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| AAPG2025 | AltLife-SSEA | PRC |
| Coordinated by : | Xavier GUILLOT | 36 months |
| D.7. Sociétés et territoires en transition | | |

Alternative life projects in rural South & Southeast Asia: Reflecting on post-development through a study of diverse emplaced collectives

I. Research proposal

I.1. Background, goal and framework

All over the world, rising social inequalities, and a disenchantment with Western modernity have been prompting experiments in alternative ways of living. Climate change and the necessary "environmental transition" have only made such projects more urgent. Besides experimental communities that reach back to the late 1960s-early 1970s, "eco-villages" have been emerging and multiplying over the past three decades (Litfin 2009). Furthermore, inhabitants of the "global South", including indigenous peoples, have been trying to maintain or retrieve their alternatives to imposed models of "development" (e.g. Blaser & al. 2004). By considering together such different types of emplaced collectives that tend to be studied separately, AltLife aims to reflect upon alternative life projects in their complexity. It geographically focuses on **South and Southeast Asia**, as regions that are not only sources of inspiration, due to their image of lands of "Asian spirituality" and home to indigenous peoples, but also thoroughly engaged in the pursuit of modernization (e.g. Rigg & Salamanca 2017; Varma 1998). Its goal is to elaborate on the distinction between "alternatives to development" and "alternative development" that was so vividly formulated by Arturo Escobar (1995: 215). Rather than trying to categorise life projects as either radically rejecting the entire paradigm of development—operating a clear-cut "post-"development—or working within this paradigm, it considers the collectives under study as expressing a range of critical engagements with dominant development (Schaffar 2018; Ziai 2025). **AltLife makes the hypothesis that a comparative study of different types of alternative life projects, of the factors that contribute to their success, or failure, can contribute to broader reflections on the sustainability of such idealistic endeavours.**

Three types of emplaced collectives

Emplaced collectives are "heterogeneous assemblages" of human and possibly non-human entities that "'take place' in a specific location" and are related by mutual obligations (Blaser 2019: 84). These collectives share **life projects**, defined as "practices of good life oriented to the(ir) sustenance" (Blaser 2019: 86) and a critical stance toward established development, but they speak from very diverse perspectives and compositions. We focus on three types of emplaced collectives: i) **Cosmopolitan collectives** have been intentionally created and involve people from a diversity of places. Although disenchanted with modernity, these collectives are likely to maintain ties with the "First - World" through at least some of their members. Our research engages Auroville in India and the eco-village of Pun Pun in Northern Thailand. ii) **Preservationist endogenous collectives** have existed in a place for generations. While, in alternative circles, these collectives tend to be presented as paragons of an interconnected and solicitous way of being in the world, they have also been subject to mainstream development politics that extol modernity and promote a "will to improve" (Li 2007). We involve Bishnoi people in Northern India, Kanekes in Banten, Indonesia, and Bunong inhabitants of highland Cambodia. iii) **(Re)converting endogenous collectives** comprise local people who, in interaction with external agents of change, have chosen to revert their way of living, in part back to what it was before it was transformed by developmental modernization. In Java, Indonesia, we study Koranic schools that promote a chemical-free agriculture based on eco-religious values, and in Northern Thailand, a Catholic project that encourages highland minorities to reinfuse their worldview and rituals into their agricultural practices.

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Three lines of analysis connected through transversal reflections

