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Personal Narratives and Labor Migration: A Retired *Guojia Ganbu* in Southeastern Guizhou

Chien Mei-Ling*

The mass domestic migration of laborers from rural to urban areas is one of the most visible and significant aspects of “the rise of China.” Examining personal experiences can help us to describe and understand this phenomenon. As Arthur Kleinman (2006) has observed, life histories and personal voices demonstrate how people live a moral life amidst uncertainty and danger, and how they interpret what really matters to them. While recounting retired *guojia ganbu* Deik Bok’s life history and narratives, I discuss and elaborate on one individual’s experience of uncertainty and morality through China’s vicissitudes from the 1950s through the 2010s. I argue that this person’s experiences tell an important story about minorities in China through the socialist and reform periods, and specifically about the shifts in economic decisions and subjectivities that accompanied the rise of labor mobility. This ethnography builds on my friendship with Deik Bok that began in 1997 and was maintained through the many years I conducted ethnographic studies in Hmub villages in the highlands of southeastern Guizhou. Deik Bok represents a lively and vivid social actor of a particular time and place participating in China’s labor migration and social transformation since the 1950s, and his story provides a nuanced view of the transformation of China’s minority areas.

Keywords: narratives, labor migration, ethnic minority, Hmub, Guizhou, Southwest China

Introduction

This paper focuses primarily on Deik Bok,¹⁾ a retired elder *guojia ganbu* (ethnic minority

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1) *Deik*, a Hmub kinship term, means “brother.” Bok is a Hmub given name.

cadre)²⁾ of Hmub ethnicity from southeastern Guizhou,³⁾ mainland China, and his lifelong experiences of rural-urban labor migration. Following the vicissitudes of his life allows for a microscopic exploration of the ways that individuals experienced mobility from the 1950s to the 2010s. Inspired by reflective scholarship on trans-local mobility combined with life history narratives, the paper draws on two decades of participant observation in Taijiang County Seat, in particular describing the linguistic performances and experiences of a cadre trying to make his living through changing economic times and the role of kinship networks in both his successes and his failures. On the one hand, personal narratives provide ethnographic data to be collected, described and analyzed; on the other hand, they also constitute an analytical approach to integrating an individual's subjectivity and linguistic performances (Hoskins 1998). Drawing on verbatim transcriptions of personal narratives, the paper explores the implications of trans-local mobility and elaborates on an individual's experience of uncertainty and morality in China since the 1950s. I argue that this person's experiences tell an important story about minorities through China's socialist and reform periods, and specifically about how the rise of labor mobility led to shifts in economic decisions and subjectivities.⁴⁾

Literature Review

Amidst China's rise, one of the most important features of modern Chinese society is the large numbers of rural migrants living their lives straddled between rural homes and urban workplaces. There has been significant scholarly interest in issues related to this massive domestic migration. Some scholars have asked how such labor migration affects relationships of migrants with other individuals, and with their families and relatives (Wu 2005; Ohashi 2011; Fang 2016; 2018; 2019; Horie 2018). Others have examined how this

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- 2) Briefly, there are two types of cadres in China: national cadres (*guojia ganbu*) who work for the central government and local cadres (*difang ganbu*) who work for local governments. The rank of national cadres is used exclusively for members of China's ethnic minority populations.
 - 3) Guizhou is located in the eastern part of the Yun-Gui Plateau. Based on a 1990s survey, there were roughly nine million Miao (Hmub/Hmong) spread across a large part of the massif that covers the Yun-Gui Plateau in Southwest China and surrounding uplands in both Southwest China and northern parts of Southeast Asia (in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand) (Chien 2009). The Miao within China are usually divided into five groups based on their language and geographical distribution.
 - 4) The transition to a socialist market economy began in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping introduced his program of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Initial reforms in decollectivizing agriculture and opening the economy to foreign investment in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to large-scale reforms, including corporatization of the state sector and partial privatization of some enterprises, in the late 1990s (Vogel 2011).

mobility reshapes and reconstructs the boundaries between villages, and between villages and county seats (Liu and Gu 1999; Yang 2003; Li 2007; Wang 2007). Studies have also explored the challenges that rural migrants face in navigating the drastic changes entailed in moving to work in a city, particularly the struggles of adapting to the rules, lifestyles, and cultural habitus of urban life (Fei 2001 [1939]; Shao 2002; Li 2007; Fang 2016; 2018; 2019).

