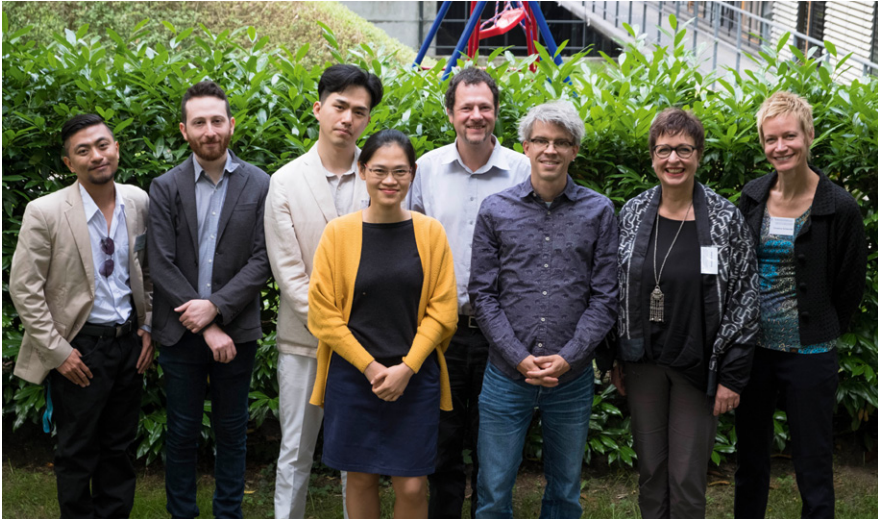


VI
THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC
ANTHROPOLOGY OF SOUTHEAST ASIA



Group members and invited guests at a pre-fieldwork workshop held on 15 June 2018: (from left) Floramante S. J. Ponce, Michael Degani, Bada Choi, Thi Phuong Thao Vu, Guido Sprenger, Oliver Tappe, Kirsten Endres, Christina Schwenkel (Photo: MPI for Social Anthropology, 2018)

Electric Statemaking in the Greater Mekong Subregion

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Group Objectives and Organization

Electricity has played an important role in realizing the promise of modernity since the late nineteenth century. With the emergence of the modern and modernising nation-state, electricity infrastructural development became part and parcel of state formation and state building projects. These “electric statemaking” processes are ongoing in many parts of the world. They include the appropriation of resources from peripheral regions and the consolidation of territorial control through development projects. They also involve new configurations of social relations, identity politics, political institutions, and power and inequality. Electricity grids are thus not only intricately intertwined with the goals of governmental modernity, but also with the making of subjects and subjectivities.

Established in 2017 (and introduced in a provisional way in the previous report), this research group investigates currents of power and electricity in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), encompassing Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and China’s Yunnan and Guaxi provinces. The group currently consists of Kirsten Endres as head of the group, two PhD students (Thi Phuong Thao Vu and Floramante S.J. Ponce) and, since September 2018, Bada Choi as postdoctoral researcher. Individual projects concentrate on Vietnam (Endres, Vu), Laos (Ponce) and Yunnan/China (Choi). By looking at the interrelationship between the development of energy systems and the complex operation of modern states and state power, the group seeks to shed light on how the expansion of electric power lines in the region has been shaping perceptions of government and governance. We also explore the role of electric infrastructure development in the construction of particular (gendered, neo-liberal, moral, political) subjects and subjectivities and ask how energy development projects serve to reshape, challenge or reproduce existing uneven social relations among different groups of people. Moreover, by paying attention to the political dynamics surrounding renewable energy development, we investigate how an energy transition might reconstitute particular forms of governmentality (and/or subjectivity, and economy) built upon current energy regimes.



'Electric statemaking' fieldwork sites, 2017–2021.

Electrification and Power Consumption

Electrification has played a key role in the global spread of modern lifestyles since the late nineteenth century, albeit with uneven results across regions. The evolution of electric power systems in Western societies and their introduction into the domestic sphere roughly coincided with the heyday of European colonial expansion and rule. It was during this time that electricity – along with other emblems of Western civilization and colonial superiority – penetrated into colonized territories, including what was then called Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos). Back then, however, the comforts of modern electric life were not for everyone to enjoy. Familiarity with electric appliances and their functions was primarily associated with the cultural sophistication of elite colonial urbanites. This changed after independ-

ence and universal access to electric power supply was (eventually) recognized as a precondition for economic development and an improved quality of life for all. As this research group posits, however, electricity grids are not only fundamental to the goals of governmental modernity and development agendas, but also to practices of statecraft as such.

