane before. She had visited some markets and some festivals but staying there and studying there she considered quite a different matter, particularly because she was well aware that others would regard her as a ‘khon baan nok’ (country bumpkin). The identity construct of khon baan nok is essentially an urban construct imposed on those from outside the city (literally means: ‘people from the village outside’). Research with children and youth in Baan Naam shows that at a young age children don’t identify themselves in these terms. They consider themselves a member of their family, of the village and of the Lao nation-state (‘khon Lao’) – typically in this order. ‘Khon baan nok’ as an identity construct is

something many youth realize as they enter their teenage years. It is in this lifephase that they increasingly view their village, rural upbringing, rural life, and rural traits as inferior to the urban and Thai standards they are exposed to through media, through actual visits to Vientiane and Thailand, and through development discourse that presents the rural as a place that lacks development and civilization (for an excellent discussion on this theme see Morarji, 2014).

The expression ‘yaan het bô dai’ is rooted in a self-identification of khon baan nok but it is also deeply aspirational. Migration becomes an aspiration to overcome this rural identity and prove oneself as being able to handle the peculiarities of modern life. Yet, this aspiration is pregnant with fear. Will I be able to do it? Will I fit in? Will people respect me for who I am?

Tears in migration: Knowing migration through emotions

At the outset, the research project was designed as multi-sited aimed at following the young villagers to their migration destinations. In practice, following proved more difficult than anticipated and was only realized in a number of instances. One such case is Khik, a second born child out of five whose father has meanwhile remarried another woman with whom he has another two children Khik regards as siblings. When Khik was about 10 years of age she stayed for about a year together with her siblings with her grandparents because her father and stepmother had migrated to Thailand. When she was about 17 she first migrated for work. She worked for some months in the same riverside restaurant as Oy (mentioned above) also worked. She returned to the village when she heard that her younger sister had come back from migrant work in Thailand. Next she left together with this younger sister (third born) and two other girls from the village for Thailand – a migration facilitated by a broker (for details see: Huijsmans and Baker, 2012: 931-2).

Khik ended up working as a nanny and domestic worker for family in the northeastern Thai city of Udon Thani. The middle-class Thai family ran a vet-clinic where the adult couple worked. Khik’s work was supervised by the elderly parents of this couple and much of her work consisted of looking after the couple’s small child. Following numerous telephone conversations with Khik my female research assistant managed to organize a meeting with Khik in the immediate neighbourhood of her place of work. However, this research encounter did not go as anticipated:

When we meet her [Khik] she explained that she had gained permission from the grandmother to meet her ‘cousin from her village’ (first author’s research assistant). Khik arrived at our meeting together with the young girl, since the girl had insisted on coming along. Although Khik claims that the grandmother was aware of the little girl joining her, we met a furious grandmother when we walked Khik back to the gate after an interview which lasted about thirty minutes. The grandmother claimed that she had been looking for the little girl everywhere and feared that she had been kidnapped. We listened to the grandmother [verbally] abusing Khik; she accused her of irresponsible behaviour for taking the girl out of the gate (which Khik afterwards explained she did frequently), and she threatened to report Khik to the Thai police for staying in Thailand illegally. Khik, in tears, uttered apologies, and the research assistant tried to explain the situation to the grandmother but with little success; we had to leave Khik behind.

When we later got in touch with Khik by telephone and referred back to the incident, she insisted that we should not worry. She explained that this was simply how the grandmother was; from time

to time got mad without reason. Furthermore, when we suggested that she may want to leave this employer she disagreed because she had just been promised a rise in salary.

Excerpt from Huijsmans and Baker (2012: 932)

This research encounter was troubling in many respects, most seriously for Khik of course. Yet it was also one of the richest encounters precisely because it was so unsettling, raw and emotional. Having met Khik in her wooden house with plaited bamboo mats as walls in Baan Naam and seeing her some months later in a modern kitchen full of electric appliances in a concrete, air-conditioned house in Thailand offers a perspective on what migration means for these young villagers that is only partly captured through words. This modern environment rendered Khik's body out of place and marked it as distinctly rural. It made her skin look darker than it actually was. It made her hair-style look more rural than it probably was. Perhaps most striking were her feet and legs. Wearing a short and flipflops, Khik's calves and feet were clearly visible. Her rural roots were written on this part of her body. Having spent many days in the fields and in muddy paddies had given her feet a thick skin that now started to show some cracks and had left scars on her calves.