Literature on China's migrant laborers has also highlighted considerable variation between the experiences of men and women, both in their reasons for leaving home to seek work in cities, and in the nature of labor migration (Schein 2006; Qui and Xu 2009; Shen 2010; Ohashi 2011; Horie 2018). For example, research has shown that women migrating between places are more likely to find themselves in a doubly marginalized situation (Qui and Xu 2009; Shen 2010; Ohashi 2011; Horie 2018). Put forward in the 2006 book *Translocal China* (Oakes and Schein 2006), the concept of "translocality" is used to discuss the different ways in which people from rural areas develop new connections, identities, and imaginations of space in response to their trans-local movements. In her essay in this volume, L. Schein (2006, 213–237) uses the concept of translocality to explore the life histories of several Miao (Hmub) women from Guizhou, with a focus on their experiences as migrant laborers.⁵⁾ Schein describes how women from the Hmub village of Xijiang, located in southeastern Guizhou, moved to urban centers through marriage or various other channels such as work, cultural performance, or the production of ethnic handicrafts and clothing. During the transition from the countryside to the city, these Hmub women experienced dislocation, emplacement, and replacement—reflected in their bodily experiences, dietary habits, appearances, clothing, identities, and worldviews. The transitional experiences of these Hmub women also serve as a vantage point for our understanding of the trans-local experiences of Deik Bok explored in this study.

Exploring the fundamental aspects of this contemporary phenomenon of translocality requires a nuanced theoretical perspective, particularly if we want to explore the interactions between rural migrants and their places of origin, or the similarities and differences between urban and rural life in their lived experiences. In exploring the subjectivities demonstrated in the experiences of Hmub migrant laborers from southeastern Guizhou, it is important to take into account such issues as bodily experiences, emotions, as well as the framing of self and identity (Kleinman 2006; Schein 2006; Fang 2016; 2018; 2019). Under this conceptual framework, I carried out an ethnographic research project among the Hmub in Taijiang County aimed at describing and interpreting the unique microhistories of individuals, families, villages, and counties in the context

5) The Miao women studied by Schein (2006) belong to the Hmub subgroup that I describe in this article.

of migratory flows, as well as the regional history of Guizhou, especially from the 1920s to 2010s. During this period, the people in southeastern Guizhou experienced a prewar phase from the 1920s to the 1940s, a socialist phase from the 1950s to the 1970s, the era of China's economic reform and development from the 1980s to 2000, and China's economic rise to prominence from 2000 to 2010. This paper especially explores how China's transformation relates to generational characteristics of Hmub people born in the 1950s in southeastern Guizhou and their mobility as reflected in their experiences of labor migration.

As J. Hoskins (1998) argues in her book *Biographical Objects*, studying a life history does not mean dealing with a pre-existing and fixed text. Narratives cannot simply be "discovered." When a person talks about their own life, they are not just providing information about themselves but also telling the outside world about who they are through the act of storytelling. For example, Hoskins describes how the Kodi people of eastern Indonesia talk about important moments and events in their lived experiences by telling stories about their cherished personal belongings. In this way, the Kodi people express selfhood through stories and objects (Hoskins 1998).

Being a "Taijianger"

Taijiang County is located in southeastern Guizhou (Qiandongnan). The field site for this study, Taijiang County Seat and the villages on adjacent mountains, is mostly populated by the Hmub people (an endonym).⁶ Taijiang County Seat, with its population of around forty thousand, is located in the north of Taijiang County. The elders and friends I met in Taijiang County Seat were from the first or second generation that moved from villages to urban areas. Born between the 1920s and the 1970s, they recounted various experiences—from their migration during the Cultural Revolution to their various reasons for going to work in a city during the Reform Era. These Hmub migrants typically faced language barriers and had to adjust to new lifestyles when moving to a new place to work. Their personal migratory experiences highlight that often working in the city was not a matter of personal choice. Their experiences also reflect the rapid transformations of Chinese society more generally; the unique historical, social, and cultural context of Guizhou; as well as the differences associated with ethnicity, gender, and generational factors.

6) Hmub society is cognate with Hmong; both refer to patrilineal descent groups that practice cross-cousin marriage and duolocal postmarital residence. Hmub and Hmong have been called Miao in Chinese since the Qing Dynasty (Chien 2017, 215).

Locally, the term “Taijiangers” (*Feb Niat bel Naik*) refers to people who live in Taijiang County Seat. Some are retired literati or officials whose hometowns are in Huangping County or Shibing County, on the north bank of the Qingshui River.⁷⁾ These two counties were once governed by *tusi*, the local chiefdom system, as far back as the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and also came under the governance of the Qing Empire earlier than did Taijiang County.

Part of being a Taijianger is participation in shared memories based on lived experiences. All Taijiangers have their own stories about life in different villages or on either side of the Qingshui River. Based on this understanding, I revisited Taijiang County Seat in 2011 and 2014 to observe the experiences of Hmub people moving between their rural homes and their workplaces in urban areas, as well as their activities within and outside their own households. These observations were combined with in-depth life history interviews of Hmub people in Taijiang County Seat set against the backdrop of ongoing economic, social, and cultural changes at the national and regional levels.

