

Portfolios of Social Protection, Labour Mobility and the Rise of Life Insurance in Rural Central Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2018–19, this article analyses the changing composition of social protection on the ground in rural central Vietnam, including the recent spread of private life insurance among peasant families. The author uses the concept of portfolios of social protection to denote the emergence of an eclectic mix of measures to manage risks and to prepare for the future in the context of intensified perceptions of risks and the increasing privatization of care. Almost unheard of in this region just a few decades ago, private life insurance has come to be taken for granted by local people, many of whom are involved in precarious trajectories of transnational labour mobility. Underlying the rise of private life insurance in these rural communities is an uncertain process in which new prudentialist rationalities are domesticated into locally meaningful ideas of risk and care. In the context of hypermobility, such mutual entanglement makes it possible for global finance to turn the countryside into a new frontier. The article extends the Polanyian notion of double movement by showing the tendency of social protection to be reincorporated into the realm of the market.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018, my male host, Đoàn, had to take a half day off, leaving his work on the construction of a neighbour's house to attend the funeral of a relative, also a construction worker, who had died falling from scaffolding while working in another province. This man left behind a pregnant wife and two small children. Over dinner that day, there was a sympathetic discussion around how the young widow would cope with the burdens of raising the children by herself. My female host, Thoa, said she was not sure if the family had any insurance — an indication of how severe their

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