In the fast-developing economies of the Greater Mekong Subregion, substantial effort has been dedicated to universal electrification. Vietnam’s recent national electrification program, for example, has been very successful in achieving its goals. After the economic reforms of 1986, access to electricity increased from 14% in 1993 to 61% in 1997 and over 99% by 2014, effectively connecting all households to the national power grid. Laos has made similarly rapid progress, with rates of household electrification rising from approximately 15% in 1995 to 87% by 2015. Moreover, the Lao government has pursued its ambition to turn the country into “the battery of Asia” through exporting hydro-electricity to consumer markets in neighbouring countries. China is certainly the biggest player in the region, and among the world’s largest producers and consumers of electricity. Since 2015, the government has been trying to reduce dependency on fossil fuels, in particular coal, and instead to build a clean, low-carbon, safe, and efficient energy system (“ecological civilization”). As a result, while China is still the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter, it is also investing more than any other country in the world in renewable energy, including hydropower, wind energy and solar energy. For the last five years, Chinese investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have dominated recent infrastructure projects in the GMS, including hydropower dams, transmission lines, railways, and roads.

Population growth, economic development, industrialization, and urbanization have been key drivers of energy demand in the GMS. This is particularly true for Thailand, Vietnam and Yunnan/China, where electrification rates and power consumption are highest. In some areas of rural Laos, however, 24/7 electricity supply is still a novelty. Ponce’s research in a hydropower resettlement village in Bokeo province shows that the introduction of electricity and electric appliance ownership significantly transformed people’s social relations, consumption patterns, and views on rural and modern life. The availability of electricity enabled new businesses to flourish in the resettled communities, such as an ice factory, an ice cream shop, a furniture factory, printing shops, and various retail stores selling electronic devices. However, Ponce identifies huge differences in how people have appropriated electric appliances in their everyday lives, depending on their level of affluence. Whereas those from traditionally well-to-do families could generally capitalize on the 24/7 electricity supply, others lost their previous sources of income in the relocation process and struggle to cope with the transformations brought about by their resettlement and grid connection. Those who fail to pay their monthly electricity bills are disconnected, which forces them to return to using oil or kerosene lamps, or to illegally reconnect to the grid.



Vietnam Electricity workers remove an old transformer to make way for one of higher capacity. (Photo: Thi Phuong Thao Vu, 2019)

Accelerating economic growth has led to increased power consumption in Vietnam in the past two decades. Domestic appliance ownership has also increased. Until the late 1980s, the proper use of all things electric was underpinned by discourses of civilizational achievement. With the onset of the *Đổi mới* economic reforms, however, Vietnamese urbanites grew ever more accustomed to living their lives electrically. Today, some of the most common electric appliances seem almost like natural extensions of their bodies and minds. In urban centres, Vietnamese households are equipped with an ever-growing number of electric appliances to cook and store food efficiently, provide physical comfort and relief from climate conditions, allow for flexible work schedules and connect people in unprecedented ways. But electricity access and consumption has not increased equally in urban and rural areas. In a rural commune in Thai Binh province, some 150 kilometres from the capital Hanoi, Thi Phuong Thao Vu found that rural households possess fewer appliances than their urban counterparts, not only because they can hardly afford to pay high electricity bills, but also because the supply voltage is often too low or unstable to operate high-energy devices (e.g. air conditioners in the summer).

Renewable energy appliances may help users reduce their electricity bills as well as their carbon footprints. Approximately 85 million solar water heating systems have been installed across China. Besides enabling residents to economize on electricity, these appliances offer a window through which to explore changing everyday practices. Choi's project focuses on the ways resettled villagers use and interact with solar water heaters installed on the roofs of their modern residential buildings in Kunming city, Yunnan province. Here, the everyday use of solar water heaters has improved users' perceptions and practices of personal hygiene. The new technology has played a role in shaping users' identities as "modern" citizens as well as subjective relationships with the state.