As mentioned earlier, this paper focuses primarily on an individual named Deik Bok (“Brother Bok”), a retired elder *guojia ganbu* of Hmub ethnicity, and his lifelong experiences of rural-urban labor migration. His life gives an idea of the ways in which individuals in Taijiang experienced labor mobility between the 1950s and 2014. Finally, there is a discussion of how Deik Bok’s narratives tell an important story about the experiences of minorities during China’s transformation through the socialist and reform periods, and specifically how the rise of labor mobility impacts economic decisions, bodily experiences, emotions, and the framing of subjectivity.

Deik Bok’s Life History and Migratory Experiences

Deik Bok is a good friend of mine, and recounting his life history in an academic article makes me somewhat uneasy. When we first met during the late summer of 1997, I was a graduate student of anthropology who had come to southeastern Guizhou to learn about Hmub culture. Since then, Deik Bok has accompanied and guided me for two decades in my research among the Hmub people. By the time I saw him in Taijiang County Seat in 2014, he had retired from his post as an ethnic minority cadre and I was a university professor with more than ten years of teaching experience.

Over the years, Deik Bok had become like an elder brother to me. In the late sum-

7) The Qingshuijiang is the longest river in Guizhou Province. It cuts across the whole of Taijiang County from west to east and then runs through the northeast corner. This river is also the border between Taijiang and Huangping and Shibing Counties.

mer of 1997, Teacher Yang of Guizhou University accompanied me to Taijiang to help me find a suitable field site for my doctoral research a year later. Deik Bok, then working in the Taijiang County Publicity Department and a member of the Federation of Literary and Art Circles of Taijiang County (*Taijiang diqu wenxue yu yishujie lianhe hui*), was my main host in Taijiang. At the time, I was deciding between two Hmub villages in the hills, Fangf Bil and Eb Diuf Nel, to be the field site for my doctoral research.⁸⁾ It was more convenient to travel to the village of Fangf Bil, so a group of us went there to conduct preliminary fieldwork. Teacher Yang became unwell and left early with a young colleague from the Southeastern Guizhou Federation of Literary and Art Circles; they returned to Kaili and Guiyang, respectively.

Therefore, Deik Bok was the only person who accompanied me to the village of Eb Diuf Nel. This village was very meaningful to my research, because it was where Professor Wu Ze-Lin (1898–1990), a well-known Chinese ethnologist, and his research team had conducted and documented fieldwork and interviews during the 1950s (Wu 1987 [1956]). The only way to reach the village from the main road was on foot. During the almost two-hour walk, Deik Bok and I discussed many aspects of Hmub village culture in the Taijiang area, and we became close friends after that field trip. At the end of 1998, I returned to the village of Fangf Bil and stayed there for a year and a half to carry out fieldwork for my doctoral research. Later, whenever I came to Taijiang for my ethnographic research, I asked Deik Bok for help.

Through him I came to know his wife and her sister, Xu Xiaohong, with whom I also became good friends. During my research, I also lived with Xiaohong's family for a short period. I still remember one night in the winter of 1998 when Xiaohong gave me two blankets to keep warm, a warmth that stays with me to this day. Later, Xiaohong left to run a shop in Kaili, the largest city in the region. Deik Bok introduced me to his relatives, and I stayed with them whenever I left Fangf Bil village and came to Taijiang County Seat for a while. I frequently stayed with Uncle Zhang Mingda, an elderly county magistrate then, and Aunt Zhou Yunrong, a respected retired teacher. Uncle Zhang and Aunt Zhou

8) Fangf Bil and Eb Diuf Nel are both Hmub villages perched high on a hillside in the upper reaches of the Qingshui River. They form part of the northern subgroup of the central Miao (Yang 1998, 99), and administratively they are part of Fanzao Township, Taijiang County, in Southeastern Guizhou Autonomous District in Guizhou Province. Local people speak an eastern Miao dialect of the Miao-Yao subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan language group. The people of Fangf Bil and Eb Diuf Nel call themselves Hmub. Both villages were composed of about three hundred households, with a population of almost 1,500 (1998–2000) (Chien 2012). They are divided into several hamlets (*vangf*) whose names refer to various nearby geographical features. The residents of any single hamlet are generally the agnatic descendants of a lineage subsegment and share a common Han Chinese surname. The naming system is patronymic (Chien 2012, 97).

treated me like their daughter. Living with them was an unforgettable experience.

Since 1997, my friendship with Deik Bok has given me a window to view his life history and experiences of migration between villages and cities from various angles. For this study, Deik Bok's life history narratives not only provide ethnographic data to be collected, described, and analyzed but also constitute material for an analytical approach to integrating an individual's subjectivity and linguistic performances.

Early Childhood Education and Migratory Experience (1959–73)

Deik Bok was born in 1959 in Datang Hmub Village, Geyi Township, Taijiang County. In 1965, at the age of six, he began to study in elementary school, just before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In fact, Deik Bok almost missed the chance to go to junior high school after elementary school because his uncle had once written slogans against the revolutionaries. As Deik Bok recalled, fortunately, the accountant of the local production brigade helped him fill in his application form so he was able to register for school. Deik Bok thus entered Shidong Junior High School in 1970 and graduated two years later, in 1972.

