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'Eating with the People'

How a Chinese Hydropower Project Changed Food Experiences in a Lao Community*

Abstract: This article investigates how poorly monitored relocation programmes of a Chinese hydropower project in Laos have negatively influenced food experiences of resettled villagers as corporeal, social and communal beings. It extends the analysis of recent hydropower resettlement studies that have focused on how dam construction induces food insecurity but paid less attention to the villagers' strategies to tackle food shortages. The point of departure is an anthropological investigation of two prevailing eating phrases in the new settlement: 'eating together' (commensal encounters) and 'eating with the people' (a corruption metaphor in Laos). I argue that many indigent interlocutors have become more food insecure and poorer after their resettlement because their livelihood and food support are inadequately provided, and the 'big people' allegedly steal their financial compensation. This precarious situation has deepened as the new neighbourhood arrangement has halted some commensal or food-sharing practices. This ethnographic analysis of how hydropower-induced hunger is experienced, viewed and confronted from below contributes to ongoing discussions in hydropower resettlement research and food anthropology.

Keywords: commensality, corruption, hunger, hydropower resettlement, metaphor

'My son, we don't have food to serve. We only have this water. You're the visitor, but you're the one who gave us food', Grandmother Meng, a villager in her seventies, said apologetically.

'Don't worry, Grandmother. Thank you for welcoming me again to your house.'

'My son, *kin nam kan* ["I want to eat with you" or "let's eat together"]. *Hak phèng kan deu* ["Let's love and value each other"].'

Grandmother Meng and her daughter, Nang, grabbed some biscuits, while I drank from my cup. The water had no ice; it was so refreshing. In fact, it tasted a bit sweet.

'Grandmother, it's very good!'

'It's a *nam houay* [spring water]. I'm happy that you like it. In the old village, it's easy to fetch. Here in the resettlement, it's difficult because we're far from the forest.'

The old woman and her daughter took a lot of *nam houay* when they last went to the forest. They also mentioned that they only had the water for breakfast because they had already consumed all wild edibles they had foraged.

'Brother, as I told you before, *phou nyai* ["the big people"] *kin nam pasasôn* [literally: "eat with the people/population"; Lao people's metaphor for corrup-



tion], so we are poor and starving like this', Nang said furiously. She referred to the local state officials and hydropower company staff involved in the distribution of compensations within the resettlement. I nodded sympathetically at her rage; I waited for her to calm down.

After consuming the snacks, Nang said that they served the last bottle of *nam houay* to me. I really felt guilty and said: 'Instead of serving it, you should have kept it.'

'No problem. You're already my family', Grandmother said kindly.

Hydropower projects in Laos have increased significantly since the new government carried out market-oriented reforms in the 1990s. This proliferation has drawn the attention of many scholars to study hydropower development's issues, ranging from structural forms of violence engendered by its state-controlled relocation schemes (Blake and Barney 2018) to serious loss of former livelihoods and food sources due to dam construction (see Baird and Barney 2017; Baird and Shoemaker 2008; Ziv et al. 2012). This article, however, focuses on other food issues within a hydropower resettlement community in Laos.

I start with the story of my second visit to Grandmother Meng's house in March 2019 to introduce not just the article's protagonists, but importantly three interrelated food issues that I will explore. The first issue deals with villagers' hunger and changing food experiences after relocation. The second issue is the two 'eating' phrases mentioned by the protagonists: 'eat together' (*kin nam kan*) and 'eat with the people' (*kin nam pasasôn*). The third issue revolves around the villagers' hospitality through offering refreshment/food, notwithstanding their impoverishment. To illuminate these food issues contributes to the social analysis of resettlement and food (in)security, food and language/metaphor and commensality from the following viewpoints.

First, this article expands how resettlement scholars have analysed displaced populations' hydropower-induced food insecurity. Recent studies on hydropower development in Laos and in other countries have revealed how substandard construction or poor maintenance of dams causes the obstruction of migratory fishes and agricultural land degradation (see Dombrowsky and Hensengerth 2018; Lebel et al. 2020; Scudder 2005). These adverse impacts of building dams in turn have serious consequences for food security (see Baird and Barney 2017; Baird and Shoemaker 2008; Blake and Barney 2018; Fullbrook 2013; Ziv et al. 2012). As precluded in the vignette, however, it is not the dam construction that mainly induces starvation and poverty. Moreover, the previously cited scholars have paid less attention to the displaced villagers' coping strategies to confront hunger. To bridge these gaps, this article investigates other factors beyond constructing dams that transform the villagers' food experiences. It argues that many villagers' food insecurity and impoverishment in the past have become worse in the resettlement community due to the 'big people's' purported corruption and maldistributed livelihood and food support. The foregoing factors are symptoms of the resettlement's poor planning and management. The article also scrutinises

how the villagers have coped with food shortages before and after their relocation. The investigation of these changing food experiences and survival strategies serves as a prism through which to scrutinise how forced resettlement has transformed the villagers' everyday lives.

Second, the article seeks to contribute to recent anthropological discussions about the integration of food studies and linguistic anthropology (see Cavanaugh et al. 2014; Manning 2012; Riley 2012). Following Cavanaugh and colleagues' notion of 'food-and-language ways' as 'meaningfully intertwined modalities' (2014: 85), this article offers an analysis that interweaves topics of language/metaphor, corruption and food. It particularly investigates how and why the convivial-sounding phrase 'eating with the people' is used as a metaphor for describing the 'big people's' alleged corruption. To parse this metaphor, I will unpack its semiotic meanings and its tangible effects, or its contributions to the villagers' current starvation. I will also juxtapose this 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor with their 'eating-together' (*kin nam kan*) encounters. The latter mean the villagers' various food-sharing or commensal activities. This juxtaposition might emphasise the metaphor's negative connotations.

Third and last, the article engages in ongoing conversations in food anthropology about the importance of 'food/eating' in maintaining social ties with both human and spiritual actants (see, e.g., Gilhus 2015; Nahum-Claudiel 2016; Van Esterik 2015). Specifically, it uncovers the villagers' reasons for sharing their foods/drinks through 'eating-together' or commensal encounters despite their food shortages. This discussion can also highlight various roles of 'food/eating' in Lao culture in general and in mediating the villagers' relationships in particular. While this article foregrounds these social aspects of 'food/eating', it argues that the damaging impacts of unsuccessful relocation processes on food systems are more than biological issues. This article sheds light on how hydropower-induced resettlement has impacted the villagers' former social practices of care and support to alleviate hunger.

