

SEA Beat

## At the intersection of history and biography: French retirees in Cambodia and Laos

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*Scholars studying international retirement migration (IRM) refer to lifestyle migration to explain the motives and aspirations of older individuals who choose to relocate out of their home country. Here I investigate French retirees' reasons for migrating to Southeast Asia, and their sense of purpose in doing so. Interviews with 17 retirees living in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, and Vientiane, Laos, whose narratives evoked some degree of historical relevance, suggest that certain migration choices are best understood in the context of a postcolonial moment comprising colonialism and its dissolution, the Cold War, and the postcolonial diaspora. Such an approach illuminates the relationship between history, migration, and pensioners' respective biographies in explaining their retirement journeys to former colonies, and in how these experiences foster multifaceted hybrid identities embedded in various historical moments.*

The post-war study of tourism and international migration research that gathered pace in the 1960s and 1970s eventually gave rise to a more recent field centred on International Retirement Migration (IRM).<sup>1</sup> IRM scholars have often approached the question of why some older people choose to live out their retirement years in a country different from their own through the concept of lifestyle migration, defined by Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly as 'lifestyle migrants [who] are relatively affluent individuals ... moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life'.<sup>2</sup> For example, Dora Sampio underlines how single older lifestyle migrants in Azores, Portugal, are often looking

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1 Russell King, Eralba Cela and Tineke Fokkema, 'New frontiers in international retirement migration', *Ageing & Society* 41 (2021): 1205–206.

2 Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly, 'Migration and the search for a better way of life: A critical exploration of lifestyle migration', *Sociology Review* 57 (2009): 609–10.

for ‘a new life with new possibilities’, as individual self-realisation is at the heart of the migration experience. Others find meaning by being involved in the local community of the receiving country, often through volunteering. Such individualised mobility is made possible not only by the urge to recreate oneself, but also by the ease of travel and digital connectivity.<sup>3</sup>

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, some IRM research has addressed retirement patterns from the Global North to the Global South in studies of pensioners searching for warmer climates and a lower cost of living. As IRM research has expanded to include migration destination countries that were formerly colonised, international retirees’ experiences or associations with what could be termed ‘the post-colonial’ has become a potentially relevant question in explaining subjects’ accounts of their decision to migrate, or in understanding their narratives of self-purpose and meaning in the destination country. A number of studies have thus far incorporated considerations of postcoloniality in their research through focusing on interpersonal racial disparities, or economic inequality, to explain migrant retirees’ emplacement within their destination communities.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Matthew Hayes uses the concept of geographic arbitrage to analyse the North to South migration driven by the ‘individualist strategy for maximising utility and material well-being’ in a low-cost country.<sup>5</sup>

We argue that to understand a subset of the self-reported migration motivations and experiences of a specific group of Global North-to-South retirees, IRM research needs to include some recognition of mobile retirees as they may be influenced by a far more wide-ranging postcolonial trajectory, with ‘postcolonial’ defined here as a complex moment that encompasses colonialism, the dissolution and aftermath of colonialism, the Cold War and the postcolonial diaspora. In the current research, postcolonial is used here not so much as situational critique, as historical inquiry. Given that the generational saeculum, in other words the span of an average human life, may reach approximately ninety years, the Global North–South IRM research focus which has emerged since 2010 onwards necessarily includes a small proportion of international retirees born between 1920 and 1930, a time when European colonialism was at its peak. Migrant pensioners born after 1930 would have had childhoods concurrent with the rest of a possibly relevant postcolonial trajectory, including the wartime era and periods of colonial powers’ dissolution and independence, and postcolonial diaspora.

Tied to the relationship between migration and a postcolonial moment is the concept of cultural hybridity, as migration resolves into new ways of being. Homi

3 Dora Sampaio, ‘A place to grow older ... alone? Living and ageing as a single older lifestyle migrant in the Azores’, *Area* 50 (2018): 459–66; Heiko Haas, ‘Volunteering in retirement migration: Meanings and functions of charitable activities for older British residents in Spain’, *Ageing & Society* 33 (2013): 1374–400.

4 Michaela Benson, ‘Postcoloniality and privilege in new lifestyle flows: The case of North Americans in Panama’, *Mobilities* 8, 3 (2013): 313–30; Leisl Gambold, ‘Retirement abroad as women’s aging strategy’, *Anthropology & Aging Quarterly* 34, 2 (2013): 184–98; Matthew Hayes, “‘We gained a lot over what we would have had’: The geographic arbitrage of North American lifestyle migrants to Cuenca, Ecuador”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, 21 (2014): 1953–971; Claudia Bell, “‘We feel like the king and queen’: Western retirees in Bali, Indonesia”, *Asian Journal of Social Science* 45 (2017): 271–93.

5 Hayes, ‘We gained a lot over what we would have had’, p. 1954.

Bhabha had argued that postcolonial cultural differences create a third or ‘in-between’ space which challenges relationships between one’s culture of origin and the culture of destination and allows the emergence of other cultural possibilities.<sup>6</sup> Hence, this cultural mixture is not only part of the postcolonial world, but is also located in the earlier colonial period.<sup>7</sup> Starting with the notion that hybridity is ‘deeply rooted in history’,<sup>8</sup> this article considers how French retirees’ accounts of migrating may embody hybrid characteristics in multiple historical layers. If so, the conceptual purpose is to ask to what extent the interaction of such characteristics facilitates a sense of historical continuity to interviewees’ narratives regarding different phases of their lives.

This article investigates French retirees in the Global South (Southeast Asia) to extend the analysis of lifestyle migration by focusing more specifically on the historically relevant timing and meaning of individual retirement journeys to former colonies of the home country. While other studies have included retirees from the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries of the North, France has been comparatively understudied.<sup>9</sup> Despite a lack of reliable figures on the topic of French retirees outside of France, it appears that the number of French pensioners who migrate is small. The current study investigates the motivations of these migrants and the role of colonial history in influencing their decision to choose Cambodia and Laos as retirement destinations.

Laos and Cambodia are suitable places for examining the unfolding of a greater postcolonial trajectory. France conquered Vietnam in stages over the mid-nineteenth century, while Cambodia became a protectorate in 1863 and Laos in 1893. These territories were collectively known as Indochina throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although Cambodia and Laos were subordinate to Vietnam (the latter consisting of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina), Indochina as a whole was a vital possession of the French Empire, probably only second to the French Maghreb in importance.