Deik Bok's retelling of his early years highlights several key points. One is that his experiences were very much entwined with the Cultural Revolution:

My maternal grandmother was labelled a landlord and my paternal uncle an anti-revolutionary. When I was a kid, I went to study at Datang Elementary School. Back then, I was not bad at studies. I was just a bit mischievous, not serious enough. During the Cultural Revolution, I wouldn't have been able to attend junior high school if it hadn't been for the recommendation from the brigade accountant.

For Deik Bok, the Cultural Revolution was a dreadful time because of his experiences at elementary school during those years: "There were always fears lingering in my heart. Once, I wrote something on the blackboard that I was later criticized for by the school. Even now, I can't remember what I wrote."

In his early life, Deik Bok had to work constantly to earn his meal tickets to survive:

It was very hard to study at that time. I had a big family, and my relatives had difficult lives. All of us earned money by cutting firewood—one piece was worth five cents, the equivalent of ten or twenty yuan today.

When Deik Bok was in junior high school, Shidong Township was in the early stages of development. Under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, farming activities in the township were filled with the friendliness of rural social networks: "[Back then] it was not as lively as it is today; it was just a small township with a small main street. The

whole school often went out to support the farmers. We helped the farmers every week.”

Deik Bok noted that Shidong also underwent an administrative change at that time: “Shidong Town was originally a district that governed ten small townships.” Deik Bok’s memories of his early years were filled with the desire to further his education, even if it meant a long journey: “The way to school was long, but I felt happy.” The emergence of this yearning also intersected with his image of his father:

At that time, my father worked for the Shidong Administration for Industry and Commerce (Shidong Gongshang Ju). Sometimes, when I went home with my father, on the way the two of us would go and chop pine trees for their oil. My father climbed the tall pine trees and cut down their branches. I would also help to carry them home; we had to walk about twenty miles.

The above narratives recalling Deik Bok’s childhood and his years of early education touched me. Despite the hardships caused by the Cultural Revolution, Deik Bok’s unique bodily experiences, personal feelings, emotions, and frame of self and identity were deeply present in his narratives. The image of a loving father and son taking a long walk home carrying firewood was vivid and a significant way to weave the profile of the young Deik Bok and his dream of his future and happiness.

Migratory Experiences from Adolescence to Adulthood (1973–94)

Another crucial point in Deik Bok’s life history relates to his first migratory experience: the basic training he received before he assumed the position of *guojia ganbu*. Deik Bok’s early childhood education paved the way for him to go on and attain the level of education necessary to become an ethnic minority cadre serving in rural areas. In 1972 Deik Bok graduated from Shidong Junior High School, and the following year he began teaching in a village elementary school. By then, he had already begun to get involved in local affairs. As well as being a teacher, Deik Bok was a *jifen yuan* (points keeper) for the *shengchandu* (local production team). In 1976, during the seven years that he worked at the village elementary school, he also took the National Higher Education Entrance Examination but failed. It was not until 1980 that he passed the exam and became a *difang ganbu* (rural cadre). This course of events was significant in Deik Bok’s life history. First and foremost, as Deik Bok was officially admitted into the Party school, he later had the opportunity to be promoted to *guojia ganbu*. Second, Deik Bok’s two years at the Party school, located on the site of the old Lotus Academy (*Lianhua shuyuan*) in Taijiang, took him to Taijiang County Seat for the first time and gave him his first experience of modern city life. As Deik Bok recalled, “I really yearned to go to Taijiang County Seat because then I could go to school and work.”

At the Party school, Deik Bok was trained in agricultural technology and botany.

After his training ended in March 1982, he went to Wujiazhuang and Zhenyuan, both in Guizhou Province, to receive military training. In 1983 he was sent to the Pingzhao People's Commune and took charge of a group of civilians who were trained to undertake various tasks despite not having officially joined the army. In 1984 Deik Bok was transferred to work at the Shidong People's Commune from April to May. That year, he also took the entrance examination for the college for adult learning and got married. In August he joined the Guizhou Radio and Television University in Majiang County to major in Party and governmental affairs. After two years at the Party school, Deik Bok moved to Taijiang County Seat. In 1986 he started working in the Taijiang County Party Committee Office (*Taijiang xianwei bangongshi*) and his eldest son was born. Since he was fond of writing, in 1987 he got involved with publishing the journal *Taijiang Literature and Arts* (*Taijiang wenyi*), which he continued until his retirement. In 1991 Deik Bok transferred to the Publicity Department (*xuanchuanbu*) of the Taijiang County Party Committee Office.

Description of a Changing Town

In narrating his life story, Deik Bok also described how the town had changed over the years. In 1989 Taijiang's first karaoke parlor and ballroom opened. In 1992 Shidong Township became Shidong Town. Recalling his life in Taijiang County Seat since 1986, Deik Bok described the living conditions back then and the leisure activities people engaged in:

DB: The house I lived in at that time was a wooden house passed down from a previous county Party committee member. It was located on the new street, on the mid-slope of the hill fortress. Life was more difficult back then.