Methodology, Older Villages and the Banmai Resettlement

I conducted my twelve-month ethnographic fieldwork in the Banmai resettlement, north-western Laos, between August 2018 and September 2019. I mainly relied on qualitative data collection techniques, involving participant observation, group discussions and in-depth interviews.¹ While living with the resettled, I did my best to participate and interact with them so as to observe and partially experience various facets of their everyday lives and foodways and to record each activity most minutely.

The Banmai resettlement is one of the Nam Nua 1 (NNua1) Hydropower Project's eleven relocation communities. The project's Lao and Chinese staff I spoke with claimed the NNua1 is the first international hydropower project in

Laos under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).² The NNua1 has resettled an estimate of 1,750 households or 10,000 people from 37 villages of Bokeo and Louangnamtha Province.

The Banmai resettlement has more than 3,100 inhabitants or 566 households. Table 1 reveals that the NNua1 compressed ten ethnically diverse communities into one site. The project also scattered these older villages over Banmai's three zones (see Table 2). I made sure that I interviewed more than 20% of households per zone. In total, I interviewed 128 households (23%). These in-depth interviews helped me to analyse patterns and to see whether relocation experiences of Grandmother Meng's family concur with or deviate from my general observations. I opted to highlight Grandmother Meng's story for two reasons. First, her case resembles that of other marginalised villagers and ethnic minorities whose

TABLE 1.1 Number of Households in Older Villages, Ethnic Identification, and Frequency Distribution of Households I Interviewed

Older Villages	Dominant Ethnic Identification	A: Total Number of Households	B: Number of Households I Interviewed	C: Percentage (%) of Households I Interviewed [C=(B/A)*100]
Dum	<i>Rmeet</i>	38	10	26.3
Khao	<i>Lao Buddhist</i>	34	7	20.6
Daeng	<i>Lao Buddhist</i>	72	15	20.8
Fa	<i>Rmeet</i>	40	9	22.5
Khiao	<i>Lao Buddhist</i>	45	9	20.0
Namtan	<i>Lao Buddhist</i>	81	17	21.0
Som	<i>Rmeet</i>	76	16	21.1
Dan	<i>Khmu</i>	57	14	24.6
Phou	<i>Lao Buddhist</i>	89	24	27.0
Bua	<i>Rmeet</i>	34	7	20.6
Total		566	128	22.6

TABLE 1.2 Number of Households in Banmai and Frequency Distribution of Households I Interview per Zone

New Zones of the Banmai Resettlement	A: Total Number of Households	B: Number of Households I Interviewed	C: Percentage (%) of Households I Interviewed [C=(B/A)*100]
Zone A	212	49	23.1
Zone B	266	59	22.2
Zone C	88	20	22.7
Total	566	128	22.6

lives became more precarious after relocation. Second, her family's unsettling ways of relieving hunger – complicated by drug addiction and discrimination after moving to Banmai – foreground the 'dark anthropology' of food, applying Ortner (2016). To emphasise 'the harsh and brutal dimensions' (Ortner 2016: 49) of relocation and food experiences counterbalances 'happy stories' of how food establishes 'good' relationships among villagers. It also illuminates the structural conditions that produce starvation in the context of development-induced resettlement.

Of ten older villages, five were dominated by Lao Buddhists; four villages were mostly inhabited by Rmeet people; the remaining village was composed largely of Khmu villagers (Table 1). The Lao-Buddhist (*Lao Phout*) interlocutors consider their temples the central sites of their rituals. The Rmeet and the Khmu are both Mon-Khmer-speaking minority groups, and are socio-culturally related to each other (see Izikowitz 1979 [1951]).³ During my fieldwork, many Khmu and a few Rmeet interlocutors already participated in some Buddhist rituals. Nevertheless, most Rmeet villagers still keep their *salôk* as the centre of their social and spiritual life.⁴ The Lao-Buddhist, Rmeet and Khmu interlocutors engage in animist practices to some extent, and some of their 'eating-together' encounters reflect such engagement – a topic to be discussed in the next section.

While five villages (Khao, Daeng, Khiao, Namtan and Phou Village) were near the river traffic, three villages were located in upland areas (Dum, Fa and Bua Village). In Som and Dan Village, some inhabitants resided close to the river; few villagers lived on mountain ridges. Most villagers I interviewed diversified their livelihood activities and local food sources by eking out a living beyond their residence.⁵ This diversification had also enabled the villagers to enjoy various dishes. All 128 interlocutors disclosed they ate at least three big meals per day. After their displacement in 2015, however, I interviewed many villagers whose quantity and quality of meals were reduced. Different factors causing and aggravating this reduction will be investigated throughout the article.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, I will present the resettled villagers' various 'eating-together'/commensal encounters. Then, I will assess the presence of mutual benefits in the 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor by comparing and contrasting it with different 'eating-together' encounters. After that, I will discuss various experiences of and views on the resettlement and 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor as well as survival strategies of Grandmother Meng's family.

'Eating-Together'/Commensal Encounters: How Food Mediates Villagers' Relations

Similar to language, food is also 'a system of communication . . . [that] sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies' (Barthes 2013

[1961; 1975]: 24; see also Faber and Claramonte 2017; Greene and Cramer 2011; Kahn 1993). To unpack what it signifies or its 'symbolic significance' and social meanings (Bloch 1999: 134) in Banmai, there is a need to understand how food mediates villagers' relationships with their fellow humans (e.g. family and community members, visitors, state officials) and with spirits.

When I asked my participants about what constituted a family or a household, many responded that it was an aggregate of people eating similar meals together, which were cooked in the same stone hearth. This resonates with Bloch's argument that 'families may be understood as being continually unified not just by biology but also by being commensal units' (1999: 138). In Banmai, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Carsten 1997; Trankell 1995), when two or more families living under one roof cook different meals and eat separately, this indicates an enmity among its members. Indeed, food is a medium for (re)creating oneness and (re)connecting people in the family (see Douglas 1972).

