



When local power meets hydropower: Reconceptualizing resettlement along the Nam Gnouang River in Laos



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ABSTRACT

In Laos, hydropower development is occurring at rapid, though controversial pace. While hydropower development could in principle contribute to the country's development objectives to promote economic growth and reduce poverty, it also impacts people's livelihoods especially local communities living along the river. Focusing on the transition of Nam Gnouang River into a reservoir, this article looks at the process of resettlement of four neighboring villages in Bolikhamxai Province, Laos into one resettlement site, Ban Keosengkham. Conceptualizing hydropower development as a 'technology' of power, it illustrates how power relations between villagers, local government authorities, and dam developers determine resettlement processes and outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Mekong hydropower is developing rapidly, responding to growing regional demand for electricity, export-led economic growth, expanding domestic consumer markets, and facilitated by the emerging importance of private sector financing¹ (Bakker, 1999; Middleton et al., 2009). At present there are thirty-six dams in operation in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), and approximately 110 planned,² under licensing or under construction in private-public partnership (MRC report, 2009). The dams have generating capacities ranging from less than 1 MW up to 2600 MW for Sambor dam planned across the Mekong mainstream in Cambodia.³

Laos is at the forefront of this development. Currently, there are ninety-nine dams planned in addition to seventeen already under operation (MRC report, 2009). Nationally, hydropower development is perceived as the state's primary means to promote

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¹ Unlike before, hydropower projects are built and operated by private developers in collaboration with key government agencies, with little or no involvement from the international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

² Twelve of these planned dams are on the Mekong mainstream. For discussion and analysis on the overall power interplay and decision-making landscape for these twelve mainstream dams see Suhardiman et al. (2015).

³ For exact configuration for these dams, see the Challenge Program Water and Food data base (CPWF, 2013).

economic growth and achieve the country's defined development targets through industrialization and domestic market development and, importantly, as a means for government revenue generation. Regionally, international financial institution such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) presents Laos' hydropower potential as an integral part of its (the ADB's) regional power trade plan, emphasizing the country's potential role as the battery for South-east Asia (ADB, 2009). In this context, hydropower development is pictured both as the Government of Laos' (GoL) major asset to promote economic growth and as part of structural measure to enhance the regional economy.

In practice, however, the rapid pace of dam construction in Laos has also caused environmental and socio-economic changes, impacting resettled communities and people living downstream of the dams (Baird et al., 2015; Bakker, 1999; Baran, 2005). Resettlement has always been a major issue in Laos, both historically and in the present (Baird and Shoemaker, 2007; Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; High et al., 2009). While past resettlement was driven primarily by the state's political security concerns, to move ethnic minorities out of the mountainous area, and thus not necessarily related to hydropower development, the scope and scale of resettlement as a core technology of state-based development planning continue to be applied in hydropower-induced resettlement (Delang and Toro, 2011; Singh, 2009).

Partly complying with the way resettlement is presented as part of the state-based development planning, current discussion on the impacts of hydropower development and with regard to

resettlement in particular tends to homogenize local communities as a group and gives them the appearance of passive recipients (Baird et al., 2015; Bui et al., 2013). Partially overlooking the fact that some villagers are better off economically and politically to cope with resettlement processes than others (Kura et al., 2014; Sayatham and Suhardiman, 2015), current research on resettlement tended to have polarized views on how it impacts local communities. For example, while a few studies have shown that resettled communities can regain or improve their living conditions (Agnes et al., 2009; Souksavath and Maekawa, 2013), other studies have also shown how resettlement can reduce living standards and result in rural impoverishment (Bartolome et al., 2000; Lerer and Scudder, 1999). Moreover, current discussion on the impact of hydropower development seems to overlook the blurred boundary between the state and society (Delang and Toro, 2011; Singh, 2009), especially with regard to the role played by the local elite in directing and influencing the overall negotiation processes with regard to resettlement.

We endeavor to move the analysis of hydropower development and resettlement further by highlighting the heterogeneous nature of resettled community, the multiple rationalities it embodies, and the role of local elite in determining resettlement processes and outcomes. We suggest that resettlement processes, not unlike other processes of social and political change, are also defined and influenced by different segments within the community and the wider society at large, in this case involving the district and provincial governments and dam developers. We examine how local communities in the four dam affected villages along the Nam Gnouang River, Bolikhamxai Province, Laos cope differently with resettlement processes and the socio-environmental changes resulting from the Theun Hinboun Expansion Project (THXP), as derived from their conceptualization of space and place in relation to the water sources, political connections and initial knowledge of the resettlement site. Conceptualizing hydropower development as a technology of power, this article positions resettlement in the central stage of the country's development agenda and illustrates how the blurred boundary between the state and society manifests in the actual process of resettlement and livelihood transitions, as derived from power relations between villagers, local government authorities, and dam developers.

2. Hydropower development as technology of power and the shaping of 'hydroscape'

Shifting the emphasis from state's territorial control to a more nuanced notion of 'governmentality' manifested in complex relationships between men and things, Foucault (1991) highlights the importance of understanding the interrelationship between space, knowledge and power in analyzing power. As stated by Foucault in Crampton and Elden (2007: 6): 'if we want to do an analysis of power... we must speak of powers and try to localize them in their historical and geographical specificity'. Perceiving power as heterogeneous, and moving from juridical conception of power based on state sovereignty to a conception of a technology of power that highlights the role of both state and society in knowledge generation and power production, Foucault develops an analysis of power that goes beyond actors who use it as an instrument of coercion to a notion that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault, 1991), and which is in constant flux and negotiation. Or as stated by Gaventa (2003: 1): '[According to Foucault] power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them'. Power pervades society and cannot be absolutely hegemonic because it involves people, their social

systems, and the ideas they hold about themselves and each other. Power thus travels through social space and time.