Both countries were affected by the First Indochina War (1946–54) as the Viet Minh forces, fighting for Vietnamese independence from French rule, made early efforts, by 1945–47, to back ‘liberation struggles’ in Cambodia and Laos.<sup>10</sup> The 1954 defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu resulted in both countries gaining full independence. Laos broke down into civil war between communist and royalist forces from 1959 to 1975, when the communists took over the country. Cambodia under the leadership of Prince Sihanouk managed only to maintain peace until the early 1960s.

6 Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1999 [2004]), p. 10. Camilla Erichsen Skalle, ‘Nostalgia and hybrid identity in Italian migrant literature: The case of Igiaba Scego’, *Bergen Language and Linguistics Studies* 7 (2017): 77.

7 Margaret A. Majumdar, *Postcoloniality: The French dimension* (New York: Berghahn, 2007), pp. 252–3.

8 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, ‘Hybridity, so what?’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, 2–3 (2001): 221.

9 The only literature that I found discussing some French pensioners was in the review *Autrepart*, which published a special issue on the new migrations from Europe to the Global South, among which some authors discuss international retirement migration. Sylvie Bredeloup, ed., ‘De L’Europe vers les Suds: nouvelles itinérances ou migrations à rebours?’, special issue, *Autrepart* 77, 1 (2016). See also Anne Raffin, ‘Colonial legacy: French retirees in Nga Trang, Vietnam, today’, *French Politics, Culture & Society* 39, 3 (2021): 123–46.

10 David Chandler, *A history of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), p. 181.

From 1965, with the US escalation of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese communists gradually sought sanctuary in Cambodia. A US-backed regime with General Lon Nol in power by 1970 was succeeded by the communist Khmer Rouge in 1975, which in turn would be overthrown by Vietnamese troops in 1979. Hun Sen, groomed by the Vietnamese, has been the prime minister of Cambodia since 1985. Overall the fight for Indochina from 1945 to 1975 was both a North–South struggle, with the breakup of the colonial empire, and an East–West one, with communist forces challenging anti-communist ones, the latter resulting in a large number of Cambodians and Laotians taking refuge in France—as well as in other countries—and resettling there between 1975 and 1985.<sup>11</sup>

Undertaking the current exploratory study to find out why a small number of French pensioners would choose to retire full or part-time in Southeast Asia, I visited Sihanoukville, Cambodia, in 2017 and 2018, and Vientiane, Laos in 2018, to conduct interviews with retirees who had spent at least three months there. Sihanoukville, along the southeast Cambodian coastline, and Vientiane, the capital city of landlocked Laos, were the destinations with the largest numbers of French pensioners in residence, according to French Embassy officials. Using a purposive sample method in both locations, along with limited participant-observation, I was able to engage with 26 retirees in Cambodia and 16 in Laos to investigate what had motivated them to make the move from France to mainland Southeast Asia, and what they thought of their life in retirement overseas.<sup>12</sup>

While the Cambodian and Lao states do not provide retirement visas for foreigners, they do not make it difficult for Westerners, in their later phase of life, to settle in their countries. In Laos, outsiders married to a Laotian are eligible for a five-year resident card. Unmarried foreigners often have a one-year resident card, which is easily renewable, or cross the border to Thailand to renew their long-term tourist visa. Similarly in Cambodia, all the retirees interviewed stated that it was easy to renew their resident's visa or whatever other type of visa they had.

About two-thirds of this small total sample of interviewees were 'old-stock' ancestral French men and woman who simply desired to move to the tropics. These interviewees tended to acclimatise to the Asian setting in a *tabula rasa* manner, lacking any significant connections or history with the destination before settling there. Their reasons for migration were diverse, such as economic reasons, dissatisfaction with life in their country of origin, or a search for a better climate, tranquillity, and transnational romance. In contrast to this group, the other third of those interviewed (17, see appendix) relocated to Southeast Asia based on various types and degrees of connection to French colonial history and its aftermath. Such connections are reflected in questions for these interviewees such as who, exactly, is the French individual seeking to relocate? What led him or her to resettle, and what considerations factored into the choice of either Cambodia or Laos as a retirement destination? What kind of intermediaries were involved in the decision to move? What significance does the retirement experience have in the personal history of the migrant?

11 Frederick Logevall, 'The Indochina War and the Cold War, 1945–1975', in *The Cambridge history of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 281.

12 Covid-19 prevented me from revisiting Vientiane in 2020.

Although this exploratory research involves a very limited study of what is a comparatively recent phenomenon, the setting and the research questions allow for a potentially more in-depth reckoning of history and biography than has been offered in the IRM literature thus far. Now we will turn to how this turbulent history intersects with the individual stories of a small number of French retirees' migration journeys, beginning with those whose life experiences stretch back to the French colonial era.

### Colonial origins and hybrid identities

#### *Cambodia and Laos*

In her work on migrations from Europe to the Global South, Sylvie Bredeloup noted how retirees abroad are not looking for a distant exoticism, but rather for 'the familiar taste of the periphery'.<sup>13</sup> The interviewees Jean and his French-born wife Emma<sup>14</sup> live in Sihanoukville much as they did in France, underlining the normality of their life in Asia: going for a walk every morning, shopping at the market, cooking and cleaning the house, and meeting other French retirees at a French bakery for coffee everyday.<sup>15</sup> Motivated by Eurasian friends in France who encouraged the couple to visit mainland Southeast Asia, they first went there in 2007. From 2008 onwards Jean and Emma have been coming to Sihanoukville during Cambodia's six-month dry season. Their move was a step-by-step process: first visiting an old friend in Phnom Penh, then arranging a three-month stay in a guesthouse in Sihanoukville, and finally increasing to a six-month stay in a rented apartment. They also made extra trips through South Vietnam and Cambodia, but stopped doing so starting in 2015, due to health reasons. Their experience illustrated the blurred line between tourism and retirement migration.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the story is more complicated, because their current circumstances are also entangled with Jean's desire to visit the country of his early childhood to search for his roots. Jean was born in Cambodia in 1941 and spent the first nine years of life living under the French protectorate. His Eurasian father, of French and Thai origins, was employed by the French colonial administration in Phnom Penh, and his mother was Vietnamese. Since they lived in the French neighbourhood of Phnom Penh, Jean had no need to learn Khmer. During Jean's childhood he was fluent in Vietnamese, but quickly forgot this language when he and his family moved permanently to France in 1950.