Many families in Banmai also use food (or drink) as a medium to show hospitality and kindness to their visitors. Similar to what Derrida (2000) observed, visitors may be categorised according to a host's expectations: expected visitors are invited guests, surprise visitors are considered strangers (or intruders). The resettled villagers broadly welcome almost all types of visitors to their community and to their households. Such friendly attitude perhaps contributed to why it became easier for me to connect with them and to become part of their extended families. After eating or drinking alcohol with a family in Banmai, they constantly told me the phrase, *hak phèng kan deu* ('let's love and value each other'; see the introductory vignette). It connotes that even if we are not related by blood, we should treat and love each other like true family members. This was also the reason why many parents and their children called me 'my son' and 'my brother', respectively. Therefore, when a Banmai villager invites you into their house to consume similar food/drink with his/her family, it implies that the person wants you to consubstantiate with them. Consubstantiality, notes Bloch, occurs when 'a common substance' (1999: 133) – which is typically food/drink – 'unites the bodies that eat together' (1999: 138; cf. Douglas 1972).

The villagers also utilise food as a medium for approaching or pleasing more powerful entities, such as state officials and spirits. When national government and party officials visited Banmai, the villagers prepared community feasts. Most village heads I interviewed said that they made such preparations not simply to welcome the high-ranking officials but also to show their appreciation to them for coming to their modest place. Other interlocutors also mentioned that it was important to please the national government officials as the latter may help them in the future. 'If they [national government and party officials] feel good about how we treat them in our village, and they see how poor we are, maybe someday they'll help us to improve our lives here', a village head explained (Interview, October 2018). This was also the reason mentioned by numerous interlocutors when I asked them why they held feasts during visitations of provincial officials

and high-ranking military and police officers. This explanation is, however, ironic because they usually serve food in great abundance to high-ranking officials during feasts – contradicting typical images of food shortages and/or poverty. At the household level, only families of relative affluence can manage to invite local officials into their houses for a feast. The primary reason of many interlocutors for the invitation is to strengthen their connections with these perceived superior actors – a way of generating social capital.⁶

Food is also instrumental in appeasing 'ancestral spirits'. Most Khmu and Rmeet interlocutors who practise animism mention that if there is a family member who remains unwell even after going to the hospital or consulting medical doctors, it indicates that their 'ancestral spirits' feel hungry and/or taken for granted. Such spirits convey their starvation by inflicting diseases on their descendants. These interlocutors placate their hungry ancestors' spirits by performing the ritual called *toukti* (Khmu) or *tôkti* (Rmeet). They claim that this is almost similar to Lao Buddhist's wrist-tying ceremony (*baci/soukhouan*) of revitalising 'life-energies' (*khouan*); however, *toukti/tôkti* involves sacrificing animals to feed 'ancestral spirits' and sometimes spreading slaughtered animals' blood over participants.

The crucial role of food in mollifying ancestral spirits has also been observed in other parts of Laos. In Louangnamtha Province, for instance, Stolz's (2021) Khmu interlocutors also practice *toukti*. Meanwhile, Sprenger's Rmeet participants perform a ritual – analogous to *tôkti* – called *dondeii* aiming to feed not only ancestral spirits but also humans' '*klpu*' ('soul') (2013: 166–167). Likewise, High observes how the Katu in southern Laos satisfy the desires of their *kimoc* ('ancestor ghosts') by offering food, usually buffalo (2021: 112–119). Many Katu believe that their unsatisfied *kimoc* may 'eat' them or cause grievous harm (2021: 112–119).

Food is also used as a medium to negotiate with intruding spirits, or 'surprise spiritual visitors', applying Derrida (2000). When a villager is possessed by a *phi pop* – a wandering evil spirit that enters and steals human bodies and exhausts 'life-energies' – the 'spirit doctor' communicates and negotiates with such spirit to exorcise it. Rather than forcing it to leave its victim's body, the 'spirit doctor' asks first the *phi pop* about its desired food to eat. 'Be kind with *phi pop*, so that they'll not get angry . . . The angrier they are, the more dangerous', explained Mophèng, the resettlement's 'spirit doctor'.

Whenever we ate lunch in the forest after foraging, or when we picnicked on the riverbanks, my friends also placed a ball of sticky rice with some of our dishes on a leaf and yelled, *kin khao deu* (literally: 'let's eat'). Many Lao-Buddhist, Khmu and Rmeet interlocutors believed that there were numerous envious evil spirits (*phi hay*) in the wild and the river. If you fail to invite them, they may possibly touch your food. Some interlocutors claim that anything that is possessed, created or touched by malevolent spirits is considered dangerous to humans because they can wipe out some 'life-energies', leading to physical and

mental illnesses or death. Thus, all foods connected to *phi hay* are considered out of place or strange foods. Mary Douglas' acolytes may view these foods as 'polluted' or 'dirty' (Douglas 1966). There is also a local belief that when you eat outside and your meal drops onto the floor for an unknown reason, it is a sign that some jealous spirits feel upset because you do not invite them. Hence, to avoid such circumstances, whenever you eat outside your house – which is perceived by numerous interlocutors as a common place for both humans and supernatural entities – it is always safe to offer a morsel of food and invite the spirits to *kin nam kan* ('eat with you'/'eat together').

The Mutual Benefits in 'Eating-with-the-People' Metaphor

Similar to many food anthropologists' findings about commensality, I have presented in the previous section how the villagers have used 'eating-together' (*kin nam kan*) or commensal encounters to strengthen their family (see, e.g., Charles and Kerr 1988; Counihan 2004; DeVault 1991; Douglas 1972; Stolz 2021) and communal relationships (see Goody 1982; Van Esterik 2015). The resettled villagers also obtain some benefits from pleasing state officials through preparing feasts and feeding or offering food to spirits. As for doing the latter, many interlocutors believe that it helps them to avoid hungry and envious spirits' potential dangers. Unlike the social purpose of preparing community feasts for national state and party officials (such as expressing gratitude or expecting succour from the afore-said actors in alleviating the community's impoverishment in the future), the reasons of most interlocutors for inviting local civil servants into their houses for a feast are primarily guided by self-interested motives (such as making political connection, obtaining personal favours). In general, both the villagers as hosts or food providers as well as different human and spiritual actors as food receivers gain some benefits from 'eating-together'/commensal encounters. The brevity of this paper precludes me from elaborating further the degree of (un)evenness during such commensal exchanges.⁷

In the villagers' common parlance or metaphorical expression, however, not all eating encounters have mutual benefits between the food provider and receiver. The eating phrase, *kin nam pasasôn* ('eating with the people'), exemplifies well that case. When I first heard and literally translated it, I thought that 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor implied a positive thing, or it may be a commensal encounter.⁸ The preposition 'with' (*nam*) in the phrase makes the metaphor sounds friendly. This phrase was, however, usually mentioned by many interlocutors who complained bitterly that the 'big people' – that is, some state officials and Lao staff of the NNua1 Project – did not fully pay their compensations for the loss of income and food sources and of gardens or tree crops. They accused that such 'big people' conspired to steal the unprovided compensations. Hence, this alleged fraud may qualify as a corrupt practice.