Bringing to light the role of powerful and less powerful actors, in particular the local elite in the resettlement processes, this article aims to enhance our understanding of local power geometry. It highlights the villagers' relative positions of power through the transition of four local communities lived in four neighboring villages into one resettlement site: Ban Keosengkham. Here, the constructed landscape involves a business of dwelling that celebrates the individual as an active participant in the perpetual construction of that which surrounds her. How do the different villages within the resettled community of Ban Keosengkham shape resettlement processes? How does it reflect the existing power structure and relations within the community and in relation to local (district and provincial) government authorities, and dam developers? And how does this power dynamics determine resettlement outcomes? These are the questions explored here. While the dam developers and local government authorities are indeed protagonists in the 'grand narrative' (Massey, 2005: 82), they will remain backstage within this article as the villagers take center stage.

3. Research methodology

The line of analysis and arguments presented in this article are derived from in-depth case study research (Burawoy, 1991; Yin, 1994), conducted by the first author from June to December 2011 supported by a literature review on hydropower development and resettlement in Laos in general, and with regard to Theun Hinboun Expansion Project (THXP) in particular. As part of the project, four villages along the Nam Gnouang River were to be resettled to the defined resettlement site to give way to reservoir construction. These four villages are Phonkeo, Sensi, Thambing, and Sopchat. Rooted in a constructivist epistemology, this research interprets social phenomena through the network of interactions between different actors and institutions (Bryman, 2008) while focusing on the resettlement processes from these four villages to the defined resettlement site: Ban Keosengkham, in Bolikhamxay province, Laos.

To understand how different villagers view and perceive hydropower development impacts in relation to resettlement, we look at: (1) how resettlement processes and outcomes are determined by the villagers' conceptualization of space and place in relation to the water sources; (2) how powerful and less powerful actors direct and influence resettlement processes; and (3) how resettlement impact the distribution of, access to, and use of water sources.

To understand how resettlement processes and outcomes are determined by the villagers' conceptualization of space and place in relation to the water sources, we look at the overall negotiation processes of the resettlement site, involving village government authorities from the four villages, dam developer, as well as district and provincial governments. We look at how various actors build strategic alliance to excel their goals, relying on their political connections and some knowledge of the resettlement site.

To understand how powerful and less powerful actors direct and influence resettlement processes, we look at how potential resettlement sites were negotiated locally between relevant villages, centering on how the different village heads participate in the actual negotiation processes in relation to the villagers' preferences of the resettlement site. Moreover, we look at the actual zoning process, which defines the division of land, area/zone in the resettlement site, and how the different village heads and villagers influence the process.

To get an overview of how resettlement impact the distribution of, access to, and use of water sources, we look at villagers' various views, perceptions, and experiences in coping with their livelihood transitions. We discuss how some villagers tend to temporarily go back to their former village or 'ban kao' to do certain things (e.g. livestock feeding), while also living in their newly resettled village or 'ban mai'. Moreover, we look at how villagers perceive water collection activities (especially in relation to domestic use) before and after resettlement as well as the way their perception of 'modernity' has (not) evolved in relation to their access to water.

The first author conducted in total of forty seven semi-structured interviews respectively with twelve key informants and thirty two villagers from the four villages along the Nam Gnouang River, as well as three key informants from Theun Hinboun Power Company (THPC). In addition, to capture the gender dimension and how this shapes resettlement processes and outcomes, four focus group discussions were held with groups of women from each of the four original villages, with approximately five to ten women from each village attending each focus group discussion.

4. Theun hinboun expansion project and the making of Ban Keosengkham

As means of development, the relationship between GoL and THPC reflects the evolving relationship between neoliberal economic values and socialist politics within the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) (Rigg, 2009). THPC comprises of three shareholders: the Lao state-owned enterprise Electricite du Lao (EdL), Norway's Nordic Hydropower AB (owned by Stakraft SF), and Thailand's leading private developer GMS Bolisat Limited. In 1996, Electricity Generation of Thailand (EGAT) and THPC signed a Power Purchase Agreement that would allow power export from Laos to Thailand (ADB, 2009). In 1998, with a US\$ 60 million loan from the ADB, THPC started with the construction of Theun Hinboun Power Project (THPP), a run-off-the river hydropower project with 210 MW installed capacity (Børset and Johnson, 2008) in Nam Gnouang River, Bolikhamxay Province. One of the major tributaries of the Nam Theun and Nam Kading river systems (a tributary of the Mekong river), the Nam Gnouang river flows 17 km north of Lak Sao, the nearest city and 217 km east of Vientiane capital. Fig. 1 illustrates the location of THPC's power projects and Ban Keosengkham, indicated by a purple and red circle respectively. The black arrow indicates THXP's location on the Nam Gnouang reservoir. While EdL holds 60% of THPC's shares, EGAT remains THPC's primary customer. Receiving more than 95% of THPP's net available electricity output, EGAT has supported THPC growth as one of the largest foreign exchanges sources in Laos (THPC, 2011).

With the aim to increase THPP's production capability, THPC started with the construction of THXP in July 2011. This project involves a storage reservoir and power plant to increase the electricity generating power of the THPP. This article focuses on resettlement process linked to the THXP reservoir construction.

4.1. Resettlement Action Plan

The development of THXP has displaced in total of more than 6000 rural households, of which 1008 inhabit Ban Keosengkham in 2011. In 2006 THPC representatives investigated the surrounding land to determine the appropriate location for the dam. In 2007, THPC informed the village heads, deputy heads and village elders from the four neighboring villages: Phonkeo, Sensi, Thambing, and Sopchat, about the need for resettlement as their village land will be flooded following the construction of the reservoir in the Nam Gnouang river.

