

MARKETS IN THE MOUNTAINS:  
UPLAND TRADE-SCAPES, TRADER LIVELIHOODS, AND STATE  
DEVELOPMENT AGENDAS IN NORTHERN VIETNAM

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*In loving memory of a dear friend,  
Radoslaw Stypczynski (Radek)*

*and for his Sa Pa Sisters*

## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I investigate market formation and integration in the northern uplands of Vietnam (Lào Cai province) through a focus on the everyday processes by which markets are created and (re)shaped at the confluence of local innovation and initiatives, state actions, and wider market forces. Against a historically-informed backdrop of the ‘local’ research context with regard to ethnicity, cultural practice, livelihoods, markets and trade, I situate and critique the broader Vietnam state agenda. At present, the state supports regularising market development often in accordance with a lowland majority model, and promoting particular aspects of tourism that at times mesh, while at others clash, with upland subsistence needs, customary practice, and with uplanders successfully realising new opportunities. State-led initiatives to foster market integration are often instituted without informed consideration of their effects on the specific nature and complexity of upland trade, such as for the realisation of materially and culturally viable livelihoods.

Conceptually, I weave together a framework for the study that draws key elements from three main strands of scholarship: 1) actor-oriented approaches to livelihoods; 2) social embeddedness, social network and social capital approaches to market trade and exchange, and; 3) the commodity-oriented literature. Fieldwork was situated in the northern Vietnam province of Lào Cai, in five upland districts bordering China’s Yunnan province. The research draws primarily on ethnographic methods: conversational interviews, semi-structured interviews, life histories, participant observation, and market surveys. Research informants included ethnic Hmong, Yao, Kinh, Nùng, Tày and Giáy small-scale market traders, state officials, market management representatives, non-governmental organisations, and foreign and domestic tourists. Primary field sites encompassed 14 upland marketplaces in Lào Cai province, with additional visits to markets in neighbouring upland provinces and across the border in Yunnan to complement the data gathered.

This thesis is broadly divided into two main results sections. Firstly, I explore upland markets as a critical social interface through which to understand the role that centripetal and centrifugal forces play within the contemporary restructuring of marketplaces, commodity networks, and trade dynamics in Lào Cai’s uplands. I

investigate the role of the state in the current development and modernisation of marketplaces within the province, as well as how recent improvements in connective technologies such as roads, transportation, and communications are working to alter upland trade-scapes. In describing these structural changes, the specific and diverse responses of upland traders to these transformations are explored - such as accommodation, negotiation, as well as overt and implicit forms of resistance - in terms of how these groups seek to carve out a living through their own constructions of marketplace trade. In the second section, I devote three chapters to in-depth case studies of upland trade networks for key cultural commodities, historically produced and/or traded by Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities: water buffalo livestock, upland artisanal alcohols, and handmade and manufactured ethnic minority textiles. Through these investigations, I address how upland markers of social difference and social support networks work to influence trade and the way actors shape their exchange activities. Focus is placed on the particular strategies used by different groups of upland traders to engage with trade opportunities and negotiate constraints in order to enhance their livelihoods.

In my thesis, I contend that there are a number of economic, social and cultural reasons for why Hmong and Yao uplanders are involved in specific types of marketplace trade to a degree that works to help them meet their own particular needs and objectives, which may differ dramatically at times from state upland development agendas. This study makes a vital contribution by explicitly paying attention to the production and trade of products which are of historical cultural and material relevance to upland ethnic minorities themselves, as well as to endogenous perspectives of upland marketplace trading. A focus on activities that have endured over the much longer term points to their relevance as resilient elements within Hmong and Yao economic practice. The research also makes an important contribution by unraveling the inter-linkages and socio-cultural and economic dynamics between locally-oriented commodity markets and externally-oriented markets, within the context of upland processes of market integration.



## RÉSUMÉ

Ma thèse examine les mécanismes qui entrent en jeu dans le processus d'intégration des populations des hauts plateaux du nord du Vietnam (Province de Lào Cai) à l'économie de marché. Je démontre que les initiatives et les innovations individuelles, l'État ainsi que les forces du marché concourent à la création des marchés de montagne ou à leur adaptation à des conjonctures nouvelles. Je rappelle et je critique l'agenda de l'État vietnamien dans les hauts plateaux de même que ses politiques concernant les relations ethniques, les pratiques culturelles, les conditions et moyens de subsistance des populations montagnardes, les marchés de montagne et le commerce en général. L'État promeut actuellement un modèle de développement des marchés de montagne basé sur le modèle qui régit le commerce dans les basses terres abritant la majorité de la population du pays. L'État encourage aussi dans les hauts plateaux une forme de développement touristique bien précise. Parfois, ce développement accroît la capacité des montagnards à pourvoir leurs besoins de base et à maintenir leurs pratiques culturelles. Parfois, c'est l'inverse qui se produit. La volonté de l'État d'intégrer les populations des hauts plateaux à l'économie de marché et les politiques qui s'ensuivent tiennent rarement compte de la nature et de la complexité des circuits commerciaux traditionnels, de leur importance culturelle et de leur contribution au bien-être des populations montagnardes.

Le cadre conceptuel de ma thèse combine des éléments issus de trois champs de recherche : 1) les approches orientées vers les acteurs et l'examen des conditions et moyens de subsistance d'une population donnée; 2) le rôle du capital social et des réseaux sociaux dans les échanges marchands; 3) les chaînes de valeurs. Mes recherches de terrain se sont déroulées dans cinq districts de la province de Lào Cai, située dans le nord du Vietnam et directement au sud de la province chinoise du Yunnan. La méthodologie préconisée dans la recherche met l'accent sur des méthodes ethnographiques telles que les entrevues conversationnelles et semi-structurées, l'histoire orale, l'observation participante et les sondages. Les participants à la recherche incluent des petits commerçants Hmong, Yao, Kinh, Nùng, Tày et Giáy de même que des fonctionnaires, des membres du personnel de gestion des marchés et d'organisations non-gouvernementales ainsi que des touristes étrangers et vietnamiens. Les principaux sites de la recherche comprennent 14 marchés de

montagne situés dans la province de Lào Cai. Des données complémentaires ont aussi été recueillies dans des marchés situés dans des provinces vietnamiennes voisines, de même que dans la province chinoise du Yunnan.

Les deux principales sections de cette thèse présentent les résultats de ma recherche. Premièrement, je détermine que les marchés de montagne constituent un lieu de rencontre et d'échanges sociaux inédit. Les marchés de montagne et les échanges socioculturels et économiques qui s'y déroulent sont influencés par des forces centripètes et centrifuges. Ces forces exercent notamment un impact sur la restructuration des places commerciales, des chaînes de valeurs et des dynamiques de marché dans les hauts plateaux de Lào Cai. Je détermine le rôle que l'État joue dans le développement et la modernisation des marchés de cette province. Par exemple, l'amélioration des infrastructures de transport et des technologies de la communication a une influence notoire sur les réseaux et circuits commerciaux qui font l'objet de cette recherche. Je documente ces changements structuraux, de même que les différentes façons dont les commerçants des hauts plateaux s'en accommodent ou y résistent plus ou moins ouvertement afin d'en retirer le meilleur parti possible. Deuxièmement, je consacre trois études de cas approfondies à autant de produits commerciaux ayant une importance culturelle phare pour les communautés Hmong et Yao, c'est-à-dire les buffles, les alcools artisanaux et les broderies et étoffes faites à la main. Ces études déterminent comment la différenciation sociale et les réseaux sociaux affectent la façon dont les acteurs concernés conduisent leurs activités commerciales. Je m'attarde en particulier aux différentes stratégies mises de l'avant par les commerçants des hauts plateaux pour retirer le plus grand bénéfice possible des nouvelles opportunités commerciales, tout en conjuguant avec les contraintes qui en découlent.

Dans cette thèse, je démontre que des combinaisons complexes de facteurs économiques et socioculturels incitent les montagnards Hmong et Yao à participer à certains réseaux commerciaux dans la mesure où ces activités leur permettent de remplir certains besoins et objectifs précis. À ce titre, leurs motivations ont parfois peu en commun avec celles de l'État et de son programme de développement des hauts plateaux. Cette recherche apporte une contribution fondamentale à la compréhension des processus de production et de commercialisation des produits

historiquement et culturellement importants pour les minorités ethniques montagnardes. De plus, la thèse propose un éclairage inédit sur les perceptions qu'entretiennent ces peuples envers les marchés des hauts plateaux. Le maintien sur la longue durée des activités commerciales étudiées démontre la résilience des pratiques économiques des Hmong et des Yao. Dans une conjoncture marquée par l'intégration des hauts plateaux à l'économie de marché, la recherche offre aussi un nouvel éclairage sur les dynamiques économiques et socioculturelles qui caractérisent le commerce de produits destinés à un usage local et celui des biens voués aux autres marchés de consommation.

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## ACRONYMS

<b>CAOM:</b>	Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer
<b>CEM:</b>	Committee for Ethnic Minorities
<b>CPV:</b>	Communist Party of Vietnam
<b>DARD:</b>	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
<b>DRV:</b>	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
<b>EFEQ:</b>	École Française d'Extrême-Orient
<b>FAO:</b>	Food and Agriculture Organisation
<b>FMD:</b>	Foot and mouth disease
<b>GSO:</b>	Vietnam General Statistics Office
<b>HEPR:</b>	Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Programme
<b>IPSARD:</b>	Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development
<b>LC:</b>	Lào Cai
<b>LCDIT:</b>	Lào Cai Department of Industry and Trade
<b>LCIPT:</b>	Lào Cai Centre for Investment, Trade and Tourism
<b>LCPC:</b>	Lào Cai Province People’s Committee
<b>LCTC:</b>	Lào Cai Tourism Company
<b>MARD:</b>	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
<b>MMB:</b>	Market Management Board
<b>NEZ:</b>	New Economic Zones
<b>NGO:</b>	Non-governmental Organisation
<b>NMPRP:</b>	Northern Mountains Poverty Reduction Project
<b>P135:</b>	Program for Socio-economic Development of Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic, Mountainous, Boundary and Remote Areas
<b>RNIP:</b>	Road Network Improvement Project
<b>UN:</b>	United Nations
<b>UNODC:</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>SOE:</b>	State-owned enterprise
<b>SRV:</b>	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
<b>VASS:</b>	Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences
<b>VND:</b>	Vietnamese Dong

## GLOSSARY

<b>các dân tộc thiểu số</b>	ethnic minority nationalities
<b>Ban Quản Lý Chợ</b>	Market Management Board
<b>buôn bán nhỏ</b>	small-scale trade
<b>chợ phiên</b>	periodic market
<b>chợ tình</b>	‘love market’
<b>chợ văn hoá</b>	cultural market fair
<b>chợ vùng cao</b>	upland market fair
<b>đổi mới</b>	economic renovation
<b>hộ khẩu</b>	household registration system
<b>Hội Đồng Nhân Dân</b>	People’s Council
<b>huyện</b>	district
<b>làng</b>	village
<b>men</b>	alcohol fermentation starter
<b>Phố Cổ</b>	Ancient quarter of Hà Nội
<b>phường</b>	ward
<b>rượu</b>	wine or liquor
<b>thảo quả</b>	cardamom
<b>thành phố</b>	city
<b>thời bao cấp</b>	subsidized economy
<b>tỉnh</b>	province
<b>Ủy Ban Nhân Dân</b>	People’s Committee
<b>Việt Kiều</b>	overseas Vietnamese
<b>xã</b>	rural commune
<b>xe ôm</b>	motorbike taxi
<b>xeem</b>	Hmong lineage clans
<b>xóm</b>	hamlet

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

*In the remote upland border commune of Pha Long, in Lào Cai province, northern Vietnam, it is 6am and Paj, a sixty year old Hmong woman, gets ready to embark once more on a 10-day trading cycle during which she will cover a circulate route of well over 150 kilometres. A few days earlier, Paj made a day trip over to Yunnan province, China along with her husband Chue, crossing at the local Pha Long border gate to purchase supplies for her trade and visit kin. Along with this couple, several other Hmong from Pha Long also made this journey because it was Wednesday, the day of the Lau Kha periodic border market in Ma Guan, Yunnan, located a distance of around five kilometres from their local border entry point. It's easy for Paj to make this passage into China as she is a border resident and has paid for a renewable permit, enabling her to undertake this crossing for a period of six months. Also, she speaks both Hmong as well as the local dialect of Mandarin Chinese, allowing her to communicate with Hmong and Han Chinese traders selling in the Lau Kha market. Through her kin networks in China, Paj has made many market contacts.*

*Starting in the late 1990s, Paj began to notice new products turning up in China's Lau Kha border market. These were decorative materials, synthetic cloths, and manufactured clothes used by Hmong women for their customary dress. At first, Paj bought these goods in China to sell at her local market in Pha Long, but then competition mounted as more Vietnam resident Hmong and cross-border Han and Hmong traders from China arrived, all selling similar commodities. Since Paj has four married sons, her family has sufficient labour to perform all of its annual agricultural tasks. Hence, she and her husband decided to explore the possibility of trading at a Vietnam market more distant from the border, where such new Hmong-oriented commodities had yet to arrive. As they had kin living in Mù Cang Chải commune, in the neighbouring province of Yên Bái, they visited the central market there and found that they could do well as traders. Today, Paj will travel by public bus to the Mù Cang Chải daily market. There, she rents out a market stall from a contact she made through her uncle who is a local resident, which she uses to trade from and where she and Chue also sleep at night. Hmong residents of Mù Cang Chải live far from the Vietnam-China border, and Paj was one of the first traders to bring these new Hmong 'cultural commodities' from China into this area. While Paj trades a variety of*

*lightweight items that she can easily transport, her biggest seller is manufactured Hmong skirts which are highly sought after by local Mù Cang Chải Hmong women, especially in the planting and summer seasons when traditional skirts are heavy and hot while working in the fields. Because Mù Cang Chải Hmong prefer to wear their own local, culturally-rooted dress design, Paj took one of their traditional skirts back with her to the Lau Kha market in China. There, she asked a Han Chinese market contact to bring the skirt to a shopkeeper in the capital city of Ma Guan, who in turn emailed a computer-generated sample of this pattern to an associate in the distant coastal province of Zhejiang, China who had the pattern printed onto a synthetic material. The Zhejiang contact returned the material by post to the Ma Guan shopkeeper who made it into a Hmong skirt printed with a Mù Cang Chải design, after which it made its way back into Paj's hands.*

*After remaining in Mù Cang Chải for around a week, Paj will travel back to Pha Long, where she will assist her daughter-in-law in distilling maize alcohol, which the younger woman sells weekly in the local Pha Long market, using the by-product to feed pigs that the household rears. However, on her way home, Paj stops off in the tourist centre of Sa Pa, in Lào Cai province. She formerly also traded in the Sa Pa town market before it too became oversaturated with traders like herself, but she has kin and friends who still work there. At the Sa Pa market, Paj stocks up on basic household supplies and buys a couple of songbirds as pets for her family. While there, she also sells some used traditional embroidered skirts that she has collected from Mù Cang Chải Hmong, for which she has either paid cash or else bartered in return for the new synthetic Hmong skirts. She sells these worn skirts to Sa Pa Hmong friends who rework the old textiles into a variety of ethnic handicrafts, which are then traded in the burgeoning tourist market (Interview notes 21-22 February 2009).*

This thesis is about Paj and other upland small-scale traders like her - 'peripheral traders' in a number of different senses: they operate in places situated on the margins of the national economy; they engage in trade activities that would not be regarded as yielding profits of great economic significance; and as upland ethnic minorities, they are often viewed and treated as marginal citizens. Yet, as Paj's story highlights, these traders are nonetheless innovators, cultivating consumer preferences and seeking out new markets wherein they can fulfil a key niche. Their trade networks knit together a variety of contacts and mechanisms of exchange and can often span vast geographical distances.

Moreover, the choice of market activities that Paj and her family are engaged in, namely textile and alcohol trading, involve items that have always held strong significance to Hmong socio-cultural practices and identity. Paj's trade - and those of other Hmong petty traders from Lào Cai province - cannot really be characterised as evidence of wholesale integration into the market economy through off-farm livelihood diversification. Even so, it is undoubtedly an important activity that enables her family to purchase hybrid varieties of rice and maize, along with the fertilisers and pesticides necessary to grow them. These subsistence agricultural activities continue to be the central and most highly valued livelihood components for Hmong households living in this upland area.

With one of the fastest growing economies over the last two decades world-wide, Vietnam provides an interesting case with which to view through a number of different windows onto processes of market change and integration. The nation's transition from 'plan to market' has been hailed as a model and dramatic success story of economic growth and poverty reduction (Griffin 1998; Balisacan et al. 2003; World Bank 2004; IDA World Bank 2010; UN Vietnam Online: 2010). While continuing to pursue its own brand of market-oriented socialism, Vietnam has opened up to international markets and trade, recently joining the World Trade Organisation (in 2007), as well as becoming a member of regionalised trade systems, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (in 1995), and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (in 1998).<sup>1</sup> The nation's fast-paced economy is reflected by a rapidly climbing Gross Domestic Product since the 1990s, and is currently being eyed by economists and investors as one of the top emerging markets on a global scale (Vuong et al. 2009; Economist 26/11/09).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, within the shadows of Vietnam's free(r) markets and economic reform achievements, two lesser told market stories have been unfolding. The first concerns the

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<sup>1</sup> The Vietnam state is a single party political system, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The Party and the state apparatus are closely interconnected and often overlapping, such that it is often difficult to distinguish between them (Koh 2002).

<sup>2</sup> In 2009, the Economic Intelligence Unit at the Economist included Vietnam as part of the second tier of big emerging markets of which the other nations listed were Columbia, Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa - given the acronym CIVETS. The first tier nations were defined by Goldman Sachs to include Brazil, China, India and Russia (Economist 26/11/09).

everyday local marketplaces upon which the majority of Vietnam's citizens depend for their livelihoods and access to everyday essentials, and particularly so for lower income groups (Moustier et al. 2006; Maruyama and Le Viet Trung 2010). Local marketplaces - as opposed to markets as theoretical abstractions based on supply and demand or price - are place-based entities, where social actors meet face-to-face and engage in economic transactions that are embedded within specific socio-cultural and political relationships (de Alcantara 1992; Crow 2001; Benediktsson 2002).

As a newcomer in the race towards progress and modernity, Vietnam seeks to follow in the footsteps of its 'Little Tiger' neighbours, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, and transform into a newly industrialised country sustaining high rates of economic growth (Evers and Gerke 1997). Accordingly, local marketplaces and petty trading activities have been recast as pre-modern, undisciplined and inefficient commercial patterns targeted for 'modernisation' (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/QD-TTg; Lincoln 2008; see Chapter 5 of this thesis). Supermarkets and retail chains, catering to the emerging middle classes are being pushed forward as throughout the nation, older traditional and informal markets are being formalised, refurbished, and upgraded to become 'healthy markets', with former traders displaced in the process and often unable to afford the costs of trading in these modernised spaces (Gillespie 2006; Leshkovich 2008).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, as the significance of the informal economy continues to grow in the wake of market reforms, small-scale traders and street vendors are confronted by efforts to drive out or restrict their livelihood activities, as the state aims to beautify, sanitise and decongest its urban and tourist centres (Abrami and Henaff 2004; Waibel 2004; Lincoln 2008; Turner and Schoenberger 2011).

The second, related market story concerns the diverse economies of upland societies where Paj carves out her trade - societies which have remained largely on the periphery of Vietnam's wider economic changes. In particular, this concerns Hmong and Yao uplanders, groups which fall under the Vietnam state's official categorisation of 'ethnic

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<sup>3</sup> 'Healthy markets' are a regulatory ideal being promoted by the Vietnam state, yet the specific meaning of the term remains unfixed and constantly changing to reflect shifting areas of emphasis in Communist Party economic policy (Gillespie 2006).

minorities' (*các dân tộc thiểu số*). The vast majority of Vietnam's ethnic minorities live in the remote uplands areas of the nation, and as a whole, face the highest concentrations of poverty, and an ever widening gap in living standards relative to the nation's lowland majority, ethnic Kinh (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001). Market integration is a key aim of the Vietnam state to achieve economic development and poverty alleviation in the uplands (Boothroyd and Pham Xuan Nam 2000; World Bank 2009).

Due to ongoing state misconceptions that many upland ethnic minorities – and especially Hmong and Yao - are autarkic and lacking business acumen for trade, a fundamental way that integration is being pursued is by 'bringing the markets to the people', through the construction and upgrading of state-sanctioned physical marketplaces in remote and upland areas (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP; Phan Si Man 2005; World Bank 2009). While upland ethnic minorities are less involved in marketplace trading than Kinh as an overall general pattern, Hmong and Yao, among other minority groups, have in fact had a long historical experience with trade and wider markets. Furthermore, as Rambo notes (1997:25) because many of the commodities that ethnic minorities exchange "do not fall within the standard categories used for economic data collection...the real extent to which mountain minorities are already deeply involved in the market nexus is not fully recognised". In undertaking forms of trade deemed by the state to be unimportant, the activities of such 'marginal traders' in northern upland Vietnam have received little attention aside from a handful of academic studies undertaken by foreign researchers (see Sowerwine 2004; Schoenberger and Turner 2008; Turner and Michaud 2008; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009; Turner 2010). This study seeks to redress such oversights.

## **1.2 Aim and Key Questions**

In light of these two stories described above, the aim of this thesis is to provide a nuanced understanding of local market formation and integration in the Lào Cai province uplands, by focusing upon how marketplaces and trade are being created and (re)shaped at the confluence of local innovation, state actions, and wider market forces. At the very heart of this study is an actor-oriented investigation geared at illuminating what it means to be an upland small-scale trader. To achieve my aim, I bring together an analysis of both how



the state seeks to develop and ‘modernise’ upland marketplaces as well as how these markets on the periphery are being crafted through the everyday actions and activities of upland residents. The geographical focus area of my research is Lào Cai, one of Vietnam’s northernmost mountainous provinces which borders China, and which is home to an extremely wide diversity of ethno-linguistic groups.

I set out to answer the following three complementary Research Questions that will enable me to address my research aim:

1. What roles do centripetal and centrifugal forces, particularly linked to the Vietnam state and market integration, play within the contemporary restructuring of marketplaces, commodity networks, and trade dynamics in Lào Cai’s uplands?
2. How do upland social markers of difference, namely ethnicity, cultural variables, gender and economic status influence trading and the way actors shape their exchange activities?
3. What strategies are used by different groups of upland social actors, most notably Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities, to engage with opportunities and negotiate constraints in trade and marketplace activities in order to construct and enhance their livelihoods?

My research concentrates on the socio-economic, political and structural factors that have influenced the nature of contemporary upland market trade since economic reforms were implemented in Vietnam (post-1986). However, I also seek to analyse both transformations and continuities over the longer term by reflecting upon how trade dynamics of the past may articulate with current day specific forms of upland marketplace trading. Moreover, while my research includes a wide range of social actors, my intent is to focus specifically on how Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities are involved in markets and trade. My rationale for this is based upon the prior remoteness of these two groups to state policies, their status as two of the least assimilated groups to Vietnamese Kinh majority society and among the most poorly understood by the state, and because Hmong and Yao face significantly higher rates of poverty than other

minority groups (Koh 2002; World Bank 2009). In addition, my concentration on Hmong and Yao is based on the fact that in the majority of the upland districts of Lào Cai, these comprise the most numerous and widespread ethnic groups. They also tend to neighbour each other, belong to their own distinct language family, and trade together as well.

In order to answer my research questions and fulfill the aim of this study, I have divided my investigation into two broad areas of inquiry. The first examines the recent transformations taking place in Lào Cai's upland marketplaces from a broader perspective, by considering state development policy and market economy shifts and how these processes are impacting local market traders (Research Question 1). The second area of focus explicitly concentrates on how Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities in Lào Cai are engaged in upland market trade (linking to Research Questions 2 and 3). To do so, I have undertaken in-depth case studies of trade activities for three products that have historically held strong cultural and livelihood significance for Hmong and Yao in Lào Cai, namely water buffalo, upland artisanal alcohols, and textiles.<sup>4</sup> An exploration of these 'cultural trade' activities – all of which are now undergoing transformations due to market integration and state intervention - provide an important avenue through which to gain insights into how Hmong and Yao uplanders are participating in markets and responding to market changes.

In the remainder of this chapter I broadly set the stage for what follows in this thesis. Firstly, in Section 1.3, I present an initial picture of the research context by introducing the key actors that are the focus of this thesis and the study site of Lào Cai province (see Figure 1.1). I then continue by tracing out the broad contours of the Vietnam state's position concerning upland ethnic minorities through a general overview of state discourse and policies on ethnic minorities and the northern uplands during the post-colonial period, as this comprises a key theme woven throughout the study. In Section 1.4, I then introduce the building blocks of the conceptual framework I have used to

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<sup>4</sup> The production (or rearing) of water buffalo, upland alcohols, and textiles has endured as important activities for Hmong and Yao living in Lào Cai. However, it is important to clarify that while water buffalo and upland alcohols have long featured as key trade activities, the textile trade has grown to become a significant activity since the mid 1990s.

inform my research and interpretations. In Section 1.5, I outline the structure and describe the contents of this thesis. To conclude in Section 1.6, I present some of the important contributions that this study makes to our understanding of markets and small-scale trade livelihood activities within the multi-ethnic social landscape of Lào Cai province, and potentially, the wider northern Vietnam upland region.

### **1.3 The Vietnam State and Ethnic Minorities in the Northern Uplands**

A brief initial acquaintance with the different actors involved in upland marketplaces and their political relationships with the state over time is critical to an understanding of the wider background context in which upland traders operate. In this section, I sketch out the key ethnic groups that feature in this study, situating them and the traders among them, within the broader political context of state branding, rhetoric and policy.

Vietnam has one of the largest and most diverse ethnic minority populations within the mainland Southeast Asian massif, including 54 state classified ethnic groups, or ‘nationalities’ (Kampe 1997; Khong Dien 2002; Michaud 2006). The majority ethnic group, Kinh, meaning ‘people of the capital’, make up 86 per cent of the total population, while ethnic minorities comprise the remaining 14 per cent and number around six million (Michaud 2006; GSO 2009).<sup>5</sup> However, the spatial concentration of Vietnam’s ethnic heterogeneity is evidenced by the fact that at least 35 of the officially designated minority groups are indigenous to the wider region encompassing Vietnam’s northern uplands – an area covering almost a third of the nation’s total land area, and the regional setting for my study (GSO 2009).<sup>6</sup>

As noted above, Hmong uplanders make up a key group of traders that I look at in this study. Officially ranked as the fifth most populous ethnic group in Vietnam as of the

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<sup>5</sup>The total population of Vietnam according to the latest census in 2009 was 85,847,000 (GSO 2009).

<sup>6</sup> In 1995, the Vietnam state enlarged the number of provinces in the northern uplands from 13 in 1995 - when it was called the north mountain and midlands - to 16. In 1999, the northern uplands were divided further into two regions: the northeast and northwest. In 2000, Vĩnh Phúc and Bắc Ninh provinces were reclassified as part of the Red River Delta, leaving the following 14 northern upland provinces: 11 in the northeast (Lào Cai, Hà Giang, Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, Lạng Sơn, Tuyên Quang, Yên Bái, Thái Nguyên, Phú Thọ, Bắc Giang, and Quảng Ninh) and 4 in the northwest (Lai Châu, Sơn La, and Hòa Bình and Điện Biên) (Minot et al. 2006).

2009 national census, Hmong are described as a transnational society, with an acephalous political structure and with specific economic practices, forms of social organisation, and cultural practices that set them apart from the nation's Kinh majority (Turner 2007; GSO 2009). With some of the first arrivals likely migrating from China during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hmong settled in many upland areas of Vietnam (Culas and Michaud 2004). While traditionally horticulturalists practicing shifting agriculture, today many Hmong households' livelihoods in the northern uplands are centered on sedentary subsistence agriculture, based largely on wet rice paddy, dry rice patches, and maize fields. Hmong in Vietnam have long had an association with upland markets and trade for both social and economic purposes, and have also maintained vital economic ties and social affinities with kin across the border in China from before it was finally set in 1896.

Ethnic minority Yao (Dao) traders are a second important group featured in this research. Rated as the seventh most populous ethnic group in the nation, Yao similarly migrated to Vietnam from China, although likely earlier than Hmong groups (Michaud 2006; GSO 2009). In upland northern Vietnam, many Yao households share core livelihood practices akin with those of Hmong, as well as a historical connection with a number of trade activities based on local specialisations that have developed as a reflection of place-based agro-ecological variations. Indeed, as will be revealed in this thesis, many of the contemporary trade activities undertaken by both Hmong and Yao uplanders have not emerged recently under market reforms, but rather are part of a historical continuum of early types of production and trade activities. In the context of upland market integration, while trade activities are being adapted - sometimes taking on novel forms in response to recent opportunities - older elements of trade and exchange practice are always retained and combined alongside new approaches.