The way in which 'food/eating' is used as a metaphor for describing corruption has been under-analysed in the growing anthropological literature on the connection between 'language use' and 'foodways' (see Cavanaugh et al. 2014). Within this emerging stream of research, some anthropologists have applied 'language socialization' (see Ochs and Schieffelin 2012) to study how children learn linguistic knowledge and cultural practices through food or from eating (see, e.g., Riley's [2012] and Paugh's [2012] studies in the Marquesas and the Caribbean, respectively). Other anthropologists have already investigated the semiotic meanings of some food: that is, how some Danish beverages connote (un)healthy (Karrebæk 2014), or how rice serves as a metaphor for 'social relations' and 'life' in the Solomon Islands (Jourdan 2010). But if people relate food/eating to legally or morally impermissible acts, what does it indicate? To address this question by unpacking different meanings and adverse effects of 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor might supply the dearth of anthropological studies about the relationships of language/metaphor, food and corruption.

Recently, some social scientists have investigated different metaphors people employ to describe corruption and other self-interested practices of state officials (see, e.g., Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Bratu and Kažoka 2018; Endres 2014). To parse corruption metaphors explores between and beyond 'the binaries inherent in the analytical definitions of corruption', such as 'public-private, formal-informal and legal-illegal' (Bratu and Kažoka 2018: 69; see also Ledeneva et al. 2017). It also scrutinises not only the cultural context of corruption but also how the local people utilise corruption metaphors to potentially 'transmit social commentary and political criticism' (Endres 2014: 614).

The use of 'food/eating' metaphors to depict civil servants taking advantage of profiteering opportunities or acting out of self-interest has also been common to many countries. In some European countries, for instance, when journalists say that the state officials 'roast their own meat' or 'butter their own bread', it connotes that these officials 'concentrate exclusively on their own interests' (Bratu and Kažoka 2018: 62). Likewise, some small traders at the Vietnam-China border employ a 'rice-congee' analogy to explain the 'reciprocal obligation' of their bribe arrangement with customs officials, where 'bribe is construed as a token of appreciation in exchange for reduced tariffs on their import' (Endres 2014: 622).

In Banmai, as elsewhere in Laos, the most common metaphor for bribery is also related to eating, which is *kin nam kin nai*. Holly High translated it as 'Eat water eat something, perhaps best translated as [giving] money for something to drink or whatever' (2014: 36). However, I prefer to use the literal translation, 'Eat water eat inside', because I have two interlocutors who explained that whenever they paid bribes to some state officials or police officers, they thought that their 'water' and/or 'internal organs' within their bodies were being consumed by these powerful actors. There is no significant difference between these two translations, but the emphasis is the nuance. High's translation reiterates the mutual

exchange between the giver and the receiver of bribes; my translation highlights how the receiver negatively affects the giver (cf. High 2014).

Unlike *kin nam kin nai* ('eat water eat inside') or bribery, the mutual benefits in *kin nam pasasôn* ('eating-with-the-people' metaphor) or fraud are, however, absent. Most interlocutors thought that it was only the 'big people' (*phou nyai*) who gained from stealing some parts of their financial compensations. In other words, it is only the *phou nyai* who eat in *kin nam pasasôn*, while many interlocutors suffer from food shortages. As discussed earlier, 'eating/food' is essential in sustaining life, not just biological (through food consumption) but also social life (through 'eating-together'/commensal encounters) (see also Kahn 1993). Thus, when 'eating/food' is used as a metaphor, it really evokes powerful emotions as it is related to life and death – taking one's food may allude to taking one's life. In the next section, I will present a case representing abject villagers whose food experiences have been affected not just by the resettlement but also by this *kin nam pasasôn* ('eating-with-the-people') metaphor.

'They Eat with the People, So We Have Nothing to Eat Now': Changing Food Experiences

This section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection reveals how the relocation's ineffective implementation and 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor have transformed the villagers' previous food experiences. The second subsection presents how the villagers have strategised to cope with their present hunger experiences that have been aggravated by the discontinuation of some of their 'eating-together' or commensal encounters after moving to Banmai.

Food Experiences Before and After Relocation

On a normal weekday of June 2019, around 19:00, while I was buying in Mother Khone's store, I saw Grandmother Meng. It was heart-breaking to see the old woman hauling a heavy sack with her crooked fingers. I helped her by carrying her things. 'Khone, do you want to buy *no kôm* [a rare bamboo shoot]?' the old woman asked beggingly.

'How much grandma?'

'70,000 Kip [USD9] for everything.'

After checking the shoots, Mother Khone took out cash from her wallet and paid Grandmother Meng. 'What will you buy using the money?' Mother Khone asked curiously.

'I'll buy some rice, monosodium glutamate [MSG], bouillon powder, and noodles. My grandson wants to eat some hot soup. I'll also buy some medicine for Mek [her youngest son in his thirties, single].'

'What medicine? I hope it's not *yama* [amphetamine], or else I'll never buy your products!'

The old lady had just murmured under her breath, and Mother Khone just shook her head. After the old woman left the place, Mother Khone told me, 'I hope she'll not give the money to her son. Mek is an amphetamine user.'

Grandmother Meng's family was one of the first households I interviewed in Banmai. When I initially visited their house in November 2018, they had no electric appliances. They managed to build some brick walls around the first floor of their house; however, they only completed about two-thirds of the work. They just covered the unfinished walls with weathered wood. They also possessed no furniture, and we only sat on a tattered bamboo mat.