ML:⁹⁾ Yes, *deik*, I can imagine and fully understand. By the way, do you still remember what you did in your leisure time in those days?

DB: Fishing . . . no, no, it's bow fishing. Going uphill to find bee pupae, then frying them to eat. . . . There was only one karaoke parlor and ballroom at the time. We went dancing instead. There were not so many [karaoke parlors and ballrooms] then.

By 2011, the year this interview took place, the first karaoke parlor and ballroom had already been demolished. During the interview, Deik Bok offered his own thoughts and feelings on the differences between life in Taijiang County Seat and in the village in the 1990s:

When you live in a village, you need very little to support a basic life. There is no way to buy expensive clothes, or especially to buy a house. This kind of problem is very troublesome. In 1992

9) ML is the author, Mei-Ling.



Figs. 1–4 Daily Life in Taijiang County Seat, Southeastern Guizhou

Sources: Photos by author (2011; 2014)

and 1993, the policy of housing reform was implemented. I bought a house from my wife's eldest brother. The house was more than 80 square feet and cost 4,000 yuan. At that time, I didn't have enough money. I couldn't manage it. I tried to borrow money from different people but failed. Later I took a loan from an affinal relative (*khait*).

In interviews and conversations that I had with Deik Bok in Taijiang in 2011, his personal experiences reflected the changes that had occurred in the county seat from the 1980s to the 2010s in terms of space and lifestyle (Figs. 1–4). Deik Bok's personal account of Taijiang in the 1980s shows how his relationship with space and the state had changed, and how his life had progressed in terms of finances, scientific knowledge, and military training: "At the time, this whole place was farmland, like that old street where the Education Bureau now stands. There are houses built in these places now."

He also recounted that since the 1980s, members of the public had been able to take out bank loans. Deik Bok's different experiences of life in the city and life in the village in the 1990s were profoundly shaped by the blend of socialism and capitalism, market reforms, and the state's urban housing policy. Eager to make use of the new opportunities, Deik Bok, who as a forty-something ethnic minority cadre had already secured a stable job as a county-level government official, moved to the city to seek a new job because he needed to pay off the loan on his house in Taijiang County Seat.

The *Dagong* Migration

Deik Bok referred to working in the city as *dagong* (wage earning on a temporary basis). It was an important experience in his life. In 1994 he left Guizhou Province for the first time, to work in Shenzhen.¹⁰ He had been pressured by his relatives to seek work in Shenzhen. In contrast to Deik Bok's rural home village and Taijiang County Seat from the 1990s to the 2000s—which were smaller yet densely populated ethnic minority areas where the native tongue of the Hmub dialect was widely spoken—Shenzhen was one of the fastest-growing urban centers in the world. While Deik Bok worked in Shenzhen for only a short period of two months, working in the city gave him very different experiences from his life in Guizhou. Because of his interest and ability in writing, he first went to the *Shenzhen Daily* (*Shenzhen ribao*) to apply for an editor position, but he was not hired. Deik Bok expressed regret about this during our conversation:

DB: It was too late for me to try that. If I had gone there ten years earlier, I could definitely have got a job as an editor or journalist in Shenzhen.

ML: Such a pity, *deik*. The world is changing so fast.

After this, he stayed on in Shenzhen and worked on a construction site. He recalled that his fellow workers were from Hubei, Beijing, and Sichuan. However, his experience as a construction worker in Shenzhen was not very comfortable, due to a sense of estrangement at work and a sense of bodily restraint in the city:

ML: How did you feel when you were working there, *deik*?

DB: When I was working there, I was constantly being supervised and given orders. There was great pressure in my heart. The atmosphere in the city was very depressed. It was also very hot.

ML: You love writing, *deik*. I still remember that you sent me your work, a manuscript of a short novel, *The Old Hong Kong*, before I left Taijiang in 1997. You wrote a story of a Hmub elder who was longing for Hong Kong. . . . I am wondering if this story is related to your experience in Shenzhen?

DB: I didn't write at the time. It was too hot at night. I had to get up a few times to cool down before I could sleep. There were an unusually excessive number of mosquitoes. It's so scary to get up in the morning and see all the mosquitoes around you.

Return to Taijiang (1994–2013)

After his brief stint in Shenzhen from March to April 1994, Deik Bok returned to Taijiang in May. There he worked in the Publicity Department until 1996, mostly handling paper-work. Sometimes, because of his idealist attitude, he had friction with his superiors. Although his stay in Shenzhen was quite short, the experience seemed to frustrate Deik

10) Shenzhen is a major sub-provincial city on the east bank of the Pearl River estuary, on the central coast of southern Guangdong Province.