Tai-speaking groups - which taken together form the largest group of ethnic minorities in Vietnam - are also importantly represented in upland markets and trade in Lào Cai province.<sup>7</sup> This includes those officially designated as Tày, Giáy, and Nùng ethnic minorities. These groups are included in this study as they occupy an important historical

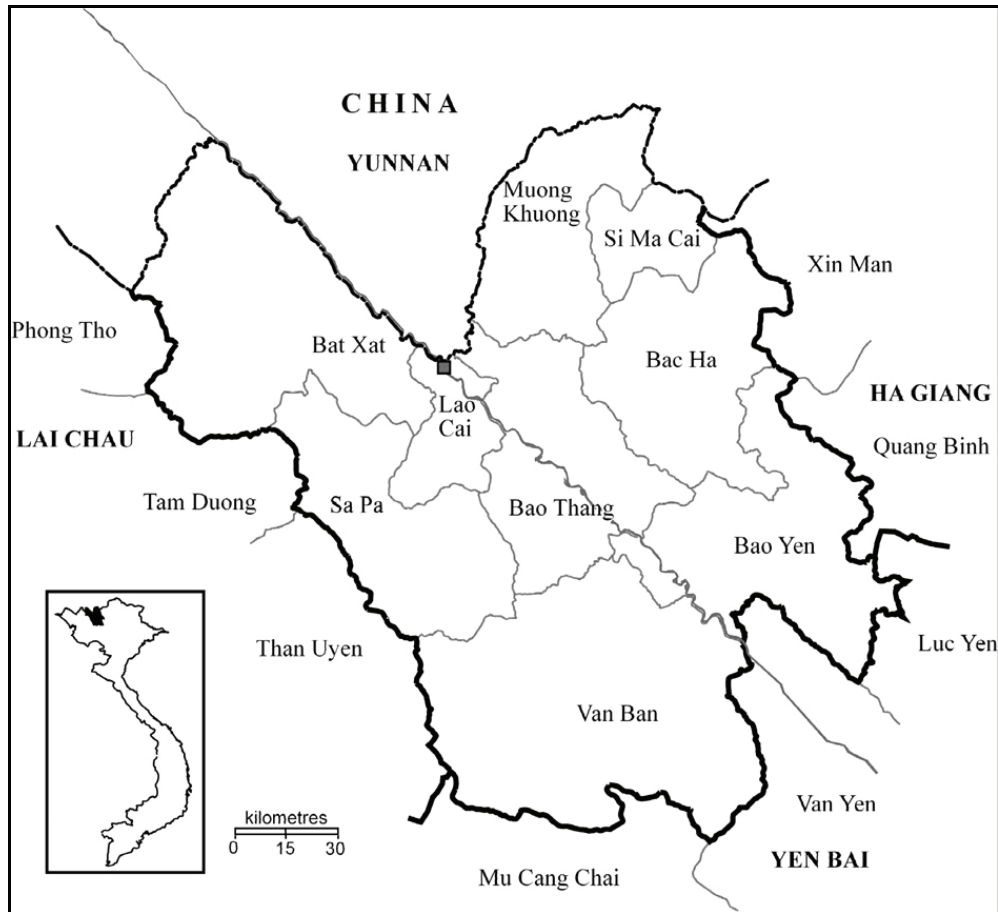
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<sup>7</sup> In this thesis, I use the 'the Tai' to refer to Tai-speaking people in Vietnam in general.

trade niche as intermediaries linking upland-lowland trades and commodity chains, a role that continues up to this day.

Ethnic Kinh form the majority population of Vietnam, as noted above, yet their populations remained marginal in the northern uplands until the 1960s with their state sponsored migration from the lowlands - a pattern that has continued since the mid-1980s through spontaneous migration. Over this period, and especially following economic reforms, ethnic Kinh, much as the Han in southwest China, have played a decisive role in changing the face of upland trading-scapes. Their social networks with the lowlands, stronger power of influence with state agents, and relatively higher levels of financial capital have enabled Kinh traders to become a dominant economic power in upland market arenas. Under the market economy (with 'socialist orientation'), Kinh in the highlands have developed more extensive regional and upland-lowland trade linkages, created new market opportunities, and also entered into trade domains that were formerly almost exclusively performed by upland minorities. This social control of accumulation in the hands of the Kinh calls for important attention within the broader context of upland development, and the dynamics of interethnic trade relations are an aspect that I devote attention to in this study.

As mentioned earlier, the setting for this study is Lào Cai province (Figure 1.1), located in upland northern Vietnam, which shares a 203 km national border with China's Yunnan province. Lào Cai province is officially part of the northern mountainous region, and is considered to be remote and sparsely populated outside the Red River (*Sông Hồng*) valley crossing it in its middle (Michaud et al. 2002). The rugged, sloping terrain limits the area of farmable land in comparison with the lowlands, hindering large-scale agriculture and household farm production, and many upland communities remain fairly isolated due to poor physical connectivity. Lào Cai also reflects a social environment of complexity, populated by 35 of Vietnam's 54 official ethnic groups, of which ethnic minorities altogether account for 64 per cent of the province's total population (GSO 2009). The province has also been evaluated by the state as one of the top six poorest in the nation, with the other five similarly located in the northern uplands (GSO 2004).



**FIGURE 1.1: MAP OF LÀO CAI PROVINCE (SOURCE: BONNIN AND TURNER: 2011)**

The current day situation for ethnic minority residents of the mountainous region of northern Vietnam is firmly rooted in their interactions with a state apparatus that has, through time, created specific directives for the uplands and ways of categorising the people living there. This naming and categorisation started during the French colonial period. Before that, in pre-colonial, imperial Vietnam, ethnicity as such was not considered a key marker of difference, with political and cultural relations to the central dynasty playing a far more definitive role in demarcating social lines and power (Michaud 2000). Then, the French in *Union Indochinoise* (today's Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos), as with other colonial regimes of its Southeast Asian neighbours, produced ethnic classifications, together with the drawing up of borders and maps, as a 'technology of power' that defined ethnic identities in relation to political boundaries (Winichakul 1994; Pelley 1998; Keyes 2002; Sowerwine 2004). Indeed, during the French colonial

period in Tonkin (northern Vietnam), a number of military explorers, missionaries and administrators alike collected data and produced ethnographies on upland peoples - linking systems of ethnic classification to specific territories (Koh 2002). Moreover, these projects also served as a means for colonial powers to gain the alliance of some upland groups for economic and political purposes (Michaud 2004).

In post-colonial, socialist Vietnam, as throughout the wider Southeast Asian massif, the practice of ethnology has continued to be employed as a political tool - reinforcing civilisational discourses of state control and sustaining an upland-lowland divide. The national classification of identity via an official tally of the 'correct groupings' and 'right names' for the diverse ethnic groups within Vietnam's borders was considered by both the independent (1954) and reunified (1975) state as essential to national consolidation, security and economic development (Koh 2002; 2004). Official ethnic classification was a lengthy and highly debated affair that began in the 1950s, with state ethnologists continuing to revise their lists until arriving at the final total of 54 ethnic groups in 1979 (Khong Dien 2002; Salemink 2003; McElwee 2004).<sup>8</sup> 'Scientific' methods of evaluating ethnic difference were prioritised over endogenous identification, creating disjuncture between the official categories and the autonyms that people used to refer to themselves, following a very similar approach to that taken by China during the 1950s (Tapp 2002a).<sup>9</sup>

Another key task of official ethnic classification was to subjectively evaluate the 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of minorities' material and cultural practices (Pelley 1998). This has included an ongoing insistence by the state on the economic standardisation and integration of ethnic minorities to fit with the dominant lowland model (whether under centrally-planned or more market-oriented economies), while the distinctiveness and adaptive features of diverse upland economic systems and practices

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<sup>8</sup>Three different versions of the list of ethnic groups were made over this period. The number of ethnic groups was reduced from an original 64 in 1959 to 54 in 1979. During this process, some groups were lumped together and thus gained more numerical prominence, while others from the former lists, vanished on paper. Additionally, derogatory terms that had formerly been used by the Kinh to refer to certain groups were officially replaced with more benign ethnonyms (Pelley 1998).

<sup>9</sup>Ethnic groups were determined based on a criterion of language, material life, culture, and 'ethnic consciousness'. At present, many members of particular ethnic groupings wish to be reclassified (Koh 2004; McElwee 2004).

have been largely ignored, misunderstood or viewed as non-productive or even destructive (Michaud 2006). Early ethnology following independence was heavily influenced by Stalinist historical materialism and evolution which which slotted groups of people into points along a hierarchy of economic as well as socio-cultural development, with ethnic Kinh located at the apex (Koh 2002; Michaud 2009).

While the right for all ethnic groups to practice their own customs and traditions is stated in the Constitution, in practice this only applies to those features which contribute to national socio-economic progress and unity (Koh 2002; Michaud 2006). During the 1970s, selective cultural preservation policies granted state officials the authority to decide which elements of minority culture were worth being preserved, or were in need of elimination or ‘transformation’ (Salemink 2003). Valued cultural elements were those seen as benign and aesthetic such as dance, dress, handicrafts, and music. Practices and beliefs considered ‘counterproductive’ or ‘superstitious’, such as subsistence and shifting agriculture, lavish ritual feasts, animal sacrifices, shamanism, and bride wealth, were targeted for phasing out (Viet Chung 1968; Nong Quoc Chan 1978). Mass education campaigns in the northern uplands were used to promote these efforts and disseminate communist propaganda via the installation of Kinh, Vietnamese-speaking teachers and cadres in ethnic minority hamlets (Koh 2002; Jackson 1969)<sup>10</sup>. For some groups, like the Hmong and Yao, oral traditions and collective memory have been an important way to resist these ethno-culturally destructive policies of assimilation (Goulet 2005).

### **1.3.2 Post-independence State Policies in the Northern Uplands**

During central planning, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north from 1954, and later the reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam from 1975, implemented a series of interlinked economic development policies that would dramatically impact northern upland societies. One of the most austere state policies targeting ethnic minorities is its ongoing fixed cultivation and settlement campaign. The rationale behind sedentarisation is that ethnic minorities’ agricultural practices are environmentally unsound and an

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<sup>10</sup> Although the constitution guarantees ethnic minorities the right to primary education in their own language, the reality is that schools are most of the time taught by Kinh teachers who do not speak local dialects and thus instruction in minority languages is not provided (Baulch et al. 2002).



obstacle to modern agro-economic development - specifically, the ‘nomadic shifting agriculture’ that was typified as customary practice by groups such as Hmong and Yao (Salemink 1997; Sowerwine 2004).<sup>11</sup>

However, the aim was not only to promote fixed agriculture, but also to ‘stabilise’ and ‘develop’ ethnic minorities by permanently resettling them into hamlets (Sowerwine 2004). The association of harmful agricultural techniques with groups for whom national borderlines had historically held little meaning - having long moved freely between them - also served an underlying security purpose (Pelley 1998). Sedentarisation made surveillance and monitoring easier, enabling census taking, service provision, and security - all mechanisms to facilitate the political and economic integration of disparate upland groups into the nation state. Many ethnic minorities were resettled into planned hamlets and communes that were often ethnically-mixed - environments that lacked the social and spiritual cohesiveness of their former communities (Pelley 1998; Goulet 2005).<sup>12</sup>

In concert with the above fixed settlement strategies, from the late 1950s and into the early 1960s, the government was at work implementing its collectivisation programme in the north as part of its socialist development model (Sikor 1999; Khong Dien 2002)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>This campaign commenced in 1968 and continues to the present. In total, an estimated 1.2 million people have undergone this sedentarisation programme (de Konink, Lamarre and Gendron 2003). As is the case elsewhere in Southeast Asia, particularly Laos and Thailand, the agricultural practices of ethnic minorities in Vietnam have long been blamed for deforestation and environmental damage. Yet, research demonstrates that rotational swidden cultivation is sustainable under appropriate conditions and low population densities (Di Gregorio, Rambo and Yanagisawa 2003). It is only within the context of state-sponsored upland migration, deforestation by forestry initiatives, natural population increases, and the ensuing land scarcity that pioneering shifting cultivation practices (practiced by ethnic minorities and Kinh alike) have contributed to upland ecological decline (Salemink 2000).

<sup>12</sup>Some ethnic minorities adopted strategies in order to counter such policies (Salemink 2003). For instance, many directly refused resettlement into villages and sedentarisation, or voted ‘with their feet’ moving into more remote upland areas beyond the direct reach of the state (Salemink 1997). Some returned from resettlement sites to their former abodes. Others took advantage of state policy by holding residence in two different villages - within different communes, districts or even provinces – often dividing their households between the two areas (Scott 2000).

<sup>13</sup>As a simple guide to understanding state policy and the general pattern of collectivisation at a national-level, its various stages in Vietnam were as follows: 1) in 1953, groups of several households were organised into mutual aid teams; 2) in 1959, low-level cooperatives comprised of 10-20 households each were formed; 3) from 1963-1965, the state shifted to high level collectives with 30-50 households each, one collective per hamlet; 4) from 1966-1969, high level collectives of 100-150 households were formed, with

Under central planning, all land (agricultural and forest) and many resources – as the property of the people, collectively - were to be managed by the state through agricultural cooperatives and state forestry enterprises (Scott 2001; Mellac 2011). Moreover, the majority of commodity exchange and distribution formally came under state control, and restrictions were placed on private trading activities.

During this time, many upland marketplaces in town centres functioned as district-run cooperatives, with goods supplied through household ration coupons. Ethnic minority households were encouraged to join agricultural collectivisation, while their previous forms of agro-ecological practice, spiritual ties to the land, and social obligations were ignored. Under collectivisation, only one dominant form and system of agricultural organisation existed and this was implemented throughout the nation, despite the wide diversity of economic, social, ethnic and biophysical contexts (Sikor 1999)<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, the disruption of customary social and political units in order to build a unified society was another key objective underlying the state collectivisation project (Mellac 2011).

Yet in practice, collectivised farming in the uplands rarely conformed to the planned model – with collective members often engaged in double or hybrid land systems - and was only ever implemented in a piecemeal fashion (Scott 2000; Mellac 2011). Many groups dwelling in higher altitudes remained outside of the reach of these initiatives, while Kinh volunteers who were tasked with leadership were often unable to communicate with minority members (Scott 2000; Castella et al. 2002; Henin 2002; Corlin 2004; Duong 2006). Moreover, despite restrictions on many forms of private trade, upland residents - both minorities and Kinh - continued to engage in a significant amount of informal small-scale trade, mostly of goods that the colonial as much as the

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one per village; 5) from 1970-1971, high level collectives expanded to the commune level, including between 4000 and 6000 people at each commune; 6) from 1974-early 1980s, agro-industrial units were formed at the district level, involving 100,000 to 200,000 people. Nevertheless, in practice the overall level and phases of collectives was highly variable (Scott 2000).

<sup>14</sup>The cooperatives were organised into work brigades (men and women between the ages of 16-55), which undertook the cultivation of paddy and upland fields. Work points were assigned based upon the number of days worked, and payments were often in paddy rice, although the paddy value of labour fluctuated depending upon the harvest and input costs (Sikor 1999).

socialist state were especially keen to regulate, such as alcohol, rice, cardamom, forest products and opium.

In parallel with collectivisation, during the 1960s and 1970s the state also implemented a large scale population resettlement of lowland Kinh from the Red River delta to the uplands in order to clear the land and create ‘new economic zones’, discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5. In addition to organising production, collectivisation facilitated the building of rural infrastructure like roads, electricity, schools and medical clinics (Hardy 2003). While these institutions were subsidised by the state and brought ‘modern’ education and health care, they also served as an essential means of directly promoting national unity and socialist indoctrination (Sowerwine 2004).

### **1.3.3 Economic Renovation in the Northern Uplands**

In 1986, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam officially inaugurated a series of market-oriented reforms called *đổi mới*, in an attempt to resolve the growing problems of the planned economy and agricultural collectivisation caused in large part by the wind of liberalisation blowing strongly over the ‘Red brotherhood’, in particular the USSR and China<sup>15</sup>. Regarding the situation for Vietnam’s northern uplands, the two most salient features of *đổi mới* have been land reform and market liberalisation (Hardy and Turner 2000).

Land reform transferred agricultural production back to the household economy, through the redistribution and allocation of collectivised land assigned by leases. Property rights have had both positive and negative consequences for upland ethnic minorities. On the one hand, land tenure certificates now guarantee a bearer’s right to use, exchange, lease, transfer, mortgage, and inherit land. On the other, land allocation has resulted in land degradation on less fertile upland soils, and household land scarcity when combined with

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<sup>15</sup>Researchers have associated this decision with a variety of interlinked external and domestic factors, including: a lack of anticipated economic growth; a series of economic shocks over the second half of the 1970s; political disgruntlement with the unequal distribution of wealth; severe food shortages; the drop in foreign aid and alienation from China following Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1979/1980; the ongoing trade embargo; and grass-roots pressures from rural peasants’ growing resistance to the cooperative system of production (Kerkvliet 1995; Beresford 2003).

customary inheritance practices and population increases (Sowewine 2004; Mellac 2011; Bonnin and Turner 2011a). This has furthered food insecurity, and created an increased need for households to rely on hybrid varieties of high yielding staple crop seeds (rice and maize) over traditional local varieties, which promote greater engagements in the market to earn cash to buy these seeds and their required inputs.

The second important affect of *đổi mới*, and directly relevant to this thesis, has been market liberalisation, which has opened remote upland areas to commodity agriculture and drawn market towns into larger webs of trade with the regional and international economy (Hardy and Turner 2000). Generally speaking, market policies over the last two decades have enhanced food security, boosted agricultural productivity and improved access to roads and markets. As I shall demonstrate in this thesis, upland actors have not simply responded passively to market forces, but have actively engaged in seeking out new economic opportunities, modifying existing pursuits in order to benefit from, as well as even contributing to, market expansion (Sikor and Pham Thi Tuong Vi 2005).

However, data from the Vietnam Households Living Standards Surveys over the period from 1993 to 2006 suggests that the Kinh majority have profited the most from these state policies, while minorities in the northern uplands have experienced slower rates of poverty reduction and ongoing gaps in household welfare (Minot et al. 2006; World Bank 2009). Research demonstrates that upland minorities in the north have poorer access to markets, and participate less in markets and trade than ethnic Kinh (World Bank 2009). Yet at the same time, such research tends to only account for ‘regular’ and ‘official’ participants in trade - such as year-round trade or having a business license and rented spot in a fixed marketplace. The problem with this type of evaluation is that it fails to consider the more flexible, irregular or seasonal engagements that many upland individuals and households have with markets. As such, in this study I take a different approach to analysing the involvement of uplanders in market trade, whereby my emphasis is not on the extent to which upland individuals and households are engaged in markets and trade, but rather on the *specific nature* of their involvement, and by extension, their livelihood strategies in doing so.

#### **1.4 The Conceptual Lens for the Study**

Marketplaces, traders, and trading in peasant societies of the Global South have long been important topics of interest for social scientists, with numerous studies produced on a variety of subjects relating to these areas in very diverse contexts (see for example, Geertz 1963; Dewey 1962; Bromley 1971; Bromley, Symanski and Good 1975; McGee and Yeung 1977; Babb 1984; Skinner 1985; Smith 1985; Plattner 1985; Alexander 1987; Mai and Bucholt 1987). The underpinnings of much of this earlier research focussed on either: the structuralist-functionalist modernisation paradigm, the formalist/substantivist debate, or else neo-Marxist or neoclassical development theories. The main goal of all of these widely different theoretical viewpoints was to seek explanations for the existence, persistence, transformations or growth of these systems and activities.

More recently, since the 1990s, research on marketplaces and small-scale trade in anthropology and sociology have drawn upon additional conceptual tools in order to better discuss the intricacies and diversity of locally-situated market systems over time and changing circumstances. This complexity is certainly heightening as the effects of market liberalisation, integration and globalisation come to bear upon even the most isolated rural societies, while new conceptual approaches point to the key role that social actors themselves play in negotiating and even shaping larger economic and political processes (Clark 1994; Seligman 2001; Little 2004; Smart and Smart 2005). In a similar way, in development geography, debates have focused on the need for more actor-oriented approaches to be incorporated into development studies (Benediktsson 1998; McSweeney 2004; Forsyth and Michaud 2011). Researchers have argued that trade networks can be a valuable analytical entry-point for understanding how rural livelihoods are limited by structural constraints, while giving due weight to the capacity of local actors to resist, grapple with or engage and give local form to these wider forces (Benediktsson 2002; McSweeney 2004).

In light of these important insights and new contributions to the study of local markets and small-scale trade, for this study I weave together a conceptual framework that draws

key elements from three strands of development literature. These bodies of work consist of: 1) actor-oriented approaches to rural livelihoods; 2) social network-based approaches to markets and small-scale trade; and 3) commodity chain approaches to trade networks.

Firstly, I ground my study within an actor-oriented livelihoods approach, a highly valuable framework for understanding how, within a context of vulnerability, insecurity or adversity, social actors draw upon a wide range of resources and opportunities in order to make a meaningful living. This is an all-encompassing approach that allows me to explore how trade activities fit into the wider livelihood portfolios of upland households and individuals, the way trading interrelates with other livelihood activities, as well as the structures, processes and institutions that influence the way small-scale trade endeavours are pursued. Livelihoods are here conceptualised the process of making a living which is also linked to ‘a way of life’ - recognising that the livelihood pursuits of upland social actors are also often framed by meanings, priorities, moralities and values that go beyond the economic.

Secondly, I draw upon social network-based approaches to markets and small-scale trade in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of how markets are socially constructed and embedded within particular social spaces and geographical contexts. A focus on the social network dynamics that underpins small-scale trade is of particular salience to this study given the multi-ethnic and socially differentiated environment that characterises upland markets in Lào Cai province, where such connections may be based on cultural elements such as kinship. Within such a context there exist multiple understandings of markets, and a variety of forms of trade and exchange.

Thirdly, to contribute to a clearer comprehension of how Hmong and Yao actors are specifically engaged in markets and trade, I utilise insights from the commodity chains literature within my case studies of key ‘cultural commodities’ for these uplanders that are being produced, traded, circulated and consumed within both local as well as external markets and how these processes may interconnect. This approach allows me to examine the socio-economic composition of upland trade and articulate the power dynamics

operating within upland commodity chain networks. It also draws attention to how the meanings and valorisation of cultural commodities is shaped and contested by different groups of social actors situated at various phases in the commodity chain. Moreover, these approaches contribute an analysis that reveals how local upland trade systems are distinctly connected to far more spatially extensive networks of commodity chains with linkages to national, transnational and global scales.

I maintain that these three bodies of literature can be usefully combined, complementing and adding to each other, to enable an actor-oriented, holistic approach to understanding both upland trade activities and development processes. This conceptual framework draws our attention to issues of power, access and diversity in livelihood processes and configurations - aspects that previous, more deterministic structuralist approaches have been weak in addressing.

### **1.5 Outline of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into nine chapters and unfolds in the following manner. In Chapter 2, I lay out the building blocks of the conceptual framework for this study by critically reviewing the literature on actor-oriented approaches to livelihood studies, social network-based approaches to markets and trade, and commodity chains perspectives. I distil key elements from these strands of work, integrating them into an appropriate analytical tool for conceptualising and grappling with the complex realities of upland markets and trade.

In Chapter 3, I present an extensive background context for this research, beginning with an overview of Lào Cai's social landscape, political administration and physical geography. I then turn to examine the main upland actors in Lào Cai province that are involved in this study as noted above, focussing on their histories in the region, social organisations, state and inter-ethnic political relations, and diverse livelihood practices. Next, I trace the histories of marketplaces and trade in Lào Cai from pre-colonial to present times, the purpose of which is to clearly situate my research analysis within the backdrop of wider socio-economic and political changes that have taken place in the

uplands over the past century and a half (since the mid 1800s). In doing so, I expose the many and varied trade and exchange systems that have been employed in the uplands during past and present times. Chapter 4 is the final chapter in this initial section of the thesis dedicated to developing the research framework, context and process. In this chapter, I focus my discussion on the research methodology that I employed for this study. I also incorporate a detailed reflection on the politics of undertaking fieldwork in socialist Vietnam, as well as some of the ethical and practical concerns I encountered while doing research.

Chapters 5 through 8 comprise the results chapters of the study, with each focusing on different aspects of contemporary trade in the uplands of Lào Cai province, and corresponding in turn to my primary research questions. In Chapter 5, I explore upland markets as a critical social interface through which to understand the role that centripetal and centrifugal forces play within the contemporary restructuring of marketplaces, commodity networks, and trade dynamics in Lào Cai's uplands (answering my Research Question 1). Here, I explore specific instances of overlap and disjuncture between state visions of upland development and the local development needs, priorities and initiatives of small-scale traders. I investigate the role of the state in the current development and modernisation of marketplaces within the province, as well as how recent improvements in connective infrastructures such as roads, transportation, and communications are working to alter upland trading-scapes. In describing these structural changes, I consider the specific and diverse responses of upland traders to these transformations, and how they seek to carve out a living through their own constructions of marketplace trade. Additionally, in this chapter I overview the key categories of traders in Lào Cai's upland markets and highlight how the activities of these social actors work to integrate individual upland markets into wider networks of trade, as well as how patterns of upland social differentiation are expressed within upland trading - both between and within ethnic groups.

Chapters 6-8 then focus on in-depth case studies of upland trade networks for the three main cultural commodities produced and traded by Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities



listed earlier: water buffalo, upland artisanal alcohol, and textiles. Through these case study investigations, I address how upland markers of social difference work to influence trade and the way actors shape their exchange activities (answering Research Question 2), as well as the particular strategies used by different groups of upland traders to engage with trade opportunities and negotiate constraints in order to enhance their livelihoods (answering Research Question 3).

In Chapter 6, I explore the multi-faceted water buffalo trade conducted by Hmong in Lào Cai - an extremely significant trade owing to the high monetary cost, productive worth and cultural importance of these animals. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Hmong use a mix of trade and exchange systems for buffalo, following different circuits of commerce in order to fulfill different objectives – encompassing household security, cultural priorities, cash earning, and speculative profit-making. Lào Cai resident Hmong are involved in local level exchange systems underpinned by shared understandings of fairness and reciprocity based on social networks with kin and community, as well as village-based trade and marketplace trade systems of a commercially-oriented nature that include more socially heterogeneous and distant groups of social actors. I argue that having a range of available options for accessing and trading water buffalo – an essential asset for upland farm households - is a critical livelihood resource for Hmong in this province.

In Chapter 7, I analyse the trade in upland rice and maize alcohols, distilled by Hmong and Yao households in Lào Cai. These are central cultural items, required by both ethnic groups for a variety of social functions, rituals and ceremonies. While most households customarily made alcohol for their own use, artisanal alcohol production is increasingly linked to upland social differentiation among minority households – with dedicated distillers now tending to be those with larger landholdings. A few of these local alcohols from specific Hmong and Yao hamlets have recently become popularised within the broader regional setting of north Vietnam and entered into wider national markets. This has given rise to new competing claims over cultural and economic values, with the ‘authenticity’ of traditional products and producers being evaluated and imposed by a

variety of stakeholders including Hmong and Yao distiller-traders, Kinh traders, the state, tourist agents, the mass media, and lowland consumers. I problematise the valorisation of product origins through village branding by the Vietnam state as a development strategy - limiting interest and investment to only a very small territory and excluding neighbouring producers. Yet, even while new commercial markets are developing for these alcohols, localised commodity chains continue to flourish, and upland consumer preferences for place-based flavours remain strong.

In Chapter 8, I investigate the dynamic new trade networks involving Hmong textiles that have emerged since the mid to late 1990s, as illustrated above with Paj – based predominantly on women’s customary dress and intimately connected to Hmong cultural identities. Here, I consider two very differently oriented and yet interlinked commodity chain trade networks. First, I explore the expanding trade in old Hmong textiles that are being purchased and reworked into a variety of ‘ethnic handicrafts’ by Hmong, Kinh, Tày and Giáy traders centred in Lào Cai’s central tourist town of Sa Pa. Items that were formerly valued by Hmong alone for their cultural and functional use value – to be discarded after being exhausted of this purpose - are now being reassessed for their economic potential as new cultural products. The end commodities are destined for sale to national and foreign tourists and are linked to global markets. Ethnic Kinh appear to capture the vast majority of value-added within these commodity chains, investing in up-market shops and using lowland connections to expand their trade to tourist centres throughout Vietnam and beyond. Yet, far from being a story of Hmong simply passively selling off their material culture to more economically powerful groups, Hmong traders are in fact critical actors shaping this market. I explore how Hmong actors draw upon their knowledge of place-based textile differences and kin-based social networks to extend the trade into remote areas of the northern uplands, resulting in new trade linkages and product innovations. Secondly, I examine the commodity chain trade networks for new, industrially produced textiles based on Hmong designs originating from China. These products are entirely oriented to Hmong consumers, and access to this trade in Lào Cai is strongly mediated by ethnicity, residency and language. Lào Cai border resident Hmong have acquired a role in disseminating these cultural commodities through the

northern upland region, as well as being catalysts of consumer desire for new fashions and materials. Only through an in-depth investigation of the specific trade networks and activities that structure these two textile commodity chains does it become clear how they are actually interwoven in complex ways that work to support one another. Moreover, we find that what appear to be petty, peripheral trades are in reality situated within a vast transnational commodity network that extends regionally, covering China, Vietnam, Thailand and Laos, as well as onwards to global markets.