Grandmother Meng has been a widow for more than a decade already; her husband died in the former village. They did not know the cause of death due to the absence of medical facilities there. Since they resettled in December 2015, Grandmother Meng had lived with her two children: Nang and Mek. In her late thirties, Nang had two sons – the eldest seven years old, the youngest three years old. Nang's husband, Ni, worked in a Chinese factory in Houayxay, the capital of Bokeo Province. A few close friends told me that Ni sold amphetamines clandestinely to some villagers in Banmai. Perhaps, Ni was also the person who introduced amphetamines to his brother-in-law, Mek.

When I interviewed the family, everyone was in the house except for Ni because he was working. Grandmother Meng, Nang and Mek had pallid faces and thin bodies. The grandsons had no clothes; they also looked undernourished; their tummies were bloated.⁹ Whenever I conducted household interviews, I usually brought some packets of biscuits, two 1.5-liter bottles of soft drinks and some bags of sunflower seeds or banana chips for snacks as a small token of appreciation for their time and hospitality. They were the only household I interviewed who consumed these foods in less than thirty minutes. They looked famished as they just bolted down the drinks and snacks quickly. 'You're kind, my son. This is our first meal for today', Grandmother Meng said gratefully.

She claimed that they never experienced such extreme hunger in their former settlement. '*You ban kao ha kin sabay!*' ('In the old village, searching for food was easy!'), the old woman reminisced. Though they possessed no ruminants before, they had many big gardens near to their old house: gardens of teak trees, tea, coconuts, and fruits (e.g. mango, pineapple, papaya). When they felt hungry and had no food, they just picked some fruits from their gardens to eat.

Importantly, they emphasised the importance of their social relations and commensality expressed with food in the past for battling hunger and food shortages. They mentioned that sometimes they could exchange their garden crops for dishes cooked by their neighbours. They also took 'potluck-style' meals (*kin khao soumkan*) with their relatives. Moreover, they could ask their neighbours or relatives for food during an emergency (e.g. when a family member was sick and they could not go to find food, or when there was an unanticipated rice shortage induced by drought). Some of the foregoing 'eating-together' or commensal

practices to slightly ease food shortages are also common to other rural communities in Laos (see Van Esterik 2012).

In the older settlement, Grandmother Meng and Nang were the caretakers of their house and gardens. During their spare time, they scavenged for wild edibles. Since they lived near the forest, they only spent less than an hour to find bamboo and rattan shoots. Meanwhile, her husband and son hunted game and netted fish for food. The river in the former village was very generous: '*You phoun ha pou ha pa sabay!*' ('Catching crabs and fish was easy there!'), Grandmother Meng recounted. Moreover, they had more freedom in cultivating the land around their old house for swidden rice agriculture. Similar to many other interlocutors, Grandmother Meng said that even if they had no money before, they could survive because nature supplied them with food. They had also small savings in the past as they sold some of their teak wood biennially and their fermented tea leaves biannually to merchants from nearby villages. They only spent their savings when they paid for boat fees (i.e. going to the market fair or to a health centre in bigger villages) or bought clothes and other basic essentials (e.g. medicines, gasoline for lamps, soap, detergent, salt). Despite this abundance of their 'giving environment' (Bird-David 1990) in the past, I do not want to romanticise their previous situation and come up with a conclusion that they had an 'original affluence' (Sahlins 1974). Prior to their relocation, Grandmother Meng's family and many interlocutors still regarded themselves as relatively poor, especially when they compared themselves with other villagers living in more urban areas of Laos or with Thai people who had better access to road, market and state services.

When Grandmother Meng initially heard about the resettlement, she was really hopeful that their move from the old village to Banmai could make their lives more comfortable. Apart from the new infrastructures – electricity, access road, a health centre, schools, internet signal, for example – the district government officials and the NNua1 Lao staff also promised them food and livelihood support. Their harrowing experiences in Banmai, however, reveal how the promises of progress made by the 'big people' have been incompletely fulfilled. Rather than receiving three years of monthly rice supply from 2015 to 2018, Grandmother Meng claimed that her family got it three times only. The NNua1 Company gave them 100 kilos of rice each time. Similar to the majority of interlocutors' sentiments, Grandmother Meng's family also criticised the distributed rice's quality. 'Some sacks had good quality, but most of them had many small stones (*mak him*) and unpleasant smell (*khao bout*)', Nang disclosed.

The family received food support once: each member got a dozen of eggs, two packets of noodles and a piece of canned fish. They were also given a quarter kilogram of MSG. 'It's not enough to survive a year. Even for three months, it's not enough', Grandmother Meng bemoaned. Twenty-five households I interviewed, however, mentioned that the families who obtained food were still fortunate because they failed to get any food support from the company. In terms of livelihood support, Grandmother Meng said that last September 2018 (two

months before my first interview with the family), they received their swidden land, which was a two-hour walk from their new settlement. Some staff of the company had also visited their house in October 2018 and informed them about the possibility of receiving twenty chickens. At the time of my research, they were still waiting for them. In general, Grandmother Meng's family, like many other interlocutors, felt that the NNua1 and the district and provincial government had unclear plans for reconstructing their livelihoods.

Regarding Grandmother Meng's compensations for the loss of gardens – which was one of their main sources of food and income in the past – the NNua1 Company and some district officials surveyed their tree crops a year before they left the old village. They claimed that the surveyors informed them that they would receive approximately 22,000,000 Kip (USD2,750); however, they were only paid 14,000,000 Kip (USD1,750). Similar to a quarter of the total households I interviewed (34 out of 128), Nang appealed to the NNua1's staff and to district officials about the inadequate compensation. These 'big people' assured them that they would redress their grievance immediately. Holding to such promise, Grandmother Meng's family thought that they would still get some payments. As a corollary of that expectation, they had already exhausted all the money they had received. They spent nearly three-quarters of it on renovating their house (i.e. cementing the floor and building brick walls of their first floor); they spent the rest on food. Grandmother Meng and Nang had asked the NNua1 staff about their appeal almost every two weeks before its new head notified them that the old boss who handled their case had already resigned. They abandoned the hope of receiving payments because they heard the unconfirmed rumour from other villagers that the former head was dismissed due to fraud. 'If we had become aware of it before we spent all the money, maybe we would not have starved', Grandmother Meng sighed. Nang disagreed with her mother; she argued that their food deprivation was not their fault but had occurred because of the 'big people'. She accused that some company's staff and district officials allegedly stole parts of what they should have received. As Nang put it:

They eat with the people, so we have nothing to eat now [*phouak khao kin nam pasasôn, dangnan phouak hao chung bo mi nyang kin*]. It's impossible that the district officials didn't know that the company stole some parts of what we should have received. I think that some district officials were also complicit in stealing . . . These big people eat with the people! [*phou nyai kin nam pasasôn!*] . . . If they continue eating with the people, we'll die of hunger here . . . We can't tell our disappointments to these big people; *Tin sang yiap pak nok!* [literally: 'The elephant's feet trample the bird's mouth!'; it means that they cannot speak ill of the big people as they are powerless].