During our interview, Jean says he feels close to both the French and Vietnamese cultures, as he grew up in a partially Vietnamese culture at home, and a French one mostly outside of home. Yet when they visited Vietnam, the country of his mother, Jean's loss of his Vietnamese mother tongue prevented him from communicating with local people. Still, Jean alluded to feeling a sense of belonging through recognising familiar smells in various places, experiencing what scholars call a 'multi-sensorial engagement with "things from home"'.<sup>17</sup> Today, Jean does not situate his experience

13 Bredeloup, 'De l'Europe vers les Suds', p. 13.

14 See the Appendix for a list of all retirees interviewed.

15 Per Gustafson, 'Tourism and seasonal retirement migration', *Annals of Tourism Research* 29, 4 (2002): 900.

16 Allan M. Williams et al., 'Tourism and international retirement migration: New forms of an old relationship in southern Europe', *Tourism Geographies* 2, 1 (2000): 29.

17 Maruška Svašek, 'On the move: Emotions and human mobility', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, 6 (2010): 868.

in the distinction created by racial boundaries, but rather does so in cultural terms, referring to Cambodia and Vietnam as separate colonial and postcolonial entities when talking about his relations with each country.

Victor is French Eurasian; his mother was fully Khmer, while his Franco-Khmer father worked in the French army during the colonial era. After the official departure of the French from Cambodia in 1954 Victor's father first worked in Phnom Penh and later become the manager of a rubber plantation on the Cambodian–Vietnamese border. Victor, born in 1951 in France, was still an infant when his parents resettled in the French Protectorate of Cambodia, where he lived until the age of 16. As the political situation there intensified due to a communist insurgency against Sihanouk in northwest Cambodia, Victor's parents sent him to study in France in 1967. In the wake of this move, he would never see any member of his family again. Victor's father was killed by the Vietcong, a Vietnamese communist organisation fighting for independence from France. The remainder of Victor's family members were subsequently killed by the Cambodian communist Khmer Rouge.

In France Victor earned two university degrees (*licences*) in language specialties, one for English and the other for the Khmer language of Cambodia. Having had access to a French primary education in Phnom Penh, his resulting linguistic and cultural assets speak to the proximity between the ex-French colony and post-empire France. Eventually marrying a Frenchwoman, with whom he had three children who are all adults now, Victor worked most of his professional life in Paris.

Inspired to relocate at the age of 54, Victor divorced his wife when she refused to come to live with him in Cambodia. He proceeded to move there on his own, and worked in rural development before retiring at 61.

I wanted to come back to Cambodia to face my tears [*déchirure*], the death of my family, my need to reconcile with Cambodia. ... A lot of suffering within myself: until my mid-fifties I had nightmares of my family being kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge, the killing of my family. Now I am in peace, I no longer have nightmares. I have healed my wound. I brought my cousins here, during their vacations, to also heal their post-traumatic syndrome.

Victor was admittedly too young to remember the French colonial period which ended when he was two years old, plus he was already living in France during the Pol Pot regime. Thus, the nightmares and narrative about his family in Cambodia during those times represent a process of memory-creation based on second-hand information.<sup>18</sup> Stating that the spirits of his deceased family members were visiting him in his nightmares, Victor needed to help them in their rebirth so 'they could transition from frightening beings that haunt, to benevolent dead, supporting the living'.<sup>19</sup>

The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements marked the end of Vietnamese–Cambodian hostilities and set the stage for the country's first democratic election. As a result, a large number of Cambodian refugees in France returned to Cambodia between

18 I thank one reviewer for mentioning that Victor's use of the word '*déchirure*' certainly refers to the French title of the 1984 film *The Killing Fields*, and shows the cultural context permeating his sentiments and narrative.

19 Caroline Bennett, 'Living with the dead in the killing fields of Cambodia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 49, 2 (2018): 203.

1991 and 1993. Victor says his decision to return there was not, however, related to this political evolution;<sup>20</sup> rather, he asserts, his return was a project of emotional reintegration after suffering the trauma of losing family members to war and genocide. In this regard, some international retirement migration scholars have already noted that retirement abroad was a way to deal with a traumatic event in one's life.<sup>21</sup>

Patrick, who was 65 years old in 2018, is a Laotian who opted for French citizenship. He was born a few months before the Protectorate of Laos was dissolved in 1953. Similar to Jean, Patrick is part of the small cohort of interviewees whose fathers worked for the French administration. Patrick came to Aix-en-Provence, France, at the age of four in 1957 with his siblings and their governess but without his parents. Patrick's father was fluent in French and had good friends in France, and used these resources to provide his children with a French education. Despite the creation of a coalition government between the communist Pathet Lao and the US-backed royalist government in November 1957, Patrick's father was worried about a reigniting of the Laotian civil war. Hence, sending the children abroad was also a way to protect them.

For many years Patrick was part of the Lao diaspora in France. He met his wife, a Eurasian woman of French and Vietnamese descent, when her family relocated to France in 1975 after her parents had first worked in Saigon for the French, and then for the Americans. The couple eventually had a child and made their life in France. In the late 1980s, with the political relaxation of Laos' communist regime and the reopening of its borders, it became possible for Laotian expatriates to visit Laos, and even relocate there.<sup>22</sup> Then, Patrick was able to visit Laos in 1989.

In Patrick's case both the presence of his father in Laos, as well as his wife's desire to revisit Vietnam, were pivotal in their decision to relocation in Southeast Asia after many years in France:

My wife was fantasising to see again Saigon, to live there. She needed to see Saigon. The city changed a lot. [After visiting Ho Chi Minh City] she had no longer the desire to return there. Instead, we settled in Vientiane in 1992. She also speaks Laotian; I don't speak Vietnamese. Moreover, daddy was still there.

After his wife's expectations of Ho Chi Minh City were put to the test, she and Patrick quickly brushed aside her disappointment and headed to Laos, where Patrick had roots.

After working for a French organisation, Patrick recently retired there. Although he embodies the migrant who returns to the homeland, he also misses France and describes himself as 'very French'. The couple is considering living for six months in Laos and the other six in France, as their only child lives in France. Doing so is a mobility practice they can afford, since Patrick receives a decent pension. Due to their hybrid culture, they consider both countries as complementary.

While these three informants belong to different age cohorts, their respective paths to later-life retirement in mainland Southeast Asia share a common historical

20 Gea D.M. Wijers, 'Contributions to transformative change in Cambodia: A study on returnees as institutional entrepreneurs', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32, 1 (2013): 10–11.