In my final Chapter 9, I present my discussion and conclusion for the study. Here, I flesh out my key arguments and examine the major reoccurring themes that have emerged from my four results chapters. These include: the disjuncture between state market development plans and upland traders' everyday realities; how an attention to trade flows and networks demonstrates upland-lowland interconnectivities; the importance of ethnicity and gender in relation to upland marketplace trade, and; how everyday resistance is expressed through marketplace trade and via the construction of meaningful upland livelihoods. I articulate my empirical findings *vis-à-vis* my conceptual framework as well as in light of broader debates on development and market integration processes unfolding in upland northern Vietnam.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This thesis pushes forward knowledge on the northern Vietnam uplands and fills a critical gap in our local level understandings of the broader processes taking place there, while providing endogenous understandings of livelihood trade practices and motivations. As noted earlier, contemporary marketplace trade in the northern uplands and the role of ethnic minorities in small-scale trading remain areas that have been little studied, or else addressed in only a piece-meal fashion within academic research, as well as receiving minimal attention by the Vietnam state and applied development organisations. This study works with the realisation that many upland Hmong and Yao households and individuals are not professional, full-time traders and only partly integrated into markets. Yet it is precisely this semi, part-time and flexible engagement that has largely escaped recognition, aside from describing it simply as such, while I contend that this is a matter

that deserves greater consideration (Turner 2007 and Turner and Michaud 2008 are two examples of research that have reflected on this topic).

A limited engagement with the market should not lead to the assumption that Hmong and Yao are not avid marketeers, or that the trade activities they are engaged in are unimportant or irrelevant because they are of a minor scale or irregular nature. This thesis demonstrates that there are a number of economic, social and cultural reasons for why Hmong and Yao uplanders are involved in specific types of marketplace trade to a degree that works to help them meet their own particular needs and objectives - which may differ at times from state upland development agendas. Furthermore, this study makes a vital contribution by explicitly paying attention to the production and trade of products of *historical cultural and material relevance to upland ethnic minorities themselves*. Other studies on upland commodities, trade and the marketisation of the rural upland economy have been concerned with the expansion of new markets for upland commodities considered to wield economic potential within external, national markets. However, this study is interested in production and trade activities that have endured over a much longer term, because this points to their relevance as resilient and sustainable features of Hmong and Yao economic practice. Finally, this research also makes an important contribution by unraveling the inter-linkages and socio-cultural and economic dynamics between locally-oriented commodity markets and externally-oriented markets within the context of upland processes of market integration.

## CHAPTER 2

### BUILDING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON UPLAND MARKETS AND TRADE

#### 2.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, the overall aim of this research is to explore the shifting terrain of upland trade dynamics in rural marketplaces in Lào Cai province Vietnam, through an actor-oriented lens that focuses on what it means to be a small-scale trader. As described in that chapter, this study concerns upland trade-scapes that exist on the margins of national and global economies but which are undergoing rapid changes, while also strongly characterised by social differentiation.<sup>16</sup> Within this context, upland ethnic minorities, namely Hmong and Yao, face ongoing social, economic, and political marginalisation in their ongoing efforts to make a meaningful living. Such a complex and multi-faceted analysis requires a highly flexible and all-encompassing conceptual approach to upland markets and trade, one that can simultaneously grapple with aspects such as access, agency, vulnerability, power and its contestations, and cultural identity and meaning.

As such, I have built my conceptual framework upon three key complementary and intersecting bodies of literature that have grown in prominence since the ‘impasse’ in development studies (discussed below). In this chapter, I organise my discussion into three main parts that correspond to each of these core concepts respectively. This encompasses an actor-oriented livelihoods approach within which this study is broadly situated (Section 2.2), as well as social network-based (Section 2.3) and commodity chain approaches that I use as a more focussed approach to look at marketplace trade (Section

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<sup>16</sup> I borrow the term “tradespaces” from Bestor (2001), who uses it in his exploration of the vast Tsukiji marketplace in Japan – the main global hub in the fresh fish trade. The markets involved in this study are far less commanding in geographical scope or scale. However, the basic idea remains similar – that the shifting configurations (of trade networks, flows and commodity chains) shaping these markets illuminate the ways that wider market forces are experienced and engaged by people in particularly-situated, locally specific ways. Such global-local interactions may appear “fragmentary to an outside observer but form a coherent, fixed view - a “scape” to a local” (Bestor 2001: 80).

2.4). Within each section, I critically examine the fundamental ideas and main strands of these approaches. In so doing, I also identify the central elements that I have drawn from these concepts in order to develop a conceptual framework that informs my research questions and overall research aim.

## **2.2 An Actor-oriented Approach to Livelihoods**

The concept of livelihood, applied in relation to empirical descriptions of how people make a living by modifying their economic resource base, has long been used by social scientists.<sup>17</sup> Polanyi (1977) however, was one of the first to engage theoretically with the concept, through his human-centred approach on the insecurities introduced to livelihoods through the unregulated market, as well as human agency in navigating these threats. Indeed, the concept of livelihood underpinned Polanyi's substantivist understanding of the economy (discussed in Section 2.3.1), as the material base that people require in order to satisfy their needs and wants. His main emphasis was that "the means, not the wants are material" (Polanyi 1977, cited in de Haan et al. 2004). While directly relevant to debates on the embeddedness of the economy (and close links to current livelihood discussions), commentators did not explicitly take up the term.

The term livelihoods re-emerged in the 1980s, and has since been adopted into a burgeoning number of frameworks, developed within both academic and applied development circles. At their most fundamental level, these approaches set out to achieve a holistic, actor-focussed conceptualisation of how individuals and households work to create and sustain a means of living within a context of poverty or vulnerability. By acknowledging the complexity of reality, livelihoods research has contributed to a clearer recognition of the multi-faceted nature of 'what people do'. Studies have drawn attention to the diversity of economic practices and the range of pursuits that are often constructed through social networks (Kanji 2002; Whitehead 2002). Although the concentration

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<sup>17</sup> Such studies were undertaken by ecologists, anthropologists, agriculturalists and economists who had all employed this term during the 1940s (Scoones 2009). For instance, during this time, Evans-Pritchard used it when referring to the ways that Nuer made a living. De Haan and Zoomers (2003) also trace the roots of the livelihoods approach back to the early twentieth century geographer Vidal de Blanche's conceptualisation of *genre de vie*. This reflected the idea that within a particular geographical territory one could find a place-based, stable and socially-bounded connection between people and the land.

centres on individuals and households, livelihoods perspectives also provide an analytical micro-macro linkage, emphasising how people are alternately coping with, accommodating, contesting, or negotiating opportunities and constraints that have arisen within the context of economic, political or environmental change (Oberhauser, Mandel and Hapke 2004). It is therefore necessary to conceptualise how livelihoods are situated within this wider structural realm – as well as the local physical and socio-cultural environments that influence them.

Two key factors led to the emergence of the livelihoods concept within development theory and practice during the mid-1980s. One was a response to the ‘impasse’ in development theory and a mounting dissatisfaction with overly structuralist explanations of uneven development offered by dependency and neo-Marxist theories of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>18</sup> While livelihoods perspectives also focus on the unequal distribution of power and resources in society, this is framed by a more balanced view that considers the role of human agency in coping with poverty, vulnerability and structural change (Bebbington 1999).<sup>19</sup> Second, livelihoods analysis presents a critique of the inadequacies of modernisation approaches to poverty - based largely on income earnings and consumption levels - arguing the need for a more multi-dimensional and situated conceptualisation (Chambers 1995; Scoones 2009). The goal therefore, is to conceptualise lived realities – viewing local development through the lens of lived experience, with a focus on individuals, households, networks and communities (de Haan and Zoomers 2005).

Divided into four key parts, in this Chapter, I critically review the livelihood literature to arrive at how I utilise this approach for my research. In Section 2.2.1, I present a

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<sup>18</sup>The development impasse reflects a period of instability within the social sciences that commenced in the 1980s and continued well into the 1990s. The contributing factors included a growing dissatisfaction with the then dominant, overly generalised and economic explanatory frameworks of Marxist and neo-Marxist analysis, the growing influence of post-modernism’s criticism of theory formation, and a recognition that the central emphasis on economic growth in many development theories at that time was environmentally unsustainable and destructive (Schuurman 1993; Booth 1994).

<sup>19</sup>Moreover, during the macro-oriented focus of development studies during the 1970s and 1980s, similar types of studies were also being conducted by agricultural economists and geographers of the village and peasant studies tradition of the micro-economies of farm production and household accumulation.

definition of livelihoods and discuss the framework that I have drawn upon to orient my analysis and methodology. In Section 2.2.2, I then commence an in-depth exploration of the different components that are included in my livelihoods framework, highlighting where relevant how these will be used in order to inform my study. Next, in Section 2.2.3, I examine and critique how livelihood resources are conceptualised as assets, which are grouped according to different types of capitals. In 2.2.4, I discuss the concept of access and how unpacking the terms of access should be a crucial element of livelihoods analyses. In Section 2.2.5, I explain how I will root my livelihoods approach more specifically within an actor-oriented perspective of livelihoods and development. Finally, in Section 2.2.6, I conclude by reiterating the key ideas and concepts that I use to craft the livelihoods approach I employ for this research.

### **2.2.1 Defining Livelihoods**

One of the most clear and all-encompassing definitions of livelihoods has been proposed by Long (2001: 241) as the “practices by which individuals and groups strive to make a living, meet their consumption necessities, cope with adversities and uncertainties, engage with new opportunities, protect existing or pursue new lifestyles and cultural identifications, and fulfil their social obligations”. A key point here is that in addition to being a way of meeting material needs, livelihoods are also a way of life, something that many frameworks have tended to overlook (Staples 2007). Yet clearly, livelihoods are also about managing relationships, affirming personal significance, reproducing identities and value systems, and the interrelations of all of these dimensions (Long 2001).

As a consequence of the close marriage between academic and policy-oriented research on livelihoods, a wide array of different frameworks have been developed to operationalise this approach. These differ in terms of their concentration, emphasis and conceptual or normative underpinnings (Scoones 2009).<sup>20</sup> For this research, I use Long’s

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<sup>20</sup>Since the early 1990s, the most influential livelihoods framework is has been the sustainable livelihoods approach which was given the following working definition for the Institute of Development Studies by Chambers and Conway (1992:7-8) as “the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base.” However, while I pay attention to how people cope with vulnerability, I do not use a



(2001) definition as a lens through which to understand the nature of how upland social actors are engaging with markets and trade. As such, my approach to analysing livelihoods does not commence with any pre-determined goal to be attained such as various notions of sustainability, as some frameworks advocate. Rather, my objective is to understand the aims and needs of different groups of social actors based on their own terms and definitions, in order to investigate how livelihoods and 'development' are differently construed and pursued, as well as the conflicts that may emerge as a result of discontinuities in these evaluations.

### **2.2.2 A Livelihoods Framework for the Study**

In terms of a more specific analytical approach - than the broad livelihoods definition offered above by Long 2001 - and as a methodological guide, I draw upon the framework developed by Ellis (2000). Within this framework livelihoods are understood as being built through an ongoing process consisting of three key interrelating elements: "the *assets* (grouped under categories of natural, physical, human, financial, social and cultural capital), the *activities*, and the *access* to these (mediated by social relations, institutions and organisations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household" (Ellis 2000: 10). The relevance of this framework for the study is that it places a focus on the complex inter-linkages between people's resources and the options that exist for them to undertake alternative activities. While this representation can be argued as an oversimplification of the intricacies of livelihood processes and dynamics, its key benefits are that it allows analysts to organise ideas into categories, and to identify entry points and critical processes. Yet, Beall (2002:72) has cautioned that:

Frameworks can be a useful mechanism for the frequently perplexing understanding derived from detailed social analysis. However, they can also become straitjackets, rigid grids that awkwardly accommodate the micropolitics of everyday life and the realities of policy and planning processes. This in turn renders the livelihoods approach open to criticisms of rigidity and of trying to codify complexity.

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sustainable livelihoods framework because my concern is with how local conceptions of development and externally-imposed development approaches are often based on different value orientations, and for this reason I choose not to use this approach in my study.

I suggest that the usefulness of this approach stems from its insistence on achieving a comprehensive understanding of livelihoods. It is therefore implicit that a livelihoods framework should retain flexibility and fluidity when used as an analytical guide, rather than be employed in a mechanistic or reductionist fashion. When adopted in this sense, the framework is a practical analytical and methodological tool for engaging with my informants' concerns, and a way of making sense of the complexity of livelihood configurations on the ground (Staples 2007). In the sections that follow, I explore each of the key elements of the livelihoods approach that help to build up my conceptual framework and how I draw upon them. However first, I commence in the next subsections, with an exploration of the concept of livelihood strategies and critical debates on the subject (2.2.2.1) – covering aspects of livelihood diversification (2.2.2.2), livelihood decision-making (2.2.2.3), intra-household dynamics (2.2.2.4), and the relevance of adopting historical perspectives on livelihood transformations (2.2.2.5).

#### **2.2.2.1 Livelihood Strategies**

Livelihood studies focus on how households and individuals are actively involved in responding and contributing to change. As such, the way people achieve their livelihood objectives by continuously exploiting opportunities has been captured by what are termed 'livelihood strategies' (de Haan and Zoomers 2005). Put simply, livelihood strategies are the various activities that people undertake by making use of, combining, reproducing, or transforming their resource base. These extend to include the wide range of market and non-market activities and types of productive and reproductive labour that people perform (Whitehead 2002). Livelihoods analysts recognise that individuals and households tend to combine a mixture of activities, resulting in a complex livelihood *bricolage* or portfolio (Scoones 2009).

Framed within the context of globalisation, progressive market integration and environmental stress, Scoones (1998) has suggested a pattern of three emerging clusters of rural livelihood strategies encompassing agricultural intensification/extensification, livelihood diversification, and migration. Firstly, livelihoods may become more heavily based upon agriculture through greater investment in intensifying production or by

placing more land under cultivation. Secondly, they may be diversified into a mix of non-farm income earning activities such as small trade. Thirdly, diversification also occurs through delocalisation, as people move away temporarily or permanently in order to seek livelihood opportunities elsewhere. Frequently, household livelihood portfolios will entail some combination or sequence of these three broad strategies (Scoones 1998). According to Ellis (2000:4) it is the “maintenance and continuous adaptation of a highly diverse portfolio of activities that is a distinguishing feature of rural survival strategies in contemporary poor counties”. Within this study I explore how different upland groups are engaged in all three of these strategies, but because my focus is on livelihood diversification – into market trading – my emphasis is on the way trade-oriented diversification interrelates with both agriculturally-based and migration strategies.

#### **2.2.2.2 Livelihood Diversification**

Rural livelihood diversification is defined as “a process by which rural households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive and to improve their standard of living” (Ellis 2000:15). In response to various socio-economic and environmental pressures and opportunities, households and individuals continually modify and diversify their livelihood approach. At times of opportunity, they may innovative new activities and approaches, while at other times they may fall back on earlier ways of doing things (Ellis 2000). However, researchers have grappled with the question of why people end up diversifying their livelihoods in different ways. Some analysts discuss motivations in terms of either ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors and regard diversification as either survival or accumulation (Ellis 1998; 2000; Moser 1998; Barrett, Reardon and Webb 2000). Push factors include the need to reduce risk, respond to crisis, or enhance safety nets (such as in response to a reduction in household landholdings, affecting food security). Pull factors can involve the realisation of new opportunities or of strategic complementarities between activities (such as the integration by Yao and Hmong households in upland Vietnam of crop production, alcohol distilling, and livestock rearing) (Barrett, Reardon and Webb 2000). In a similar way, Bouahom, Douangsavanh and Rigg (2004) make the distinction between ‘progressive

diversification' and 'distress diversification', while Start and Johnson (2004) discuss diversification as either 'thriving' or 'coping'.

However, Tuner (2007) contends that this leaves us with an either/or picture with which to articulate diversification. Based on her research - set within the same context of this current study - she proposes the concept of selective diversification as a way of capturing the more flexible engagements that she observed ethnic Hmong individuals may pursue with markets and trade (also Turner and Michaud 2008). This gets beyond dualistic interpretations of diversification as simply a response to crisis or an exploitation of new opportunities by considering the ways that different livelihood activities are valued, prioritised, and thus oriented around one another. Her conclusions concur with my own findings that Hmong and Yao individuals and households may at times assume a more elastic approach to their involvement in marketplace trade. This is a complementary attitude that fits trade in relation to other more salient livelihood agendas, but one which does not always match with the state's notion of how markets should be used. To examine Hmong and Yao livelihoods in more detail, I therefore utilise a three-pronged approach to diversification that recognises coping, thriving, as well as forms of 'selective engagement', in my analysis of livelihood diversification into small-scale trading.

### **2.2.2.3 Livelihood Decision-Making Debates**

Attempts to explain livelihood strategies have led to debates concerning precisely how this decision-making takes place, as well as whether it is reasonable to even call this strategising at all. One such concern has been how to reconcile household and individual decision-making. A second matter has been whether livelihood strategies should be regarded as tactical and intentional, or unintentional, involuntary responses (Ellis 2000; Start and Johnson 2004; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). I work through these questions and flesh out the key arguments in the following sections.

Much early livelihoods research was influenced by household studies and failed to recognise the household as a potential site of conflict. The household was often taken as the unit of analysis, but under the assumption that it functioned as an integral whole, with

members pooling resources and acting out of compromise (Wolf 1990; Francis 2000). Critics of this method demonstrated how it obscured intra-household power dynamics based on gender, age and other factors, as well as how social positioning translated into differential access to resources and opportunities (Folbre 1986; Guyer 1988; Whitehead 1990). Moreover, treating the household as a 'black box' disregarded the possibility of household members having divergent pursuits, interests and goals (Beall and Kanji 1999; Francis 2000). However, simply shifting the focus away from the household to the individual level is also problematic if this does not consider intra and inter household relationships and the way these are shaped by gender, age and other factors (Hart, 1995).

Subsequent research has demonstrated that gender plays a very important role in understanding livelihood strategies, and a diverse range of studies have drawn from feminist materialism as well as post-modern and post-colonial approaches in order to look at various facets of gendered experiences of development.<sup>21</sup> Within this study, gender emerges as an important element for consideration, as local marketplace trade throughout Vietnam - as well as most of Southeast Asia - is an activity undertaken largely by women. This gendering of trade in the Vietnam uplands and its specific implications will be investigated throughout the results chapters (Chapters 5-9), as well as further explored in the thesis discussion (Chapter 9).

Livelihoods analysts now widely accept that livelihoods must be conceptualised as the outcome of negotiations, bargaining, and conflicts among household members who wield unequal power (Kabeer 1994). In addition, households and their internal relations must be understood within their particular local, socio-cultural contexts, as a universal configuration of the household is an essentialising presumption that overlooks the diversity of domestic arrangements over time and space (Hart 1995). In the context of globalisation and market integration, patterns toward household decomposition and

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<sup>21</sup>The majority of research has focussed upon women's gender roles and relations, examining in particular how gender ideologies and women's reproductive role can work to limit their mobility and access to resources (Sen and Grown 1987; Kabeer 1994; Mandel 2004). Analysts have also examined how gendered roles, activities, and access to resources might be transforming in the context of economic restructuring and globalisation, creating new opportunities, constraints, and ways of coping (Kabeer 1994). Livelihoods research is also more recently exploring the complexity of how gender identities, power relations, and material realities intersect (Oberhauser and Pratt 2004).

individualised livelihoods reinforce the need for studies to clarify the contents of ‘a household’ (de Haan and Zoomers 2003). The presence of diverse goals and pursuits parallels the increasing diversification of livelihoods, with households and individuals engaged to a greater extent in multiple and multi-local forms of income-generation (Ellis 2000; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). In this thesis, I focus on the individual experiences and motivations of small-scale upland traders, but endeavour to understand how their pursuits are influenced by - and in turn, also influence - intra-household dynamics.

#### **2.2.2.4 Livelihood Strategies**

The emphasis that authors drawing from livelihoods approaches place on the agency of social actors to operate within the limits of their environment has given rise to concerns over the danger of misinterpreting all activities as based on strategic decision-making (Rakodi 1991; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). This is clearly a very problematic emphasis in contexts of extreme deprivation where actions are forced, or when structural factors - such as distance to markets, remoteness and difficult agro-ecological zones - strongly bind the feasible set of opportunities and outcomes (Rakodi 1991; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). Furthermore, the utility functions that underpin the concept of strategising such as profit-maximisation, risk mitigation and drudgery aversion “tend to be generalised with respect to common, known preferences of peasant households and the meta-preferences are assumed to be those of ‘rational economic man’” (Start and Johnson 2004:25).

Yet, the logic and objectives framing livelihood strategies are also tempered by individual perceptions, aspirations and beliefs, which are located in the realm of cultural values, practices, and human personality (Start and Johnson 2004). A key strand of livelihoods research belongs to the hermeneutic and actor-oriented tradition, in which the actions of social groups and individuals are not cast in terms of instrumental rationality but are understood as based on diverse, fragmented rationalities and motives. These explanations cannot be assumed at the outset but must be determined through research, and interpreted according to the meanings given to them by actors themselves (Bebbington 1999; Long 2001; Benediktsson 2002). Thus, as Bebbington (1999) argues, in order to understand livelihood choices and decision-making, it is essential to establish

how these are framed by people's own definitions and perceptions of well-being and poverty. Similarly, it is important to ascertain why social and cultural values and meanings are assigned to particular livelihood strategies (Cooke 2004).

In addition, De Haan and Zoomers (2005) have proposed two related ways of overcoming the polarisation of livelihood strategies as either intentional or unintentional. First, the concept of livelihood styles or the sets of organisational practices shared by a group has been proposed a method to bring livelihood decision-making beyond individual strategising (Arce and Hebinck 2002; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). Livelihood styles evoke:

A specific cultural repertoire composed of shared experiences, knowledge, insights, interests, prospects and interpretations of the context; an integrated set of practices and artefacts, such as crop varieties, instruments, cattle; a specific ordering of the interrelations with markets, technology and institutions; and responses to policy (de Haan and Zoomers 2005:40).

Human strategic behaviour is thereby reinterpreted as embedded within a specific historical repertoire, as well as in social relations and institutional processes, which taken together, work to pre-structure decision-making to some degree (de Haan and Zoomers 2005).<sup>22</sup>

A second way forward comes through the idea of the livelihood pathways followed by particular social groups – these reflect shared livelihood regularities or patterns.

Livelihood pathways are conceptually distinct from strategies:

Because a pathway need not to be a device to attain a pre-set goal which is set after a process of conscious and rational weighing of the actor's preferences. Rather it arises out of an iterative process in which in a step-by-step procedure goals, preferences, resources and means are constantly reassessed in view of new unstable conditions. Individuals decide on the basis of a wide range of past experiences, rather than on a vision of the future, while

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<sup>22</sup>The concept of livelihood styles stems from Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitus*, the system of patterning of social relations, the dispositions, and the classificatory schemas that are acquired through socialisation in a particular cultural context. This process leads to regular practices, perceptions and attitudes that are unconsciously followed, and previous experiences form a framework within which decisions are made. Individuals of the same social classes, gender or ethnicity, may tend to have similar livelihood strategies, as a consequence of having similar dispositions, life experiences and social expectations (de Haan and Zoomers 2005). Action therefore takes place through these unconscious constraints which work to limit, but not determine, the range of choice-making. However, within these limits there is freedom to act, which offers the possibility of transformation and change.

these recollections of the past depend to a great extent on our intellectual concern in the present.

As such, both history and culture are recognised to play a major role in orienting the livelihood decisions of individuals and groups. These approaches thereby present a counterview of neoclassical economic explanations in which social actors are driven solely by utility maximisation (also, the formalist perspective explored in-depth in Section 2.3). As I describe in Section 2.2.5, by accommodating an actor-oriented perspective within the livelihoods framework, I seek to enrich current perspectives regarding upland traders' decision-making by paying specific attention to endogenous accounts of the motivations and cognitive choices of different groups of traders.

#### **2.2.2.6 Historical Elements of Livelihoods**

This brings us to another key criticism of livelihoods frameworks, which relates to the lack of an explicit historical component. Indeed, many studies offer only a 'snapshot' of the current situation, failing to situate this within an account of how people have grappled with shifting social, economic, political and environmental circumstances over the longer-term (Ellis, 2000; Murray 2002; Whitehead 2002). Hence, I believe that the concepts of livelihood styles, and pathways or trajectories are important ways of complementing a circumspective livelihoods analysis with a more historically informed, retrospective investigation of changing livelihoods and conditions (Bagchi et al. 1998; Murray 2002; Whitehead 2002; De Haan and Zoomers 2005).<sup>23</sup>

A number of studies on rural markets and trade have demonstrated the important role of historical trends and experiences, cultural practices and ethnic identities in shaping the contemporary livelihood strategies of different groups of traders (Lewis 1989; McSweeney 2004; Sowerwine 2004; Turner 2010). Also frequently highlighted is the 'stubborn' persistence of old trade practices and networks alongside or in combination with new 'modern' ones, as localities are drawn into external markets and globalising forces. In the context of upland Vietnam, Turner and Michaud (2008) have stressed the

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<sup>23</sup>However, de Haan and Zoomers (2005) make a distinction between livelihood pathways and livelihood trajectories whereby the former refers to patterns observed among certain social groups, while the latter signifies the life paths of individual actors.



need to look at new local opportunities in conjunction with inherited, specific traditions, and historical trajectories in considering how ethnic minority Hmong individuals are involved in contemporary trade. They note how a variety of niche activities have waxed and waned over time in the sense of their insertion into wider markets, but with little livelihood impact on this group's culturally embedded economic core. Following from this, to contextualise my study I trace the involvement of ethnic Hmong and Yao in upland markets and trade in Lào Cai back over the last century. By following the trade histories and contemporary movements of key objects that have long retained their material, cultural and livelihood values, I demonstrate how Hmong and Yao trade actors work to meet their own cultural priorities and social obligations while simultaneously responding to new economic avenues in emerging markets for these commodities.

### **2.2.3 Livelihood Resources and Assets**

Livelihood approaches place a central emphasis on the various forms of resources available to people, and how these may be used, combined, expanded and reshaped to meet their material and experiential needs and motivations (Bebbington 1999; Ellis 2000). Livelihood resources encompass the range of tangible and intangible 'assets' that people own, share, control, claim, or can otherwise access. While assets are recognised to play a determining role in shaping available outcomes and well-being, they simultaneously are what enable and empower households and individuals to build their livelihoods, mitigate vulnerability, and cope with adversity (Scoones 1998; Bebbington 1999; Ellis 2000). This focus on assets directs attention to what people already have and can build upon, rather than casting them as entirely deprived or focusing on what they are lacking – an approach I adopt in this thesis (Moser 1998; Ellis 2000; Staples 2007).

#### **2.2.3.1 Conceptualising Livelihood Assets and Capitals**

Assets are further conceptualised as being grouped under different but interwoven material or social forms that are frequently referred to as 'capitals'. Most commonly, these include natural, physical, financial, human, and social capital (Scoones 1998; Bebbington 1999; Ellis 2000). To this list I add cultural capital for reasons explored below.

The category of natural capital refers to the stocks of environmental assets such as land, water, plants, and biodiversity that people can draw on (Scoones 1998). A consideration of the affects of shifts in natural capital access is highly relevant to this project, as shrinking agricultural land to meet subsistence needs is an important factor prompting upland households to undertake trade activities to support farming through the use of new input-intensive hybrid seed varieties. Moreover, in Chapter 7, I reveal how the ability to continue traditional specialisations such as artisanal maize and rice alcohol making and trade has become strongly dependent upon having a sufficient level of natural capital.

The physical capital category consists of all human-made assets whether built by individuals, groups or on behalf of the state, and that enable production. This includes assets such as shelter, productive equipment, basic infrastructure, transportation, energy and irrigation, to name a few (Rakodi 1999). In Chapter 5, I explore how the role of the Vietnam state in enhancing marketplace infrastructure and roads, together with improvements in transportation and communications technology are changing contemporary upland trading-scapes. Moreover, I debate how the state's conceptualisation of this 'improvement' in physical capital is not always shared by marketplace traders.

Financial capital comprises savings – including assets such as cash, livestock, and jewellery (silver, in the case of Hmong and Yao) – as well as inflows of wealth including income, credit, pensions, remittances, and state transfers, which people may transform into other forms of capital or use for consumption (Rakodi 1999; Ellis 2000). In Chapter 6, I look at the essential role that water buffalo serve for Hmong households as a key source of financial capital. However as I will demonstrate, water buffalo are an interesting type of asset in this context as they in fact serve a multiplicity of forms, acting in various ways as a source of financial, physical, natural, social and cultural capital. It is for this reason that they are one of the most precious possessions for Hmong households in Lào Cai, and this significance deserves further attention.

Human capital encompasses the skills, forms of knowledge, education-levels, health and well-being that influence the livelihood abilities and options of individuals and households (Moser 1998). In this research, local and traditional knowledge are a key resource that many Hmong and Yao draw upon in crafting their livelihood strategies as well as in innovating new opportunities (some authors refer to local and traditional knowledge as cultural capital instead, discussed next). However, Brocklesby and Fisher (2003) contend that subsuming 'knowledge' under 'human capital', may gloss over the interfaces where different forms of knowledge meet, becoming a potential source of consensus as well as conflict. This point also emerges within my study, as I compare the Vietnam state's particular understanding of market 'know-how', with the way marketplace trade is performed by Hmong and Yao traders. Knowledge interfaces are also highlighted within case studies of upland commodities in Chapters 7 and 8 where local traditional knowledge and 'authenticity' are elements being reframed by external stakeholders and used as strategic marketing resources in the process of commoditisation.