Electric Statemaking and Subjectivity Formation

Although the provision and maintenance of essential infrastructure is still seen in many parts of the world as a central task of the state, private sector participation and public-private partnerships in infrastructure development have become widespread in the era of neoliberalism. This is true for the Greater Mekong Subregion, where hydropower development has emerged as a high-priority sector in national and regional development plans. But the development of hydropower is globally controversial due to the hazardous effects of large dams on riverine ecosystems and human populations. The most obvious effect is the large-scale displacement of people whose livelihoods are transformed by the new dams. Ponce’s research reveals that despite obtaining 24/7 electricity supply together with other new infrastructures and new ways to make a living, the majority of villagers were dissatisfied with the management of the relocation process. Many claimed that the promised compensatory measures had not been properly implemented – such as transportation assistance from old settlements to the resettlement village, safe and better housing, food support and free electricity for three years, and compensation for the loss of agricultural land. Some complained that district government and company staff favoured relatives and close friends, which caused irritation and jealousy in the resettlement. Moreover, the majority of Ponce’s informants indicated that they had been happier in their old settlements because they had enjoyed many sources of both income and food there. As a result of their disillusionment, they felt they had a bleak future in the resettlement; some were considering returning to older settlements or migrating elsewhere.

Choi’s research participants in Kunming had also had to relocate, but for a different reason. Their village became the site of a massive urban development project, and villagers had to move to newly-built apartment blocks equipped with communal solar water heating systems on the roof. While the relocation as such was perceived as a necessary sacrifice for national development objectives, the water heaters enabled the state to re-establish a positive relationship with its citizens. Given the difficulty of obtaining hot water in the past, solar water heaters gave residents an intimate feeling of being re/embraced and taken care of by the Chinese state. People also felt that the everyday use of solar water heaters contributed to raising their overall “quality” (*suzhi*), which is seen as a prerequisite to the ultimate goals of modernization and development. People felt that the cleaner they became through 24/7 availability of hot water (which enabled them to take a shower anytime they wanted to and to wash their bodies as long as they wanted to), the more civilized they were, a belief rooted in the idea that personal hygiene mirrors *suzhi*.

The Vietnamese state – that proclaims to be “of the people, by the people and for the people” – has likewise instrumentalized electricity to well maintain its relationship with the population. Vu’s preliminary findings show that electric power works both at the everyday level to improve rural living standards and at the ideational level to maintain the desire for state care. Whereas the state is almost uniformly given

credit for the positive effects of electrification, the state-owned electricity corporation EVN and its workers are blamed for any power sector inadequacies. “Electric statemaking” is thus an important tool of Vietnamese statecraft to maintain its legitimacy and its positive relationship with citizens. However, in the context of market economic reforms and the development of a domestic private sector, the state’s claim to act “for the people” is being challenged by privatization and reductions in tariff subsidies. The public resentment evoked by the 2019 power tariff increase showed that legitimacy depended on the provision of basic necessities – including electricity – at affordable prices. Another effect of raising power tariffs is that electricity is now increasingly regarded as a commodity that has to conform to certain quality standards to justify the price being charged. Consuming and paying for electricity thus raises people’s awareness of consumer rights, including the right to complain and demand better quality service. This emergent customer subjectivity potentially transforms relationships with the utility company, which in turn may translate into new ways of relating to the state.

Activities and Prospects

The research group kicked off with a workshop entitled *Untangling the Grid: Toward an “Anthropology Electric” in the Greater Mekong Subregion* during which group members presented their research proposals and received comments and practical advice from experts in the field. Ponce’s and Vu’s long-term doctoral field studies in Laos and Vietnam, Choi’s 6-month research in Kunming (China) and Endres’s research in the *Archives Nationales D’Outre-Mer* in Aix-en-Provence (France) and the *National Archives Centre Nr. 1* in Hanoi (Vietnam) took place in 2018/19. We are currently in the process of analysing and writing up our ethnographic and archival data and expect to begin presenting our results at conferences and workshops in the near future. The group conference *Flows of Power and Electricity in the Greater Mekong Subregion: Promises and Prospects*, originally planned for May 2020, has to be postponed due to the Covid19-crisis. Group members also plan to present their results in different panels at the EASA meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, in July 2020 and the 4S (Society for Social Studies of Science) Meeting in Prague, Czech Republic, in August 2020.

The group aims to contribute to the anthropological study of infrastructure development. It focuses in particular on the statemaking processes through which power is enacted, political subjection is achieved, and forms of governance are legitimized. We do so by showing how electricity infrastructures, services and devices are important sites of encounter and negotiations that affect and are affected by understandings and experiences of the state in everyday lives, thereby having a profound impact on people’s identities and practices as citizens.