Defined by the Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) as 'asset registration', the first step of the compensation required that each household evaluate their land size, crops, livestock, other belongings as well as a family size (Norplan, 2008). According to our key informant from THPC, this process of asset registration involves six levels of registration to confirm the villagers' belonging. The first and second levels involve the male and female household heads, respectively. THPC constitutes the third level of confirmation, the district government the fourth, and the village authority the fifth. The provincial government completes the sixth and final level of confirmation. This procedure aims to ensure effective implementation of THPC's compensation policy that is based on the principle of replacement cost for the loss of immovable assets.

Besides, the RAP also states that households which were losing 20% of their total livelihood/income or more are entitled to take part in livelihood restoration and improvement activities (Norplan, 2008). Aiming to ensure that villagers' livelihoods are better off after the project was implemented, the RAP targets all households affected by the project to reach the defined annual income target of LAK 17,497,750 (as of December 2011, the average exchange rate of 1 USD was equivalent to LAK 8000). The RAP states that as of 2008, the average total household annual income across all affected zones was slightly above LAK 10 million.⁴ Agricultural production, namely rice cultivation, constitutes the main source of income, followed by fishing, livestock, wage labour, and collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) (Norplan, 2008). Considering potential changes to these livelihoods production, THPC also include indicators other than income targets for desired outcomes, such as improved health and education. Integral to such improved conditions is the diversification of livelihoods production. THPC outlined five main livelihood options for all resettled villagers, which included: (1) non-irrigated agriculture; (2) livestock rearing; (3) individual fish ponds or as in Ban Keosengkham, reservoir fishery group; (4) NTFP collection; and (5) off-farm activities such as weaving and handicrafts.

4.2. Overall negotiation process of the resettlement site

With the government's approval of the RAP in 2007, THPC began developing the necessary infrastructure in the original resettlement sites of Nam Ngoy valley and Nam Phiat area in Bolikhamxay Province. THPC began consultations in 2007 when resettlement was planned in the villages of Souphouan, Phongthong, and Nong Xong, which are part of the Khamkheut district, akin to Keosengkham's four villages at the time (see Fig. 2).

In early 2008, however, the Bolikhamxai provincial authority rejected these site locations for the four villages now constituting Keosengkham. This rejection was supported by two factors: (1) the plan for the establishment of Xaychamphone district in 2008; and (2) Phonkeo and Sensi villager preference for resettlement near the Nam Gnouang river. As the four villages resettling outside of Xaychamphone district would have depleted its necessary population quota of at least 30,000 inhabitants, this would impede the plan for the establishment of the new district.

For Bolikhamxai provincial government, resettlement contributed to the development of infrastructure and new market to achieve its development goals. But most importantly, consolidating a surplus population, THXP provided a unique opportunity for the provincial government to establish Xaychamphone district. For these reasons, it opposed the four villages resettling outside of its domain and thus instigated negotiations for a new resettlement

⁴ This income level was calculated from the value of commodities produced and consumed plus the cash income from all activities (Norplan, 2008).