Social capital entails the assets based on relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchanges that promote cooperation in endeavours and are often drawn upon in times of crisis as informal safety nets (Rakodi 1999). These relations may be based on networks, kinship, social claims, social relations, shared identities, as well as a variety of other associations. As social networks and social capital perspectives makeup the second building block of my conceptual framework, a more thorough examination of these ideas, notable contributions, and debates on this concept will be fleshed out in greater detail within the next section of this chapter (Section 2.3).

While cultural capital is often subsumed under social capital, I follow those analysts who treat it as separate (Bebbington 1999; Perreault 2003). This category reflects the range of assets that stem from cultural organisation and values, as well as the situated cultural practices linked to livelihoods that are valued for their meaningfulness. Bebbington (1999) explains the unique significance of these 'cultural resources' is that they can be extremely enabling and empowering, acting as a catalyst and orienting point for types of action and resistance that the other forms of capital are not. Cultural capital is also more

specifically defined as a society's methods of adapting to its environment, such as local knowledge systems, or as Berkes and Folke (1998: 6) put it, "the factors that provide human societies with the means and adaptations to deal with the natural environment and actively to modify it". For this study, cultural capital is an important element regarding how social groups endogenously define wealth and poverty, as well as for helping to explore the strong importance that upland minority residents attach to different livelihood pursuits such as the making of textiles and alcohol, rearing buffalo, and rice planting.

Although I have treated each category of capitals in turn in order to define and describe them, the reality is that these, and the assets that they encompass, are interlinked in complex ways. The ability to acquire or use one form of capital may first require the access to and exploitation of another form. Different assets may also be combined or substituted in a variety of manners, leading to trade-offs in terms of what livelihood options people may pursue (Scoones 1998). In this study, I pay attention to these types of interplay between different types of capital, and how they are accessed. For instance, having the 'right' social capital can facilitate access to physical capital for trading activities - such as using kinship ties to access coveted market stalls - while water buffalo may be used to enhance natural capital via soil fertility or be traded at the marketplace to generate financial capital.

### **2.2.3.2 Critiquing the Capitals**

While the idea of livelihood assets offers a broad understanding of the multi-faceted resources used by poor and vulnerable groups, the economic metaphor of capitals under which these are grouped is highly contentious (Beall 2002; Whitehead 2002; Arce 2003; Scoones 2009). Furthermore, the question of how to evaluate and measure a mix of tangible and intangible capitals and how they are substituted, linked, or traded-off is considered problematic (Scoones 1998; Toner 2003). For one, Arce (2003) argues that assets are not the equivalent of capital (as the two are often used synonymously in the livelihoods literature), because the terminology of capital is rooted in the discourse and value system of neoclassical economics. Its usage therefore, is really only meaningful within the context of market economies where productive assets are individually and

privately owned. Building from this, Arce (2003:206) suggests that the language of capitals leads to an analytical homogenisation of diverse interpretations of value, stating:

A key question concerns how to give operational meaning to the conceptualisation of fragmented capital assets starting with peoples' own understanding of the world. In the 'real context' in which people live, we find contests over social value including the co-existence of several, seemingly incompatible, interpretations of social value within the same set of social relations or institutions. This challenges a view of the holistic and uniform nature of values...whatever their cultural context, offering instead an analysis of the interweaving of social and economic values, and the working of local economies, power and agency.

Whitehead (2002:577) has expressed that assets become "torn out of their relational context in the shift to the language of neoclassical economics to explore livelihoods". Harvey (1996: 63) argues that unlike Marx's original conceptualisation of capital as a process or a relation, in such neoclassical economic interpretations "capital is treated as an unproblematic (i.e. noncontradictory stock of assets (of things) with certain qualitative and quantitative attributes which, when set in motion by human agency, embody causative powers."

Nevertheless, according to Staples (2007) the simple reduction of complex socio-political realities into categories like 'capital' can be overcome by trying to understand what particular assets mean to certain groups in particular situations and contexts (also see Forsyth and Michaud 2011). Bebbington (1999) has argued that assets, such as land, are not simply tools in order to achieve economic and material ends, they also endow meaning to a person's world. In addition to being vital for survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation, assets must be also recognised as "the basis of agents' power to act and reproduce, challenge, or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources" (Bebbington 1999:2022). It is this approach that I will ground my own analyses in, in Chapters 5 to 8, in particular by incorporating endogenous valuations and understandings of key assets.

#### **2.2.4 Access: The Most Important Livelihood Resource**

Understanding the dynamics of how access plays into the distribution, control and transformation of resources and how this shapes the livelihood opportunities that are open

or closed to people is a crucial element of conceptualising livelihoods (Bebbington 1999; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). Indeed, I would concur with Bebbington (1999) that access itself should be viewed as the most important livelihood resource of all. The role of access holds particular salience within contexts of rapid change, such as where livelihoods are undergoing transformations from predominantly natural resource-based to those deriving from a wider range of resources and a diversity of activities (Bebbington 1999). Understanding the shifting terms and nature of access is a fundamental part of this study as I consider how different groups of upland social actors are engaging with new avenues for market trade in response to various wider pressures and opportunities. Through this analysis I uncover the many layers of access and its place-based contours, and notably demonstrate how ‘marginal traders’ in one market context can be drivers and innovators in another.

#### **2.2.4.1 Conceptualising Access**

The complex mechanisms which mediate household and individual access to assets and activities manifest in three primary aspects: social relations, institutions, and organisations (Ellis 2000; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). Social relations reflect how differential social positioning in society works to mediate access, based on elements such as ethnicity, kinship, gender, socio-economic status, or beliefs system (Ellis 2000). This realisation is essential to this study, where I analyse how different groups’ access to particular types of trade is strongly shaped by the nature of their social relations.

Next, institutions comprise the formal, official rules and conventions - such as state policy and regulations - as well as the informal, often local culturally-based conventions, rules, norms and moral codes that constrain or enable access to opportunities. The functions played by diverse institutions in affecting access are similarly relevant within this research because these are what determine “the way markets work in practice” (c.f. Ellis 2000: 10). Markets are governed by both local informal institutions as well as wider level state policies, with areas of overlap and conflict between these different regulatory modes.

Lastly, organisations reflect membership in a group that is organised around a common set of objectives such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cooperatives, and state-owned enterprises (Ellis 2000; De Haan and Zoomers 2005). An important advantage of this conceptualisation of access, which I draw upon, is that it offers a way of integrating livelihoods analyses across different scales (Ellis 2000). In other words, the micro-macro linkages extending from households and groups to regions and macro-economies can be tackled explicitly by investigating the roles of institutions and organisations. In Chapter 7, I question the terms of access afforded to local ethnic minority artisanal alcohol producers through their membership in a new form of cooperative and dealings with a state-owned enterprise.

Despite acknowledgement of the clearly vital role of access, livelihoods approaches have often been weak at grappling with this concept, particularly due to a poor theorisation of the relational element of access (Bebbington 1999; De Haan and Zoomers 2005). A refined conceptualisation of access is provided by Ribot and Peluso (2003) who define it as the ability to benefit from resources, but who relate this specifically to how power is embodied and exercised in society through various mechanisms. Here, different strands of material, cultural, and political-economic power are woven together to create wider ‘bundles’ and ‘webs’ of power that act to configure resource access. Differently positioned social actors possess and can draw upon different bundles at various times and contexts. The terms of access are ever shifting, as a group’s or individual’s position and power within a network of social relations are contingent upon shifting historical and politico-economic circumstances, and may vary between locations and scales.

Thus, mapping resource access involves identifying the means, processes, and relations by which particular groups of actors are able to gain, control, and maintain their access to a resource and its distribution (Ribot 1998; Ribot and Peluso 2003). Ribot and Peluso (2003) further divide mechanisms of access into rights-based access (sanctioned by law, customs, or convention – such as formal market stall licenses) and illicit forms (such as theft or illegal border crossings). These forms are additionally mediated or reinforced by structural and relational access mechanisms, including technology, capital, markets,

labour, knowledge, authority, identities, and social relations (Ribot and Peluso 2003). This approach is useful to my analysis of how different groups of upland residents are able to access the necessary resources in order to craft their marketplace activities. Mapping out the mechanisms of access that gain their form through complex bundles and webs of power enables a more nuanced analysis that accommodates for shifts, openings and closures that may occur over time and between places and scales.

### **2.2.5 An Actor-Oriented Approach to Livelihoods and Development**

An overarching central critique of the livelihoods approach is its failure to engage sufficiently with or articulate clearly enough the role of power and politics. This omission is surprising, given that these are central elements that affect individual and group access to resources, especially through the social-institutional processes that mediate livelihood strategies (Ashley and Carney 1999; De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Scoones 2009). As such, calls have been made for a more comprehensive actor-oriented approach that clearly integrates the context-specific cultural, historical, gender, spatial, and power dynamics of livelihoods (Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington, 1999, 2000; Long 2001; McSweeney 2004). As such, I build further upon the livelihoods perspective, as well as the other conceptual building blocks of this research, by rooting them within an actor-oriented approach to development and change.

The actor-oriented approach evolved in development sociology - primarily through the ongoing work of Norman Long - arose under the diverse umbrella of social theories of practice (Ortner 1984). In development studies, the actor-oriented approach is regarded as an important way of reconciling the structure/agency debate through its capacity to explain how macro forces of change are experienced locally. In this view, processes of market integration and development are analysed through a lens that remains sensitive to local contexts, histories, cultural configurations and society (Benediktsson 1998). While acknowledging the limits on people's actions in the face of wider structuring elements, a central emphasis is placed on an individual's agency in constructing their life world. The voices and experiences of individuals are thus essential, and the priority is shifted from external framings to endogenous knowledges of development and modernity (Drinkwater



1992; Bebbington 1999; Arce and Long 2000). In so doing, supporters seek to identify and explain social heterogeneity, namely the different responses or adaptations that occur within similar structural circumstances and how these are produced, reproduced and/or transformed.

Drawing on such an approach, social change is considered to result from the actions of individuals and groups with diverse and conflicting interests and positions of power – all of whom are linked together in a network (Benediktsson 1998). Under the constraints of unequal access to resources, information, and uncertainty, social actors have room to manoeuvre and may negotiate, cooperate, coerce, participate, resist, reject, or adapt to new situations – leading to a range of frequently unpredictable outcomes (Long 2002). Two key analytical guiding points are employed, referred to by the metaphors ‘social arenas’ and ‘social interfaces’ (Rossi 2005). Social arenas represent sites of negotiation and/or contestation where different groups meet to pursue their own goals, strategies, and projects, such as in the marketplace. Social interfaces involve dynamic encounters between different social worlds, values, or logics, such as between state development policy makers and upland market traders (Long 2002; Rossi 2005). It is through the analysis of social arena and interface dynamics that differences and discontinuities in power, knowledge, value and interests and how these are mediated, perpetuated or transformed are brought to the forefront in livelihood studies (Long 2004).

Critics of the actor-oriented approach are concerned that the capacity and creativity of vulnerable, marginal groups to act, choose, and resist is overemphasised, at the risk of playing down the socio-economic and political constraints people endure as they struggle to build their livelihoods (Rossi 2005; Kay 2006; Nygren and Myatt-Hirvonen 2009). As such, for this study I endeavour to locate my analysis of individual and group actions within a broader consideration of institutional and historical constraints and disadvantages. I draw upon an actor-oriented approach to livelihoods in order to analyse the social constructedness of upland marketplaces and trade networks - how they are being continually shaped by actors’ power struggles, both big and small, while relating this to larger changes in the socio-economic and political landscape (Benediktsson 1998).

### **2.2.6 Drawing from the Livelihoods Literature**

In Section 2.2, I have demonstrated how the livelihoods concept offers a beneficial approach that allows me to answer my overall question of what it means to be an upland trader while situating this analysis within the context of, and relating it to, social actor's wider livelihood portfolios. My basic working understanding of livelihoods outlined in Section 2.2.2, draws from analysts who conceptualise this as both a means of making a living as well as a way of life. Thus, throughout the study, I address not only material pursuits but also socio-cultural objectives and prerogatives, all the while situating my analysis within the context of wider structural changes and limiting factors. Beginning with a critical discussion of livelihood assets grouped under different categories of 'capital' (Section 2.2.3), I demonstrated how these have been conceptualised, and understood in terms of resources that can be used, combined or substituted. This leads to livelihood 'trade-offs', signifying the importance of considering the interrelations between different types of capitals. Moreover, I highlighted how assets cannot be understood only as tools to achieve material goals – their specific social and cultural meanings must also be analysed and addressed, as this strongly impinges upon how livelihoods are crafted. I next explored the relevance of employing a more a multi-dimensional understanding of livelihood diversification and activity choices, which considers the possibility of how social and cultural meanings attached to specific types of livelihood pursuits also influence decision-making. I then examined (in Section 2.2.4) how access is the most important livelihood resource of all, and the benefits of analysing specific facets of access to resources and opportunities through relational and power dynamic approaches. Finally, in Section 2.2.5, I complemented my overall livelihood framework by grounding it within an actor-oriented approach that endeavours to locate the workings of human agency at key social interfaces. Here, contestations over values, meanings and objectives are highlighted, with the outcomes of these negotiations leading to both livelihood and social changes.

### **2.3 The Social Construction of Markets: Social Network and Social Capital Approaches**

In order to develop a rich understanding of how social agency and power are expressed within upland markets and trade, I draw from bodies of literature on social embeddedness, social networks, and social capital. Drawing from these approaches enables me to build a framework which accommodates a number of important dynamics and processes: firstly, upland markets are understood as embedded within various, situated socio-cultural understandings and practices, and constructed through the efforts of social actors; secondly, insights are offered into how traders draw upon their social connections in pursuit of their activities; thirdly, it elaborates how networks can also work in an exclusionary fashion, cutting out certain groups of social actors from access to particular resources and trade opportunities.

As structures, markets have been understood according to three key perspectives (Dilley 1992; Benediktsson 2002). Firstly, markets can be understood as theoretical abstractions based on universal neo-classical economic principles. Secondly, the ‘real markets’ approach considers markets as particular constellations of commodities, places, and social actors (de Alcantara 1993; Benediktsson 2002; Crow 2004). This conceptual orientation sees market complexities as arising beyond the economic, paying attention to the myriad institutions and socio-cultural relations that help to give markets their form (Benediktsson 2002). Thirdly, markets can be viewed according to what is likely to have been the initial definition of the term, as geographically situated marketplaces of different forms wherein economic exchange and social gatherings take place (Dilley 1992; Benediktsson 2002). My study of upland markets and trade combines the second and third understandings of markets, rooting the analysis in an approach to markets as contested fields of power that are socially constructed and re-composed through the efforts of human actors. Market activities are further recognised as mediated by a variety of limiting and enabling structural factors and processes via their localised expressions.

Within this segment of the chapter, I outline my approach to upland markets and trade by way of a critical overview of the key literatures that have contributed to the discussion on which I am drawing. Commencing with a discussion of the concept of markets as socially embedded (2.3.1), I then move on to explore the different ways that this idea has been further articulated and refined, namely within the social networks (Section 2.3.2) and social capital (Section 2.3.3) literature. I conclude in Section 2.3.4, with a discussion of what I take from these literatures and how I employ them in my study.

### **2.3.1 The Social Embeddedness of the Economy**

Having long recognised that economies are framed by their socio-cultural contexts, anthropologists have provided major contributions to understanding the role of social networks and relations within market trade and livelihood activities (Mintz 1961; Geertz 1963, 1978; Trager 1981; Davis 1973; Alexander 1987, to mention just a few). More recently, geography and sociology has also developed an interest in the social embeddedness of markets and trade activities (Granovetter 1985; Evers and Schrader 1994; Benediktsson 2002). The origins of this approach can be traced back to the work of Polanyi (1944; 1957) who disputed the idea of the economy as divorced (or disembedded) from the social world – as was believed to characterise market societies – as the dominant model of economic integration and order (Hann and Hart 2011). Instead, Polanyi historicised this market model, pinpointing its nascent emergence to Europe's 'great transformation' to an industrialised capitalist system in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing upon empirical ethnographic research, Polanyi illustrated that within many preindustrial societies there had long existed other types of exchange systems in addition to market exchange, in which the economy was subordinate to social systems – namely reciprocity, redistribution and householding (Plattner 1989; Hann and Hart 2011).<sup>24</sup> Although many types of marketplaces also existed in these societies, they remained marginal relative to other forms of integration, and were often also sites of strong social, religious and political importance (Hann and Hart 2011).

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<sup>24</sup> Reciprocity refers to non-market forms of exchange between persons of relatively equivalent social status, like gift-giving. Redistribution refers to the collection and central pooling of surplus, often via a political entity, which would then be subsequently distributed in society (Berdan, 1989).

Polanyi's argument inspired subsequent debates between opposing 'substantivist' and 'formalist' schools within economic anthropology during the 1960s (Plattner 1989; Narotzky 1997; Browne and Milgram 2009; Hann and Hart 2011). Substantivists believed that a society's unique livelihood strategies stem from ongoing adaptations to particular socio-cultural, environmental and material circumstances – which no one set of generalised concepts could adequately explain (Hann and Hart 2011). To back up this argument, ethnographers from the substantivist school produced a number of typologies of exchange in different empirical contexts, establishing how the economies of geographically diverse societies at various times could be articulated through particular cultural and moral ways of ordering (Bohannon and Bohannon 1968; Dalton 1968; Sahlins 1972; Scott 1976). Moreover, some proponents, including Polanyi, contended that different types of economic exchange actually coexisted in all societies, interacting with one another, even ones where market exchange appeared to be dominant (Barber 1995).

The formalists' counter take was that all forms of economic activity could be explained and verified through the universal principle of self-calculating economic actors, who base their choices and actions on the goal of maximizing utility under conditions of scarcity (Firth 1968; Plattner 1989). This body of researchers applied the tools of mainstream neoclassical economics to diverse situations in a number of societies (Foster 1965; Cook 1968; Cancian 1972; Schneider 1974). However, one of the main difficulties of the formalist paradigm was the quandary over how the self-interested actions of maximising individuals would ultimately translate into the reproduction of society (Hann and Hart 2011).

Nevertheless, despite the fundamental conceptual divide between substantivists and formalists, the former still conceded to the existence of an economic sphere dominated by western market principles (Dilley 1992). Hence, they made a distinction between non-market and market-based societies, whereby the former was interpreted as either a feature of the past or else a vestige of 'traditional societies'. The socio-cultural elements of

persisting non-market economies were destined to eventually be undermined by the exploitative forces of market capitalism (Benediktsson 2002).

This conceptual dichotomy between non-market and market societies also led to debates within modernisation theories and neo-Marxist variants of development theory on the persistence of the informal, dual economy or petty commodity production. Modernisation theorists argued that economic development was being impeded by the persistence of traditional, pre-capitalist communalism where economic and non-economic motives overlapped, and where economics was often ancillary to morality and religion (Boeke 1953).<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, according to this uni-linear model of development, the traditional, socio-culturally embedded ways of making a living would eventually be subsumed into the modern capitalist economy as all societies became fully integrated into the market (McGee 1979; Wilk 1996).

Alternately, neo-Marxist proponents of the petty commodity line of critique argued that dual economy models disguised the true operation of the traditional economy (Long and Richardson 1978).<sup>26</sup> Rather than being comprised of two autonomous and parallel

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<sup>25</sup>Modernisation theory refers to a loosely grouped set of teleological socio-economic development paradigms, which held that traditional ways of making a living would eventually be subsumed into the modern capitalist economy as societies evolved into full industrialisation (McGee 1979; Wilk 1996). Destined to disappear, small-scale 'traditional' activities that anthropologists had long studied, were considered remnants of traditional society and therefore deemed 'backwards,' unimportant and marginal. In neoclassical economics, W.W. Rostow (1960) coined the notion of 'take-off' in his highly influential schema of economic development as a progression through a set of five predetermined stages. A central tenet was that all societies eventually pass through this sequence. As such, economic development in the post-colonial Global South would proceed along a uni-linear path, urbanising and industrialising via a growth pattern similar to the already developed 'West' (McGee 1979).

<sup>26</sup>Put simply, petty commodity production can be defined as a condition whereby the means of production "either are owned by or are under the control of the direct producers" (Binford and Cook 1991: 67). Frequently, petty commodity producers engage in production for direct consumption by their households, or else produce for exchange for the sole purpose of acquiring their subsistence. More recently however, it has been argued that although this type of reproduction for subsistence is common, one should not rule out the possibility of capital accumulation or profit-making. In terms of a political economy approach, the traditional, non-market economy and its petty producers fulfilled many vital functions for the capitalist, market economy. For one, it helped maintain low wages and an abundant casual workforce in the formal sector. This was due to the low incomes and instability of informal sector work, as well as the provision of low-cost essential goods and services to the industrial labour force. Theorists also argued that the traditional economy was linked to the market sector as a source of inputs for equipment and materials with petty producers vulnerable to hikes in production costs for inputs sourced on national and international markets (MacEwan Scott 1979). Studies also demonstrated the existence of disguised self-employment, whereby what appeared to be independent petty enterprises were actually wage workers in subcontract and

economic sectors, the market (formal) and non-market (informal) sectors articulated with one another in a way that perpetuated non-capitalist activities like petty commodity production (Smith 1989). This approach thereby demonstrated that petty commodity production was itself a necessary and integral component of wider capitalist social formation (Long 1986). However, neo-Marxists regarded socio-economic transformation as a product of external determination, stemming from the logic of capital and forces of production. As such, they neglected the significance of local histories, structural variance, and differential responses in affecting outcomes (Di Gregorio 1994; Milgram 1997). The dominant focus on exploitation by capitalist forces left little space for agency or the active role that petty commodity producers and traders might themselves play in shaping the development of the capitalist market economy (Long 1986). A more recent observation is that petty commodity forms are not disappearing - in some cases even growing - in the context of global market integration (Binford and Cook 1991).

The role of the market on economic organisation as well as social embeddedness was also being tackled within the tradition of peasant studies. Building on the classic work of Chayanov (1966), Scott (1976), in his important study of Southeast Asian peasant households, argued that the capitalist agricultural system - characterised by export-oriented production and the commoditisation of land and labour - was a violent imperialist imposition that wrought destruction on both means of livelihood and culture.<sup>27</sup> While Scott dealt solely with the capitalisation of the agricultural sector, he contrasted an indigenous 'moral economy' of the peasants at odds with a contradictory, implanted

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piece-rate arrangements with capitalist firms (Gerry 1978; MacEwan Scott 1979; Cook 1984). Thus, the relationship between the sectors was characterised as one of dependence and subordination of the informal sector to the formal or market economy (Moser 1978). This neo-Marxist approach thereby demonstrated that petty commodity production was itself a necessary and integral component of wider capitalist social formation (Long 1986).

<sup>27</sup> In his study of Russian smallholders during the early 1900s, Chayanov held that the household formed the basic economic unit of production and consumption in peasant societies and that peasant economic decision-making followed a subsistence ethic - an entirely different logic than neoclassical economic's *homoeconomicus*. In his view, producers preferred to remain self-sufficient, self-reproducing subsistence farmers outside of wage-labour. Peasant households aimed to attain what was necessary for subsistence and desired no more even if capital accumulation was a possibility. They only entered into commodity and monetary circulation when needs could not be met via direct production for use. Household differentiation was based upon the lifecycle: when households had a labour surplus, they reduced the overall level of work undertaken in order to just sufficiently match household consumption needs. If labour was scarce (as in the case of a young household with children) the available household members laboured more intensively in order to meet household demand (Scott 1976; Netting 1993; Wilk 1996).



colonial system. Scott conceptualised the moral economy as built upon a 'right to subsistence' ethos and 'safety first' principle that guaranteed a basic-level of provisioning to all households. Peasants created and depended on reciprocal and redistributive social support systems where resources are exchanged and shared in order to mitigate subsistence risks. As excessive individual profit-seeking clashed with standard communal relations this was often frowned upon as greedy and immoral. From this perspective, small-scale market trade and artisanal activities were understood as self-help survival strategies, undertaken during slack agricultural months or due to a decreasing availability of land, but were never oriented towards individual gain. Trader's economic relationships stabilised through long-term, personalised, reciprocal exchanges in order to minimise risk (Scott 1976).

The imposed market forces, Scott suggested, worked to displace the traditional morals, norms and values structuring society.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to modernisation proponents, who saw the exogenous capitalist system as bringing development and modernisation, Scott viewed this process as wholly detrimental on socio-cultural, as well as material terms. Villagers lost their ability to subsist as local production was undermined by the introduction of cheaper, imported manufactured items. The instability in world prices made it difficult to secure decent prices for agricultural commodities, and access to important communal forest and pasture lands was abolished (Scott 1976).

As a response to the 'impasse' in development theory that arose from the mid-1980s, current approaches to understanding the impacts of market transformations on societies and livelihoods located on the 'peripheries' of the global market economy endeavour to move beyond meta-theorisations/narratives and dichotomies in recognition of economic diversity. These conceptualisations combine political economy together with various frameworks that ascribe greater agency to social actors through the networks they are engaged in. In so doing, the reductionist tendencies of earlier variants are overcome, giving actors more space for manoeuvre through more nuanced conceptualisations of

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<sup>28</sup> However, a major part of his later arguments (Scott 1985) was to emphasize how peasants resisted exploitation and the imposed transgression of their moral order, sometimes through outright rebellion, but more frequently in passive and everyday forms of protest.



diversity within processes of market integration, commoditisation, and globalisation (see for instance Vershoor 1994; Milgram 1997; Benediktsson 2002). In addition, while substantivist and formalist positions continue to be employed in studies, an either or position on its own appears insufficient for interpreting the everyday reality of social actors' economic behaviour and livelihood decisions. As Alexander (1992: 83) argues, a more viable way forward is to recognise that:

...trading practices in all markets, not simply peasant markets, are culturally constituted. Actors in any market are linked by commodity exchanges and by social relationships, but they are also linked by shared, common-sense, taken-for-granted understandings about the ways in which transactions should be conducted and the ways in which they are conducted.

Hence, for this study I adopt the position of Hann and Hart (2011: 85) who suggest that “self-interested calculation *and* moral norms are present in all economies; what matters is their variable interplay”. I strive to explore such dimensions by devoting attention to the connections that exist between non-market and emerging forms of market exchange, the complexity and socio-cultural specificities of upland markets, and by attending to the concepts that market participants use to undertake and justify their everyday economic practices in upland Lào Cai (c.f. Alexander 1992).

### **2.3.2 A Relational Understanding of Social Embeddedness: Social Networks**

While Polanyi made a significant contribution to our understanding of economies as socially embedded, his articulation of human agency was less clear, although he certainly considered this important (Benediktsson 2002). Indeed, Polanyi's conception of embeddedness concentrated the macro-level of the economy, and was focused on the issue of the analytically autonomous economy (Krippner and Alvarez 2007). At the meso or micro level, one of the key contributions to the role of social actors themselves in constructing markets is offered by Granovetter (1985). However, unlike Polanyi, Granovetter's engagement with social embeddedness centres on the issue of atomism (Krippner and Alvarez 2007). Granovetter (1985), moves beyond earlier dualistic interpretations of economic action by proposing a relational view of the social context of economic action. Within the dualistic framework explored above in Section 2.3.1, there are two models of social action. The formalist or neoclassical account, reflects the undersocialised social actor, with calculated decision-making based on utility

maximisation. The substantivist reading reflects the oversocialised actor, whereby economic practice is structured according to internalised socio-cultural norms and values (Lie 1997). For Granovetter (1985; 1991), the problem with both of these explanations was that they viewed economic action as atomised and uninfluenced by people's existing social relations (Granovetter 1985; 1991).

As an alternative, Granovetter (1985) proposed a middle ground, arguing that actors' efforts are always embedded in and mediated by ongoing patterns of social relations – hence, in actors' social networks. Social networks are essential to the market process, patterning exchange and facilitating collective action.<sup>29</sup> Agreements are reached through negotiation, shared understandings, or social struggle, rather than by markets 'functional effectiveness' (Benediktsson 2002). As such, Granovetter maintained that the economy should be conceptually and analytically understood through the social networks that shape them.

A distinction is also made between the different forms and densities of social relations. For instance, local marketplace trading relations are facilitated through 'strong ties' such as ethnic, household, kinship, and community relations – or various other informal social networks (Long 2001). However, 'weak ties' of acquaintanceship between actors in a more socially heterogeneous environment could frequently offer greater access to economic information, resources and opportunities than could strong ties (Granovetter 1973). By adopting a social network lens towards markets, it becomes clear that market dynamics are contingent upon sets of shifting relations between social actors, which vary over time and between places (Benediktsson 2002).

Despite this important realisation, a strong critique of the social network approach is its lack of explicit engagement with the historical variations of markets (Lie 1997).

Additionally, critics have noted that insufficient attention has been given to the content of social ties - not simply their density – and to how networks are actually formed

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<sup>29</sup> Through social networks, the 'rules of the game' are set, particularly in terms of generating and securing trust, gaining access to information, and enforcing cooperation through monitoring and communal sanctions (Meager 2005).

(Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). The abstract focus on social networks in conventional approaches overlooks the particularities of socio-cultural context and meanings – including gender, kinship, ethnicity, household positioning and age-based dynamics - and how these might impinge upon interpersonal relations and networks (Jacobson 1987; DiMaggio 1994; Barber 1995).<sup>30</sup> While paying attention to these factors, I consider how different migration histories also interact with diverse subject positionings in shaping marketplace social networks. A related shortcoming is that the standard techniques of many social network analysts tend to focus on structural and functional patterns.<sup>31</sup> Yet, when applied to the ethnographic context and micro-level realities, this approach often fails to capture the richness and diversity of social-cultural dynamics in relational systems. For instance, within Hmong societies, kinship roles shift throughout the course of an individual's life course, and are not simply replicated from generation to generation. Thus, within this study, my analysis of how social networks are used in upland trade follows others who strive to conceptualise “the organised diversity [and] variability of social contexts within which individual actors and their behaviours are situated” (Schweizer and White 1998: 4).