Bok deeply. Before taking up his position in the Federation of Literary and Art Circles of Taijiang County (where he worked from 1996 to 2012), he did not seek work outside Taijiang again. For him, working in the county seat was more comfortable. “I feel happier in a small city,” he said.

As mentioned earlier, I first met Deik Bok late in the summer of 1997, when I came to Taijiang to find a field site for my doctoral research. Deik Bok recalled that this was the time he and his wife had begun to invest in restaurants (1997–98), giving them names that reflected his education and love of literature.¹¹⁾

As a *guojia ganbu*, Deik Bok closely followed the news of economic reforms and housing policies promoted by the state. In 2004 a new county government policy began encouraging rural villagers to move to the city:

The county government promoted a policy back then. In order to increase the urban population, the county government encouraged people to spend money buying a house in the county seat. They would give you a new house of 80 square feet. After I worked in the county government, I was retired from the production team and had also sold all the farmland in my hometown. I could only work in the local government while doing a bit of restaurant business.

From the ethnography and narratives recounted, we can see how this ethnic minority cadre in Guizhou skillfully adapted to state policies and profited through careful calculations based on economic rationality. For example, Deik Bok was able to launch successful restaurant ventures by securing financing through various channels:

When you have no money, that’s the only way. I returned to my village and asked all my relatives [*ghat ghat khait khait*, consanguine and affine] to lend me a few thousand yuan. Then we could borrow money from the bank. So I took a loan of 70,000 yuan. . . . When business was good, we could earn 10,000 to 20,000 yuan a month. . . . In 2004 I secretly took a loan with my house as collateral. I paid more than 600 yuan a month from my salary. It was a 15-year loan. Now there is 30,000 yuan left of the loan.

Apart from the restaurant business, Deik Bok also took over a quarry and a sheep farm, but these two ventures did not last long. When I heard that he had tried again and again to invest in various kinds of businesses for survival, I started to appreciate new sides of my old friend. As I had known him over the years, he was a romantic, intellectual person

11) The names of his restaurants included North Sea People’s Restaurant (*Beihai renmin canguan* 北海人民餐館), Forestry Restaurant (*Linye canting* 林業餐廳), and King Xiang Yu Restaurant (*Xiang-dawang canguan* 項大王餐館). Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BC) is a well-known historical tragic hero from the late Qin period of Chinese history. He led an uprising and built the regime of Western Chu. He died by suicide when he was defeated by Liu Bang (256–195 BC), the founder of the Han Dynasty.

(this was the impression I had since I first met him in 1997). During our early encounters we bonded over classical Chinese literature and poetry; we shared our experience of writing essays, short novels, and free verse in Chinese. When I began interviewing Deik Bok for this project, I discovered an entirely new side of him I had never imagined before.

In the above narratives, the profile of Deik Bok from adulthood to middle age highlights the importance of conventional kinship relations and kin-based networks even as capitalism and socialism became entangled in the new age of the twenty-first century (the influence of kinship relations on a Hmub individual's adaptation to the changing world will be explored in the later Discussion section).

Retirement (2014–)

I met Deik Bok again during a field trip to Taijiang in the summer of 2014. By this time, he had already retired from his post as a *guojia ganbu*. We had a conversation over a cup of tea. He had aged considerably from the time we had met last, in the summer of 2011, yet the atmosphere of our conversation was the same as it had always been over the years: such a long and warm friendship always made me feel at home when I visited Taijiang. Still, this time I was concerned about how Deik Bok was doing after retirement. “Why did you retire now, *deik*?” I asked. “Was it because you reached retirement age?”

He smiled bitterly and replied, “I retired for the sake of a camera.”

ML: No kidding, *deik*. I cannot believe it.

DB: I now regret it. Originally, I could have bought the camera with my retirement money. But I was not able to buy it. The money was soon divided among family members, and I had nothing left. Recently the government has raised the wage for a *guojia ganbu* from 500 to 2,000 yuan.

In my field notes I wrote down the Chinese phrase “再見” (*zaijian*), which carried two layers of meaning. The first meaning was “See you again.” From 1997, when I started my doctoral research, through to my later career as a professor, my continued research on Hmub culture had brought me back to Taijiang every two or three years. Each time I went to Taijiang, I would be sure to visit Deik Bok. The second meaning was “Goodbye.” When I returned to Taijiang in 2014, Taijiang County Seat and its relationship with the villages on the surrounding hills had undergone drastic changes. The various developments and changes experienced by the county seat and villages had become ever more apparent. Furthermore, my old friend Deik Bok had retired from being a *guojia ganbu*. For me, these changes signaled a temporary ending of my anthropological journey in Taijiang. It was the end of one chapter but also the arrival of a new generation and a new era. I said “Goodbye” and “See you again” to the Taijiang County Seat of old, and to my old friend Deik Bok.