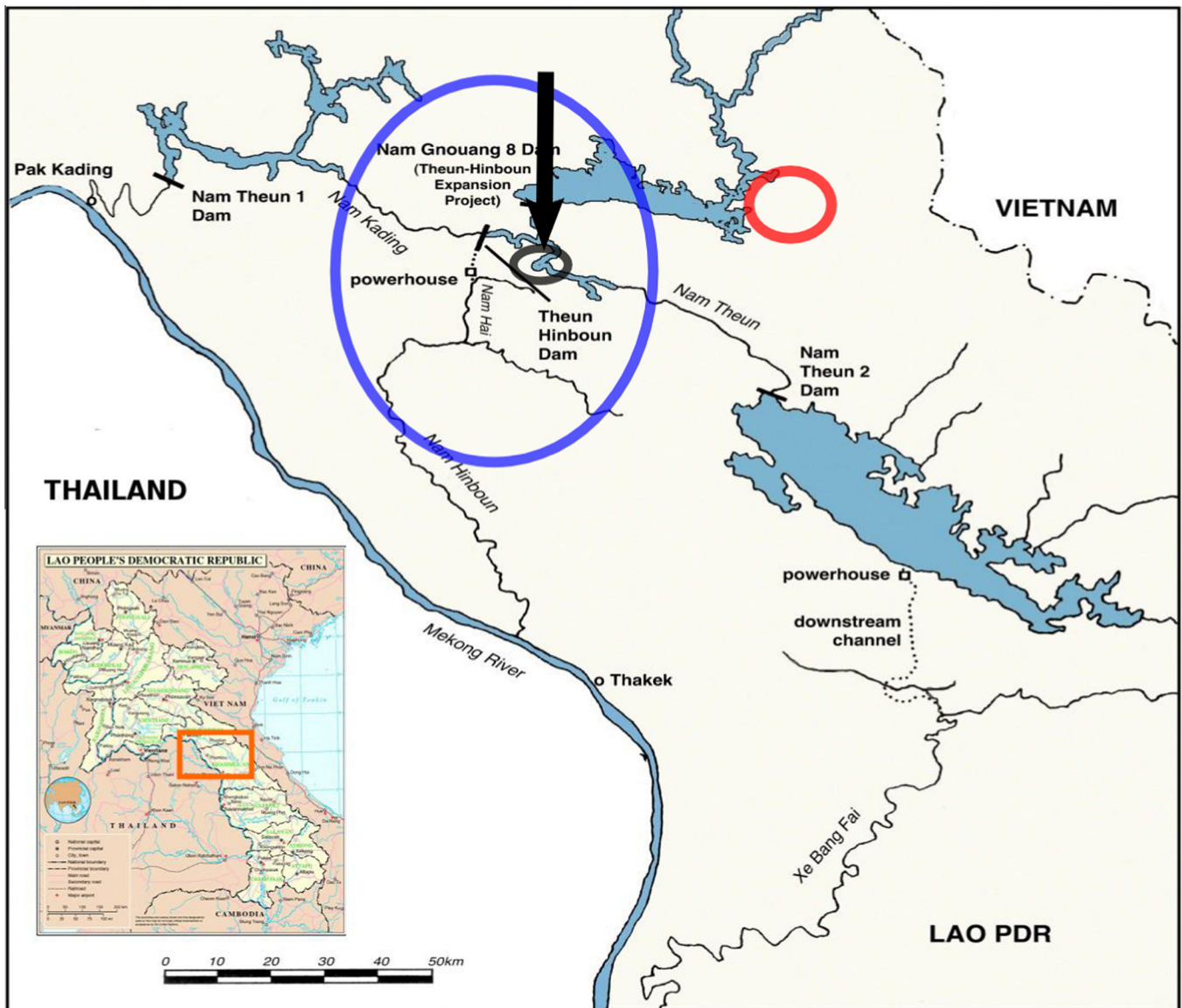


Fig. 1. THPC Project (purple circle) and Ban Kaseonkham (red circle). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.) Source: "Laos: Theun River Basin".

site. These negotiations on the final resettlement site did not conclude until early 2011, just three months prior to the villagers' actual resettlement in Keosengkham.

Once concluded that the villagers from the four villages would be resettled in Keosengkham, complications with regard to land allocation emerged. These concerned developing mountainous land for village homes, infrastructure (e.g. road, electricity, water supply system), and appeasing disappointed villagers (especially those from Thambing and Sopchat) who preferred to resettle in lowland areas. Keosengkham's location further complicates resettlement processes, mainly because the decision to resettle the four villages in a mountainous area contradicts the government's internal resettlement policies (Baird and Shoemaker, 2007) and its twenty year long efforts to resettle ethnic minorities to lowland areas for the purpose of political securitization often presented in the language of social and cultural integration and development acceleration. Nonetheless, the RAP states that each household received three hectares of upland rice fields for shifting cultivation, 1000 squared meters of land surrounding individual houses, and

120 square meters of household garden. THPC also compensated monetarily for any additional land and crops owned by the villagers prior to resettlement.

5. Powerful and less powerful actors

Focusing on the transition of the four villages into one resettlement site: Ban Keosengkham, this section looks at powerful and less powerful actors across the four villages and illustrate how local power geometry determines resettlement processes and outcomes.

5.1. The shaping of power geometry in Keosengkham

Centered in Phonkeo's and Sensi's village power domination over the other two villages, Thambing and Sopchat, the choice of resettlement site was defined in accordance with Phonkeo's and to a certain extent Sensi's villagers' preferences. Our key informants from each of the four villages confirmed that while all of

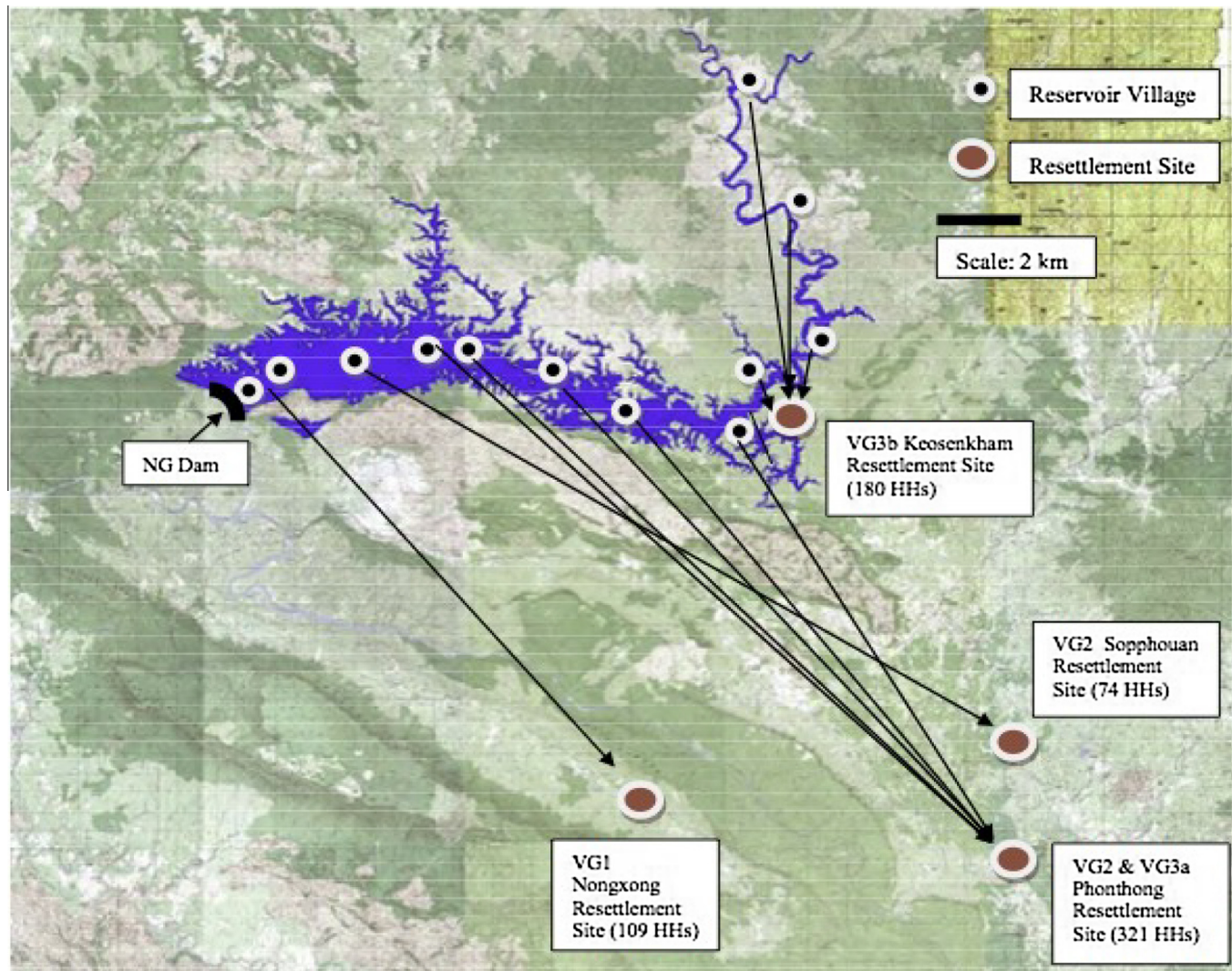


Fig. 2. Resettlement map (THPC, 2011: 9).