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a lively discussion within geography, anthropology, and sociology on the social construction of markets and trade, drawing ideas from Granovetter's concept of social-embeddedness, as well as reflecting a renewed interest in Polanyi's work (Halperin 1988, 1994; Barber 1995; Benediktsson 2002). Commonly accepted in current social theory (outside of neoclassical economics), is that all economies are socially embedded, even ‘developed’ capitalist ones (Plattner 1989;

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<sup>30</sup>A number of studies in economic sociology and economic geography have drawn from Granovetter's concept of social embeddedness. Much of this research has tended to focus on regional networks of industrial districts in developed countries, or formal organisational networks, while for the most part overlooking the situation for small-scale trade and rural contexts of the Global South. Yet, Granovetter (1985) himself applies his particular articulation of embeddedness to examine exchange relations amongst small groups of individuals through a review of various anthropological studies of small-scale trade, barter and exchange in the global south. He concludes that all ongoing exchange, regardless of the cultural and physical distance between traders, is mediated by personal ties, but that the exchange process itself will differ according to the social distance covered by the ties. For example, he argues that in small localised groups where this process is stretched over time, the specificity of what is to be expected in return is lower than in more market-oriented, impersonal exchanges. In the case of the former, there is an expectation of a fair return, although the timing and character of this are left vague.

<sup>31</sup> This includes the use of methodological tools such as block modelling for social networks.

Barber 1995). In contrast to earlier modernisation perspectives that foresaw these socio-cultural elements of the economy as temporary, they have proven to be resilient features accompanying market integration and globalisation - blending into and sometimes providing the foundations for market economies themselves (Granovetter 1985; Gaughan and Ferman 1987; Lomnitz 1988; Mingione 1991).<sup>32</sup>

The ways through which social embeddedness is expressed however, are various, manifesting in terms of different social ties, norms and cultural practices, and political contexts (Woolcock 1998). Moreover, Evers and Schrader (1994) in addition to others, dispute the view that one type of exchange is 'economic' (such as market exchange) while other types are 'social' (such as reciprocity), considering all forms of exchange to be economic and social at the same time.

Consolidating findings from earlier anthropological research, Evers and Schrader (1994) like Scott (1976), revealed the existence of moral codes and other socio-cultural barriers against personal capital accumulation in many societies. Based upon these patterns, they formulated what was termed the 'trader's dilemma'. Applying their thesis to various case studies undertaken in the context of Southeast Asia, they discuss the problems that social embeddedness can pose for small traders in the transition from rural subsistence to more market-oriented economies. Their argument has three key points. First, the trader's dilemma arises because traders must balance moral expectations to disburse gains amongst kin, neighbours, or community – such as by offering goods on credit or buying from producers at a 'fair' price but having to sell at market prices - alongside a desire to accumulate profits (Evers and Schrader 1994). Yet, secondly it is in meeting these obligations that a trader is able to enrich their own social standing - as opposed to by individualised economic pursuits – through the transformation of wealth into symbolic cultural capital such as honour or prestige (c.f. Bourdieu 1986). By living up to social expectations, a trader gains the respect of others and eliminates the suspicion that they are

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<sup>32</sup> To take one example, morality is often attributed to commercial transactions as a response by trade actors to potential power inequalities created through exchange relations, while price is often influenced by cultural and moral understandings of what constitutes these as just, fair or correct (Alexander 1992; Dilley 1992).

engaged in a selfish or greedy endeavour. Thirdly, in negotiating these circumstances, traders devise strategies for manoeuvre that combine political, economic, and sometimes religious elements. Traders also draw upon various ways to circumvent moral obligations, such as through social, cultural or religious differentiation, or by the ethnic demarcation of traders such as trading diasporas. Another strategy is to maintain a very minute scale of enterprise so that social expectations remain more limited than for a larger scale venture (Turner 2003). All of these methods have been highlighted as key ways that traders are able to fulfil, navigate or escape the pressures of local moral economies.

### **2.3.3 Social Capital Approaches**

Since the late 1990s, social capital has been adopted as a complementary approach within social network and embeddedness studies. While there remains a lack of consensus on a specific definition of the concept, it is broadly understood as the relations of trust and norms of reciprocity which are integral to social networks and that may be used to gain access to resources and opportunities (Bourdieu 1986; Portes 1998; Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Lin 2001; Perrault 2003). Analysts argue that social capital may be used to support the economic endeavours of actors, while also functioning as a coping mechanism to mitigate livelihood adversity and crisis (Moser 1996). For this reason, it has been explicitly positioned as one of the primary forms of capital within the livelihoods approach, as I discussed earlier. A source of popular agency, social capital is also seen by some as enabling vulnerable social actors or groups to moderate the effects of political, economic and social marginalisation (Meager 2005). The main reasons for this are that: firstly, social networks facilitate flows of information; secondly, they can help social actors to exert their influence on others; and thirdly they act to reinforce group identity and belonging (Meager 2005).

The three key figures widely credited with developing the concept of social capital are Bourdieu (1977; 1986), Coleman (1990), and Putnam (1993; 2000). Each has used the term in quite different senses theoretically and analytically, and applied it to different scales. Whereas Bourdieu and Coleman centred on individual and household-level

benefits and micro-scale social relations as the unit of analysis, Putnam spatially expanded social capital as an attribute of cities, regions and nations, and considered cumulative benefits at larger scales (Portes and Landolt 2000). In this research I am concerned exclusively with the former, micro-scale approach to conceptualising social capital, as my interest is to explain the multiple types of social networks that different groups of upland market actors are involved in, and how these have been formed and transformed over time.

For Bourdieu, economic calculations were not solely applicable to economic exchange, but should also be extended to social and cultural life, to material as well as symbolic ‘goods’ (Bourdieu 1977:177). In what he terms an economy of practice, Bourdieu (1986) identifies three different types of capital that people work to accumulate, namely economic, cultural and social capital. Social capital he defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu 1986:248). According to Bourdieu, the three forms of capital are exchangeable and can be traded with one another. In fact, this trading of capitals is necessary for their development (Portes and Landolt 2000). However, relative to economic exchanges, social and cultural capital transactions tend to be less transparent in terms of the specific obligations, the timeframes involved, and the possibility that reciprocal obligations will be ignored (Portes and Landolt 2000).

However, Bourdieu (1986) also maintained that social capital was not evenly distributed in society, and that its production and reproduction required constant individual or collective investments in social relations – in order to call upon them at a future point as a source of benefits. Moreover, an individual’s ability to draw on and acquire social capital depends upon both the number as well as the quality of their social relations (Perrault 2003). Bourdieu’s Marxist reading of social capital is significantly concerned with inequality, through its attention to how social capital interacts with other forms of capital to reproduce class difference and social disparities (Rankin 2002). Yet, despite his linkage of social capital to inequality, Bourdieu did not address the negative aspects that

might be present for those seemingly privileged with bountiful social capital (Social Capital Workshop 2003).

Coleman developed a rather different idea of social capital, vaguely defining it by its function. For him, this was not a single entity but a variety of different entities with two elements in common: “they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain action of actors - whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure” (Coleman 1988:S98). To Coleman, social capital encompassed a mixture of forms and mechanisms, including obligations and expectations, information channels, norms and sanctions, relations of authority, appropriable social organisation and intentional organisation (Portes 1998). However, Coleman’s unclear definition, which appears to confuse the causes, sources, and effects of social capital, has led to a lack of conceptual clarity with which the term has been used, as well as the glossing over of many different and contradictory processes as ‘social capital’ (Bebbington and Perrault 1999; Portes 1998). Nevertheless, a strength that has been identified with Coleman’s treatment of social capital is its basis in common identity or shared concern (Bebbington and Perrault 1999). He suggests that an ongoing engagement in social networks leads to people’s entanglement in sets of rules, norms, and bodies of information that can assist the activities of some members, while limiting it for others (Bebbington and Perrault 1999).

Putnam extended the idea of social capital to the scale of community and nation. He defines social capital as “features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (1993:167). In this communitarian view, the analysis is not at the individual but rather the community level, where social capital is seen as a collective asset or public good. Greater ‘stocks’ of social capital inherent in an area are argued to lead to higher levels of collective well-being, a stronger, more vibrant ‘civil society’, good governance, and economic development. These stocks equate with the level of associational involvement and participatory activities in an area. Associational activities bring together strangers and work to forge a sense of cooperation, solidarity, and public-mindedness that then

contributes to a dispersal of generalised social reciprocity and trust (Social Capital Workshop 2003). Portes and Landolt (2000), among others, are highly critical of this analytical jump of geographical and social scales. They argue that an inherent conflict stems from the fact that benefits of social capital which accrue at the individual level can often have negative effects at the collective level. Furthermore, Portes (1998) states that Putnam's conceptualisation is problematic because it regards social capital as both a cause and effect, leading to logical circularity. For instance, social capital causes a more vibrant civil society and is simultaneously the outcome of it. Nevertheless, this communitarian approach has drawn particular recognition from scholars and has been widely influential in policy circles.

Despite limitations, Putnam (2000) usefully distinguished between various 'forms' of social capital, which can be helpful for operationalising social capital in research and analysis. Bonding social capital refers to the social relations within homogenous groups - similar to Granovetter's notion of 'strong ties' - based on social characteristics such as kinship, ethnicity, gender, class, or religious background. Alternately, bridging social capital consists of more heterogeneous social ties with non-community members or which extend across social groups. Like, Granovetter (1973), Putnam suggested that bonding social capital was helpful for getting by in daily life. On the other hand, bridging social capital was helpful for mobilising resources beyond the local level and has been seen as vital to economic development (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). Bonding social capital is also interpreted as being more exclusive in the sense that group members must possess an element of shared identity, whereas bridging social capital tends to bring together a wider range of social groups (Portes and Landolt 1996; Davidsson and Honig 2002). However, both are conceptualised as encompassing horizontal elements of social capital because they link together social actors of comparatively equal socio-economic backgrounds (Turner 2007).

In addition to bonding and bridging, analysts have also added linking social capital to this typology, which reflects connections developed between actors often including with those operating in official institutional structures - such as between farmers and non-



governmental organisation actors (Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Turner 2007). This form of social capital is viewed as having a more powerful vertical dimension than bonding and bridging social capital because it enables actors to leverage resources, ideas and information from beyond their immediate local level through their contacts with actors in formal channels (Woolcock 2001). Within my research, I draw upon this three fold categorisation of social capital as useful way of articulating the different types of trade-related social networks that operate within the very ethnically and socially diverse context of upland Lào Cai's market settings.

### **2.3.3.1 Concerns with the Social Capital Approach**

Social capital has generated a number of criticisms, in terms of conceptual inconsistencies, its normative effects, and the way it has become uncritically adopted as a tool of development policy and practice (Bebbington 2000; Fine 2002). The most common critique is the tendency for social capital analysts to overlook its double-edged outcomes. In particular, the majority of social capital research of the communitarian school has tended to emphasise positive dimensions, while overlooking the negative potentialities that are more evident in social network approaches. Portes (1998) has highlighted four key possible negative aspects of social capital. Firstly, as social networks entails membership in a group, this always comes at the exclusion of others, leaving outsiders unable to access the same resources and opportunities. Secondly, social networks have the potential to place excessive obligations upon group members. This aspect of social capital has been identified in a number of studies on small-scale trade wherein group members were expected to provide assistance to network members, which worked to burden or undermine their own initiatives (Geertz 1963; Evers and Schrader 1995; Bonnin 2004; Turner and Nguyen 2005). Thirdly, due to the norms and obligations inherent in social networks, there can be restrictions on the autonomy of individuals to act as they might wish under the pressures to conform. Finally, Portes (1988:17) highlights situations where “group solidarity is cemented by a common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society”. This can lead downward levelling norms to arise within a network, which may eventually work at perpetuating the situation of marginalised social groups.

Another key factor that remained overlooked in much of the previous literature until lately is the gendered dimensions of social capital. Feminist researchers have highlighted how the above mentioned downsides also become expressed in their gender differentiated forms, often leaving women especially burdened by social capital expectations (Silvey and Elmhirst 2003). Within a social context where gender-based socio-economic inequalities are already very pronounced, social capital can further women's disadvantaged position when they are excluded from more powerful networks accessible only to men. Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) have thus called for a re-conceptualisation of social capital that explicitly incorporates an analysis of gendered power relations within social networks. This approach should focus in particular on how women and men contest, accommodate, and negotiate the gendered demands made on them through social networks. Throughout this thesis, I give specific attention to the gendering of social capital with regard to upland trade activities, and a summary discussion of the gendered nature of marketplace trade is presented in the final chapter (Chapter 9).

Another important argument is that social capital and network approaches to trade can have an essentialising quality if economic hindrances are portrayed entirely as an outcome of cultural values – such as when the Vietnam state views the some upland ethnic minorities disinclined toward entrepreneurship (c.f. Meager 2005). Meager (2005) suggests that this type of cultural determinism and stereotyping can be avoided by seeking a more historically and institutionally-sensitive analysis that considers “the propensity of social networks to block or support economic growth as a product of their specific institutional content and the way such networks are in turn embedded in the wider social and institutional environment of a given locality” (Meager 2005:226). This need to consider the role of historical circumstances in shaping current social capital formations has also been highlighted by Fine (2003). Fine advocates for an understanding of social networks as shaped not just by cultural identity but also by history, power relations, and relations with the state (ibid). As was highlighted by Bourdieu (1986), this also points to the fact that social capital analyses must be situated within the particular spatio-temporal setting in which it is being considered, as the ability to draw upon such

capital as a resource depends upon the mutual understandings that are the foundations for social relations.

Finally, in terms how it has been applied to the livelihoods approach, Bebbington (1999) contends that social capital should also be considered not only for its material but also its intrinsic value. This includes recognising how social (and cultural) capital works to maintain and enhance people's identity or enables voice and participation, rather than viewing it simply as a tool to access resources and opportunities. I pay attention to all of these dimensions within this research, by stressing the importance of history, local cultural identity, as well as state-ethnic minority and majority-minority relations for understanding how social capital is accessed and drawn upon in contemporary upland trade networks.

#### **2.3.4 Drawing from the Literature on the Social Dimensions of Markets**

While keeping in mind the above mentioned criticisms, I argue that key aspects taken up from the specific social capital and network approaches are important for producing an in-depth understanding of how markets are socially constructed and embedded within their socio-cultural and geographical contexts. I draw upon these literatures to analyse the different types of social networks that upland traders use, how patterns of inclusion and exclusion are expressed through these networks, and how mobilising different networks can help explain changes in access to resources and power relations. This network based analysis is especially relevant to this study due to the ethnically and socially-differentiated context of upland markets in mountainous northern Vietnam. This is an environment where multiple understandings of markets and types of exchange co-exist, and emerging market opportunities are being engaged through older and newer forms of social networks. It is also a context where trade networks build and build on diverse alliances across ethnicities and national borders.

I take on board Bebbington's (2000) suggestion that social capital be used as a 'meso-level' concept that can be combined with other concepts – here, the livelihoods and commodity-oriented literatures. I place specific attention on social actors and their

networks, using an analysis of these networks in order to better understand shifting terms of access to resources and power relations. I adopt a nuanced understanding of social capital, drawing primarily from Granovetter (1985) and Bourdieu (1977; 1986), but also taking on vital insights from Silvey and Elmhirst's (2003) attention to gender and power and Meager's (2005) historically and institutionally-aware approach social networks. In doing so, throughout the results sections (Chapters 5-8) of this study I highlight the fluidity and contested nature of trade-based social networks, as well as their potential function as a resource for different groups of upland trade actors.

## **2.4 Commodity Approaches to Trade Networks**

In order to develop a rich understanding of what it means to be an upland trader, and more specifically, the nature of how ethnic minorities are involved in markets and trade, this research incorporates three detailed case studies of historically important key upland goods for Hmong and Yao in Lào Cai province. These studies - corresponding to Chapters 6, 7 and 8 respectively – involve the production (or rearing) and trade of water buffalo, upland artisanal alcohol, and textiles. On the surface, these commodities and their trade may be regarded as marginal in scale and scope, and they are certainly not of paramount interest to the Vietnam state or of much consequence to the national economy as a whole. Nevertheless, from a research perspective they are important subjects of analysis because of the manifold uses they serve, and ways they are valued by Hmong and Yao, encompassing economic, social and cultural dimensions. In addition, while all of these goods have long been in use and circulation locally, in the last decade they have become increasingly entangled in wider markets, owing to trade liberalisation and the emergence of new stakeholders on the scene.

Analysing the implications of such changes requires examining the shifting exchange values and processes of commoditisation, as well as the social and cultural dynamics underpinning these transformations. This objective can be most fruitfully achieved as Appadurai (1986) has contended, by paying attention to the 'things in motion' themselves, as this is a vital methodological entry point for revealing the human and social contexts within which material objects flow. He maintains that because:

Things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with...this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical, circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things” (Appadurai 1986:5).

Since making this suggestion that we should focus upon the things that are exchanged and not just the forms or functions of exchange, Appadurai’s conceptualisation has led to new ways of understanding and reframing production, consumption and exchange. With this overarching perspective in mind, I therefore ground my case study analyses within the diverse literature on commodity chains. In the sections that follow, I critically review the literature on commodity chains, pulling out the key ideas and concepts that are adopted for my study. To begin, I provide a general working definition of commodities and commoditisation (Section 2.4.1). I then move on to examine four key analytical approaches to commodity chains, describing them and presenting their strengths and weaknesses in terms of how they might be applied to this research, covering: global commodity chains (Section 2.4.2), commodity circuits (2.4.3), commodity networks (2.4.4), and systems of provision (2.4.5). To conclude (Section 2.4.6), I highlight the specific elements that I use to form my conceptual and methodological framework, and also explain how I situate the analysis within a wider actor-oriented lens.

### **2.4.1 Defining Commodities**

The field of anthropology has contributed much to the debate on what criterion distinguishes an object as a commodity. Some have made distinctions between exchange systems, differentiating between capitalist and pre-capitalist economies; others have made a division between goods or gifts and commodities; while others still have highlighted the use of restricted currencies versus general purpose money (Stone, Haugerud and Little 2000). At the broadest level, the definition of a commodity could be any object of economic value intended for exchange (Appadurai 1986). This would encompass both market or non-market exchanges, and recognise that a substantial amount of exchange takes place without money and is frequently heavily regulated by socio-cultural rules and mechanisms. However, Appadurai (1986:13) has proposed that

instead of viewing commodities as a particular type of thing, they should be regarded as “things in a certain situation”. This commodity situation, in turn reflects specific phases wherein “the social life of any ‘thing’ be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other things is its socially relevant feature” (Appadurai 1986:13). As this definition of commodities as a condition draws attention to the fluidity of how goods are interpreted, the politics of value, and the dynamics of exchange, it informs my understanding of commodities within this study.

I also utilise Long’s (2001) terminology on insights regarding the distinction between commodification and commoditisation. Here, commodification concentrates on the formation and reproduction of monetised or exchange value. Alternately, while commoditisation also takes this into account, it additionally considers the “ongoing historical processes by which commodity and non-commodity relations evolve, through not necessarily in a linear or cyclical form” (Long 2001: 245). As such, commoditisation is understood “as a process of becoming, rather than as an all-or-nothing state of being” (Kopytoff 1986: 73). The difference is important for this research, as both types of relations are expressed and remain important within upland trading contexts.

Keeping these important definitions in mind, within each of my case study analyses a different theme has emerged that links back to these understandings. My research into how water buffalo are traded (Chapter 6) highlights the existence of multiple trading systems for these precious animals, encompassing a wide variety of forms of exchange, and underpinned by different logics for assessing value. Regarding the case of upland artisanal rice and maize alcohol production and trade (Chapter 7), these activities have always required specific local traditional knowledge, but increasingly as such products undergo commoditisation, knowledge – of distillers, traders, and consumers - is being redefined both from the outside as well as internally. In my research on commodity chains and trade networks for Hmong textiles (Chapter 8), objects formerly interpreted for their use value alone are increasingly being assessed in terms of their monetary worth. Hmong textiles are entering new regimes of value as markets are emerging for a diversity of forms of these items, destined for local as well as external markets. In order to further

flesh out these three themes, among others, within my results and discussion chapters, I situate my analysis within key strands of the literature on commodity chains, which I now move on to critically examine and explain.

#### **2.4.2 Global Commodity Chains Approaches**

The conceptual genealogy of the commodity chain approaches in use today traces back to world systems theory. Based in dependency and Marxist theory, world systems explained the uneven development of a single, world capitalist system in terms of a spatial division into a small powerful ‘core’ region and a vast, exploited ‘periphery’ (Leslie and Reimer 1999; Hughes 2000).<sup>33</sup> As initially introduced by Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986: 159) a commodity chain is “a network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity”.<sup>34</sup> During the 1990s, in light of growing interest to explain how local areas were being integrated via globalisation and economic restructuring processes, the direction of inquiry was more coherently developed into the ‘global commodity chains approach’ (Raikes et al. 2000; Jackson et al. 2006). This perspective initially focused on the global linkages of the manufacturing sector through a centrally coordinated and internationally-dispersed system of production activities. The system was composed of chains made up of sets of inter-organisational networks clustered around one commodity, linking together households, enterprises and states (Gereffi et al. 1994; Raikes et al. 2000). In order to remain competitive and lower costs, firms were

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<sup>33</sup>According to Jackson et al. (2006), a second and distinct starting point for commodity chain approaches emerged from work on the new political economy of food and agriculture, also in the 1970s. This tradition - subsequently referred to as ‘commodity systems’ - adopted a framework for comprehending the exploitative impacts of agricultural technological transformations on farm workers by broadening the horizon of the analysis to linking farms with corporate power and agricultural production systems (Friedland 1984; Jackson 2006; Challies 2008). This approach was adopted and refined during the 1980s and 1990s, in research on the internationalisation and globalisation of food chains. Since then, it has been incorporated in studies on the development of the international food system (Jackson et al. 2006). Because my research does not involve a study of global food systems, I do not deal with this approach in detail here.

<sup>34</sup>Hopkins and Wallerstein’s conceptualisation also had a historical/cyclical dimension whereby chains lengthened and underwent vertical integration during expansionary periods, when monopolistic concentration was reduced. In periods of contraction, often due to technological changes, the reverse occurs, with less competitive firms eliminated and more intense monopoly concentration. This process occurred over an approximately seventy year Kondratieff- Cycle. However, unlike the global commodity chains approach, Hopkins and Wallerstein only focused on identifying production processes and input stages and did not trace the commodity chain through to marketing and final consumption (Raikes et al. 2000).

impelled to participate in a global factory where commodities made by local producers in peripheral regions were retailed and consumed in the core (Gereffi et al. 1994).

The structure of global commodity chains was further categorised according to their institutional power orientation, which also relocated the ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ concept to nodes in the commodity chain itself (Leslie and Reimer 1999). These modes of organisation were either producer-driven chains based on the industrial wealth of transnational manufacturers, or else buyer-driven chains constituted by the commercial power of transnational branded retailers (Leslie and Reimer 1999). Within this model, the sets of relations around commodities were interpreted in relation to an integrated sequence of value-adding activities, with profits distributed unevenly along the chain and much of the economic surplus captured by ‘core’ countries and firms (Long and Villareal 1998; Raikes et al 2000).

While this approach has made a fundamental contribution to thinking about global power relations and divisions of labour, as well as the spatial interconnectivity of firms and people and the asymmetrical nature of production, it has a number of shortcomings. Due to an overarching emphasis on the global dynamics of political economies, this approach tends to privilege macro-scale or national levels systems and flows, with limited attention to the dynamics at local-levels or individual nodes (Leslie and Reimer 1999; Hughes 2000; Dunway 2001). An associated concern is that while drawing attention to exploitative relations of production, little scope is given to the role of human agency, or how differently situated social actors cope within wider socio-cultural, political and economic structures (Leslie and Reimer 1999; Jackson et al. 2006; Challies 2008). Furthermore, the analysis centres on inequalities at the production node of the chain, while phases of distribution and consumption are often glossed over or entirely overlooked (Leslie and Reimer 1999; Challies 2008).

For the purposes of my study, the global commodity chains approach is not well suited to a case study analysis of upland commodities, given the emphasis on international flows and limited engagement with localised realities. My research examines the various



impacts of market integration and the Vietnam state on the expansion of upland commodity chains, yet this extension – alternately, to national, transnational, and global scales - is far more complex than is befitting to describe under the typology of global commodity chains. Moreover, each of the upland commodities studied are now simultaneously involved in multiple commodity chains destined for both local and external markets. Some chains overlap at key nodes to form interlinked webs, resulting in a dynamics that warrants specific attention. Finally, I wish to embed my commodity chain approach in development processes operating at the local scale, which the global commodity chains perspective has been weak in addressing. In the next sections, I thus turn to examine some of the alternate conceptualisations that have been put forward as a way to broaden the commodity chains perspective, and explain how these will be incorporated into my conceptual framework.

### **2.4.3 Commodity Circuits Approaches**

Drawing insights from anthropological perspectives on the social life of commodities and commodity cultures, a group comprised mostly of human geographers has taken another analytical direction termed the commodity circuits approach (Hughes 2000; Jackson et al. 2006). This body of work developed out of a critique of the narrowness of the commodity chain concept which, due to its implication of a unidirectional, linear and mechanistic map of relationships, oversimplified a more complex web of mutual interconnections (Jackson et al. 2006; Pratt 2008). Further, proponents were motivated by a need to ‘humanise’ commodity chains by incorporating a more multi-dimensional, culturally-based approach to understanding the movements of material objects (Jackson et al. 2006). Unlike the sequential stages view of global commodity chains, circuits analysts propose that there is no beginning or terminal point to commodity movements. Rather than pre-given as fixed, each ‘site’ is constructed and changing (Jackson et al 2006). Commodities interrelate with other goods as they move, and as such social relations, cultural meanings, economic power, and geographical knowledges are continually being shaped and reshaped (Cook and Crang 1996; Leslie and Reimer 1999). The task therefore is to focus on these how these complex culturally-inflected dynamics combine and work to interlink circuits of production, distribution and consumption (Jackson 2002).

An important contribution of the commodity circuits perspective is its recognition of the agency of consumers and their potential for aesthetic reflexivity, such as the role of consumer knowledge of geographical origins and qualities of commodities in constructing and reconstructing commodity circuits (Crang 1996; Leslie and Reimer 1999). Hence, this approach works to bridge the divide between ‘the economic’ and ‘the cultural’ through a nuanced understanding of the shifting semiotic meanings that humans attribute to commodities at different times, places and phases of commodity circulation (Jackson 2002; Kneafsey et al. 2001; Crang et al. 2003). This point emerges within my case studies of Hmong textiles (Chapter 8), where a diverse mix of producers, traders and consumers are involved in a spatially extensive network in which the meanings of these commodities are continually being knowingly and unknowingly reworked for both economic and cultural purposes.

Analysts contend that the circuits approach should not privilege consumption but engage in illuminating and analysing multiple sets of connections (Leslie and Reimer 1999). Nevertheless, much of this work has tended to focus upon the dynamics of consumption (Hughes 2000), particularly regarding the analysis of displacement whereby local contexts of consumption are reframed as:

Being opened up and constituted through connections into any number of networks... furthermore where imagined and performed representations of ‘origins’, ‘destinations’ and forms of ‘travel’ surround these networks’ various flows; and where consumers (and other actors in the commodity system) find themselves socially and culturally positioned, and socially and culturally position themselves, not so much through placed locations but as in terms of their entanglements with these flows and representations (Cook and Crang 1996:138).

Another central critique of this approach is that in taking on the terminology of a circuit, there is a risk of losing an important orienting point for political critique and mobilisation. In renouncing the commodity chain in favour of mutually connected circuits it is more difficult to underpin the analysis in relations of exploitation at sites of power; possibly leading to a masking of asymmetrical relationships (Goldman and Papson 1998; Leslie and Reimer 1999; Kneafsey et al. 2001). While critics concede that ideological aspects are important to consider, it is argued that a singular focus on these

aspects can lead to a reification of the individual, subjective and symbolic, thus missing the ways by which power and politics are implicated in these processes (Leslie and Reimer 1999; Raynolds 2002). Furthermore, as Leslie and Reimer (1999: 14) have pointed out, “if the aim is no longer to determine what forces are driving the chain, we are left with a question as to why chains should be constructed at all”.

I do not rely extensively on this approach, as my research concentrates on tracing the detailed workings at sites of upland production and trade; a difficult task to achieve with a circuits approach that proposes no starting or end point. I nevertheless incorporate valuable insights from this body of work into my analysis, namely a heightened awareness of the mutual interactions and connections between commodities, social relations, cultural meaning, and economic power at different phases in a commodity’s movements.