Based on an initial WP1 « Coordination and state of the art », our research unfolds along a common set of lines that have interrelated entrances—material, social, ideal. First, we study emplaced collectives’ **material arrangements and spatial (re)rooting (WP2)**, asking how they live from and with the land on which they are dwelling. Considering that the process of (re)rooting cannot be predetermined by the geographical and physical reality of the territory, we examine interactive forms of human composition with their environment. While all emplaced collectives strive toward self-sustainability by trying to regain sovereignty over land, water, food, energy, or technology, we ask how this quest is influenced by their technical and economic situations. Further, we explore the **social and institutional reconfigurations (WP3)** that occur in emplaced collectives as they engage in alternative life projects. We examine how people give form to their aims of living meaningfully together and articulating sovereignty and interdependence and how collectives combine local and immediate imperatives with supralocal and long-term issues. To do so, we look at transcalar dialogues involving neighbouring populations, other collectives, NGOs, and government representatives, and at how these inform their internal relations. In the process, we examine local translations of powerful concepts such as “ecological transition” and “autonomy”. Lastly, we compare the **(cosmo)political imaginaries and subjectivities in motion (WP4)**, as they shape alternative life projects and are reshaped along the way. We examine how different types of emplaced collectives contest dominant modernist development, with particular attention to their mobilisation of local wisdom and values, to propose different ways of relating to fellow humans as well as to other-than-humans. Particular attention is paid to processes of formalisation and strategic mobilisation of certain self-representations that are likely to bring about gaps that affect how people see themselves and their world. **Transversal reflections (WP5)** aim at discerning subject matters that run through the three lines of research (WP2-3-4) and to analyse how ideal and material elements, but also institutional elements resonate, intertwine to compose more or less egalitarian, anti-capitalist and autonomous “ways of being and living”. Considering that as researchers, we also (co-)produce discourses, this transversal approach needs to be reflexive. We will tackle questions and possibly upcoming dilemmas that are inevitably related to collaborative research, which involves engaged collectives.

I.2. A pluri-disciplinary, cross-regional, and collaborative methodology

While field research with emplaced collectives in India, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia constitutes the project’s methodological common ground, it will be implemented according to the members’ disciplinary specialisation and regional experience. Each member of the research team uses classic tools of qualitative research, such as **participant observation, (semi-)directive interviews and thematic focus group discussions**, and deploys them on multiple, concentric scales—following the collectives’ connections, from individuals to households, subgroups, community, including also external stakeholders (representatives of the government, persons living in the vicinity of the collective, etc). There will be 2 modes of research: 1) **fixed** and 2) **itinerant**:

1. Researchers with a strong area specialisation (anthropology, sociology, geography), which includes the command of local languages, will spend extended periods of time with the collective(s) they investigate to explore in-depth questions and practise thick description for a fine-grained ethnography. Some of them are already engaged in long-term relations with Bunong, Bishnoi and Kanekes peoples enabling the co-construction of knowledge. Further, they will act as facilitators and translators for the itinerant researchers.

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2. Researchers with a strong disciplinary specialisation (architecture, economy), will visit several to all collectives, to examine a common body of specific questions, notably through questionnaires, across the two regions. They will provide knowledge complementary to the more locally anchored research.

While close collaboration with members of the collectives is key, it will be adapted to each collective, given the political contexts—authoritarian, conflictual—and the disciplinary approaches, and range from sharing specific information to co-constructing knowledge. Comparative reflection will be furthered in yearly hybrid international workshops in India, Thailand and France that will assemble not only researchers and artists, but also practitioners from the various collectives. These regular events will promote circulation of ideas between places, disciplines, and collectives.

I.3. Research contributions

AltLife-SSEA aims to contribute to broadening the scope of South and Southeast Asian studies and to nourish global reflections on ways of living and dwelling that are critical of established development by shedding light on alternative life projects in a region where they have so far received little attention. By thinking together through three types of collectives that have tended to be siloed, it will show the circulation of actors, practices, ideas and values, as well as processes of appropriation, translation and vernacularisation. These three types of collectives will not be approached as enclaves within countries or regions. Part of the research will examine their social, cultural, and political environment, considering that this environment influences a portion of their life projects and vice versa. By comparing alternative projects in different countries, AltLife will assess the weight that national and regional norms and structures exert on how people (re)formulate their ways of relating to the world. It thereby seeks to provide critical but constructive insights on post-development, taking seriously constraints on collective efforts towards “good life” as much as affordances that these efforts suggest. Through its collaborative approach, the project shall be informed by the thoughts of members of the involved collectives, and foster dialogue among these collectives. This dialogue will materialise (**WP6**) in two online open-access resources: a **collaborative glossary** on alternative life projects in South and Southeast Asia, as well as an **interactive map** involving local artists and giving multimedia insights about the various emplaced collectives. Further, the AltLife team will contribute **articles** in the fields of South and Southeast Asian Studies (with IFP & IRASEC editions) and of critical development studies (e.g. *Third World Quarterly*), and publish a **book** (e.g. Lever Press, open access) focusing on the studied collectives’ spatial (re)rooting practices.