There are two striking metaphors in Nang's statement: 'They eat with the people' and 'The elephant's feet trample the bird's mouth'. As mentioned earlier, the first metaphor was also stated by many interlocutors who were frustrated with the received compensations. Nang's elaboration clearly implied that in the 'eating-

with-the-people' metaphor, it was only the 'big people' who ate, while the ordinary people starved. Whenever the interlocutors describe their current hunger as an outcome of the aforementioned fraud, it is a veiled allusion to how the 'big people' have taken their opportunity to live a decent life.

During household interviews, 102 out of 128 households, including Grandmother Meng's family, were outspoken in their disillusionment. Many of them also mentioned the metaphors. Although they expressed their views openly, they were still aware of the strength of the one-party Lao state and its apparatuses – specifically the police and the military – in controlling and silencing opposing citizens. This might be the reason why many of them mentioned 'the elephant's-feet-trample-the-bird's-mouth' metaphor to indicate that they could not directly resist the state officials and the NNual's staff. Many interlocutors stated the 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor not only because they wanted to convey strong emotional messages but also because they feared the 'big people'. In this sense, applying James Scott, the villagers' use of the 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor (and other corruption metaphors) can be considered an instance of 'everyday resistance' (Scott 1985) or a form of 'hidden transcript' (Scott 1990).

Ways of Relieving Hunger After Some Commensal Practices Have Petered Out

The hydropower project seemed to undervalue the villagers' rich food sources prior to relocation. The company's staff and district officials I interviewed claimed the project surveyed carefully the villagers' tree and fruit gardens. Accordingly, the resettled received food assistance and financial compensation for the loss of these food sources. This, however, shows that the project failed to consider the villagers' two other valuable food sources. First, the forest and river; second, food sharing or commensal practices. Having discussed above the impacts of the loss of the first food source, this subsection focuses on the second food source.

The way in which commensal practices' potential in tackling hunger is undervalued can be manifested in how the project has 'deliberately' dispersed the older neighbourhoods throughout different zones of Banmai (see Table 2). The above-mentioned staff and officials told me that the dispersal mainly aimed to encourage inhabitants of smaller and remote upland villages (most of whom are ethnic minorities, i.e. Rmeet and Khmu, including Grandmother Meng's family) to 'cooperate' (*houammu*) with villagers of bigger communities (who are dominantly Lao Buddhists). This new cooperation in Banmai would provide an opportunity for the formerly isolated villagers to assimilate so as to overcome their 'backwardness' (*lasamai*) and to be part of 'national development' (*kan-phatthana pathétsat*).¹⁰ However, I argue that the 'cooperation' discussed by these officials and staff was just an ideological justification for homogenising the displaced communities' culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Rather than a sense of cooperation, the dispersal of former communities has just created distance. Many interlocutors complained to me that they needed to walk going to their relatives' and former neighbours' new houses (geographical distance); they became indifferent to their new neighbours (metaphorical distance).¹¹ Importantly, Grandmother Meng's family and many poorer ethnic minorities expressed concern about how such distance weakened some of their social practices of care and support to cope with food shortages.

As presented in the previous subsection, these commensal practices include the exchanging of fruits and dishes with their neighbours, eating 'potluck-style' meals with their relatives and asking for food during an unexpected situation. When they resettled, Grandmother Meng's family could no longer take part in such food-sharing activities because they were the only household within the area who came from their old village. All their relatives and former neighbours were patchily distributed throughout Banmai's three zones. As Grandmother Meng recounted some of her experience being with her new neighbours:

I saw the child living in front pushed my eldest grandson for no reason. My grandson was just staring at the child while eating biscuits; my grandson was not even begging for it. The child's mother also witnessed it, but she did not reprimand her child. Since then, I haven't allowed my grandchildren to go to my neighbours' houses.

Similar to Grandmother Meng's family, some Rmeet and Khmu interlocutors also lamented that they found themselves being cold-shouldered by some of their new Lao-Buddhist neighbours whenever their paths crossed. This relative lack of warmth made these ethnic minorities reluctant to approach their new neighbours to eat with them. As one Khmu man in his fifties succinctly explained it: 'If they [new neighbours] can't give me a few nods or smiles, there's no way they would share their food with me' (Interview, March 2019). The way in which resettlement planners and managers failed to take into account this unintended socio-cultural outcome of the new neighbourhood arrangement resonates with how some government and development institutions in Laos discounted the cultural diversity of food systems of Katu people, an ethnic minority group in southern Laos (Krahn 2005). Krahn observed how the government's policy of prohibiting polygamy disrupted Katu's 'local food sharing mechanisms' and 'culinary principle' (2005: 90). The prohibition particularly created 'smaller consumption units' and a reduced 'number of festivals' – both of which in turn seriously impinged on Katu's kinship solidarity and its poorest members (2005: 90).¹²

Like the Katu, the poor ethnic minorities in Banmai have been greatly affected by the discontinuation of food-sharing practices. Their precarious position stems from their relative lack of economic and social capital. Unlike those Lao-Buddhist villagers who have pre-resettlement savings, these marginalised villagers do not have financial resources to utilise new physical infrastructures in Banmai (roads, electricity, internet, etc.) so as to run lucrative businesses. Likewise, they have no

close relations with the ‘big people’, restricting their access to opportunities (i.e. obtaining government posts and scholarship grants) and resources (i.e. getting good land and other agricultural support). To meet their bare necessities, during my fieldwork, many of them just worked as commercial farmers on Chinese plantations within Bokeo or as construction workers at the small Chinese dam near Banmai. These low-wage labourers’ family members who stayed at home tackled their new food insecurities with some strategies.