Her differently marked body seemed to ensure that she would always be signified as other in this household. And importantly, as another of lower quality. The abusive treatment we observed and the emphasis on her undocumented migrant status appeared legitimized by this marked difference. Equally, the bodily markers that set me apart as a western foreigner meant that I was welcomed into this private home and was never questioned about my status. These very different bodily markers of migrantness both Khik and myself were proud to have partially overcome when meeting casually over a few softdrinks at this Udon Thani roadside café. Instead, we celebrated what we had in common, knowing a particular village on the Lao side of the border. We were wrong of course as we both stood out in this urban Thai space. Something that we did individually and something that was only aggravated when the two of us met yet with very different implications for either of us. Reflecting on this I realized that it was wrong to try meet young (un)documented Lao migrants in Thailand as it would only attract more attention to their otherness which they worked so hard to overcome.

Post-migration emotions

Given the challenges of following young migrants to their place of migrant work many of the young migrants recalled their migration experiences post-migration when back in *Baan Naam*. One such example is Tukta.

Tukta is the third born (out of six). She has not completed primary school and first migrated at age 13 or 14 to Thai village across the river from Baan Naam and worked there for one month as a domestic/nanny. After some time in the village she left again for Thailand this time with another girl from the village to do domestic work in a nearby village on the Thai side of the border. Or so it was promised by a fellow villager from *Baan Naam* who had facilitated the migration.

We had heard from other people in the village that Tukta's migration had gone wrong. It was a public secret in the village but at the same time no one seemed to have talked about

this with Tukta directly. We had talked with Tukta many times before as she was one of our regular respondents. Nonetheless, my research assistant was very hesitant to raise the issue with Tukta and when she did (much to my insistence) she approached it very carefully by mentioning that we had heard that ‘something not good had happened to her in Thailand’. Tukta happens to be together with the friend she had left the village with when we interview her. Together they confirm this rumour and bit by bit fill us in on what had happened. In short, once on the Thai side of the border a van was waiting for them which drove them to a destination in central Thailand. The girls had resisted but were pushed into the van by Thai men. They ended up in a karaoke bar and the girls stressed that although nothing bad had happened to them there they didn’t want to be there and had cried a lot. One of the ladies working in the karaoke bar helped them to escape. The girls had also stolen a mobile phone which allowed them to get back in touch with their parents in *Baan Naam* and to be guided back there. Altogether they were back in *Baan Naam* four days after they had left.

Despite being a public secret Tukta claims that she had not told her story to any of her friends, only to her parents. In fact, she claims that some of her friends had asked her about this but her parents had answered before she could. Reflecting about this with my research assistant she mentioned that only very close friends would inquire about this. Revealing why she had initially not wanted to address the matter she further added that anyone else asking about such bad experiences are insensitive people with bad manners.

Curious about how the issue was handled we inquired whether the lady from *Baan Naam* who had facilitated Tukta’s migration had met any punishment. Tukta and her friend explained that the lady was fined 3000 Thai Baht (about USD100) by the local village security and nothing further had happened to her. These days Tukta says she avoids the lady. When we ask her whether she has any dreams or other problems relating to this migration-gone-wrong experience Tukta claims that she had bad dreams at first but that things had meanwhile gotten better.

Conclusions

- In my research I have mostly relied on representation, yet the emotional is much better captured through performance and the non-representational
- Reflect on the relative absence of emotions in research with young men
- Reflect on how emotions demonstrate policy making as more-than-rational. Also note the generative capacity of the emotional
- Reflect on how a sensitivity to the emotional at different points in the migration trajectory deepens the understanding of migration as a social process
- What is youthful here about the emotional, what is the generational specificity?
- etc

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