Phonkeo's and half of Sensi's inhabitants preferred resettlement in Keosengkham, none from Thambing and Sopchat shared this preference. Accepting THPC's original resettlement plans in a lowland area, Thambing and Sopchat inhabitants celebrated the opportunity to make the transition from upland rice farming through shifting cultivation to lowland rice farming. As a villager from Sopchat asserted: *'resettling closer to the city in THPC's original resettlement site would have provided the opportunity for lowland rice cultivation and thus, improved livelihoods'* (interview note, 18 July 2011). Nevertheless, our key informants from Sensi and Thambing noted that as their respective village heads promoted unity and kinship to encourage their villagers to resettle in Keosengkham, they finally agreed to resettle in Keosengkham. Sopchat's village head, on the other hand, chose to move elsewhere and has since been replaced by a former deputy village head. Partially contradicting the earlier point made by Sensi and Thambing key informants, our key informant from Sopchat village also attributed a lack of choice to their ultimate resettlement in Keosengkham.

Forging an alliance with the district government and Sensi village authority, Phonkeo inhabitants fulfilled their aspiration to move to Keosengkham instead of to the original resettlement site outside of the Xaychamphone district. Intimate with the GoL, Phonkeo's village head holds also the position of Secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) office at the village level, while Sensi's village head acts as Deputy Secretary. As our

informant from District Agricultural and Forestry Office (DAFO) explained: *'The Party approves all of the GoL's work and is thus, the highest authority in Laos'* (interview note, 8 July 2011). Sensi's and Phonkeo's political affiliations facilitated their successful resettlement near the Nam Gnouang. As stated by our key informant from Phonkeo village: *'Resettlement was not difficult, because with our party and the government behind us, we have the advantage'* (interview note, 21 September 2011). As witnessed during the field visits, GoL and THPC officials communicate their resettlement plan and agenda through the village head of Phonkeo. Though elections for a 'village head' of Keosengkham had yet to transpire, majority of the villagers have already positioned Phonkeo's village head as the new leader of Keosengkham.

Deemed the "fighter" village by its inhabitants, Phonkeo's village head resisted THPC's original resettlement plans because of a concern for livelihoods. Our key informants from Phonkeo and Sensi asserted that, without the Nam Gnouang, the villagers' livelihoods productions, such as riverbank gardening and fishing, would be negatively impacted. Consequently, as Phonkeo's village head concluded: *'the whole feeling of the villagers would change'* (interview with Phonkeo's village head, 21 September 2011). Our key informant from Sensi village reiterated this belief, asserting that *'[With the Nam Gnouang] our livelihoods are the same'* (interview note, 11 September 2011). Beyond livelihood dependencies on the Nam Gnouang, villagers expressed an affinity with the river.

As stated by one of the villagers from Phonkeo: *'We feel close to the river'* (interview with villager from Phonkeo, November 2011). For Phonkeo and Sensi villagers, physical proximity to the river sustained familiar livelihood productions and place-based associations. It also supported opportunities for fishing and returning to their respective villages.

While the four village heads formally agreed on their ultimate decision to resettle in Keosengkham, villagers from Thambing and Sopchat continued to reiterate that they had no choice because the district government said they needed to stay in Keosengkham. As a villager from Thambing also noted: *'The name 'Keosengkham' comes from Phonkeo (Keo) and Sensi (Sen). We [Thambing and Sopchat] do not really count'* (interview note, 15 July 2011). This unequal access to decision-making processes around the resettlement site is most apparent from Thambing and Sopchat villagers' absence throughout the negotiation process. A villager from Sensi affirmed that throughout the negotiation process, *'it was difficult for Thambing and Sopchat to come to the meetings because it cost them 10 L of petrol [to travel by boat]'* (interview note, 13 July 2011). Obviously, Phonkeo and Sensi's proximity to Keosengkham not only inspired the village's name but also endowed them with the advantage of participating in decision-making processes related to site location and land allocation.⁵

5.2. Placing zones: The 'Merging' of four into one

According to THPC informants, the amount of land received by each household was derived from a land survey in the resettlement site, divided into four zones representing the four original villages and the number of households in each village. Phonkeo, the largest of the four zones, had the first pick. Our key informant from Phonkeo asserted that Phonkeo villagers did not want to take advantage of this opportunity and thus, in an effort to be fair and appease their new neighbors, chose a less beautiful place. Less beautiful relates to a lower soil quality, which, as he explained, deters from the zone's aesthetics as well as the productive growth of its crops (household gardens and fruit trees).

The subsequent consultation process involved the three remaining village authorities, THPC, and GoL to agree upon zone locations. Within each zone, household allocations depended on household type and the villagers' preference of neighbors. Spatially, Keosengkham reflects the different alliances between villagers in terms of resettlement site preference, proximity to the river and their former villages, and kin relations. Though each zone constitutes distinct mountain-tops, there exists a visual and actual gap between the Phonkeo-Sensi and Thambing-Sopchat sides. We argue that such spatial relations impact and were impacted by existing (power) relations. Aware of this, respondents noted how the current 'order' of zones reflects the former order of villages along the river (see Fig. 3).