Discussion

Deik Bok's narrations of his migratory experiences tell an important story about minorities through China's socialist and reform periods. First, some narratives engage specific bodily experiences, emotions, and the framing of self and identity. It is notable that Deik Bok's memories and narratives of his educational experiences were always marked by positive feelings about progress and mobility. For example, the narratives of his time studying at Shidong Junior High School were highly charged with feelings of optimism and progress: "The way to school was long, but I felt happy," "I had a sense of happiness," and the vivid recollections about his journey home with his father ("Sometimes, when I went home with my father, on the way the two of us would go and chop pine trees for their oil. My father climbed the tall pine trees and cut down their branches. I would also help to carry them home"). These feelings of optimism and progress were still present when Deik Bok entered the Party school to train to become a rural official. As he recalled, "I longed to go to Taijiang County Seat, because I could study there."

In recalling his experiences from adolescence to early adulthood, Deik Bok consistently expressed feelings of happiness about his educational progress at the college for adult learning and the Party school despite suffering setbacks during the Cultural Revolution due to his family background. However, these positive feelings did not extend to his experiences at work. In the late 1990s, as Deik Bok reached middle age, he went to Shenzhen, an urban center outside of Guizhou, to seek work. Describing his position as a temporary worker and the working conditions he experienced in Shenzhen, he expressed a sense of exhaustion toward work: "The atmosphere in the city was very depressed. It was also very hot. . . . When I was working there, I was constantly being supervised and given orders. There was great pressure in my heart." This kind of job burnout continued to affect Deik Bok's employment choices later in life, and he felt he was more accustomed to life in smaller cities.

Bodily experiences provide a unique lens to understand the meanings of labor mobility between different places, such as the recollection about the humid, hot weather and the mosquitoes when Deik Bok lived in Shenzhen as a temporary migrant worker:

It was too hot at night. I had to get up a few times to cool down before I could sleep. There were an unusually excessive number of mosquitoes. It's so scary to get up in the morning and see all the mosquitoes around you.

This narrative goes against the common assumption that moving away from the remote countryside means moving away from bugs, and it offers a fine-grained corporeal account of what it actually feels like to move between places. Looking back, it was a unique

personal experience for Deik Bok to travel to Shenzhen and work there in 1994. To him, Shenzhen was not just an urban center.

Dagong vs. Gongzuo

Deik Bok's experiences and narratives of work are another point for discussion. The distinction between *dagong* (打工), or wage earning on a temporary basis, and *gongzuo* (工作), or wage earning on a permanent basis, was of primary importance to him. His understanding of the differences between *dagong* and *gongzuo* also reflect the ways in which social and economic capital are intertwined with each other:

Dagong is all about labor or skill and pays very little. A stable job is a real job. It's like, if I had got the job of an editor at *Shenzhen Daily*, my household registration could have been transferred from my village to the city. If you have a *gongzuo*, it is stable; and if you are just hired on a temporary basis, it is *dagong*.

The different conceptualizations of *dagong* and *gongzuo* motivated Deik Bok to find a "proper job." For him, a stable position in a private company was not *gongzuo* but *dagong*, whereas work that granted a work permit was considered *gongzuo*: a real job. Deik Bok applied the same views with respect to his offspring. He considered his second son, who ran a real estate business in Shenzhen, as not having a real job but only doing *dagong*. In contrast, he considered his eldest son, a police officer in Taijiang, as having a real job. Deik Bok's conceptualizations of *dagong* and *gongzuo* point to the influence of state policy on the views of ethnic minority cadres. His experiences of work embody how local social networks intersect with modern ways of life. In other words, the transformation that Deik Bok encountered is embedded in the intersection of the state and local society.

Many Sides of Deik Bok

Over time, I came to see many different sides to Deik Bok. Initially, he was primarily a friend, a guide, and a consultant in my research on Hmub culture in Taijiang—someone who also loved writing and publishing literary journals. He was also a newspaper columnist as well as an ethnic minority cadre who occasionally had friction with his managers. As I discovered, Deik Bok was also a businessman adept at making money. However, despite our enduring friendship and my many field trips to Taijiang over the years, somehow I had remained totally unaware of this side of Deik Bok. In our past exchanges, our conversations typically centered around Hmub village culture. My main impression of him was as a member of the local educated elite, someone who worked in Taijiang and was passionate about literature. It was not until I interviewed him in 2011 and 2014 and listened to his life history that I realized I was just "an innocent anthropologist" and had

entirely missed another side of his life.