To alleviate their current hunger experiences induced by the unsuccessful relocation process and worsened by the demise of some food-sharing practices, Grandmother Meng and Nang typically walked for more than three hours from the Banmai resettlement to the dense forest to forage for food. They toiled from twilight to starlight. When Nang’s husband did not give money for buying food and rice, they just sold their collected bamboo and rattan shoots. Ni rarely provides for his family because he uses *yama*; he loves to gamble. Mek had worked with his brother-in-law in the Chinese factory before he became physically and mentally ill. Grandmother Meng blamed the gruelling work, but Nang said it was due to hunger and amphetamine overdose. At that time, Mek sat beside his sister staring into space and babbling incomprehensible words. ‘Sometimes he’s like that, sometimes he’s normal’, Nang said. Every time Nang and Grandmother Meng went to the forest, they left the children to their relatives residing in another zone far from their house. ‘My husband is a bad person; my brother is sick; my mother is already old. It’s only my mother and I who find food for the family. It’s very difficult . . . Maybe I’ll find a job in Houayxay next year’, Nang lamented.

They also disclosed that they had consumed more noodles, MSG, and bouillon powder since they moved to Banmai. Although they were aware about the low nutritional value of these ‘chemical foods’ and their harmful effects on health, they still used them to increase servings of their meagre meal. ‘When we add more water, some vegetables, and MSG or bouillon powder to one packet of noodle, we can survive the day’, Grandmother Meng explained. In addition, whenever they fortified their meatless soup with MSG and bouillon powder, they felt like eating real meat, and their appetite also increased. Numerous abject families I spoke with used such excessive consumption of noodles, MSG and bouillon powder in relieving their hungry bellies. Hence, such ‘chemical foods’, similar to ‘sugar, coffee, and tea’, may also be considered ‘proletarian hunger-killers’ (Mintz 1979: 60; see also Kimura 2013).

When Grandmother Meng’s family had no wild edibles or industrially produced foods to eat, they resorted to eating any available food they had or to skipping meals. This was also the last course of action of many impoverished interlocutors. In July 2018 – the same period when the *Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy* Dam in Attapeu Province suddenly collapsed – there was heavy rain for almost a week in Banmai, so Grandmother Meng and Nang could not go out to scavenge in the forests. They revealed that they slept with empty stomachs for two days. On the third day, they decided to butcher their dog to ease their hunger. ‘My eldest

grandson cried when we killed his dog, but we had no choice. We needed to eat and live', Grandmother Meng said dejectedly.

On a typical morning of July 2019 – almost a year after they slaughtered their dog – I saw Grandmother Meng picking up trash in front of Mother Khone's house. At first glance, the old woman looked normal; when I went closer to her, I observed that she was talking to herself. According to Mother Khone, Grandmother Meng had slept in front of their side door for two days already. While Mother Khone and I were talking, a neighbour of Grandmother Meng had interrupted our conversation and informed us that the old woman was already alone in her house. The neighbour added that Nang and her two sons had gone to Houayxay; however, no one knew where Mek was. 'Grandmother, what are you doing?' Mother Khone asked. The old woman replied cheerfully: 'I'm going to meet my husband; do you want to come?' Mother Khone moaned: 'Perhaps she would not have been like that if some staff from the company and some district officials had not eaten with the people [*kin nam pasasôn*].'

Conclusion

An investigation of harrowing food experiences after relocation underscores how hydropower development's poorly planned and monitored resettlement programmes adversely affect the villagers' daily lives. The culprits for their current starvation include the alleged corruption of some local state officials and staff of the hydropower company, the maldistribution of compensations and the dispersal of former neighbourhoods. This discussion transcends the analysis of recent resettlement scholars who pay much attention to how dam construction threatens food security and who are reticent about how the villagers cope with food shortages. The villagers' changing food experiences I examined cover not simply transformations in quantities and qualities of consumed food but also in food-sharing activities and survival strategies to tackle hunger. The analytical starting point for explicating the foregoing changes is an anthropological discussion of two eating phrases that prevail in Banmai: 'Eating together' and 'Eating with the people'.

In general, Banmai villagers are aware about how their 'eating-together' / commensal encounters with human and more-than-human actants can strengthen their personal, familial, communal and spiritual relationships. From such reinforcement, they gain benefits. The article's protagonists, like many interlocutors, also reiterate the practical advantage of their food-sharing practices in dealing with food insecurity in older settlements. However, the new neighbourhood configuration in Banmai has disrupted these practices. As a corollary of this process, there has been a growing indifference among many villagers I spoke with. It signals the disintegration of 'communal solidarity' expressed through commensality (see Goody 1982; Van Esterik 2015).

The 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor insinuates that it is only the 'big people' who consume food, while letting ordinary people experience hunger. It is the villagers' euphemistic description of how the 'big people' purportedly steal some parts of their financial compensations. It also alludes to how the villagers' opportunity to live a decent life has been taken. There are two reasons why the villagers use the 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor (and other corruption metaphors related to food/eating). First, they aim to transmit socio-political criticisms in subtle ways as they fear the one-party Lao state and its apparatuses. Second, they want to convey strong emotional messages as food and foodways are 'sensitive topics' that deal with life and death, that 'lay at the [centre] of people's emotions' (Cavanaugh et al. 2014: 94; see also Jourdan and Hobbis 2013).

Many poor interlocutors have suffered from the double whammy of the 'big people's' fraud and inadequately provided livelihood and food support. The demise of previous food-sharing activities has also left them in an extremely precarious situation. Put differently, experiences of hunger and poverty existed in the past; however, unsuccessful relocation programmes have made them poorer and more food insecure. To survive their new ordeals, many indigent interlocutors, especially the ethnic minorities, travel vast distances to forage for food, consume more 'chemical foods' or 'proletarian hunger-killers' (Mintz 1979), and/or resort to eating any available food they have or to skipping meals. The disastrous impacts of these coping strategies can be manifested in abject interlocutors' weak and undernourished bodies. As a result of their new food experiences, most interlocutors saw a bleak future in the resettlement. If their plight gets worse, some of them might consider leaving Banmai and returning to older settlements, or selling their houses and going elsewhere.