According to a villager from Thambing, his 1 ha of shifting cultivation is not his but "belongs to Sensi and Phonkeo." Another villager explained that *'DAFO staff divided the land but hired people from Phonkeo and Sensi to measure everything, which is not fair. If I were them, I would have chosen one person from each village'* (interview note, 15 July 2011). Our key informant from DAFO confirmed that villagers from each zone were invited to participate in this process but, given the travel distance and consequent costs for Thambing and Sopchat, only Phonkeo and Sensi inhabitants participated. Whether they were aware or unaware of this measuring process, majority of Thambing and Sopchat interviewees noted how they in practice received less than 1 ha of land, as compare

to 3 ha of land they supposed to receive as stated in the RAP. Another villager from Thambing described how his land has many big stones and steep hills, which is not appropriate for rice cultivation. As stated by this villager: *'Even though we planted rice, I feel that we will get nothing'* (interview note, 15 July 2011).

Villagers from Phonkeo and Sensi are also more familiar with Keosengkham's land. Prior to resettlement and the establishment of Keosengkham, Phonkeo villagers conducted shifting cultivation on these land and Sensi villagers passed through the area during their travels. Phonkeo's key informant admitted that "giving up" her old land was difficult but "only fair" since every Keosengkham inhabitant requires land for agricultural production. Each household received 1 ha of this shifting cultivation land one month prior to moving and thus, were able to start preparing it before officially moving-in. In practice, however, given the distance between respective ban kao and Keosengkham (ban mai), only Phonkeo and Sensi villagers began early cultivation in March. Thambing and Sopchat respondents affirmed that their land preparation began in June, after moving-in.

The imbalanced power geometry making those with less power feel less apart of their new home and those with more power feel settled. Integral to this imbalance is the villagers' (un)familiarity with Keosengkham's area given the proximity of their respective former village. For Phonkeo and Sensi inhabitants, resettling within the vicinity of their former village not only influenced their agency in decision-making processes, it enabled them to 'go back' and consequently, collect more food. As the following sub-section elaborates, this physical mobility relates to their social mobility, which as discussed above, secures their ultimate position of power.

5.3. Asset registration process and villagers' strategy to exploit compensation

A means of making amends with the villagers for their loss of assets, THPC's compensation policy was contingent on the asset registration process (Børset and Johnson, 2008). In practice, however, some villagers tended to manipulate their asset information, as to get the highest amount of compensation. These manipulation tactics included the 'miscounting' of crops (including fruit trees) and familial re-arrangements through 'convenient marriages, divorces, and adoptions'.

Aspiring to benefit from the principle of 'replacement costs', some of the villagers in Phonkeo and Sensi claimed to 'miscount' their crops during the initial asset registration phase. Heeding the villagers' request to recount their crops, THPC staff returned to their respective village, armed with a can of red spray paint to mark each counted tree. The villagers responded to this approach by requesting that she return another day. That day never came as the villagers never requested the THPC staff to return.

Adapting to the spatial dimensions of the resettlement houses, such familial re-arrangements intended to take advantage of the 'replacement house' compensation policy, which states that families of seven members or more receive a house of 70 m² and families of six members or less receive a house of 60 m². Depending on the size of the house, the villagers could choose either a traditional Lao wooden house, raised on concrete columns, or a grounded concrete house. Only one out of the 181 households in Keosengkham is a concrete house. THPC staff explained this peculiarity in terms of the house's disparate values: *'As the traditional wooden house costs US\$12,000, while the concrete house costs US\$ 7000, choosing for the first is a better investment option for the villagers'* (interview note, June 2011).

A household's ability to exploit the compensation process is linked to their knowledge about the asset registration process and the 'cleverness' of their respective village authority. For example, while villagers from Phonkeo and Sensi would try to manipulate and perhaps even exploit the compensation scheme

⁵ Our informants from THPC and DAFO also affirmed that Lao naming traditions relate to the physical environment. The name Keosengkham reflects its proximity to Phonkeo and Sensi villages.

hold. Inhabitants will pay for their use of these pumps, which function as back-ups for the stream-water taps. The near-by stream, Hoi Kayot, supplies the stream-water taps via a water tank located in Sopchat. Unlike the groundwater, this water is free. While Phonkeo's villager noted that '*Keosengkham has sufficient water supply because the water tank can save 50 m³/day as compare to 30 m³/day water requirement from 181 household*' (interview note, 21 September 2011), other respondents disagree.

Previous experience with a lack of water during the month of June, a few days before this research took place in 2011 and the monsoon season arrived, prompted villagers' concerns about a sufficient water supply. While the water is distributed freely, the respondents experienced its potential limitations. The increased population size based on the four villages being integrated into one, fed the respondents perceived lack of water. According to one respondent, there is too little water for too many households. Another attributed the ten-day dry spell to the storage tank's pipe breaking. A villager from Phonkeo explained that in order to prevent a lack [of water] for the households, THPC and village leaders monitored the use of water by opening the [main] tap only at certain hours of the day. DAFO informant confirmed that these hours were, on average, between nine and eleven in the morning and four and six in the evening.

Prior to resettlement, Phonkeo, Sensi and Sopchat each had a water-tap system constructed by connecting a rubber pipe from the nearest stream directly to a central point near their households. According to our focus group discussions, Phonkeo and Sensi kept this pipe open, allowing the water to trickle down the hillside toward the Nam Gnouang. Sensi inhabitants constructed a cement tank for water collection, to which four separate taps were attached.⁸ Villagers of each village would either collect water from these communal places or, if able to afford it, connected a personal pipe between the communal 'tap' and their household. Such water was used for domestic purposes (cooking, cleaning), while the Nam Gnouang was used for these same purposes and for bathing.

While one of the participants of our focus group discussion in Sensi village noted that the "way" of using water in Keosengkham is the same as before, others disagreed. Limited access to other water sources given the distance between the river and houses as well as (un)familiarity with the area imbued the villagers with an increased sense of limited agency in water collection abilities.