#### **2.4.4 Commodity Network Approaches**

Another third line of approach has combined elements of various other commodity chain analyses with actor-network methodologies to create a commodity network framework, most notably in the literatures on the alternative geographies of food (Challies 2008). A central idea behind actor-networks is that network agency is collectively attributed to both human and non-human actors, with material objects also endowed with the ability to shape the hybrid networks that they have been enrolled into (Murdoch 1997; Whatmore and Thorne 1997). For instance, the relationships between humans, animals and inanimate objects are suggested to be influenced by the material or biological properties of those things, and may undergo transformations through technological developments (Busch and Juska 1997; Hughes 2000). A second key idea argument is that networks are situated, localised entities and nodes that are fixed in time and place. Their global extension can only be understood in terms of the physical reach by key network agents across space (Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Hughes 2000; Kneafsey et al. 2001). As with commodity circuits, this approach also affords a more all-encompassing approach to commodity chains by replacing a unidirectional, sequential flow with an analysis of complex webs of intersection and feedback (Kneafsey et al. 2001). Moreover, network

approaches also transcend the dualistic core and periphery explanations inherent in global commodity chains, as a more nuanced account of global power is traced through the actions and abilities of many interlinked actors (Hughes 2000).

However, some commentators are sceptical about how much further actor-network theory can actually contribute to the analysis of commodity chains, while others suggest that its function is to act as more of a methodological guide than a theory or conceptual framework (Buttel 2001; Friedland 2001). At the same time, others argue the network approach has improved on the global commodity chains analysis because of its multi-scalar perspective and efforts to uncover the differently placed agents, their mutual entanglement in the network, and how they shape and are shaped by their political, cultural and social environments (Arce and Marsden 1993; Jackson et al. 2006; Challies 2008).

For my study the metaphors and morphologies of a network, when employed more loosely, are vital tools for unravelling the complex, interdependent webs of actors that link together specific commodities, resulting in flows that extend through multiple scales. Recent studies of small-scale trade and markets have integrated a similar network approach to investigating traders' activities (Benediktsson 2002; McSweeney 2004; Bush 2004). Yet, I do not engage as rigorously with this approach to the point of giving equal attention to the agency of non-human actors, particularly as this would be practically unfeasible due to the wide variety of commodities and trade networks that I explore, and because I am more interested in concentrating on human interactions. Nevertheless, I do examine the influence that particular commodities exert on the nature of exchange and commercial networks - such as within the water buffalo trade where animal health, environmental adaptation, and travelling stamina are key issues. Moreover, while I concur with the suggestion of the shifting nature of power as constituted within a network, I also wish to retain a consideration of the role of pre-existing structures of power, and how these legacies influence contemporary upland markets and trade.

#### **2.4.5 Systems of Provision**

A fourth analytical tradition, called systems of provision, makes significant inroads to readdressing the critiques of global commodity chains noted earlier. This approach was initially developed by Fine and Leopold (1993), who described each commodity chain as having its own system of provision linking production, distribution, marketing and consumption according to unique patterns, distinctive from other commodity chains. Such differences are attributed to the material properties of commodities as well as the socio-cultural practices that shape these chains and how these relations manifest between each node in the chain (Challies 2008). As such, Fine and Leopold rejected common horizontal features influencing consumption as extending to the entire economy. Instead, they considered the specificities of how production and consumption are connected for particular commodities, thus offering a more balanced treatment of how these phases interact (Leslie and Reimer 1999; Jackson et al. 2006). Importantly, systems of provision approaches also consider the significance of shifting systems of value for commodities over time and space. Thus, the analysis is not only on material flows but is also directed at the discourses, knowledges, and representations that accompany them (Leslie and Reimer 1999).

However, while vertical approaches underscore the uniqueness of particular commodity chains, this isolated analysis fails to account for possible interconnections between different systems of provision. A number of analysts have therefore urged that both vertical and horizontal dimensions be analytically combined, in order to understand how key horizontal factors such as place, ethnicity, gender, and class feed into the logics and character of commodity chains (Leslie and Reimer 1999; Bush 2004; Schoenberger and Turner 2008). For example, the symbolic meaning of commodities is not limited to their own individual chains, but is also a product of how they relate to other commodities (Leslie and Reimer 1999). Moreover, place has been specifically highlighted as a key horizontal feature for consideration because it is often a strong element shaping how commodities are interpreted, and which in turn also modifies the way other horizontal factors – such as gender and ethnicity - are expressed within the context of commodity chains (Hartwick 1998; Leslie and Reimer 1999).

As I draw extensively on this approach for my research, I further clarify the distinction between vertical and horizontal approaches, in terms of how they are relevant to my study of rural upland market trade. In this case, a vertical approach involves following the trade of a particular commodity, such as artisanal alcohol, by tracing the steps and negotiations performed in order to move it from the point where it is produced to when and where it is consumed (Bush 2004). Within this project, I use this approach to understand how particular forms of production and trade interact to result in specific forms of consumption (Jackson et al. 2006). Alternately, a horizontal analysis involves two different possible approaches. First, it involves a comparison of the dynamics at a specific trade node in the commodity chain for two different goods. For example, this could entail an examination of the upland cross-border trade of buffalo between Vietnam and China, versus that of textiles. The second approach is to compare different commodity chains that exist for the same commodity, such as Hmong textiles for tourist markets compared to Hmong manufactured textiles for Hmong consumers. This type of analysis permits a realisation of how the nature of a commodity shapes the process of trade, as well as how commodity chains may overlap at particular nodes to produce combined effects (Hartwick 1998; Bush 2004). It also highlights how actor relationships in different chains of trade vary according to the nodes and places where exchanges take place, as do likewise the socio-cultural and political institutions that underpin these trades and the meaning of commodities (Hartwick 1998; Bush 2004). Accordingly, in this study, I follow analysts who combine both vertical as well as horizontal dimensions in order to interpret the influence of inter-linkages between nodes of a given chain, in conjunction with the place-based factors that articulate with different commodity chains at specific sites.

#### **2.4.6 Drawing from the Commodity Chains Literature**

As I have demonstrated within this section, the commodity chains literature offers elements of a useful conceptual lens and methodological framework with which to achieve my case study analyses of key upland commodities that are produced, traded and consumed by ethnic Hmong and Yao. Through this critical review of the literature I have

highlighted the key elements that are most suitable for this purpose, that is, a conceptual approach that is able to accommodate a wide diversity of social actors, forms of trade, and commodity chains. Given this research context, I have necessarily utilised a ‘hybrid’ approach, adopting and adapting relevant insights from different bodies of work.

For reasons already explained, I do not directly take on board a global commodity chains approach in this study. That being said, I derive from it the general notion of commodity chains as comprised of sequential value-added activities in order to pinpoint how economic surplus is captured, and by whom, within the upland commodity chains that I study. Next, the commodity circuits approach offers beneficial insights into the various ways commodities are interpreted and their multiple uses by specific groups and at different phases in a commodity’s movements. This is important for interpreting how the meanings of material objects are reassembled and transformed over time, space and place. Such a perspective helps me to analyse - in Chapter 8 for Hmong textiles - how groups that are considered ‘marginal’ traders and consumers play a role in innovating and influencing permutations in the creation of new commodities and trade networks. Moreover, the concept is a useful way for recognising feedbacks and interconnections that exist within commodity circulations, rather than presuming that connections are only sequential or mono-systemic. I additionally draw upon the metaphor of commodity networks approach as a way of grasping and representing the spatial extension and interconnections that knit together a wide variety of actors and their resources into upland networks of trade. As my key framework to identify and analyse vertical trajectories and connections in conjunction with horizontal conditions, I use a combined systems of provision approach. In particular, I look at the role of places and how this articulates with other horizontal factors such as ethnicity, gender, residential status, and economic class to produce specific dynamics within the trade networks and systems of provision for water buffalo, artisanal alcohol, and Hmong textiles. An important contribution is my consideration of the role of local commodity chains that operate alongside and interweave with externally-oriented chains, as well as the local consumption practices for commodities that are also intended for wider - national, transnational and global – markets (c.f. Elias 2010).

Finally, to complement my overall approach, I add an additional analytical layer by viewing the social dynamics of upland commodity chains through an actor-oriented lens, as introduced in Section 2.2.5. This approach commences from the standpoint that commodity forms are both defined and contested through the actions of particular actors (Long and Villareal 1998). As applied to commodity chains, this perspective centres on elucidating the social relations, cultural representations and contests of value associated with commodities in various production, trade and consumption settings. This is achieved by identifying and analysing “moments of contestation in which commodity and non-commodity values, but also livelihood concerns, social commitments, and cultural identities - often at considerable socio-geographical distance - are constituted” (Long and Villareal 1998:727). In my commodity chains results chapters (6, 7, 8) I utilise the idea of different, competing ‘theories of value’ and their interrelations, within a multi-ethnic, socially-differentiated environment. In addition, I use such concepts in order to demonstrate how these processes also work to influence access and notions of authenticity, further shaping the conditions of upland trade and associated livelihoods. This type of analysis is crucial because it more precisely engages with questions of power and how these relations are produced and crystalised through diverse value definitions, ascriptions and disputes. At the same time, as I explore in Chapters 7 and 8, the focus on social interfaces, as introduced in Section 2.2.5, permits the recognition of how power dynamics fluctuate over the commodity chain, whereby power in one node does not necessarily determine authority over social relations in another (Long and Villareal 1998).

## **2.5 Conclusion: Consolidating the Conceptual Building Blocks**

In this chapter, I have examined and critiqued the literatures on livelihoods, embeddedness, social network and social capital contributions to markets and trade, and commodity chain approaches to trade networks. I have identified the important contributions and shortcomings within these works, as well as some of the possible ways forward. Taken together, these three bodies of literature serve as the conceptual foundations for my study of upland marketplaces and trade in Lào Cai province, upland



northern Vietnam. In Figure 2.1 below, I visually depict the core themes that I have distilled from these concepts which make up the key elements that I use to inform my research on how diverse groups of upland actors – particularly Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities - are engaged with market trade activities in this region.

1. Actor-Oriented Livelihoods Approaches	2. Embeddedness, Social Networks & Social Capital	3. Commodity-Focused Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actor-defined livelihood strategies, motivations &amp; outcomes</li> <li>• Heterogeneity of experience &amp; local agency in shaping outcomes</li> <li>• Endogenous understanding of resource assets</li> <li>• Shifting terms of access &amp; barriers to trade opportunities &amp; resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity of exchange approaches – the norms &amp; moral economies that underpin them</li> <li>• Dynamics of different types of social networks involved in trade</li> <li>• Constraining &amp; enabling elements of networks</li> <li>• Role of history, institutions, cultural elements &amp; gender</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spatiality &amp; composition of trade/commodity flows &amp; actors involved</li> <li>• Divisions of power &amp; social, economic &amp; political constraints along the commodity chain</li> <li>• Contestations over value and meanings</li> <li>• ‘Social life of things’ &amp; the biography of commodities</li> </ul>

**FIGURE 2.1: BUILDING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE THESIS**

In the remainder of this thesis, I put this conceptual framework into operation, using it as a guide to investigate the key questions and overall aim of my study as highlighted in Chapter 1. However, before I embark on this analysis - in the results and discussion Chapters 6 to 9 - I begin by setting the scene for this study, in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3  
INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH CONTEXT:  
LÀO CAI'S PEOPLE, MARKETS AND TRADE IN PAST AND PRESENT TIMES

**3.1 Introduction**

The societies dwelling in present day Lào Cai province have had a long experience with local market and wider commercial trade. Since imperial times, the region has been enmeshed in a number of national and transnational trade networks, owing to its prime location as a key source of precious commodities with strategic links to external trade routes. While today, new commodity chains lace the uplands with the lowlands and across the border with China, some contemporary elements of trade are built on or continue earlier patterns, while some dynamics of commodity exchanges reflect 'hybrids' combining past and modern forms. This underscores the relevance of incorporating a retrospective analysis of upland trade into my thesis, in order to understand the historical legacies that have helped shape contemporary market relations and upland economies (Lewis 1989; Michaud and Turner 2003; McSweeney 2004). In addition, marketplaces are a mirror to the complex social environments that makes up Vietnam's northern uplands. Here, for centuries, a diversity of upland social actors has congregated within these trading-scapes for the purposes of exchange and socialising.

In this chapter, I locate Lào Cai province's upland markets in relation to the temporal currents and transformations in the socio-cultural, economic and political fabric of the northern Vietnam region, in order to clearly situate the research analyses that follow in Chapters 6 to 9. I accomplish this by identifying key groups of upland social actors, marketplaces and trade in Lào Cai from past to present times. After setting the research scene in Lào Cai province and noting the important local demographics there in Section 3.2, the chapter is divided into two main sections. In Section 3.3, I embed upland markets within their social contexts by outlining the key ethnic groups that have long participated in them. My discussion includes histories of settlement, socio-political organisation, and livelihood practices of Hmong, Yao, Tai-speaking groups, and later Kinh settlers to the

uplands. Then, in Section 3.4, I present a historical overview of marketplaces and trade in Lào Cai. To do so, in Section 3.4.1, I draw on archived French military reports to gain insights into how markets and trade in Lào Cai might have looked during the colonial period (1880s-1940s). I highlight the multi-faceted local and externally-oriented webs of trade that existed, the roles of the main commercial players of the time, and the specific ways that ethnic minorities fitted into the upland trade picture. I then move on in Section 3.4.3, to explore markets and trade in the province during the post-independence period after 1954, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam imposed its agricultural collectivisation and subsidised economy models in the north.<sup>35</sup> I demonstrate that although private market trade declined overall – with the distribution of basic goods and many key commodities officially regulated by the state - a substantial amount of informal, small-scale trade was still being conducted by ethnic minorities and Kinh alike. Next, in Section 3.4.4, I bring the discussion up to the present, focusing on the structures of upland markets in Lào Cai as they exist today. I illustrate the different ways that these upland markets may be classified and examine their overall composition. Yet for the meantime, I leave out a more thorough investigation of traders' activities as these will be delved into in Chapters 6 to 9. To complete the chapter, in Section 3.4.5, I reflect on the role of the national border in current upland trade dynamics, focussing on the types of border gates operating in Lào Cai and how regulations governing border access influence the current characteristics of upland cross-border trade.

Before embarking on this discussion, I would like to first clarify some of the difficulties of representation I encountered in writing this chapter. As shall be subsequently revealed, within Lào Cai province a wide range of economies and economic practices exist amongst upland households. This includes mixed economies combining subsistence with cash-earning activities, and exchange systems that embrace and combine reciprocal non-market and market transactions. As such, my rendition of the socio-economic dynamics and political systems of different uplander households and communities aims at providing an understanding and contextualisation of this historical and extant diversity.

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<sup>35</sup>The subsidised economy was implemented by the reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam from 1975 to 1986. However, agricultural collectivization and steps towards the subsidised economy model were being implemented under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam prior to this.

However, while I believe this background overview is essential for explanatory purposes, I faced the dilemma of how to represent the experiences of upland societies which are consistently marginalised by the state and wider society without inadvertently conforming to discourses that fix, homogenise and erase inter and intra ethnic variations and linkages. Indeed, one downside of a broad, province-level and multi-sited study of markets and trade is that generalisations tend to end up being made, and complexity reduced. Therefore, I wish to note that I do not intend to imply that what I present are in any way ‘static and timeless features’ of cohesive, self-contained upland societies. I recognise these as elements, processes and practices that are historically contingent and locally varied, leading to continually changing, flexible and heterogeneous situated outcomes. Sowerwine (2004:292), who grappled with a similar predicament in her research, also in the uplands, writes that both *amongst* and *within* upland groups there exist numerous and complex “similarities and differences in terms of migration and settlement histories, forms of social and economic organisation and identity and environmental practices”. Thus, while I have suggested general patterns derived from my research findings, throughout this thesis I have endeavoured to emphasize place-based specificities in upland trade by way of case studies - clarifying the social actors and localities that are involved. It is my ultimate hope that this will result in a more nuanced understanding of the range of economic spaces and activities that are being engaged, created and reshaped by different upland actors.

Moreover, while recognising that ‘ethnicity’ is a highly contentious and ambiguous concept, I share the perspective of those who view it as a socially constructed and re-composing process arising out of a particular context via interaction and the mediation of socio-cultural, political, economic and environmental circumstances (Sowerwine 2004; Robinne and Sadan 2007; Forsyth and Michaud 2011).<sup>36</sup> Put more clearly, my interpretation of ethnicity for this study with specific reference to upland minority societies in the Southeast Asian massif follows from that proposed by Forsyth and Michaud (2011: 10):

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<sup>36</sup> As opposed to an essentialised identity marker based on fixed characteristics such as biology and/or location/topography.

[kinship] ties, cultural variety, local agency, and the political agendas of highland people dealing with opportunities and constraints. Ethnicity helps people reproduce an identity they believe in...especially important when a group has to maintain itself in the face of fast-changing circumstances such as those related to globalisation and...when attempting to create viable livelihoods while negotiating particular standardisation constraints created by socialist regimes. In turn, this means paying attention to both the growing role of national and global trade flows in these regions, as well as local explanations of distinctiveness.

Within this context, ethnicity should also be viewed with regards to its transnational element - given the longstanding resilience of vital socio-cultural and trading ties that straddle national borders - instead of restricting it to the context of single nation states (Forsyth and Michaud 2011). At the same time, as discussed in Chapter 1, it is also vital not to lose sight of the role of political ideology in producing notions of difference. The creation and institutionalization of static ethnic categories remains the dominant approach of socialist Vietnam and is important for interpreting state-minority relations and how this relates to processes of state control, market integration, and cultural tourism in the uplands.

### **3.2 Setting the Research Scene: Lào Cai Province**

Lào Cai province, the focus of this study, is truly representative of the topographical, ecological and socio-cultural diversity that characterises Vietnam's northern uplands (see map in Figure 1.1).<sup>37</sup> Encompassing a land area of 6383 km<sup>2</sup>, Lào Cai neighbours other highland provinces of Lai Châu to the west, Hà Giang to the east, and Yên Bái to the south. To its north, Lào Cai shares a 203 km national border with Yunnan province, China (Cổng thông tin điện tử Tỉnh Lào Cai, 2010). The physical landscape of the province is intersected by a number of extended mountain ranges between which lie river basins, including: the Hoàng Liên Sơn range, drained on its east by the Red River; the Con Voi range located west of the Chảy river; and the Tây Côn Lĩnh range to the east and south east of the Chảy river.<sup>38</sup> A large area of the province lies at elevations between

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<sup>37</sup> The province of Lào Cai was officially established in 1907. In 1975, the three provinces of Lào Cai, Yên Bái and Nghĩa Lộ were amalgamated into a new province called Hoàng Liên Sơn. Then, in 1991 Lào Cai was re-established as an independent province (Cổng thông tin điện tử Tỉnh Lào Cai, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Lào Cai province has over 100 rivers, most of which are tributaries of the larger Red River, Chảy and Năm Thi river.

300-1,000 metres.<sup>39</sup> This topography constrains the extent of large-scale irrigated agriculture as well as household-based paddy rice farming. As such, many Lào Cai residents rely on upland cultivation to complement their wet-rice production (Donovan et al. 1997; Michaud and McKinnon 2000).<sup>40</sup> Yet, the province also contains mid-level and low-lying valley areas, such as directly along the Red River at Lào Cai City, as well as in the districts of Bảo Thắng, Bảo Yên, and Văn Bàn where elevations are as low as 80 metres. Moreover, a significant amount of the province's land, namely 44 per cent, remains officially classified as forest cover - a mix of natural and plantation forests (Cổng thông tin điện tử Tỉnh Lào Cai, 2010).<sup>41</sup>

Lào Cai's climate is characterised by two main seasons. The warmer, rainy season begins in April and lasts until October, and the cooler, dry season starts in October and continues until March. However, during the wet season rainfall tends to be concentrated over short episodes, resulting in intense storms that often damage roads, property, and irrigation systems through landslides and floods (Donovan et al. 1997). Droughts often happen because of the uneven distribution of rainfall, which greatly affect crops. Lào Cai's cool climate in comparison to the rest of Vietnam - being one of its northernmost provinces - also influences agriculture, with only one main crop of rice or maize possible in many of the upper altitude areas.

Lào Cai province is also emblematic of the multi-ethnic social landscape that is representative of the wider northern uplands. The provincial population includes 35 of Vietnam's 54 officially recognised ethnic groups (GSO 2009). This ethnic heterogeneity in turn, reflects a long and varied history of population movements into and through the region, as will be explored in the following sections of this chapter (Michaud et al. 2002). Based on the national census of 2009, the total population of Lào Cai is approximately 614,595, with ethnic minorities accounting for about 64 per cent of this total (GSO 2009).

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<sup>39</sup> Lào Cai contains Vietnam's highest mountain peak, Fansipan at an elevation of 3,143 m, located in the Hoàng Liên Sơn mountain range.

<sup>40</sup> While upland soils are highly fertile, containing rich organic matter, many soils have become deeply weathered, poor in nutrients and are vulnerable to erosion when cleared (Donovan et al. 1997).

<sup>41</sup> Massive forest destruction took place in Lào Cai in the 1960s and 1970s with the in-migration of Kinh involved in logging, cutting trees for firewood and land-clearing for agricultural development projects, combined with shifting cultivation (Donovan et al. 1997).

The most populous ethnic minority groups include: Hmong, 22.21 per cent; Tày, 15.84 per cent; Yao, 14.05 per cent; Giáy, 4.7 per cent; and Nùng, 4.4 per cent (GSO 2009). Ethnic Kinh now account for 35.9 per cent of the province's total (GSO 2009). Table 4.1 shows population by ethnic group for Vietnam and Lào Cai province. The table is limited to the main ethnic groups that are represented in this study.<sup>42</sup>

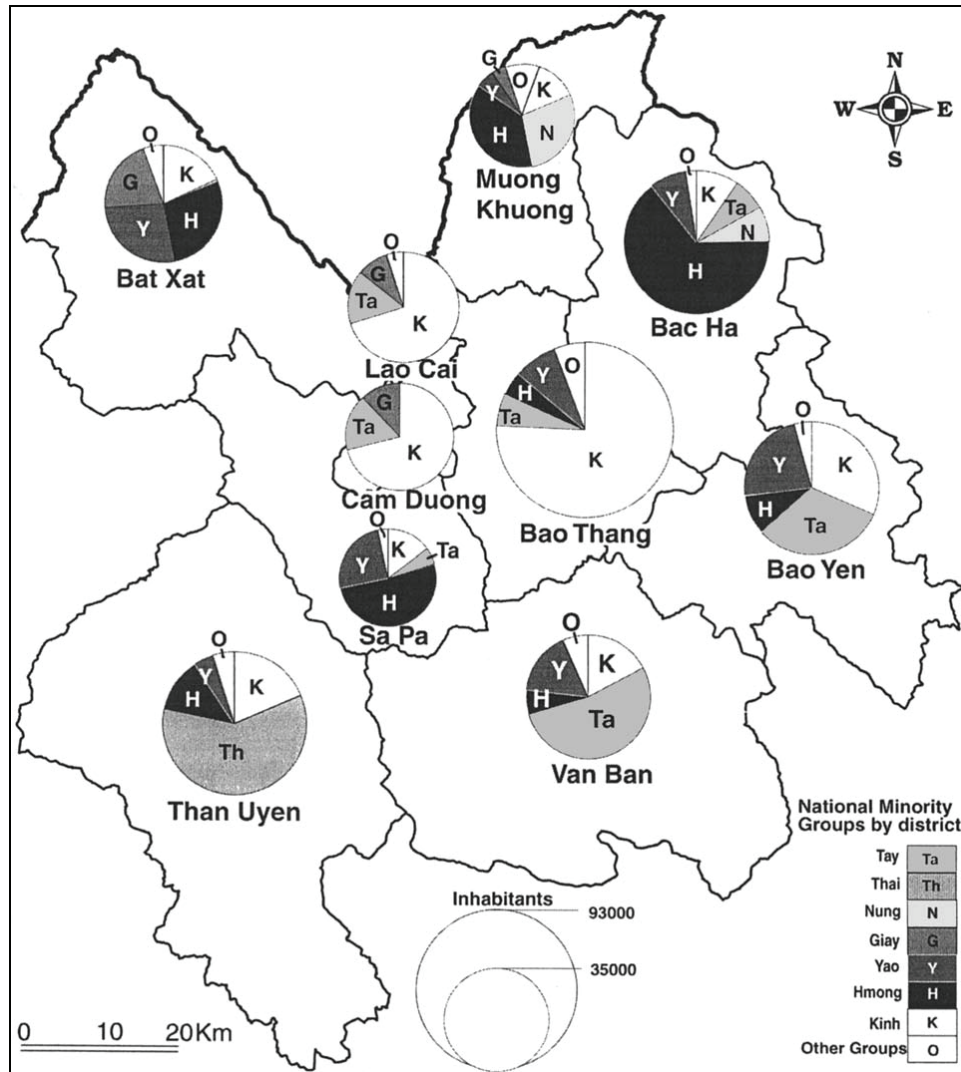
**TABLE 3.1: 2009 POPULATION BY OFFICIAL ETHNIC GROUP: VIETNAM AND LÀO CAI (SOURCE: GSO 2009):**

ETHNIC GROUP	VIETNAM NATIONAL POPULATION			LÀO CAI PROVINCE POPULATION		
	<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>RURAL</i>	<i>URBAN</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>RURAL</i>	<i>URBAN</i>
KINH	<b>73,594,427</b>	49,708,761	23,885,666	<b>212,528</b>	105,838	106,690
TAY	<b>1,626,392</b>	1,405,454	220,938	<b>94,243</b>	86,159	8,084
NUNG	<b>968,800</b>	867,049	101,751	<b>25,591</b>	23,909	1,682
GIAY	<b>58,617</b>	51,286	7,331	<b>28,606</b>	25,528	3,078
HMONG	<b>1,068,189</b>	1,042,507	25,682	<b>146,147</b>	142,165	3,982
YAO/DAO	<b>751,067</b>	727,479	23,588	<b>88,379</b>	84,384	3,995

As Figure 3.1 also clearly depicts, for many of the upland districts of Lào Cai, ethnic Kinh comprise the minority - particularly so for the higher altitude districts of Sa Pa, Bát Xát, Mường Khương, and Bắc Hà.

<sup>42</sup>However, ethnic composition within Lào Cai province can be broken down further by district: 1) Tày residents are concentrated in the districts of Văn Bàn, Sa Pa, Bảo Thắng, Bảo Yên, Bắc Hà and Lào Cai city; 2) Nùng live chiefly in the districts east of the Red River, namely Bắc Hà, Mường Khương and Si Ma Cai; 3) Giáy populations are concentrated in areas closest to the national border, in Lào Cai city, Sa Pa, Bát Xát and Mường Khương; 4) Hmong, Yao and Kinh populations are found throughout all districts of Lào Cai province. However, only a tiny number of Hmong and Yao live in Lào Cai city (Michaud et al. 2002).





**FIGURE 3.1: DISTRICT-LEVEL ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF LÀO CAI PROVINCE (SOURCE: MICHAUD ET AL. 2002: 294)**

Administratively, Lào Cai province (*tỉnh*) is divided into one city municipality (*thành phố*) Lào Cai city, plus eight rural districts (*huyện*), each of which has its own head town, giving it its name: Sa Pa, Bát Xát, Mường Khương, Bắc Hà, Si Ma Cai, Bảo Thắng, Bảo Yên and Văn Bàn.<sup>43</sup> These eight districts are further divided into 163 communes (*xã*), wards (*phường*), villages (*làng*, or *ban* in Tai), and hamlets (*xóm*). Of these, 125 are classified as ‘upland communes’, while 26 are ‘national border communes’ (LCPC

<sup>43</sup>District-based 2009 populations were as follows: Lào Cai city 98,363; Sa Pa district 53,549; Bát Xát district 70,015; Mường Khương district, 52,149; Bắc Hà district 53,587; Si Ma Cai district 31,323; Bảo Thắng district 99,974; Bảo Yên district 76,415; and Văn Bàn district 79,220 (GSO 2009).



2004). This top-down structure reflects the hierarchical administrative units used by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in which provinces are divided into districts that are broken down into communes, and further into hamlets. Each unit from the commune level and above has its own People's Council (*Hội Đồng Nhân Dân*) as a representative of the state, and a People's Committee (*Ủy Ban Nhân Dân*) that functions as the major administrative body. Moreover, each level has a branch of the Communist Party that helps to determine socio-economic policy and administrative matters (Koh 2004).

For reasons that will be explained in my methods chapter (Chapter 4), my fieldwork concentrated on the marketplaces of upland communes and townships in the five districts of Sa Pa, Bát Xát, Mường Khương, Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai. The key upland minority groups that feature in this thesis – and which are also the most populous ethnic minorities in the province – include Hmong, Yao, Tày, Nùng and Giáy. As such, the settlement histories, socio-cultural and livelihoods practices of these groups, along with those of lowland Kinh migrants to Lào Cai, will be the main focus of the following sections.

### **3.2.1 Modeling Upland Ethnic Diversity**

In Vietnam, ethno-spatial classifications of upland ethnic minority groups remains a dominant mode of classification by the state as well as researchers, whereby altitudinal zones are linked to both ethnicity and agricultural practices (Donovan et al. 1997; Sowerwine 2004).<sup>44</sup> According to this elevation model of ethnicity, Hmong inhabit the highest elevations, and Yao are categorised as high altitude dwellers, while also residing at the lower slopes and middle elevations (Donovan et al. 1997; van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001). As a result of this topographical range that they 'traditionally' inhabited, both of these groups have been typified by the state as 'semi-nomadic' shifting agriculturalists, making them key targets for fixed settlement and cultivation policies (Pelley 1998). Tai-speaking groups are mostly categorised as settlers of lower levels, in mountain valleys and upland plains, and are considered wet rice agriculturalists (Donovan et al. 1997; van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001).