21 Benson and O'Reilly, 'Migration and the search for a better way of life', p. 610.

22 Catherine Choron-Baix, 'Retour au Laos: Le mirage de la mémoire', *Ethnologie Française* 30, 3 (2000): 380.

trajectory tracing back to colonialism in Cambodia and Laos, subsequent clashes over nationalist independence and conflicts of the Cold War, and the resulting Southeast Asian diasporic community in France. These shared generational experiences distinguish the biographies of Jean, Victor and Patrick from other age-group contemporaries and create a coherent and continuous narrative of their many-sided engagements with colonial pasts and postcolonial realities.

### *Routes of the Great French Empire*

Not all interviewees linked to the historical French empire have a specific tie with Southeast Asia; a few have a connection with other such regions. Similarly, their biographies also encompass colonialism and the dissolution and aftermath of French colonialism. For instance, Philippe was born in 1951 in French colonial Algeria. As a child he left Algiers with his family at the age of 11 in 1962, when France was defeated in the Algerian War of Independence. He describes himself as 'uprooted' after that, longing for the Algerian/French cultural mix. Philippe had three children with his British-born wife, who are now all adults. The couple divorced more than twenty years ago.

In early 2000, while on vacation in Thailand, Philippe crossed the border to Cambodia to renew his tourist visa and discovered Sihanoukville, which reminded him of Algiers, the city of his fondly remembered childhood. He has been living in Sihanoukville since 2005. Only 54 years old when relocating there, Philippe started his own business in the hospitality industry. Today his Khmer partner runs the businesses and Philippe is retired. Fluent in English, he describes himself as lacking a strong attachment to France.

Philippe perceives Sihanoukville as a substitute for Algiers, each place having access to sunlight, sea bathing, and a slow pace of life.<sup>23</sup> This narrative offers a glimpse of how Philippe adapted his colonial memory of Algiers to another context, while maintaining emotional attachments to both places.

Playing out in another part of the ex-French empire is the story of Paul, who was born in 1944. Similar to Jean and Patrick, Paul's father was in the French colonial administration as a *commissaire* for the French Federation of Afrique Occidentale Française from 1948 to 1958 (Senegal gaining independence from France in 1960). Paul left France for Senegal when he was four years old and remained there until the age of twenty, during which time he spent two years studying law in Dakar. He then successfully passed the entrance examination for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and spent most of his career abroad.

During a diplomatic mission to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Paul discovered Sihanoukville and especially liked a beach there called Serendipity. He came back regularly on vacations until retiring there in 2009 at the age of 65. A full-time resident of Sihanoukville, he speaks fluent English. He is separated from his wife and has been living with a French-speaking Khmer partner for almost a decade. Paul says he plans to go back to France in a few years in order 'to secure his [partner's] future'.

23 This finding is reminiscent of the work of Andrea L. Smith, *Colonial memory and postcolonial Europe: Maltese settlers in Algeria and France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). She studied French settlers of Maltese descent who, after their departure from Algeria, would visit Malta, which offers similar language (Maltese is related to Arabic), flora and landscape, and functions as a substitute for colonial Algeria.



In Paul's case we can see institutional continuity in both lifestyle and privilege between the French colonial administration and its administrators, and embassies in a postcolonial world that represent a foreign nation in another country. As the son of a colonial official, Paul enjoyed growing up abroad while still partaking of a French environment, and his profession as an adult allowed him to maintain this aspect of his earlier life. Proud to represent the French nation through diplomatic missions, he maintained ties with embassy personnel by acting as an honorary consul for Sihanoukville while he lived there until health problems prevented him from doing so.

The historical and biographical reality of French colonialism decisively affected the way Philippe and Paul chose to live their lives later on. Each reconstructed a memory of the colonial past in another geographical space. Sihanoukville functions as a substitute and imaginary for a 'real' homeland that no longer exists. Their respective narratives express a degree of nostalgia for the bicultural amenities of happy colonial-era childhood. For Philippe and Paul, this sensibility whether French/Algerian or French/Senegalese, paired with the contemporary appreciation of life in Cambodia with a Khmer partner, indicating how new hybrid forms emerge due to migration.

### **Wartime connections**

#### *The First Indochina War and Indochinese hybridity*

What are today the countries of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, constituted the former French colony of Indochina, an entity to which some of the interviewees still referred. For some, the choice of retirement location was connected to a family member. The interview subject followed a precursor's footsteps in Indochina, and the link between the two was in the form of artefacts or remembered narratives. These interviewees form a small cohort sharing a connection with the First Indochina War (1946–54). Josephine, born in 1953 and raised in France, has three adult daughters and has been divorced since 1983. She was 65 years old when I interviewed her in 2018, and had been living full-time on the outskirts of Vientiane for the previous nine years after retiring at the young age of 54. Her narrative shows an indirect link to the First Indochina War:

One of my grandfathers participated in the [First] Indochina War. He bought some paintings in Vietnam, I have them with me. He was a Breton sailor, a traveller at heart. One uncle was a teacher in Saigon under the Americans [the Vietnam War]. We spoke about Asia at home, but this did not interest me at the time. One ex-boyfriend of mine had a brother living in Thailand and we went to visit him. I right away loved it. I told myself Asia is for you; I want to stay. We went on vacations [to Thailand] for one month [a year] over ten years. We wanted to start a business, a high-end guesthouse with an art gallery. But it is too much a scam for foreigners to start a business in Thailand.

When placed side-by-side, the paintings represent Ha Long Bay in Vietnam. Her grandfather had brought them back from Vietnam to France, and Josephine's grandmother eventually passed them down to her. Josephine thought it made sense 'to bring [the paintings] back home to Indochina'. The interplay of the war of

decolonisation in Indochina, the memory of the grandfather she liked very much, and the artworks she inherited, tie the past to the present and, for Josephine, echo a benign vision of an historical era. She attaches a familial memory to these artefacts that symbolise a return to a destined place perceived as home, a perception which reconciles the initial opposing concepts of 'home' and 'adopted country'.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the paintings, the past has left other traces for Josephine. In the book *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation*, Britta Schilling acknowledges Natalie Zemon Davis' observation that books are not just 'a source of ideas and images, but ... a carrier of relationships'.<sup>25</sup> Josephine tells me that the French novel *Les Asiates* by Jean Hougron as written in 1955, 'is [describing] me', 'people who said that they will return to France, but deep down don't want to return to France. [I am] more at home in Asia than in France'. The author Hougron lived in Saigon from 1947 until his return to France in 1951.<sup>26</sup> The *Asiates* that Hougron describes are not only native Vietnamese, but also Eurasians and Europeans living in the colonial city of Saigon. The story follows the life of a young French couple who lived in Saigon, today Ho Chi Minh City, from the early twentieth century to the First Indochina War. The book describes the devolution of this family through romantic relationships between the colonisers and the locals, evoking the drama of the integration of Eurasians in society and the impossibility of becoming fully native.