The main factor dividing respondent's opinions, (a lack of) confidence in a sufficient water supply bred feelings of livelihood (in)security and (dis)comfort. Respondents described the stream-water tap system as more comfortable than their previous water-collection methods. Nevertheless, as our key informant from Sopchat, said: '*We rural people don't mind to go to the river to drink, bathe*' (interview note, 15 July 2011). His association with going to the river and being rural reinforces an intimacy with the river that was essential to life in the ban kao. Collecting water was a part of daily life, a habit. From our focus group discussions, women from each village (ban kao) listed water collection as a main activity prior to the resettlement, which involved walking to the river and carrying multiple buckets/ gallons uphill to their house.⁹

⁸ Expressing a sense of pride about his ban kao water infrastructure, Sensi key informant said that 'it seems like Sensi was more forward in terms of these things – cleanliness and hygiene' (interview note, 15 July 2011). Sensi was the only village to have latrines in the ban kao. In Keosengkham, each household has a private latrine behind their house.

⁹ Recall that in each ban kao was located on an incline and thus, walking to and from the riverside required walking downhill and uphill, respectively. According to our focus group discussion participants, this made water collection more challenging. Women participating in our focus group discussions explained that they would either carry two buckets on either hand or hang 6–8 gallons of water onto a stick, which they rested upon their shoulder. Many of them did this while carrying their babies on their backs.

The groundwater, on the other hand, runs on electricity and therefore, costs money. Each household has a meter measuring its electricity use. At the time of this research, EdL had yet to establish whether or not they would provide the villagers with free electricity for an extended period of time beyond the first month. All participants from our focus group discussions agreed that regardless of the necessary payments, they would rather use groundwater than river water during a potential dry spell because they now have a choice to not walk far (to the riverside). Whether or not inhabitants have to and can afford to pay for water will be determined with time and their ability to adapt to a cash-based economy. Beyond economy, the taps strengthen some of the inhabitants perceived connection to the city. For a villager from Thambing, the way of using water in Keosengkham associated the physical closeness of water for domestic use with the increasing similarities between life in Keosengkham and life in the city.

6.3. Electrifying development

Electricity imbued respondents with a sense of 'developing' and thus, as they stated, 'becoming more civilized'. It increased their cultural similarities to and interactions with city-goers. A villager's ability to embrace the advantages of electricity related to their different economic abilities. Purchase power impacted the kinds of technology villagers acquired from Lak Sao traders who, upon electricity's arrival in September 2011, traveled daily to Keosengkham selling their goods. Keosengkham was more than a market for fishing; it was a market that, as witnessed, competing traders aspired to target with their electrical goods.

As the following illustrations demonstrate, THPC also contributes to the fulfillment of some villagers 'ideal' lifestyle. Reinforcing their eagerness to adapt to the changing and 'more civilized' place, women in Phonkeo village included the following main items: a central, paved road; electricity poles; water tank with connecting pipes to each household; food and clothing markets; hospital; schools; and a beauty salon in their 'ideal village' during our focus group discussion. More 'natural' features such as a small river was included in the last minute only after the first author questioned where they would find food. Women in Phonkeo village also feel more able to adapt to 'modern conditions' than their neighbors.

For Thambing women, on the other hand, 'modern things' are less present in their conceptions of an 'ideal' lifestyle after resettlement. During our focus group discussion they included gardens, fruit trees and paddy fields along with schools and a health center, as the main items for their 'ideal village'. Our discussion revealed that they were more concerned with the fact that they could not work hard as lacking lowland rice fields, compare to too much free time. One of the women enjoyed having access to 'modern things,' like television and music, but expressed a sense of boredom with life in Keosengkham.

Phonkeo's and Thambing's focus group discussions illustrate the impact of their zones relative location to the river, city, and ban kao. The women's inclusion/exclusion of certain features ('modern' or 'natural') demonstrated those things that the women currently missed, rather than denote their (in) significance. In contrast, the river is secondary to Phonkeo women's paved road because it is still a part of their daily lives. Phonkeo women had access to their ban kao gardens and fruit trees unlike those from Thambing who had barely visited the riverside since resettling four months before. Thambing's 'ideal' village is not just an expression of what its creators aspire; it can be considered a testimony to their nostalgia for their life in the ban kao.

Existing somewhere in-between the ban kao and Keosengkham, the respondents illustrate that resettling does not mean giving up a previous existence; rather, as an incomplete process of rupture and

transition between 'rural' and 'civilized' lifestyles, it involves a heightened awareness of those things and places that constitute their individual existence and the existence of others. Such awareness arises from the villagers' place-based associations, their tasks and interactions within places of production. The transition of four villages into one accelerates competition over natural resources. Through acts of resistance and alliances with higher authority, Phonkeo's and to a certain extent Sensi's inhabitants facilitated their access to these resources and ultimately, secured their (current) position of power within Ban Keosengkham.

7. Discussion

While some inhabitants celebrate, hydropower development and resettlement that comes with it dictates the encounters between the villagers, dam developers, and local government authorities. In the context of water resource management, Molinga (2011: 22) defines a technology as anything from a '*bodily force to other physical forces [that is] consciously and unconsciously used by actors in social interactions*'. Transitioning from a flowing to a static body of water, the Nam Gnouang River is central to the article's conception of space. It is the literal and metaphorical focal point at which the different actors meet and around which power relations transpire. Harvey (2004) distinguishes three kinds of space: absolute, relative and relational. Absolute space involves what Lefebvre (2009: 171) calls '*material planning*', or '*quantifiable and measurable*' geographical indicators of distance. Relative space defines sites, situations, routes and regions, illustrating individual movement and mapping spatial relations. Relational space engages psychological understanding of these relations. According to Harvey (2004: 3), space is therefore, '*neither absolute, relative or relational in itself, but [something that] can become one or all simultaneously depending on the circumstances*'. These circumstances involve subject positions, or actors, who '*permeate*' and '*support*' (Lefebvre, 2009: 186) the spatial constructs that designate social interactions.