II. Partnerships

II.1. Scientific coordinator

Xavier Guillot is an architect and planner, professor HDR at the National School of Architecture of Marseille (ENSA), and a researcher attached to EFEO’s Construction des Centres de Civilisation unit. He is the founder of the scientific and thematic network “Espace rural et projet spatial” (<https://erps.archi.fr/>). Within this network, he is the chief editor of the book series “Espace rural et projet spatial” published by the University of Saint-Etienne. Since 2017, he is a member of the editorial board of *Les Cahiers: Journal for the Study of Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape*.

II.2. Consortium

AltLife brings together a group of researchers from the fields of architecture, anthropology, geography, economy, and sociology with regional focus on South Asia (SA) or Southeast Asia (SEA). The involvement of three French research institutions with centres in Asia—the École Française d’Extrême-

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Orient, IRASEC and the Institut Français de Pondicherry—and the partnership of Asian academic institutions will facilitate the conduct of fieldwork and workshops, which assemble local and foreign specialists. South and Southeast Asian collectives will be partners in research. IFP engineers will provide support in data analyses and representation (Department of Geomatics) and CNRS Passages engineers in data dissemination (REGARDS Team).

| Steering team (involved in all 6 WPs) | | | | |
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| EFE0 | X. Guillot | coord. & WP1 resp.- Architecture SA & SEA | 36% | PR ENSA Marseille |
| IRASEC | G. Facal | WP3 resp. – Anthropology - SEA | 18% | Deputy Dir. IRASEC |
| EFE0 | C. Scheer | WP4 resp. – Anthropology - SEA | 18% | MCF EFE0 / CASE |
| IFP | D. Thivet | WP5 resp. – Sociology - SA | 10% | Head of Dep. IFP |
| LAVUE | F. Landy | WP2 resp. - Geography - SA | 10% | PR Paris Nanterre Univ. / LAVUE |
| Passages | A. Carimentrand | Economy - SA & SEA | 10% | MCF IUT Bordeaux |
| Passages | J. Ballet | Economy - SA & SEA | 10% | MCF Bordeaux Univ |
| EFE0 | Post-doc researcher | Anthropology - SA | 100% | |
| French academic partners | | | | |
| IFP | V. Govindan | WP3 & 4 – Sociology - SA | 10% | RE. IFP |
| EFE0 | O. Tessier | WP2–Anthropology&Agro-engineering - SEA | 10% | MCF EFE0 / CASE |
| French research support team | | | | |
| IFP | B.Dhandapani | WP6 resp. - Data analysis & representation, statistics | Department of Geomatics | |
| Passages IFP | C. Abela S. Corgne | WP6 - Research dissemination WP6 - DMP, digital humanities | Team REGARDS Department of Geomatics | |
| Artistic collaborators | | | | |
| India | Ravi Agarwal | WP6 - Interactive map | | |
| Thailand | Som Supaparinya | WP6 - Interactive map | | |
| Foreign academic collaborators | | | | |
| Thailand | C. Vaddhanaphuti | Regional Center for Social Sciences & Sustainable Development | Chiang Mai University | |
| India | A. Kothari | Kalpavriksh | Pune | |
| Contact persons in the emplaced collectives | | | | |
| India | Y. & A. Rozin | Sadhana Forest (Auroville) | Tamil Nadu | |
| India | V. Karwasra Bishnoi | Jeev Raksha Sabah | Haryana | |
| Indonesia | A. Kirdiat | Ukhuwah Islamiyah (YASMUI) | Banten | |
| Thailand | T. Niphot | RTRC/Asian School of Wisdom | Chiang Mai | |
| Thailand | J. Jandai | Pun Pun Village | Chiang Mai | |
| Cambodia | P. Neth | Bunong Indigenous People Association | Mondulkiri | |

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