These resettled villagers' changing food experiences add new layers to recent discussions in hydropower resettlement studies and food anthropology. This analysis does not simply confirm the plethora of anthropological literature on commensality but also explores how the Lao people assign practical, sociocultural and/or cosmological meanings to their consumed and shared food. The examination of 'eating-with-the-people' metaphor and its deleterious effects also contributes to a growing debate within anthropology that links food studies with linguistic anthropology (see Cavanaugh et al. 2014). Moreover, this article provides an alternative frame for understanding how hydropower projects' failed resettlement processes can negatively influence new food experiences of villagers as corporeal, social and communal beings.

These aspects might move beyond academic discussions and can contribute to the formulation of better policy for combating hydropower-induced hunger. To preclude the tragic stories of food deprivation I presented, hydropower developers and facilitators, within and outside Laos, need to regard the resettlement not as an end in itself but rather as a means to reconstruct the displaced villagers' lives. They must also introduce a range of interventions – beyond breaking up the older communities and neighbourhoods – that would help ethnic minorities to gradually integrate into the new settlement and 'to

make convivial coexistence possible' (Pholsena 2020: 1886). Importantly, in developing and implementing resettlement policies, they should consider all factors before, during and after the dam construction and relocation that might induce food shortages.

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Notes

- * Winner of the 2020 EASA Award for a Postgraduate Student Paper in the Anthropology of Food.
- 1. I deliberately changed the names of the hydropower company, the resettlement village, older settlements and all research participants to preserve their anonymity.
- 2. For more discussions about China's BRI, see Huang (2016).
- 3. In Banmai, most Rmeet and Khmu villagers I talked with have a good command of Lao language. I met only two Rmeet villagers in their sixties who had difficulty in speaking Lao. Nevertheless, they could understand Lao.
- 4. The Rmeet in Banmai called their village guardian spirit houses *salôk*.
- 5. Those who lived near the river relied not only on fishing but also on shifting cultivation,

collecting forest products, hunting and gardening in the wild. Likewise, upland villagers (mostly Rmeet and Khmu) harnessed the forest resources and caught fish and crustaceans in the river. Of 128 interlocutors, 112 engaged in shifting cultivation; 114 collected wild edibles and forest products (e.g. wild palm fruit, cardamom, *kok tiang/peuak meuak* [*Debregeasia hypoleuca*], a bark used for making glue) and sold them to itinerant merchants; 57 owned teak gardens; 77 had fruit and *miang* (tea) gardens. There were a few interlocutors living close to the river traffic who had successful businesses in older villages: trading in forest products and unhusked rice, managing a big retail store and leasing motorboats. These businessmen, who are Lao-Buddhists and relatively affluent, have also managed good businesses in Banmai.

6. For more anthropological discussions about feasting or feasts, see Kerner and colleagues (2015) and Nahum-Claudel (2016). For more on hospitality, see Candea and da Col (2012).
7. In Southeast Asia, there have been some studies on this topic. For instance, Stolz (2021) has examined how the distinctions between shared and exchanged food reflect the (a) symmetry of local kinship dynamics in a Khmu village in north-western Laos. Trankell (1995) also observed the unequal and hierarchal relations involved in the Tai concept of 'feeding' (*liang*).
8. In her fieldwork in southern Laos, Holly High's interlocutors mentioned the phrase *kin nam pasasôn* (eat with the people) 'to cast a pall of suspicion over what appeared [to me oftentimes] to be perfectly normal state activities, such as contributions to the local school, special levies for District festivals and taxation' (2014: 37). It is interesting that some of her interlocutors used *kin nam cao* (High translated it as 'eat with you') (2014: 34) as a euphemism for corruption. However, at my field site, I did not encounter anyone who used *kin nam cao* to describe the 'big people's' corrupt practices.
9. Since 'hunger', 'malnutrition' and 'poverty' are controversial issues, I considered some methodological suggestions put forward by social scientists who carried out research on sensitive topics in general (see Lee 1993) and on people experiencing hunger and food insecurity in particular (see Henry 2020; Kimura 2013). I particularly adhered to all normal procedures and best practices concerning informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and data storage.
10. This rationale for breaking up the older neighbourhoods is also reminiscent of how the socialist government in its early years justified the mainstreaming of ethnic minority groups. As I paraphrase the statements of Kaysone Phomvihane, the first leader of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party: To strengthen the unity of all people in Laos 'draws' 'national groups who live in remote and backward areas of the country' 'into the building of socialism', which in turn 'improve[s] education, cultural facilities, medical services, develop[s] production and raise[s] the living standards for the different national groups' (Phomvihane 1981: 213).
11. By geographical, I refer to the distance between 'here' and 'there'; the metaphorical distance is the gulf between 'me' and 'others' (Pholsena 2020: 1877).
12. For recent ethnographic accounts of the Katu's festivals and some food-sharing practices, see High (2021).

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« Manger avec les gens » : comment un projet d'hydroélectricité chinois affecte les expériences alimentaires d'une communauté au Laos

Cet article étudie comment les programmes de réinstallation mal suivis d'un projet hydroélectrique chinois au Laos ont influencé négativement les expériences alimentaires des villageois réinstallés en tant qu'êtres corporels, sociaux et communautaires. Il approfondit l'analyse des études récentes sur la réinstallation des populations vivant de l'hydroélectricité, qui se sont concentrées sur la manière dont la construction des barrages induit l'insécurité alimentaire, mais qui ont accordé moins d'attention aux stratégies des villageois pour faire face aux pénuries alimentaires. Mon point de départ est une enquête anthropologique sur deux expressions alimentaires courantes dans la nouvelle colonie : « manger ensemble » (rencontres commensales) et « manger avec les gens » (métaphore de la corruption au Laos). Je soutiens que de nombreux interlocuteurs indigents sont devenus plus pauvres et ont été plongés en situation d'insécurité alimentaire après leur réinstallation parce que leurs moyens de subsistance et leur soutien alimentaire sont insuffisants et que les « grands » leur volent leurs compensations financières. Cette situation précaire s'est aggravée car le nouvel arrangement de voisinage a mis fin à certaines pratiques commensales ou de partage de la nourriture, de sorte que les villageois ont actuellement du mal à manger à leur faim. Cette étude ethnographique contribue aux discussions en cours dans la recherche sur la réinstallation de l'hydroélectricité et l'anthropologie alimentaire.

Mots clés : commensalité, corruption, faim, réinstallation de l'hydroélectricité, métaphore, Chine