Debunking the presumed 'causal' link that seeing power as everywhere resembles the lack of foundational ground for taking (political) positions, we argue that the villagers, dam developers, and local government authorities (e.g. district and provincial governments) are subject positions who construct their spatial rationalities into a hydroscape. While some inhabitants celebrate and pursue their potential for development, others are unable to adapt to the accelerated flows of people, information and resources arising from resettlement. This distinction relates to one's conceptualization of space and place, as derived from one's relative socio-economic, cultural, and political position and relationships, as well as gender relations, and how these in turn influence one's ability to communicate his/her development aspirations and needs through the resettlement processes. Space is a movement void of a concrete beginning and end. Space is neither a metaphor nor backdrop for these subjects but a flexible construction that emerges from human interactions, while simultaneously molding these interactions into different positions. Akin to the river, it is a constant motion and yet, akin to a reservoir, it flows within porous boundaries that restrict certain movements.

Echoing Bourdieu's (1989: 16) '*field of power*', Massey (1994: 21) refers to these different positions as a '*power geometry*', in which space exists as a '*porous network of social relations*' that are in constant flow. The power one possess emerges not from the actual space they inhabit; rather, it emerges from the way that they conceive of and use their place within that space, which impacts the way others conceive of and use that same place. Or as stated by Bourdieu (1989: 19): '*the representations of agents vary with their position (and with the interest associated with it) and with*

their habitus, as a system of schemes of perception and appreciation of practices, cognitive and evaluative structures which are acquired through the lasting experience of a social position'. The villagers, dam developers, and local government authorities are not to be seen as three groups within which each individual holds the same position, but as references of the different actors within these groups. For example, the villagers constitute not one body of those impacted by hydropower development, but rather as myriad individuals engaging the transitions through their different positions.

8. Conclusion

Rooted in the transitions of the Nam Gnouang River into a reservoir and the four villages into one resettlement site, this article illustrates the different (political) positions taken by villagers, dam developers, and local government authorities as active participants in the overall shaping of the hydroscape. Viewing power as everywhere, and thus as '*something that is negotiated within interactions*' (Mills, 2007: 49), it resembles '*space aliveness*' (Thrift, 2007: 55), and shows how powerful and less powerful actors define their strategies and determine resettlement processes and outcome. Seeing power as everywhere sheds light not only the existing power asymmetry, it also stresses the need to look at resistance and challenges face by those in stronger/weaker position, toward more equal and just development.

Illustrating the villagers' power relations through Ban Keosengkham's spatial relations, this article brings to light three key findings. First, the way different villages within the resettled site: Ban Keosengkham determine resettlement processes and outcomes reflects the existing power geometry, as manifested in the villagers' relative level of agency in negotiations around the resettlement site, which stems from their socio-economic, cultural and political conditions. Beyond a process of *rupture and transition* (Papastergiadis, 2000), hydropower development and resettlement that comes with it is a technology with which certain villagers, namely those from Phonkeo village, secured and asserted their position of power within Keosengkham specifically and the hydroscape at large. Phonkeo's and Sensi's political alliances facilitated their own and the provincial government's respective powers, thus bringing to light the blurred boundary between the state and society. Together, they achieved their interdependent acts of resistance and influence – Phonkeo secured their livelihoods and the Xay-champhone district its necessary growth. Central to this resistance and influence was the Nam Gnouang River, the place at which local power met hydropower. Intervening on this central force, the THPC was implicated in both the villagers' and district's development. Meeting and colliding within the hydroscape, these three actors (de)constructed Keosengkham's spatial reality through their perpetual conceptions of space, knowledge and power.

Second, we show how the existing power geometry and dynamics is partially shaped by the villagers' conceptualization of space and place in relation to water sources, rooted in their socio-economic and political positions, and vice versa. The river is the literal and symbolic force of this power. Its distribution, access and use impacts and is impacted by the relative weight a villager holds within the power geometry. A villager's physical proximity to the river facilitates his/her livelihood production capabilities and ultimately, enhances his/her power within Keosengkham. Simultaneously, while Keosengkham's spatial relations reflect the inherent power relations between the different villages, a zone's relative proximity to the river demonstrates its relative weight within the existing power structure. Emerging from a process of subject making, in which individuals are responsible for their own subjection, these relative weights depend upon the villagers' political connection and initial knowledge of the resettlement site. Unlike

their neighbors in Thambing and Sopchat, the zones designated for Phonkeo and Sensi are those currently located closest to the river.

Third, our focus group discussion with group of women in each of the four villages show how women in Phonkeo view, perceive and experience resettlement differently than their neighbors in Thambing and Sopchat. Women from Phonkeo village embraced their sense of being more able to adapt to the transition from a so-called 'rural' to 'civilized' lifestyle. Ensuing from the villagers decreased access to and use of places of production (agricultural land, forest), this transition reinforced the influence of globalization's narrative, in which the 'underdeveloped' must 'develop.' Framing themselves as 'just rural,' some of the respondents, namely from Thambing and Sopchat, perpetuated their subjection as a 'less able other' within the hydroscape. Nevertheless, for some, associations with 'rural' were simply expressions of nostalgia for their ban kao and their ability to be self-sufficient.

While this article argues that some of the villagers hold a stronger position of power, it does not suggest that these positions are unchanging. They will evolve just as the reservoir will evolve for 'the cyclical nature of social reproduction' (Mollinga 2008: 16) is reflected in the cyclical nature of water. As Keosengkham's places of production develop, so will the relative weights within each zone of its power geometry because, at the end of the day, every individual is simply striving to survive, with some better equipped to do this than others. Somewhere in-between Keosengkham and the ban kao, the villagers are in "endless motion" (Papastergiadis, 2000: 1) as their journeys of displacement and resettlement never complete.

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