Like many of the characters in Hougron's novel, Josephine lives in a liminal space. She is still part of the French expatriate community where she has friends and ties of origin, yet has a well-anchored foot in the Laotian world, as she lives in a Lao neighbourhood on the outskirts of the capital where she rents a house and eats Lao cuisine most of the time. While she speaks basic Lao, Josephine mentions that she also has Lao friends who speaks French, and she expresses a wish to eventually die in Laos where she belongs, adding:

I like the Buddhist philosophy, people's kindness, the slow pace of life and the climate. Since we could not start up our business in Thailand, we [she and her previous boyfriend] came to Laos. I love that there are still some people who can still speak French, [there is] cheap wine [*pinard*], *pastis* [popular French drink], and *pétanque* [bowls] grounds.

As this quote suggests, Josephine is not only positively engaged with the surrounding Lao community, but also with the local art of living and its vestigial colonial amenities. She exemplifies a theme in French-language novels set in Indochina in which the French protagonist has lived too long in colonial Vietnam to make returning to life in France a possibility. Josephine's Asia-based family connection and the associated cultural artefacts nourish her self-perception as a hybrid person, living in

24 Bolzman et al., 'What to do after retirement? Elderly migrants and the question of return', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32, 8 (2006): 1367.

25 Britta Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of empire in a decolonized nation* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), p. 16.

26 Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson, "'Blacky-whites, Cheeches and Eight-Annas": The stereotypical portrayal of Eurasians in colonial and postcolonial novels', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 13, 2 (2016): 43.

Laos but able to uncover the traces of French culture that continue through food and drink, entertainment and friendship.

While Josephine refers to specific historical objects—paintings and a novel—that are also part of her personal heritage, ties to the First Indochina War were no less salient in guiding other informants to settle in the former Indochina. The sociologist Karl Mannheim argues that historical-political events that happen in early adulthood—around the age of 17—may have a disproportionate impact on memories and actions in later life.<sup>27</sup> For instance, one informant in Vientiane named Lucas, who was 16 years old in 1954, recounts:

People of my generation were influenced by the colonial past in our choice to come here. The First Indochina War, the Vietnam War, the films, the newspapers were talking about it, at the level of the unconscious we are marked [by it]. Unconsciously, I was attracted by Indochina for a long time. I had a Vietnamese fiancée in France; at the age of 50, I had another Asian girlfriend. I was more attracted by Vietnam. I miss the sea here. But I met my wife [in Laos] who turned out to be Lao.

Apart from Lucas, none of the informants said that the First Indochina War was an important event they experienced firsthand, stating that they were either too young to do so or paid no attention to it at the time. Known as the ‘forgotten war’ in France, it was mostly overshadowed by the Second World War (1939–45), the anti-colonial Algerian War (1954–62) and the Vietnam War (1955–75). The French felt a general indifference to the earlier faraway war in Asia, fought by a professional army in a colonial setting with a small number of French settlers.<sup>28</sup>

Only because a member of their family had participated in the First Indochina War did other informants acknowledge its importance in their lives.<sup>29</sup> One such person was Marc, 73 years old in 2018 and a full-time retiree in Vientiane, who had cousins that had participated in the First Indochina War. ‘They talked about the beauty of the women, the landscape, how good the food was, it was beautiful everywhere. This gave me the desire to come here.’ Likewise, Adrian, born in 1960 and a seasonal retiree, decided to first visit Laos in part because his godfather had been a paratrooper there during the First Indochina War: ‘He kept reiterating that it was a beautiful country.’

These examples show how these retirees do not necessarily act in accordance with a generation born within a certain age range; rather, they make up a small cohort influenced by the narrative of a family member whose outlook on the region was influenced by the First Indochina War. Shared recollections fuel interviewees’ desire to first visit, and later retire in Cambodia or Laos full or part-time.

Yet as much as the First Indochina War comes into the conversation, just as quickly do these subjects’ narratives switch to themes present in the retirement lifestyle literature: the country’s superior weather, cheaper amenities, and so on. For

27 Karl Mannheim, ‘The problems of generations’, in *Essays on the sociology of knowledge: Collected works of Karl Mannheim*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York: Routledge, 1952), p. 300.

28 M. Kathryn Edwards, *Contesting Indochina: French remembrance between colonialism and Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), p. 1.

29 Judith Burnett, *Generations: The time machine in theory and practice* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 37; Jeffrey K. Olick, ‘Collective memory: The two cultures’, *Sociological Theory* 17, 3 (1999): 339.

instance, Clarence, a retiree in Sihanoukville who was born in 1951, mentioned that he went on vacation for a month to Vietnam in 2011 because he was thinking of retiring there. He chose the location because

I went there to search a bit of my father; he was in the [First] Indochina War. He would recount his experience [in the war] and I was then very interested in Vietnam.

During this trip, Clarence learned that getting a long-term visa for a senior in Vietnam was very complicated and discovered that ‘the Vietnamese don’t like us [French people]’. In partial quest of his father’s past, Clarence weighed alternatives and ended up in the adjacent Indochinese country of Cambodia, of which he states: ‘the cost of everyday life is cheap, I like the tranquillity and I have a local partner.’ Interestingly, respondents who alluded to a particular familial connection related a positive version of it, a somewhat odd characterisation given that they are referring to an era of warfare. Similarly, the same kind of positive language was used to appraise their own retirement abroad.