From Deik Bok's life history narratives, we can see how this *guojia ganbu* gradually adapted to the developing market economy after the launch of China's reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang*). Familiarizing oneself with the survival skills to cope with modern life has a great bearing on one's experiences of transformation. During my stay in Taijiang in the late summer of 2014, I finally wrote down a tentative topic in my field notes: "Being a *guojia ganbu* after China's economic reforms." To me, Deik Bok's life history and narratives are very fitting material for this topic. In the eyes of this Chinese *guojia ganbu*, *gongzuo* given by the state offered a relatively stable job with a work permit, granting retirement and a pension. At the same time, other *guojia ganbus* among Deik Bok's contemporaries actively adopted different approaches to adapt to the market economy, namely, by engaging in economic activities and making money. This is supported by the fact that Deik Bok, then a *guojia ganbu*, also invested in business ventures such as a sheep farm and various restaurants, demonstrating how ethnic minority cadres such as he carefully calculated gains and losses based on economic rationality. Viewed in this way, we can understand why Deik Bok said he regretted his decision to retire early "for the sake of a camera" (even if this explanation was just a joke with an old friend) and understand the importance of economic rationality in his values and decision making. However, looking back we can see that he experienced a complicated lifetime of dramatic social change from a socialist society to a socialist market economy; the camera is also an indexical metaphor for me to illustrate Deik Bok's lifelong idealist personality and romantic attitude.

Importance of Social Networks

For Deik Bok, gaining the economic capital to run a business in Taijiang required not only familiarity with the rules of the market reforms, but also his pre-existing social network ("I returned to my village and asked all my relatives [*ghat ghat khait khait*] to lend me a few thousand yuan. Then we could borrow money from the bank"). This network was particularly evident in his ability to secure financing. Deik Bok acquired his initial capital to do business by selling farmland and borrowing money from consanguine (*ghat*) and affine (*khait*) relatives in his rural hometown.

Thus, in the story of Deik Bok's integration with the market reforms in southeastern Guizhou, we see that Hmub kinship networks played an important role in shaping the labor migratory experiences of this Hmub individual and, in the process, his encounters with China's transformations over the socialist and reform periods. Before we move to the last point of our discussion, I would like to provide some details about how the Hmub is a kin-based society, and how *ghat* (kin, or consanguine) and *khait* (affine) are

the most important pairs of kinship. Following is an illustration of the relationship between *ghat* and *khait* through gift exchange in ritual settings among the uphill Hmub villages.

From late 1998 to early 2000, when I was conducting fieldwork in Village Fangf Bil, *khait* were usually the main gift-givers on various occasions, such as weddings, funerals, building a new house, and so on. The *ghat* usually came to these occasions with a bowl of rice wine, some meat, or a small number of fish caught in a paddy field. Hmub people consider “entertaining guests” (*nil khait*) to be the main responsibility of *ghat*, not to “present gifts” (*ghet ghongf ghit*). There are two sentences in Hmub language that express this contrast most clearly:

“*Khait ghot gongf ghit dak.*” (The *khait* carry the gifts and come.)

“*Ghat xud jet denk nil khait.*” (The *ghat* take the wine and go drink with the guests.)

The verbs in these sentences cannot be confused: the *khait* “carry gifts and come,” and the *ghat* “take wine and go drink with the guests.” The quantity of a gift may be regarded as a criterion of distinction between the *khait* and the *ghat*, but an even better criterion is that *ghat* who go to drink with the guests do not bring rice gifts with them. Both the *khait* and the *ghat* can bring meat and wine as gifts, so rice is what distinguishes the two groups in the eyes of the host family. It is noteworthy that the *ghat* and the *khait* share and eat the cooked glutinous rice brought by the *khait*, as well as the white rice, vegetables, pork porridge, and glutinous rice cooked by the host family for the ceremony (Chien 2005, 50–51).

What is special about the experiences of a minority cadre in southeastern Guizhou? How unique or common are Deik Bok’s narrations and experiences? Based on my long-term fieldwork among Hmub societies in southeastern Guizhou, my ethnography and interpretation tell me that the world of kin-based relations is an important legacy not just for Deik Bok but for all other Taijiangers. It is through the web of these relations that the ethnic minority cadre represented himself and shaped his local and social identity.

Conclusion

Mass labor migration from rural to urban areas is one of the most visible and significant aspects of “the rise of China.” Examining personal experiences can help us to describe and understand such macro phenomena. For example, from eight persons’ life histories and personal voices, Kleinman (2006), a Harvard anthropologist and psychiatrist, has described how people live a moral life amidst uncertainty and danger, and interpreted

what really matters in their personal lives. While recounting Deik Bok's life history and oral narratives, I have discussed one individual's experience of uncertainty and morality through China's socialist and reform periods. Specifically, I listened closely to how the rise of labor mobility led to a shift in his economic decisions and subjectivity. This ethnography builds on the long-term friendship between us and on the ethnographic studies I have conducted in Hmub villages in the highlands of southeastern Guizhou since 1997. Particularly relevant data was gathered during two field trips in 2011 and 2014. Life history narratives not only help us to reconstruct and interpret the lives of real people through empirical methodology but also relate to concepts of performance, existence, and linguistic practice. Deik Bok represents a lively and vivid social actor of a particular time and place participating in China's labor migration and social transformation. As such, his story provides a nuanced understanding of China's transformation from the perspective of a person in a minority area.

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