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<sup>44</sup> These three upland altitudinal and cultural zones consist of: 1) the high mountain zone above 800 metres; 2) the low mountain zone between 200-300 metres; and 3) the mid-elevation mountain zone, which is the area between the high and low mountain zones (Tran Duc Vien 2003; Clement 2008).

While the altitudinal model of upland ethnic distribution reflects the overall, generalised pattern in Lào Cai province and across the country as a whole, when considered at individual district levels the picture becomes much more complex. For instance, within Sa Pa district alone, Yao hamlets are located at upper elevations (Bản Khoang commune), mid-level elevations (Tả Phìn commune), and low lying regions (Nậm Càng commune). Tày households often combine valley wet rice production with upland shifting cultivation (Lundberg 2004). Hmong households in Lào Cai have been practicing sedentary irrigated wet rice agriculture since their arrival in upland Vietnam centuries ago, clearly contradicting the ‘nomadic’ stereotype (Donovan et al. 1997). On the flip side, as many as 48 per cent of Kinh settlers in the uplands practice farming on upland non-irrigated fields (World Bank 2009). Moreover, upland territorial units have long been ethnically heterogeneous, all the more so since the state’s engineering of this through sedentarisation and resettlement schemes. As such, Hmong, Yao, Tai-speaking, and Kinh households may all be found living in the same upland communes or hamlets (Pelley 1998; Michaud et al. 2002). In many communes of Lào Cai, more than ten ethnic groups are represented (Michaud et al. 2002). These examples underscore a wide range of upland residential composition and agricultural practices, which often shift in response to local and wider change, thus pointing to the inadequacies of topographic determinism as a definitive way of characterising and mapping upland social groups. While I observed in the field that ethnic groups and altitude often do seem to correlate in Lào Cai, this has been the result of historical socio-political and economic processes (c.f. Scott 2009).

### **3.3 The People of Lào Cai Province**

Up until the point when French colonisers created military territories in the northern uplands in 1891, ethnic minorities in current day Lào Cai had experienced only limited political, social or economic interference from lowland imperial Vietnamese powers (Michaud 2004). This upland area, on the margins of Vietnam’s territory and remote from lowland ‘civilisation’, captured minimal ongoing interest for imperial state actors. Lowland powerholders accomplished very little by way of integrating the people inhabiting the northern uplands into the lowland political, administrative and cultural

‘centre.’ Illustrative of this is Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945) Emperor Gia Long’s list from of the ‘countries’ falling within the scope of Huế’s tributary relations - these did not cover any principalities of the northern uplands (Michaud 2000).<sup>45</sup> Indeed, ethnic minority leaders of the most northern regions of the uplands only ever paid tribute to the imperial state on an intermittent and piecemeal basis, although Tai-speaking groups living closer to the lowland delta came under more regular tributary ties (Michaud 2000; 2006). As ‘outsiders’ to the tributary system, Jonsson (2005) argues that for uplanders dwelling with pre-modern Southeast Asian states, ethnic identities were fused with notions of rank. Such societies became defined by formal power holders as ‘savage’ “because they did not share the rhetoric or practices that defined state society” (Jonsson 2005: 11). Far more important at this time for upland ethnic minority residents were the inter-ethnic political power dynamics between upland societies themselves - as I will go on to examine later in this section - with these relations later manipulated by the ‘divide and rule strategy’ of the French, as well as Vietnam nationalists, to achieve their own political and economic agendas (Michaud 2000). Yet, despite their location on Vietnam’s furthest periphery, upland groups were far from living in total isolation. As I will explore in this chapter, as far as historical evidence goes, the northern uplands and its residents have always been linked to wider circuits of market trade.

### **3.3.1 Hmong Groups in Lào Cai**

Hmong individuals and households living in Vietnam and the rest of the Mainland Southeast Asian massif descend from and are related to part of a larger generic ethno-linguistic group that is officially referred to in China as Miao (Culas and Michaud 2004).<sup>46</sup> At the time of the 2009 national census, Hmong ranked as the fifth largest ethnic group in Vietnam, and the largest minority group in Lào Cai province as noted earlier.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> During this period, Huế was the capital of Vietnam. Gia Long’s list did however cover Luang Phrabang and the Tran Ninh plateau in Laos (Michaud 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Hmong, along with Hmau, Hmu, and Qoxiong are taken to comprise the four linguistic (but mutually unintelligible) branches of the larger Miao grouping in China, the majority of which reside in south west China. Miao is considered part of the Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) parent linguistic family (Culas and Michaud 2004).

<sup>47</sup> In addition to Lào Cai, the bulk of the Hmong population in Vietnam is concentrated throughout the northern upland provinces of Hà Giang, Yên Bái, Lai Châu, Sơn La, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Nghệ An, Thanh Hóa, Hòa Bình, and Bắc Thái. There are also substantial populations – tens of thousands - in the central uplands province of Đắk Lắk, as well as Gia Lai in southern Vietnam, with Hmong migrating to these areas

Vietnamese ethnologists currently recognise six different Hmong subgroups, with specific names based mainly on the colour or style of women's customary dress (Khong Dien 2002).<sup>48</sup> Considered the most recent ethnic group to migrate southwards from China into upland northern Vietnam, researchers suggest that Hmong likely arrived in waves, settling in Lào Cai and neighbouring provinces starting around the mid-1800s, with smaller groups possibly arriving even earlier (Culas and Michaud 2004; Culas 2010). Michaud (1997b) has proposed a number of political and economic factors behind this departure of Hmong groups into Vietnam and Laos, Thailand, Burma, and recently, Cambodia. These include: encroachment by ethnic Han into upland areas; taxation and land expropriation by the central Han administration; and various revolutionary wars between the imperial Han state and minority groups that were followed by famines and epidemics.<sup>49</sup> Commentators suggest that opium production and trade was an additional migratory catalyst, a pull factor, as Hmong and other upland ethnic minorities such as Yao were key producers of this high-stakes upland crop (Culas and Michaud 2004). Competition with the British and French over the opium market in China during the 19<sup>th</sup> century led the Chinese state to pressure upland populations into cultivating it for them and taking the production away for a relatively cheap price (Culas and Michaud 2004). Such exploitative trade - on opium as much as on a variety of other forest products - was resented by upland ethnic minorities who were caught in the cross-fire of fierce international competition. Many upland groups responded with either resistance by force,

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from the mid-1990s due to land shortages in the north and in pursuit of new opportunities (Corlin 2004). A small handful of young Hmong women from Sa Pa – mostly former trekking guides - have moved to Hà Nội, working in the hotel and tourism industry, as shop employees, or attending courses.

<sup>48</sup>These subgroups include (in Vietnamese): Hmông Đen (Black Hmong), Hmông Trắng (White Hmong), Hmông Xanh (Green Hmong), Hmông Hoa (Flower Hmong), Hmông Đỏ and Na Miêu.

<sup>49</sup>Ethnic Han are the majority ethnic group in China. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, China's population tripled, resulting in serious pressures on available agricultural land and leading to Han Chinese expansion into mountainous areas. This was enabled, among other factors, by the introduction of maize and potatoes from the Americas by the Spanish which could grow abundantly on the thin mountain soils. Struggles between minorities, regional rulers and the central Han administration over land expropriation and taxation resulted in many Hmong being pushed or escaping into more remote and higher mountain zones, while others migrated further south. Such events spawned numerous different uprisings by diverse ethnic groups against such socio-economic oppression, such as the Panthay insurrection (1855-1873), the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864), and the incorrectly labelled 'Miao rebellion' (because it involved Miao and non-Miao groups), among others (Michaud 1997b). Dramatic climate variability was also taking place at this time (floods, droughts, storms, typhoons and earthquakes) resulting in outbreaks of malaria, dengue and other tropical fevers, creating plagues and leading to further social distress and unrest throughout the region (Leiping 2008).

or else by moving southwards into Vietnam (Culas and Michaud 2004). An additional mechanism proposed to have facilitated Hmong migrations were the social networks between Hmong and long-distance caravan traders from Yunnan. Hmong wishing to seek greener pastures often drew on their connections with these traders, joining the caravan circuits until finding new areas to settle, after which they soon brought their kin as well (Michaud 1997b).

### 3.3.1.1 Hmong Socio-Political Organisation

Hmong societies are described by ethnologists as acephalous, whereby the highest form of social and political organisation finds its expression through kinship social structures (Michaud 2006).<sup>50</sup> Social organisation is founded on lineage clans (*xeem* in Romanised Popular Alphabet script) or exogamous surname groups, with decent linked back through the male line to a common apical ancestor (Tapp 1989).<sup>51</sup> Households are patrilocal and marriages take place between individuals from different clans, creating ongoing flows of women, resources and information between communes and hamlets (multi-local clanic exogamy).<sup>52</sup> Clan lineage ties underpin most social interactions and ritual relations, and their significance transcends intra-ethnic subgroupings and state boundaries (Corlin 2004; Lemoine 2008). Indeed, Culas (2010) contends that while ‘subgroups’ are the key division used by Vietnam state ethnologists to classify Hmong, clan names are a far more relevant endogenous method that Hmong employ to define themselves. Indeed, during field visits with Hmong research assistants to areas distant from their home I noticed how it was important for them to establish the clan names of Hmong informants and whether they shared the same kin network; conversations which were always of great benefit to

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<sup>50</sup>However, there are also instances of larger Hmong political or ‘messianic’ leaders. Culas (2004) states that these figures have emerged in the context of foreign powers imposing chiefly structures or else in the context of political-religious crisis.

<sup>51</sup>The clan naming system is used by Hmong throughout the Southeast Asian massif and China, and indeed the whole diaspora (Leeprecha 2001). According to Geddes (1976), each clan possesses spiritual associations that are reflected by shared ritual practices and mythologies. These mythologies are passed down through oral traditions as Hmong did not have a written language (although some claim that a written language was lost) until a variety of exogenous scripts were developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular the 1950s. Ethnologists in Vietnam have also devised a Hmong script, which is not interchangeable with the other scripts and is very rarely ever used in popular practice.

<sup>52</sup>This was also the common pattern that I observed in Lào Cai. However, women who were separated or divorced would tend to return to live with their parents.

me too for developing rapport regardless of whether or not an actual shared kinship existed.

Clan membership strength persists over time and space, creating networks that are important sources of social capital for travelling Hmong who find clan members in new locales to provide hospitality and guarantee their social security (Geddes 1976; Cooper 1984; Lemoine 2008). A young Hmong female friend of mine from Lào Cai who is a survivor of human trafficking to China, explained that during her ordeal she was able to finally escape and met a Hmong woman with whom she shared the same clan. The woman took her in, cared for her, and eventually assisted her to return to Vietnam, illustrating just how valuable and strong extended Hmong clan ties can be. From my observations in Lào Cai, kin-based social networks are also an important resource within contemporary trade. For instance, Hmong traders use these networks to learn about potential opportunities in distant markets, to gain access to selling spots in these markets, as well as to facilitate cross-border trade activities with Hmong in China, as will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 8.

In Lào Cai, the Hmong hamlets I conducted research in are composed of two or more different clans that are often related through marriage, which as noted above are pluri-clanic for the purpose of marriage, as a male or female marriage partner must be from outside one's own clan. However, there are instances where hamlets that have been officially defined by the state differ from those that are actually recognised by local residents. Many Hmong hamlets are grouped within communes that are ethnically-mixed and include Yao, Tai-speaking and sometimes Kinh households, while the individual hamlets themselves tend to be more ethnically homogenous. Historically, before the Vietnam state reorganised Hmong households into permanent settlements via sedentarisation and land allocation programmes (see Chapter 1), village groupings were never permanent communities and many clan lineages functioned as mobile units. A household might decide to leave a hamlet after a few years if the land could no longer sustain food security, or if problems of a social, economic, political or ritual nature could not be solved, using their clan networks to relocate (Culas 2000; Lemoine 2008).

Consequently, socio-political organisation was not tied to a specific territory (Lemoine 2008), and hamlets did not usually have an overall main hereditary leader, reflecting their acephalous nature, as noted earlier. Rather, the male heads of each lineage would meet to solve intra-hamlet problems and adjudicate disputes.<sup>53</sup> In Lào Cai, this informal mode of political organisation continues at present, while overlaid by the state's system of political administration where state-approved hamlet and commune leaders form the local state apparatus. The informal route is often the preferable way to deal with intra-hamlet conflicts if possible, as one Hmong elder from Sa Pa (20/02/09) district explained, "we always try to solve the problem by ourselves in the community first if we can...always"

### **3.3.1.2 Hmong Livelihoods**

Noted earlier, Hmong groups in Vietnam are commonly characterised as settlers of the highest mountainous altitudes, while settlement, land use and agricultural patterns in fact vary greatly depending on the particular agro-ecological environment (Pham Quang Hoan 1994). For instance, in Lào Cai province the climate and soils enable Hmong households situated west of the Red River to grow greater amounts of wet rice, while for the eastern districts of Bắc Hà, Mường Khương and Si Ma Cai, overall less rice but more maize can be grown (see Figure 1.1). Upon their arrival in Vietnam, many Hmong households were horticulturalists practicing rotational swidden agriculture, while nowadays they are predominantly sedentarised peasants (Turner 2007).<sup>54</sup>

In the areas of Lào Cai province where I undertook research, the majority of Hmong household economies are based upon semi-subsistence livelihoods – oriented around rice and maize – while often complemented by petty trade, closely tied to the local periodic marketplace. In these uplands, Hmong food systems encompass five key components, namely terraced wet rice agriculture, upland cultivation, animal husbandry, horticultural

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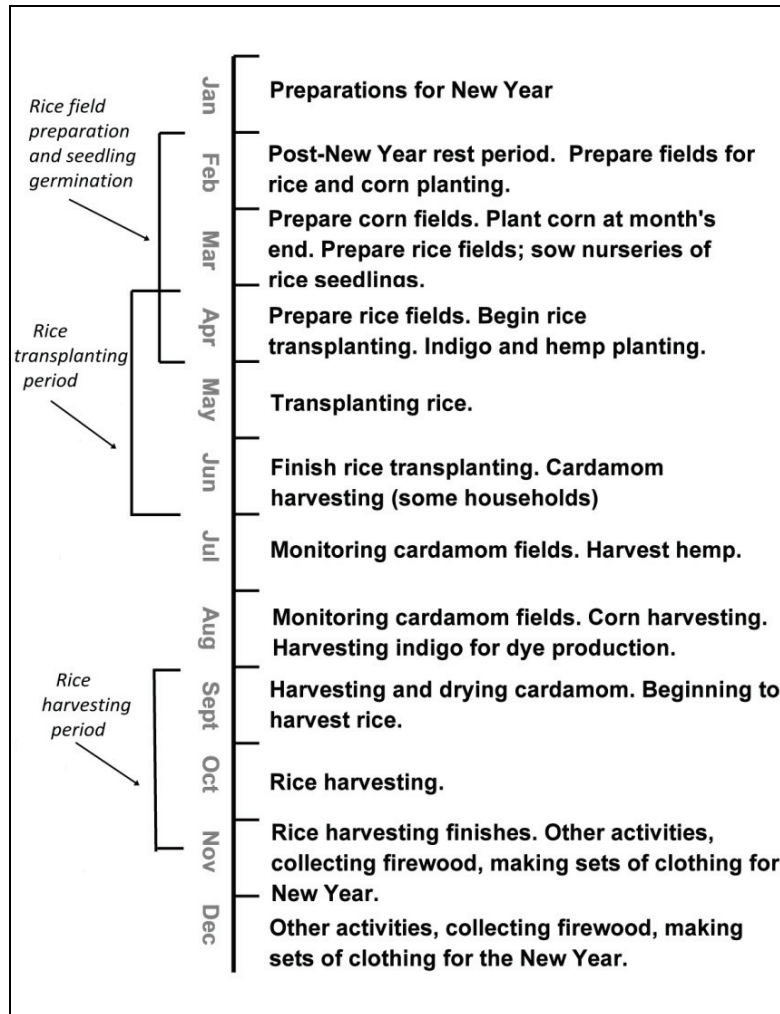
<sup>53</sup>Hmong lineage groups are subdivisions of clans, and refer to male unilineal descent groups that link to a common and traceable ancestor. Other important individuals in Hmong society include ritual performers, shamans and herbal healers which taken together comprise a powerful cultural segment within the community (Leepreecha 2001).

<sup>54</sup>Rotational swiddening involves the following stages: clearing an area of sloping land; burning the brush in order to introduce nutrients into the soil; cultivating and intercropping upland crops such as maize, rice, cassava and others for 3-5 years until the soil is no longer sufficiently productive; then allowing a fallow period of around 20 years for soil regeneration before returning to begin the cycle again.

gardening, and the cultivation or collection of forest products (explored further below). Rice, wet or dry, is the more highly valued staple food overall for its taste, while maize is used to supplement the diet in times of household rice shortages as well as for animal feed (discussed further in Chapter 7; see also Bonnin and Turner 2011a). However, even while maize (as well as cassava), are often considered less palatable, fall-back staple foods, rice, maize and cassava are all highly important to Hmong for making alcohol, as will be discussed in Chapter 8. Hmong endogenous notions of household wealth and well-being in Lào Cai province are defined first and foremost by annual rice security, which reflects having sufficient rice growing land to achieve this (Bonnin and Turner 2011a). A second factor Hmong in this area use to evaluate wealth is the ownership of livestock, namely the very expensive water buffalo, but also goats, cows, horses and pigs (Chapter 6).

As noted earlier, within my areas of study it is only possible for Hmong and Yao households to grow one primary crop of rice and maize per year due to topographic and climatic conditions, with precise agricultural schedules differing across Lào Cai's upland districts. In Figure 3.2, I outline the general annual agricultural livelihood calendar used by both Hmong and Yao households in Lào Cai.





**FIGURE 3.2: HMONG AND YAO ANNUAL AGRICULTURAL LIVELIHOOD CALENDAR (ADAPTED FROM BONNIN AND TURNER: 2011)**

Hmong extended households are usually the basic economic unit, tending to farm their own fixed wet rice and upland fields. This often consists of a multigenerational household – composed of the parents, the eldest son, his wife and children, as well as unmarried siblings – together with separately dwelling nuclear households of younger sons and their families that have inherited their own portions of rice land.<sup>55</sup> Married women, although technically estranged from their original households after marriage, also frequently continue to help their natal families with agricultural activities, or to receive assistance from them (So, Sa Pa Hmong woman 31/05/10). In addition, broader

<sup>55</sup> Younger married sons and their families may also live in their natal home, but when economically feasible, they often eventually move into their own separate house with their wives and children.

reciprocal exchanges of labour and resources in-kind or in cash are also common. Some examples of these forms of social support include, among others: exchanging human labour during rice planting and cardamom cultivation; sharing, exchanging or renting buffalo labour; informal rice land use or rental arrangements; and sharing the increasingly scarce local rice varieties.

Paddy fields and terraces are planted with a mixture of different local rice varieties and - since the late 1990s – hybrid varieties that are partly subsidised by the state (Bonnin and Turner 2011a).<sup>56</sup> Based on discussions with Hmong individuals in Sa Pa district, it is not common for households to sell their rice surpluses. Rather, surpluses tend to be shared or exchanged with kin or neighbours who are experiencing household shortages, or who need special varieties for ceremonies, celebrations, or health practices (Sa Pa elderly Hmong woman 24/02/09). Upland fields are planted with local varieties of upland dry rice, local or hybrid maize –also subsidised by the state since the 1990s - as well as beans and cassava. In maize growing areas such as Mường Khương and Si Ma Cai districts, a number of Hmong households are starting to sell hybrid maize in order to buy agricultural inputs and additional rice for consumption (DFID and LCPC 2003; Chapter 7).

Depending on local growing conditions, home gardens are planted with fruit trees, sweet potato, cucumber, beans, calabash, soy, taro, red peppers, sugar cane, sesame, pumpkin and medicinal plants. These garden products are used mainly for household consumption or sold in the market in order to buy essentials like salt or kerosene. In addition, Hmong may plant hemp for clothes-making and indigo for dying fabrics, especially in Sa Pa district (Hmong textiles are discussed further in Chapter 8). Household animal husbandry is also an important activity - water buffalo are depended upon for ploughing rice fields and for ceremonial purposes, goats may be reared for consumption and trading, while pigs and chicken are used as investments for rituals and ceremonies such as New Year,

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<sup>56</sup> Hybrid rice is selectively bred for particular seed traits via the crossing of two genetically distinct parents. While producing higher grain yields than local varieties, – under optimal conditions and if proper inputs are applied - these seeds lose their capacity with replanting and farmers must buy new seeds for each growing season (Bonnin and Turner 2011a).

weddings, deaths, and illnesses (Culas 2004; in Chapter 6 I delve further into the livestock trade).<sup>57</sup> Horses used for transportation were still widespread throughout the 1990s, and while now largely replaced by motorcycles, they continue to be prized by many and needed by residents of the most remote hamlets to travel to the market. In some areas such as in Sa Pa district, some households also have fish ponds. The collection of forest products including honey, fruits, wild vegetables and mushrooms, orchids, medicinal plants, bamboo shoots, dead and live animals, animal parts, animal fodder, insects, firewood and hunting are also vital elements of Hmong livelihoods.

Historically, Hmong as well as Yao (Section 3.3.2) have had a long-standing involvement in trade and commercial activities, often relying on exchange with other groups in order to obtain basic necessities or luxury goods that they did not produce themselves. This is particularly true for salt, an essential commodity that has always been in demand by upland consumers (Lee 2005). As the uplands have remained the source for a variety of precious commodities – particularly forest products - Hmong and Yao have benefited through their access to these domains as the initial suppliers. At the same time, some of the older, highly lucrative niche trades such as opium - which was cultivated and exchanged by both Hmong and Yao – and coffin wood (*Fokienia hodginsii*), have been officially banned by the state since the 1990s, cutting off these groups' access to important sources of earning cash (UNODC 2003; Turner and Michaud 2007).<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, since then a number of new trade opportunities have emerged.

Since economic renovation in 1986 (*đổi mới*), Hmong livelihoods have become increasingly diversified. In some places, cash crops are now being grown. For instance, plums are grown for sale by a number of Hmong households in Bắc Hà, and medicinal cardamom (*thảo quả*) is cultivated and traded by Hmong and Yao with access to forests in Sa Pa and Bát Xát districts. Indeed, the latter has become the most profitable

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<sup>57</sup>Hmong in Vietnam have traditionally practiced animism, based on shamanism and a system of mythology, beliefs and rituals focused on natural, supernatural and human ancestral spirits. A number of Hmong in Lào Cai and northern upland Vietnam have converted to Christianity (Catholicism or Protestantism).

<sup>58</sup>However, Hmong and Yao participation in opium cultivation and trade was highly variable in the northern uplands, as in many areas these groups remained uninvolved in these activities (UNODC 2003).

commodity traded by these groups since the prohibition on opium production (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009). Noted above, Hmong in some areas of Bắc Hà, Si Ma Cai and Mường Khương districts also market their surplus maize either as grain or else transformed into maize alcohol (see Chapter 7).

Small-scale trade is progressively becoming a more significant activity for Hmong living in areas near urban centres, marketplaces, tourist towns such as Sa Pa, and national border areas. Key commodities currently being traded or exchanged by Hmong amongst themselves and externally include:

- cardamom and other forest products such as herbal medicine, orchids, mushrooms, honey, bamboo shoots, song birds for entertainment, snakes and other animals for alcohol, beetles for human consumption, logs, and planks
- livestock, including buffalo, cattle, goats, pigs, chicken, ducks, and horses
- home-made alcohols
- handicrafts produced and traded by women in tourist areas such as Sa Pa and Bắc Hà district
- Hmong-oriented cultural items such as silver, old coins, textiles, ornaments, music VCDs/DVDs
- Maize grain, agricultural seeds, inputs and farm implements, guns and knives

Specialised Hmong blacksmiths may still sell handmade agricultural tools and knives, as I observed in Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai town marketplaces and in remote villages, however cheaper manufactured versions have become more popular.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, for the majority of both Hmong and Yao households in upland Lào Cai, subsistence rice production is considered the most important household activity, and earnings from trade are most often used to support it. Since the Lào Cai state's introduction of hybrid varieties, access to cash has become essential for households to purchase rice and maize seeds as well as the chemical inputs necessary for these varieties

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<sup>59</sup>Hmong silversmiths also used to perform an important trade however this appears to have declined significantly. In Sa Pa, itinerant Yao traders from Văn Bàn occasionally brought handmade and manufactured silver jewelry to the Sa Pa market to sell to Hmong there (Field notes May 2010).

to grow optimally (fertilizers and pesticides). This recent agricultural change is highly significant to this study as it is a key factor behind why Hmong and Yao are increasingly integrating petty trade activities into their wider livelihood portfolios. Moreover, cash is also important for hiring labour for rice planting which has become important for many Hmong and Yao households who lack sufficient labour or need to complete these tasks within a short time-frame (Bonnin and Turner 2011a). Food shortages have improved since the introduction of hybrid rice seeds, but are still common between April and October/November, due to poor weather conditions for growing, an increasing scarcity of arable land, and the provision of poorly suited hybrid seeds by the state (Bonnin and Turner 2011a)

### **3.3.2 Yao Groups in Lào Cai**

Yao ethnic minorities in Vietnam- written *Dao* in Vietnamese - are classified as belonging to the Miao-Yao (also called Hmong-Mien) language family, and as related by language and ancestry to groups living in southern China as well as Laos, Burma and Thailand (Michaud 2006). Their broad sphere of settlement in Vietnam encompasses the upland border regions with China and Laos, the central uplands, as well as coastal provinces in the north.<sup>60</sup> The bulk of Yao migrations from southern China into the territory now governed by Vietnam are proposed to have taken place over the last four centuries. These migrations were precipitated by a number of political and economic events in China, as well as by similar changes and catastrophes that prompted Hmong migrations described above (Michaud 1997b; Khong Dien 2002; Michaud 2006).<sup>61</sup>

The 2009 national population census ranks Yao as the seventh largest ethnic group in Vietnam (GSO 2009). The Vietnam official system of ethnological classification breaks the Yao ethnic category down further into to a number of different subgroups.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>In addition to Lào Cai province, Yao populations are found in the northern provinces of Hà Giang, Tuyên Quang, Lào Cai, Yên Bái, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Bắc Cạn, Thái Nguyên, Lai Châu, Sơn La, Phú Thọ, Vĩnh Phúc, Bắc Giang, Thanh Hóa, Quảng Ninh, Hòa Bình, and Hà Tây (GSO 2009).

<sup>61</sup> In Vietnam, Yao folksongs refer to these migrations as moving southwards to flee from disturbances and turmoil (Davis 2008).

<sup>62</sup>As is the case for Hmong, many of the exonyms given to Yao subgroups in Vietnam merely reflect clothing styles and colours much more than any serious ethno-linguistic classification or one based on autonyms and differences that people recognize among themselves (Sowerwine 2004). Pelley (1998) notes

However, researchers have demonstrated that both within and between these formal subgroupings socio-political organisation and village composition varies widely, continually adapting and transforming in response to local economic and environmental conditions, as well as through interactions with other ethnic groups and more powerful political entities (Jonsson 2001, 2005; Sowerwine 2004).<sup>63</sup> Within the context of Lào Cai province, Yao political organisation has remained at the local hamlet level. Yao leaders are typically selected by hamlet elders; customarily determined by the prospective leader's intelligence, eloquence, age and experience (Sowerwine 2004) but also, nowadays, literacy in Vietnamese as these leaders also typically serve as members of the Vietnam state administrative and political bodies in upland communes.

### **3.3.2.1 Yao Socio-Political Organisation**

For Yao living in Lào Cai, extended households tend to form the basic social, economic and ritual unit, which can be either nuclear or multigenerational households (Sowerwine 2004). Yao marriages are patrilocal and exogamous, with the eldest Yao son commonly continuing to reside with his parents after marriage along with his wife, children and unmarried siblings. Younger sons tend to move into their own homes, and are allocated a portion of their parent's wet rice and upland cultivation plots. Women are introduced to their husband's ancestral lineage, leading to the development of inter-hamlet social networks through which information and other resources are transmitted between different localities, as similarly noted for Hmong households (Jonsson 2001; Sowerwine 2004).<sup>64</sup> For example, Sowerwine (2004) describes how married Yao women from Sa Pa district frequently maintain their access to paternal cardamom land as well as upland

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the problematic nature of the Vietnam state's formalization of Yao (Dao) subgroups in 1979, which was then redefined to include a number of groups that had been named during French colonial times (Lunet de Lajonquière 1906), but previously not classified as 'Yao' by the communist state, such as Coc Mun, Coc Ngang, Diu Mien, Dai Ban, Dong, Kiem Mien, Kim Mun, Lan Ten, Lo Gang, Man, Quan Chet, Quan Trang, So'n Dau, Tieu Ban, Thanh Y, Trai and Xa. She contends that this may have been a politically strategic move to give Yao greater prominence and support their role as revolutionary actors for the Vietnam state. Yet simultaneously, it also served to marginalise the original concept of community.

<sup>63</sup>Indeed, Sowerwine (2004:296) describes how "scholars consider the Yao to be a 'highly adaptive culture'...as indicated by their 'selective incorporation of particular customs, economic activities and religious rituals, resulting in a great diversity and range of Yao cultural practices'".