### **Hybrid nature of sponsored retirement projects**

#### *Wartime and Cold War origins*

Sometimes the nature of hybridity is lodged not only in individuals and their environments, but also in the arrangements and meaning of projects older migrants undertake when they live abroad. The first such example takes a circuitous route. David, a Laotian, was born in 1955 in Laos to a father who worked as a customs officer under the French Protectorate. After growing up there, David left for France in 1973 to study accounting, being part of the ‘university’ migration of young people from Indochina to take up studies there in the Cold War era, between 1954 and 1975. Due to the 1975 communist takeover in Laos, this educational journey often evolved from temporary to permanent, and this was true for David as well.<sup>30</sup>

After his studies David settled and worked in France, but never took French nationality. David met a Frenchwoman, Sophie, and the two moved in together in 1990 and then married in 2004. From 1992 to 1999 they came to Laos every year to visit David’s Francophile parents, and in 2000 they relocated permanently to the outskirts of Vientiane. The couple’s decision to move to Laos was a result of push-and-pull forces: the small company where David worked was planning to relocate from Paris to a provincial French town, and he preferred to stay in Paris. Moreover, Laos had reopened its borders. David applied to the French government’s scheme of assisting migrants’ return to their country of origin and proposed the creation of a farm just outside Vientiane, next to his parents’ home. The project was accepted and financed primarily by the French government. This case offers an interesting example of French investment in an economic venture for a Lao citizen on Laotian territory, of which Sophie was an indirect beneficiary. Here the notion of hybridity may apply to Sophie’s choice to settle in Laos because of her hybrid marriage.

Sophie, born in 1950, was 68 years old at the time of our interview. Since her retirement from a French organisation in Laos, she has been working six hours per

30 Le Huu Khoa, ‘L’immigration du sud-est asiatique’, *Hommes & Migrations* 1114 (1998): 85.

week giving French language tuition, not for money, but for ‘human contact’, as she stated. Sophie speaks neither Lao nor English and her Francophone in-laws, who used to share their memories of colonial and postcolonial Laos, passed away a few years ago. While she does not regret her relocation to Laos, she acknowledges that she and David barely socialise with others, as ‘we are sufficient for one another’. While not mentioned by Sophie, we might wonder if this reclusive life was not also the result of the disdain suffered by Laotian returnees, who are often perceived as cowards who had abandoned other Laotians who stayed behind to face the political situation, or as opportunists who economically benefitted from settling in the ‘French Eldorado’.<sup>31</sup>

The next example traces a story about the completion of a retirement project that was first begun during the colonial era. Lucien, who was born in Lyon, France, in 1947, was trained as a civil engineer and worked for l’Agence Française de Développement (AFD), an organisation that supports sustainable projects in France and overseas. After a stint in Africa, he was sent to Cambodia. There he continued with the agency but, at the same time, was hired by the French Handicap International, a non-governmental organisation that serves economically and socially vulnerable populations, especially the disabled. A widower without children, at 46 Lucien remarried a Khmer woman with whom he had three children, now all adults. Retired since 2016, Lucien and his wife spend 20 days in Sihanoukville and 10 days in Phnom Penh per month, the latter so they can spend time with their three children and their grandchild in Cambodia’s capital city. Lucien’s wife is fluent in French, and Lucien himself also speaks rudimentary Khmer and English.

This interviewee’s work indirectly links him to the well-known French writer Marguerite Duras. Duras was born in Gia Dinh, near Ho Chi Minh City, in 1914 and grew up in colonial Vietnam and Cambodia. In 1950 she wrote and published the famous novel *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (*The Sea Wall*), which is partially autobiographical. Set in the late 1920s the story was inspired by Duras’ mother, who was granted a parcel of uncultivable land by a corrupt colonial administration in Kampot province, Cambodia. Despite the construction of dams or ‘sea walls’ by Duras’ family, the crops were constantly destroyed by inundations from the sea. Lucien ended up working on the same spot many years later when he and co-workers were given the task of making this marshland cultivable through a system of dykes, valves and canals. Funded by the AFD, the project took ten years to complete and eventually yielded 50 kilometres of canals that in turn made possible the distribution of 22,000 land titles by the Cambodian government.<sup>32</sup> While living there, Lucien became a local tour guide on the area and described himself as an ‘expert on Duras’ life during the period when she lived in Prey Nop between 1925-1933’. He even went so far as to visit the French National Overseas Archives (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, to find the specific location of Duras’ mother’s house in the land registry. Due to his expertise, Lucien was hired as a technical adviser for the 2008

31 Michèle Baussant et al., ‘Logiques mémorielles et temporalités migratoires: Une introduction’, in *Migrations humaines et mises en récit mémorielle: Approches croisées en anthropologie et préhistoire*, ed. Michèle Baussant, Irène Dos Santos, Evelyne Ribert and Isabelle Rivoa (Nanterre: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Ouest, 2015), p. 21.

32 Anne Diatkine, ‘Un barrage, comme une utopie restée dans les esprits’, *Libération*, 3 Jan. 2009.

French movie titled *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, based on Duras' novel and made by the Cambodian director Rithy Panh.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, even Lucien's employer, the AFD, has colonial roots. While in London, General de Gaulle created the Central Fund for Free France (CCFL) in 1941. The CCFL acted as central bank, development bank and treasury department to French colonial territories that had rallied to the Allied cause. From the 1950s to the 1970s France sought to maintain privileged relations with its former colonies, and the organisation offered them loans and advisory services.<sup>34</sup> In 1998, the organisation's name was changed to AFD.<sup>35</sup>

Lucien's postcolonial trajectory is thus not linked to the First Indochina War, but to the Second World War, as AFD embodies a degree of institutional continuity between colonial and postcolonial realities. Some might also see a continuity with the colonial civilising mission in bringing the benefits of French culture and knowledge, in this case material 'uplift' to allegedly 'backward' peoples. Carry Watts argues that NGOs are twenty-first century missionaries that resemble European civilising missions of the nineteenth-century 'bringing modern attitudes, institutions and practices to the world's underdeveloped people'.<sup>36</sup>

#### Hybrid diasporic connections and retiree journeys

Due to its colonial past, there is a large Cambodian community in France. Members of this group have played a role in facilitating the relocation of old-stock French retirees to Cambodia, pointing to the importance of 'mixed friendships'. France was the first country to be solicited as host country for those fleeing the genocide of the Khmer Rouge period (1975–79), and again during the decade when Cambodia was under the authority of the Vietnamese (1978–89). Between August 1975 and December 1989, a total of 46,864 Cambodian refugees moved to France.<sup>37</sup> For some interviewees, contact in France with diasporic Cambodians was a mediating point in the formers' decision to migrate.

Bernard, born in 1953, was influenced by his father's tales of sailing on the Mekong River when he had been in the French merchant navy. His father's memories were the reason Bernard and his wife Agathe first visited Vietnam in 1981. They retired at the age of 60 in 2013, and decided to become full-time residents in the resort city of Sihanoukville. He notes, 'We would not have retired in Vietnam; we did not like Vietnam; Vietnamese people are not friendly.' The couple discovered and fell in love with the Khmer culture mainly by having many Khmer friends in France.

Satisfied with their decision to settle in Sihanoukville, they are nonetheless frustrated with their inability to speak Khmer, despite taking lessons. Hence, they mingle

33 Ibid.

34 'Notre histoire', <https://www.afd.fr/fr/agence-francaise-de-developpement> (accessed 5 Aug. 2020).

35 On the development of agencies and their policies embodying French colonial practices, see Mathieu Guérin, 'France, the IUCN and wildlife conservation in Cambodia: From colonial to global conservationism', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 53, 1–2 (2002): 183–208.

36 Carry A. Watts, 'Introduction: The relevance and complexity of civilizing missions c.1800–2010', in *Missions in colonial and postcolonial South Asia: From improvement to development*, ed. Carry A. Watts and Michael Mann (London: Anthem, 2011), p. 3.

37 Julia Ponrouch, 'Entre retour au pays et visite des lieux de mémoire: le tourisme des Cambodgiens de France', *Diasporas: Histoire et Sociétés* 14 (2009): 64.

with the French-speaking community but, as Agathe puts it, refuse to socialise with those who 'go out with young Khmer girls [*gamines*] and have kids'. Because Bernard and Agathe are limited to a language the majority of Khmer people do not understand, they live within a diminished social circle as retired expatriates. While they do refer to Sihanoukville as embodying a desired way of life, the couple also visits the capital city Phnom Penh every three months to buy groceries not available in the resort town and to enjoy 'a change of scene'.

Another diasporic example is Thierry, born in 1952 and divorced since 2005 with five adult children, who discovered Sihanoukville in 2009 thanks to a Franco-Khmer friend who went back for good to Phnom Penh and invited him to visit. During Thierry's three-month vacations in Sihanoukville he met his current Khmer wife and they married in 2012. Now he is a part-time retiree in this seaside city. Thierry says he would rather live in Phnom Penh or Battambang, as both cities have places of French culture such as the French Institute of Battambang. However, because his wife has a job in Sihanoukville, as well as three children from two previous marriages, they stay put in this city.

Franck, of French ancestry, is 67 years old, unmarried and without children. Speaking neither Khmer nor English, Franck was living in Sihanoukville at the time of our encounter. He came to this resort city thanks to a Cambodian living in France. The latter had invited another French friend to visit him in Phnom Penh over the summer, and Franck accompanied the friend and stayed at the Cambodian's second home in the capital. He found Phnom Penh too hot for a permanent home, but liked Sihanoukville for its seaside access, climate and sunlight. The trip made him realise that if he settled there he would have access to a better quality of life, including making occasional trips to Phnom Penh and Thailand. A few years later in 2003 he became a full-time resident, and later sold his apartment in France because it was too difficult to manage from abroad. With no family ties in France, a tourist trip led to Franck's permanent move to Cambodia.

In these three final examples, the interviewees' respective relocation was facilitated by the existence of a transnational network between France and Cambodia. Interestingly these retirees do not volunteer any recognition of a colonial link in their decision to move to Southeast Asia; instead, they underline the search for a better life as a primary force in bringing them to this part of the world.

### Conclusion

Studying international retirement migration only through the lens of lifestyle is an inadequate framework within which to understand the total set of experiences of French retirees living in the Global South. This article has drawn on responses from a small subset of French retirees interviewed in Laos and Cambodia to reflect on a postcolonial moment in the study of IRM as a means of creating historical depth. In the conclusion to her book *Postcoloniality: The French Dimension*, Margaret Majumdar notes the capacity of former imperial powers to carve out continuing spheres of influence in parts of their ex-colonial empires.<sup>38</sup> This piece has documented traces of empire through those French pensioners who maintain a

38 Majumdar, *Postcoloniality*, pp. 240–42.

colonial or other kind of historical connection to former colonised territories in their retirement.

The postcolonial trajectory serving its context for this research is marked by hybridity, personal identities, relationships and circumstances. Such hybridity illuminates how older individuals in a sub-sample studied here, make the decision to migrate. In some cases, the migration decision arises out of hybrid associations with the earlier French colonised territories of Cambodia and Laos, as well as the greater French Empire. The hybrid French entity of Indochina and sense of intrinsic connection between its constituent parts (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) informs the life decisions of other interviewees, even if their associations with Indochina are vicarious, symbolic or indirect. Finally, the hybrid circumstances of a postcolonial diaspora, Cambodians living in France, enable a third kind of migratory impulse through serendipitous friendships with local French people of retirement age.

This article argues that such hybridity, for all informants, allows them to construct a continuous narrative tying together past and present in a way which make sense to them. The hybridisation process is an active one organised around cultural continuity through reference to existing paradigms—Indochina, French Empire, ex-colonies—which justifies a space for back-and-forth migration between France and its former colonial entities. Migration experiences can thus be understood as a result of the influence and interdependence of various historical-cultural environments.

Some retirees were the children of those who were part of the colonial world. These individuals had spent some or all of their childhood in a French colony, whether in Indochina or elsewhere. Their biographical stories cover not only the colonial period there, but also the aftermath as it played out in those territories and beyond. For other interviewees, their decision to migrate was influenced by family members who had directly participated in the First Indochina War. A few of those interviewed had no familial connections to colonialism, but landed in Southeast Asia thanks to the postcolonial diaspora in France. Taken together, these retirees embody different facets of a telescoped postcolonial moment encompassing the dissolution of colonialism, the Cold War, and the resulting migratory diasporas.

Regarding the spatial aspect of hybridity, some of the interviewees who settled in Laos or Cambodia refer to factors related to Vietnam in their narratives about relocating: examples include a member of the family who fought in the First Indochina War; a Vietnamese mother; a Vietnamese fiancée; a Franco-Vietnamese wife; or a father who worked in Vietnam. Jean's trajectory embodies a somewhat limited blending of cultures due to the loss of his original maternal language, Vietnamese, in which he was fluent during childhood. Still, the interwoven aspects of cultural and spatial experiences give a sense of continuity to his narrative regarding how he came to decide to relocate to Cambodia, rather than Vietnam. The fact that Vietnam appears in multiple accounts indicates that, even today, the notion of Indochina is still a relevant factor in the choice of a retirement destination, and points to the legacy of the French historical attempt to consolidate a lasting geographic entity during the colonial era.

Linked to the concept of hybridity is that of memory. Some informants' narratives speak of a cultural remembrance expressed through objects and an



intergenerational transmission of selective memory regarding the First Indochina War. Studying the Dutch colonial elite, Caroline Drieënhuizen argues that memory and the material residue of colonialism connect past and present, and thus enable the means and methods by which the future can be constructed.<sup>39</sup> For Josephine, her 'mission' to return the paintings to Indochina and her self-description as an 'Asiate' justify her geographical location in Vientiane, and shape her life-narrative according to the romanticised memories the artefacts suggest.

In her book *Contesting Indochina*, Kathryn Edwards looks at the French collective remembrances of the First Indochina War from two competing perspectives: anti-communist and anti-colonial narratives. Such polarised accounts are also grounded on contentions over the legacies of colonialism, decolonisation, and the Cold War.<sup>40</sup> In my own research, pensioners themselves did not adopt either of these viewpoints. Still, the current research does add a new vector of remembrance of these key historical periods by analysing the impact of the latter on the life course of these retirees. This does not, however, mean that these retirees' memories were not political. By eschewing the more negative aspects of colonialism, some interviewees tended toward a problematic benign vision of French colonialism in their responses, even if they did not intend to do so. As Renato Rosaldo explains, 'imperialist nostalgia' has the 'capacity to transform the responsible colonial agent into an innocent passer-by'.<sup>41</sup>

Yet are we talking about an imperialist nostalgia here, a sentimental longing for a colonial past? There are no laments about the loss of the past in these accounts, as Josephine, for instance, can still find French cuisine, entertainment and friendship within a Lao environment. Similarly, Lucas, Marc, Adrien and to some extent Clarence are able to experience the aesthetic and pleasurable aspects of the Indochinese landscape, people and food, just as their forebears did. The past is also not irrecoverable for those returnees with Asian roots (Jean, Victor, Patrick and to some extent Sophie, in relation to her Lao husband), since they were able to return to Cambodia, face the consequences created by colonial and postcolonial histories, and create a space to reinvent new ways of organising their lives.

Similarly, Lucien in Cambodia was able to finish the job Duras' mother began through making a useless piece of land that she had acquired into a cultivable one. In doing so he makes symbolic amends for the socioeconomic injustices of the French colonial system. Rather than longing for the 'good old days', Lucien emphasises the more positive aspects of colonialism, inadvertently overlooking the fact that Duras' mother owned a plantation as a result of the dispossession of other small-scale peasants. For interviewees like Paul and Philippe, who trace their origins to colonial times, childhood recollections justify their current presence in Cambodia. While they have a sense of nostalgia for an African colonial past, these interviewees do not consider their current host-country to be a poor substitute; rather, they happily re-enact aspects of their colonial experiences in Sihanoukville today.

Finally, in the case of Agathe, Bernard, Franck and Thierry, contact with a Franco-Cambodian network in France, brought them to Sihanoukville. For them

39 Caroline Drieënhuizen, 'Objects, nostalgia and the Dutch colonial elite in times of transition, ca. 1900–1970', *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 170, 4 (2014): 508–09.

40 Edwards, *Contesting Indochina*.

41 Renato Rosaldo, 'Imperialist nostalgia', *Representations* 26 (1989): 108.

the process of migration decision-making was not based on nostalgic travel and a search for meaning, but on their specific relationship to the colonial past in Cambodia, that is, their ties with Cambodian migrants and their descendants in France. The existence of a postcolonial diaspora in the formal colonial metropole is a common aftermath of colonialism.<sup>42</sup> The Cambodian postcolonial diaspora in France creates opportunities for bi-cultural friendships with locals at a life stage for the latter that coincides with retirement. Deciding to leave France is a voluntary choice, and such decisions promote the development of a type of chain migration in miniature driven by lifestyle considerations, an emerging trend in modern migration.

Now that the data has been considered, we may return to the questions posed in the introduction. Who exactly are these retirees? We find they often have a hybrid identity, as some pensioners are bi-racial or binational; others have inherited mixed heritages regarding treasured objects or passed-down family narratives, or have entered into mixed-marriages. What led these individuals to resettle to Cambodia or Laos? In part, a search for a better quality of life, but also much more. Histories and imaginaries linked to the French Empire, as well as narratives articulated around colonial artefacts and colonial family stories are some of the push-factors leading interviewees to spend their later-life years in Cambodia or Laos. What kind of intermediaries were involved with the decision to move? An important structure facilitating French pensioners' relocation to Cambodia was the existence of a transnational network between the latter country and France. What significance does the retirement experience have in the personal history of the individuals who migrate? Some interviewees are aware of the role of history intermingled with their retirement experience. However, the narratives of a majority of them quickly move beyond such considerations and instead highlight Laos and Cambodia as places offering a more desirable and pleasant quality of life.

As the subjects of this research made up less than half of the total number interviewed (17 out of 42), I suspect that much of the salience of the postcolonial moment discussed here will likely recede when these retirees pass away. Given the disdain with which colonialism is looked upon in present-day France, it is doubtful that any sense of colonial nostalgia will be passed along to younger generations. Nevertheless, the range of migratory experiences documented here goes beyond a simple formulation of the Global North moving to the Global South, or 'West meets East'. Alongside retirees' desire to enhance their lifestyle by moving overseas, or their calculations to exploit social or economic inequalities in doing so, an historical trajectory of colonialism and its aftermath can also give rise to complex hybrid identities and multi-layered experiences tied up with older people's desire to relocate to, and possibly return to, a retirement destination.

42 Majumdar, *Postcoloniality*, p. 252.

**Appendix: List of Interviewees (All retirees' names are pseudonyms)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Year of birth</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Lucas (Laos)	1938	M
Jean (Cambodia)	1941	M
Emma (wife)	1953	F
Paul (Cambodia)	1944	M
Marc (Laos)	1945	M
Lucien (Cambodia)	1947	M
Sophie (Laos)	1950	F
Franck (Cambodia)	1950	M
Victor (Cambodia)	1951	M
Philippe (Cambodia)	1951	M
Clarence (Cambodia)	1951	M
Thierry (Cambodia)	1952	M
Patrick (Laos)	1953	M
Josephine (Laos)	1953	F
Bernard (Cambodia)	1953	M
Agathe (wife)	1953	F
Adrian (Laos)	1960	M