<sup>64</sup> In Sa Pa district, Sowerwine (2004) found that as in most Yao communities throughout Asia, in certain instances a groom may initially move in with his in-laws to pay off a debt or the bride price but ends up remaining permanently to become part of his wife's family and take on her lineage name, as do their children.

maize or cassava fields located in their natal hamlets, resulting in cooperative transboundary property relations.

### **3.3.2.2 Yao Livelihoods**

While Yao hamlets used to shift location according to rotational swidden cycles, since at least the 1990s most Yao in Lào Cai have lived in permanent hamlets, often in multi-ethnic communes with Hmong, Kinh and Tai speaking groups. The livelihoods of the majority of Yao households in my study area are oriented around a semi-subsistence agricultural core of rice and maize farming, supplemented by small-scale trade. This involves a composite style of farming similar to that described above for Hmong, which includes: wet rice fields, upland rice, maize and cassava fields, home gardens with fruits, vegetables, indigo and medicinal plants, and animal husbandry. This is balanced by a wide diversity of items collected and cultivated in the forest, namely: wild vegetables and tubers, medicinal plants, honey, bamboo shoots, animals and animal fodder, and wood for fuel and house building. Water buffalo are important for farming wet rice and for ritual sacrifice during communal feasts, and livestock such as pigs and chicken are used for various ritual offerings and ceremonies.<sup>65</sup> Yao endogenous wealth rankings in Lào Cai are based on access to wet rice land and household labour, which are in turn influenced by factors such as age and size of household, a family history of ‘industriousness’, and fortune (Author interviews; Sowerwine 2004).

Commercial activities and local marketplace trade have also played an enduring role in the livelihoods of Yao households; to be discussed more in Section 3.4.2.1. As with Hmong, some Yao male farmers are also skilled as blacksmiths and silversmiths, generating a complementary income, and while the importance of this trade has diminished with the entry of cheaper substitutes on the market, a minor trade in Yao jewellery has persisted. Since the mid-1990s, for Yao living near the tourist town of Sa Pa, textile handicraft production and trade by women (discussed in Chapter 8), and tourist

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<sup>65</sup> In Vietnam, Yao traditional spirituality is based upon combined elements of Daoism, animism and ancestral worship.



home stays have become an important way to earn cash to buy hybrid rice seeds, agricultural inputs, as well as to hire labour for rice planting (Chapter 8). In some areas of Lào Cai – namely forested areas of Sa Pa and Bát Xát - cardamom trade has grown to become the biggest source of cash income, as equally so for Hmong households there (Sowerwine 2004; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009). Rice alcohol has also continued as a historically prominent production and trade activity, while its significance has expanded since the late 1990s with the development of domestic tourism markets in the region, as I explore in Chapter 7.

### **3.3.3 Tai-Speaking Groups in Lào Cai**

Taken together, members of the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai linguistic family comprise the largest cluster of the official ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. This generic linguistic category covers an extremely broad diversity of groups, with wide-ranging socio-cultural, political, economic and spiritual practices over time and space. In Lào Cai province, the main Tai-speakers are classified by the Vietnam state as ethnic Tày, Nùng and Giáy (Michaud et al. 2002). All three of these groups reside on both sides of the Vietnam-China border, with much earlier histories of migration to the Vietnam uplands than Hmong and Yao. Barlow (1987) suggests that there is evidence of ethnic Tày/Nùng groups in Vietnam potentially as early as the Neolithic period. Yet, it is more generally believed that some Tai-speaking groups migrated to Vietnam over 1,000 years ago as a result of Han Chinese encroachment on upland areas, while others have arrived over the last few centuries (Michaud 1997b; 2006).<sup>66</sup> Populations of different Tai-speakers are distributed throughout the Mainland Southeast Asian massif, extending up to north east India (Michaud 2006).

According to the 2009 national population census, ethnic Tày formed the vast majority of Tai-speakers in Vietnam (GSO 2009).<sup>67</sup> Following this, ethnic Nùng ranked as the sixth largest minority group overall and the third largest of the Tai-speaking group (GSO

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<sup>66</sup>The origins of Tai-speakers remains disputed however, with some commentators proposing this to be China, while others contend a common ancestry with Mon Khmer groups from the south (Keyes 1996).

<sup>67</sup>Tày were made an official group by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1978, while French colonials sometimes referred to this group as Tho, which is currently the name of an entirely different ethnic minority group (Michaud, 1997b).



2009). Nùng have been described as closely integrated with the Tày in terms of settlement, patterns of residence, and linguistic, religious and cultural practices (Michaud 2006).<sup>68</sup> Within China, official ethnic classifications incorporate both Nùng and Tày into a massive generic ethnic category called Zhuang (Michaud 2006). Those classified as ethnic Giáy have the smallest population of these three Tai-speaking groups in Vietnam (GSO 2009). Yet, their significance in Lào Cai is reflected by the fact that almost 50 per cent of the total national Giáy population is concentrated in this province, where they outnumber Nùng residents (GSO 2009).

### 3.3.3.1 Tai Socio-Political Organisation

Traditionally, and very distinct from Hmong and Yao, most Tai-speaking groups throughout Asia are described to have followed a hierarchical, feudal-style of political organisation, based on territorial and political units called *muang* (Condominas 1976; Evans 1991).<sup>69</sup> A typical feudal configuration, but one on a relatively small scale, a *muang* would normally be governed by a small class of elite families who managed political affairs and owned the agricultural and forest land. The remainder of the population worked as agricultural labours, paying rent in-kind and labour for the use of the land (Michaud 2006). Smaller private land parcels may have also been owned by individual families and inherited by sons (Lundberg 2004). Prior to the French colonial period, Tai-speaking societies were the dominant political and economic forces within many of the upland valleys throughout the Southeast Asian massif, including Vietnam (Keyes 1996).<sup>70</sup> Indeed, their control within the northern upland region of Vietnam is reflected through the many current day toponyms which are based on Tai language. Various Tai leaders strived to control highland groups dwelling within their *muang* by demanding taxes and labour from them - as was done by the White Tai of Sip Song Chau

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<sup>68</sup>In addition to Lào Cai, Nùng also live in the provinces of Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, Bắc Giang, Hà Giang, Thái Nguyên, and Tuyên Quang. More than 100,000 Nùng have also migrated south to Lâm Đồng, Đắk Lắk and Đồng Nai provinces in the central uplands seeking new agricultural opportunities (Michaud 2006).

<sup>69</sup>Scale-wise the Tai *muang*, meaning literally 'country' in the vernacular, may relate alternately to the level of a principality, a district, a province, or a nation ruled by an individual leader (Evans 1991). Condominas (1976) provides a well-documented article relating to the historical *muang* system.

<sup>70</sup>However, in all of Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Hunan, the majority of Tai-speakers were concentrated in and around Sip Song Phan Na in southern Yunnan, and in southeast Guizhou, with the Dong and Buyi. The rest of these provinces were dominated by non-Tai-speakers such as the Naxi, Bai, Hani or Yi. Guangxi and Hainan also had a majority of Tai-speakers (Zhuang and Li) (Michaud, pers comm. 20/03/11).

Thai region (in present day Lai Châu - formerly known as Muang Lai - Điện Biên Phủ – previously Muang Thanh - and Sơn La provinces) and the Tày and Nùng east of the Red River (McAlister 1967; Michaud 2000; Le Failler 2011). This subordination was facilitated by the sometimes larger populations of Tai-speaking groups as well as their powerful role as intermediaries in upland-lowland commerce (Michaud 2006). A number of uprisings by Hmong and Yao in the northern uplands, such as the Pa Chay rebellion in 1918, were initially started out of a sense of exploitation by the Tai (UNODC 2003; Michaud 2006).

Tai feudal systems often involved a complex set of nested tributary obligations with lowland powers, as well as struggles for authority between different Tai feudal leaders, partly mitigated through matrimonial alliances (Michaud 2006; Le Failler 2011).<sup>71</sup> During Nguyễn Vietnam, the local authority of certain Tai leaders was formally recognised through special appointments to the *tusi* (*thổ ty*) system (Davis 2011). These leaders were relied upon for both administration and security, particularly in the northern border uplands, enabling lowland powers to extend their control into hard to reach areas (Poisson 2009; Davis 2011). Nevertheless these wider political undertakings were a highly varied state of affairs amongst upland Tai-speaking societies in Vietnam. For instance, Michaud (2006) states that ethnic Nùng never formed their own larger feudal domains, perhaps because of their closer geographical proximity to the more imposing lowland Kinh and Han political powers in both Vietnam and Guangxi, China. He also explains that Giáy groups in upland Vietnam did not organise an independent feudal socio-political structure at all, possibly because their populations were much lower in density and tended to be more scattered and remote. Instead, these populations often came under political authority of the larger Tai-speaking groups (Michaud 2006).

During the colonial period, White Tai (*Tai Kaw* in the vernacular), and some Black Tai (*Tai Dam*) groups from west of the Red River allied with the French against the Viet Minh, and in turn received substantial political favours, such as the granting of an

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<sup>71</sup>For instance, various Tai feudal kingdoms paid tribute at different times to Thailand, Burma, China and later, Vietnam (Michaud 2006).

independent Tai federation in 1948 (Michaud 2000). The Hmong and Yao populations living within this territory resented how this act further enabled exploitative social relations - particularly via exacting taxes and profits from opium - and were thus impelled to side with the Viet Minh. Alternately Tày and Nùng east of the Clear river valley supported the Vietnam nationalists and communists, while Hmong and Yao there sided with the French (Michaud 2000). Such inconsistencies in political organisation, alliances, conflicts and power struggles, reflects the substantial inter and intra-ethnic variation in terms of competing aspirations and responses by variously situated upland households, clans and communities.

Compared to Hmong and Yao, Tai-speaking groups are often described as more ‘assimilated’ into Kinh culture and society. This relates to the latter group’s history of stronger political influence by the Vietnam state, particularly in regions closer to the northern delta (Michaud 2000). During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, some Tày intermarried with Kinh mandarins sent to northern upland areas as representatives of the state - to administer censuses and attempt to impose taxes (Michaud 2000, 2006). These lineages created important Tày elites who acted as mediators with the Vietnamese state and lowland powers, creating alliances between the Tày and Kinh (Evans 1991; Michaud 2006). As such, relations between local elites and lowland powerholders both created and reflected inequalities and social differentiation amongst and within upland groups. This integration with the ‘centre’ has led to a perception by the Vietnam state and Kinh society of Tai linguistic groups as more ‘superior’ relative to other upland minorities (Michaud 2000).

### **3.3.3.2 Livelihood Activities of Tai-speaking Groups**

In northern upland Vietnam, the livelihoods of Tai-speaking groups have long been based on wet rice agriculture in plains or valleys. In some areas, this is complemented by shifting cultivation or short fallow systems in upland fields, as well as collecting forest products (Rambo 1995; Lundberg 2004). Furthermore, as alluded to above, Tày, Nùng and Giáy individuals and households have historically been engaged as trade intermediaries between upland dwellers and the key lowland commercial powers. Thus,

trade has long been an important livelihood strategy for these groups, and their mid-way location between uplands and lowlands and along major waterways became of strategic advantage in assuming this role (Michaud 2006).

As early as the Chinese Song era (960-1126 AD), Tày and Nùng (or Zhuang in China) were important middle agents in the cross-border trade between Vietnam and China for commodities including horses and swords from China, and alluvial gold and coffin wood from Vietnam (Barlow 1987). According to Barlow (1987), much of the trade by Zhuang merchants in China at this time involved goods sourced from the Vietnam border region. Moreover, as has been documented first-hand by French explorer and diplomat Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis in the 1880s, Tai leading elites drew on their social status to construct extended trade networks with Tai speakers in other upland areas of Vietnam as well as the wider Southeast Asian massif (Michaud 2006). During the Vietnam imperial and French colonial periods (1800s-1940s), Tai-speaking groups were important actors in long distance upland-lowland trade systems for a wide diversity of precious commodities – such as Puer tea from Yunnan and sea salt from coastal Vietnam, among others - facilitated by their political and social ties with Kinh and Chinese. Tai groups were also the middle people directing the lucrative opium trade with the Red River delta, while Hmong and Yao were the main producers and smaller-scale traders, a situation that resulted in commercial relations that were often far from equitable or harmonious (McAllister 1967; Michaud 1997b; Michaud 2006).

This early ethnic specialisation by Tai-speakers as traders and intermediaries within wider trade circuits and commodity chains has been maintained up to the present day. For example, in Lào Cai province, Giáy (along with Kinh), operate as middle people in the highly profitable cardamom trade (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009). Tày and Giáy are also important actors within commodity chains for ethnic minority handicrafts and upland alcohols – destined for international or domestic tourists and lowland markets - as traders, intermediaries and shopkeepers (discussed further in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). Nùng individuals and households are involved in small-scale cross-border trade, including trade of hybrid rice seeds, agricultural products, textiles, and water buffalo and other livestock

(Chapter 6). Moreover, within the ethnically-mixed upland communes of Lào Cai province, these three ethnic groups are frequently entrepreneurs and run local shops, act as intermediaries for locally-produced goods, and operate as informal lenders of rice or money to local residents.

### **3.3.4 Kinh Migrants to the Northern Uplands and Lào Cai Province**

As of 2009, the population of ethnic Kinh in Lào Cai amounted to 35.9 per cent of the provincial total, as noted in Section 3.2. These Kinh residents have tended to follow a strong pattern of urban and town-based spatial concentration in districts along the Red River valley, with populations most concentrated in Lào Cai city and upland towns. In many upland districts such as Sa Pa and Bắc Hà, Kinh account for only 15 per cent of the overall total (Roche and Michaud 2000; Cổng thông tin điện tử Tỉnh Lào Cai, 2010).

During Nguyễn Vietnam, from 1831 Lào Cai was part of the vast and diversely populated Hưng Hóa province - which also encompassed part or all of current day Điện Biên, Lai Châu, Hà Giang, Yên Bái and Sơn La (Davis 2011).<sup>72</sup> Administering this province was a monumental undertaking for the Nguyễn state. According to Davis (2008), Kinh lowlanders were encouraged to settle in this area in order to expand the tax base of the northern region, facilitate trade along the Red River, and to improve law and order. Nevertheless, while Kinh migration to Lào Cai had occurred on a small-scale since ancient times, the population of permanently settled lowlanders in the region never really started in earnest before the Hải Phòng-Yunnanfoo (Kunming) railway link (finished in 1910) allowed more movement towards the uplands, and remained marginal still until the 1960s.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>The implementation of a provincial (*tỉnh*) system by Nguyễn rulers in 1820 to replace the geographically larger military protectorates of Gia Long (1802-1820) was in large part a measure to improve responses to security threats in the northern borderlands (Davis 2011).

<sup>73</sup>As noted earlier, during the pre-colonial imperial era, Lào Cai and other northern upland areas fell largely outside the domain of lowland powers (Michaud 2000). Many of the small number of Kinh mandarins sent to the uplands as administrators for the imperial state during the 15th and 18th century were stationed in areas closer to the delta and it is unlikely that this system was fully operational as its reach was limited as far as concerns current day Lào Cai (Michaud 1997b, 2006).

By the 1910s, under French rule, a number of Kinh had moved to upland towns to provide services and labour for the colonial military and civil administration, yet forty years later their total population in the northern highlands still remained below 25,000 (Michaud and Turner 2000). After defeating the French in 1954, the new revolutionary state set to work colonising its borders, resettling to the northern uplands groups of Kinh refugees who had fled from rural areas of the Red River delta to lowland urban areas during the war, as part of an effort to populate the region with residents belonging to the ethnic majority (Michaud 2006). Larger scale population movements of lowlanders into the uplands continued during the 1960s and 1970s under state ‘new economic zones’ schemes (NEZ).<sup>74</sup> Officially, the overriding rationale of these migration programmes was to help ethnic minorities to ‘develop’, especially through the dissemination of wet rice cultivation and ‘modern’ agricultural technologies, yet also by their integration into Kinh society via the spreading of majority language, culture and administration (Lundberg 2004). However, their other purposes were to enhance the state’s political security over the uplands, while simultaneously relieving the intense pressures on agricultural land in the Red River delta region (Salemink 2000; McElwee 2004). Lowland Kinh settlers were assumed to subscribe to the sentiments of state socialist ideology and were thus ‘used’ to populate the sensitive upland border regions inhabited by the more ‘politically unstable’ ethnic minority groups (Desbarats 1987).

After independence, the North Vietnam state considered the northern uplands as an almost ‘empty’ underutilised resource that needed to be tapped. Mass resettlement and land clearing strategies dramatically increased the population movements of lowland Kinh into what were traditionally ethnic minority areas (Khong Dien 2002). For instance, between 1960 and 1989, the number of Kinh increased on average by 500 per cent in nine northern upland provinces (Khong Dien 2002). Most of these movements were of a large scale and not just limited to individual households (Lundberg 2004). These new population pressures took a serious toll on upland communities, as they sapped formerly abundant local resources, such as fuel wood, water, and land (Michaud 2006).

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<sup>74</sup>Under this plan, a million people were to be resettled in the northern uplands, and 450,000 hectares were to be ‘reclaimed’ for agriculture (Khong Dien 2002).

Concurrently, many Kinh in-migrants faced a lack of physical and social infrastructure in their destination areas and were unable to adjust to life in the uplands. By the 1980s, half of the NEZ migrants had abandoned the programme and returned to their lowland hometowns, many doing so illegally (Hardy 2001; Abrami 2002; Lundberg 2004).

Since *đổi mới*, the character of lowland-upland Kinh migration has been reshaped. While until the 1980s, migration was largely state controlled, this has now been replaced by independent economic migration by Kinh individuals and households (Hardy 2000). A critical factor enabling this strategy was the delinking of the household registration system (*hộ khẩu*) to resource access with the dismantling of the state subsidy system. The *hộ khẩu* system was introduced by the state in the 1950s and required that every household member register as a resident of a particular place (Hardy 2001). This institution set strong restrictions on internal travel and unauthorised migration, as it defined people's access to subsidised food, housing and welfare benefits by their place of permanent residence (Abrami and Henaff 2004). Although household registration is still obligatory, it is no longer a key capital asset that determines livelihoods.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, migrants now have the option to more easily change their resident status or register as temporary residents if they wish to maintain their original status, while many decide to go unregistered (Hardy 2001; Winkels 2008).<sup>76</sup> However, while upland migration in the 1980s and 1990s was being used by Kinh as a way to enhance their livelihoods, since the late 1990s it has become more of a survival strategy due to a lack of growth in rural-based industry in the lowlands and an increasingly redundant rural labour force (Abrami and Henaff 2004; Lundberg 2004; Chapter 6).

#### **3.3.4.1 Kinh and Ethnic Minority Relations in the Uplands**

For Kinh upland migrants arriving under state resettlement programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, while their relocation was presented as a 'national duty' it was not always

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<sup>75</sup>However, *hộ khẩu* still has a significant impact on individuals, as public services including subsidised health care, education, pensions, water, and electricity are to be formally accessed in place of permanent residence and a *hộ khẩu* is still required for selling or building housing, selling land, and registering a motor vehicle (Hardy 2001; Winkels 2008; UN Vietnam 2010).

<sup>76</sup>If an individual spends more than five days outside of their place of permanent household registration they are supposed to register with the local police for temporary resident status, however some people ignore this law (Abrami and Henaff 2004).



voluntary. As such, this group of migrants did not tend to consider their northern upland arrival areas as ‘promised lands’ wielding economic potential, and they often experienced difficulties in coping with the new environment (Lundberg 2004).<sup>77</sup> Rather, the remote mountain frontier and the ethnic minorities dwelling there were generally perceived by lowland settlers as ‘backwards’ and ‘uncivilised’ - highly unattractive places to live. Moreover, these landscapes were often feared by Kinh who believed them to contain supernatural creatures, dangerous animals and disease (Hardy 2003). Indeed, Poisson (2009) explains that from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, upland areas were commonly viewed as having poor climates, characterised by ‘unhealthy air’ and malarial disease.

Lundberg (2004) argues that Kinh customary beliefs regarding nature and the environment – based on ideas from Confucianism – also influenced their engagement with the uplands as well as with ethnic minorities living there. According to this view, the wild, untouched and pristine aspects of nature need to be manipulated and transformed by human efforts into cultivated, domesticated landscapes.<sup>78</sup> Relations between Kinh in-migrants and ethnic minority residents in the northern uplands have often been strained. A commonly held impression by many Kinh – reinforced in popular media and through ethnocentric state policies – is that ethnic minorities are primitive, with irrational cultural and livelihoods practices (Salemink 2000). Still, both groups maintain stereotypes and misconceptions about each other, affecting inter-ethnic social relations and community solidarity. Social distancing is evidenced by low rates of intermarriage between Kinh and upland ethnic minorities, as well as by the tendency for Kinh in multi-ethnic communes to live on the periphery, separate from ethnic minorities

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<sup>77</sup>Hardy (2003) describes how many Kinh settlers to the uplands initially underwent challenges adjusting to the new climate, agricultural landscape, administration and customs. Other research on Kinh upland migrants shows that settlers commonly experienced fear, hardship, isolation, loneliness, homesickness and dissatisfaction (Lundberg 2004; McElwee 2008). However, during more recent waves of voluntary migration of the 1990s, the uplands were increasingly viewed by Kinh as a source of new, improved or expanded livelihood opportunities (Lundberg 2004).

<sup>78</sup>This contrasts, for example, with Hmong customary understandings of nature. For Hmong, the exploitation of forest land is regulated by ecological knowledge and oral traditions, whereby sacred forests and forests near water sources must be preserved and protected (Vuong Duy Quang 2004). Lundberg (2004) also suggests that extreme manipulation of the environment may be at odds with Yao Taoist philosophy of the flow of nature, and of tempering human activities that may interfere with this.



(Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan et al. 2007; McElwee 2008; although see Lundberg 2004).<sup>79</sup>

Yet at the same time, research demonstrates how knowledge transfer from ethnic minorities to Kinh settlers was vital to these migrants' initial survival in the uplands (Lundberg 2004; McElwee 2008). Early Kinh migrants were unable to replicate their 'delta style' of livelihoods in the new upland settings, namely a reliance on wet rice agriculture (Lundberg 2004). As such, settlers looked to ethnic minorities to learn how to adapt and diversify their livelihoods. Knowledge transfer from ethnic minorities to Kinh migrants included the practice of shifting cultivation, learning which rice varieties to grow in mountainous environments, as well as how to hunt and collect forest products (Lundberg 2004; McElwee 2008). McElwee (2008) notes the irony of this situation, a reversal of the state's vision of Kinh migrants teaching ethnic minorities 'how to develop'.

Concerns have been voiced that the economic activities undertaken by Kinh groups in upland areas sometimes act to further entrench poverty amongst ethnic minorities (McElwee 2008). This is because Kinh migrants have tended to end up dominating and monopolizing upland trade and business, advantaged by their spatially extensive social networks, better ability to communicate with local state officials and gain access to bank loans, relatively larger financial capital, and greater mobility (World Bank 2009). Kinh traders can also succeed at operating commune trade shops because their social distance from other upland groups and spatial distance from their lowland families allows them to escape moral obligations to share wealth and favours with kinfolk. For the most part, Kinh are under less pressure of the burdens of intra-hamlet exchange systems that

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<sup>79</sup>On a more positive note, some studies indicate improving social relations between Kinh migrants and ethnic minorities. Lundberg (2004) demonstrates that while older generations of Kinh in-migrants maintain a strong lowland identity, differentiating themselves from ethnic minorities, second generation migrants are more likely to point out similarities, and to develop additional identities based on notions of commonality as 'mountain people'. In addition, his research - based in Hà Giang province - notes how Kinh migrants are striving to build transethnic networks with Tày, Giáy, Yao and Hmong residents. Lundberg substantiates this through the important usage of wedding and funeral ceremonies in strengthening the interaction and integration between these groups.

discourage profit-making and capital accumulation by community members (c.f. Evers and Schrader 1994; Lundberg 2004; World Bank 2009). Other researchers have presented examples of how Kinh have taken advantage of ethnic minorities by locking them out of higher value-added segments of trade networks, tying them into credit relationships, or paying them unfair prices for products they sell in the market (Sowerwine 2004; Turner 2007; McElwee 2008; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009; World Bank 2009; Chapter 6, 7 and 8). Then again, Kinh migrants also bring benefits to ethnic minorities by supplying essential goods, as well as introducing new services and commodities to remote upland hamlets and periodic marketplaces. Furthermore, they have improved ethnic minorities' access to markets by stimulating new cash-earning opportunities for these groups (World Bank 2009; Chapters 5 and 8).

#### **3.3.4.2 Kinh Livelihoods in the Uplands and the Role of Social Networks**

Since *đổi mới*, Kinh migration to the uplands has often been guided and sustained by social support networks based on kinship, shared hometown, or ethnicity (Winkels 2008; UN Vietnam 2010). Many Kinh upland migrants had relatives or friends who had already settled in these areas. Such networks reduce both the costs and risks of moving, facilitating migrants' access to resources and information (Winkels 2008). In Chapter 5, I explore how Kinh traders also often rely heavily on social networks with others in their hometowns or provinces in order to conduct their businesses and raise start-up capital. As I will reveal in my Results Chapters (5 to 8), Kinh in Lào Cai province have become the major actors within a wide variety of commodity chain networks, as traders, collectors, intermediaries and wholesalers for ethnic minority products such as handicrafts, upland alcohols, cardamom, water buffalo, plums, and maize, among others. As such, Kinh assume a decisive role in linking ethnic minority producers and traders to wider markets and expanded commodity chains. Yet, they also tend to retain an overall larger share of the financial earnings. Undoubtedly, Kinh in-migrants have become powerful shapers and drivers of upland economies.

Up to this point in the chapter, my discussion has focussed on providing a background overview of the key groups of social actors in Lào Cai today who feature within the

province's upland markets and trade-scapes. I have touched upon the historical contingency of inter-ethnic relations and livelihood practices and how these have varied over time and place in response to wider economic and political changes. This sets out the broad terrain in which to situate the second half of this chapter. In the sections that follow, I present a historical and contemporary account of upland markets and trade in Lào Cai province over the last century and half.

### **3.4 Lào Cai's Markets and Trading-scapes from Past to Present Times**

Up until 1975, Lào Cai province was officially recorded as having a total of seventeen marketplaces (Lào Cai Province Planning Dept. representative 24/04/07). What might these early markets have looked like? We know that many of them have long histories which are strongly linked to the development of commercial ties with China, and date back to French or further still to pre-colonial imperial times. Furthermore, Leiping (2008) proposes a connection between the development of markets in the Vietnam-China borderlands and the overland routes used by imperial Vietnam to make tributary payments to China, as these markets facilitated the supply of provisions along the journey.

Most of Lào Cai's early markets have persisted and are still in operation today – if in name but not always precise location (see Figure 3.2). Several of these marketplaces are documented and described in French archival military reports produced in 1898 and 1903, which makes it possible to piece together a picture of upland trade sites over a century ago, as well as to draw comparisons and contrasts with the situation at present. Within these markets a blend of trade zones overlapped, stitching together localised, inter-regional and externally-oriented trade. These diverse trades were being performed by a multiplicity of local and foreign social actors. As noted by French colonial observers, the bulk of upland market participants were ethnic minorities, namely Hmong, Yao, Tày, Nùng, and Giáy, much as remains the case today. Chinese merchants also had a commanding presence in the markets at that time, both as local traders and as long-distance caravan merchants. Rounding off the market attendants were a small number of

French who were stationed in Lào Cai province's military posts – then called the 4<sup>th</sup> Military territory - as well as Vietnamese personnel and traders.

While hamlet-based reciprocal exchanges with kin and neighbours were a vital means of exchanging and redistributing resources, it is clear from these military reports that Lào Cai's marketplaces were also important sites of economic transactions for upland populations. Markets enabled access to a wider variety of goods and involved exchanges with a diversity of people. Moreover, they served essential socio-cultural and political functions for upland societies (Michaud and Turner 2000). For ethnic minorities such as Hmong and Yao with exogamous matrimonial arrangements and inhabiting remote communities, market gatherings were a key way to meet and court future marriage partners. Moreover, these arenas of social interaction were important for building, strengthening and renewing social networks, as well as for exchanging information, such as about agricultural practices, political matters, or simply gossip (Michaud 2006). These significant marketplace functions beyond their clear economic purpose have been maintained up to the present. Indeed, as I explain further in Section 3.4.4, it is these 'cultural dimensions' which now form the basis behind the marketing of Lào Cai's ethnically 'colourful' upland markets as a tourist attraction since the late 1990s.

### **3.4.1 Early Upland Markets in Lào Cai (pre-1954)**

Lào Cai province occupied a flourishing cross-border trade zone and a node on the land branch of the extensive trade route known as the Southwest Silk Road that connected Yunnan with Vietnam's delta via the Red River channel, underscoring its historical significance as a crossroads for trade (Yang 2004; Leiping 2008). The ancient market town of Lào Cai is known to have existed as a settlement and trading post since at least the 1600s, while during the 1800s it was established further as a commercial hub, and military and customs post by the French (Michaud 2000, 2004). Situated on the banks of the Red River and directly bordering Yunnan, China, the commercial centre was a well-placed venue for an elaborate range of commodity circulation operating at local, national, and transnational scales. Most notable was the Red River trade route between Vietnam's lowland Red River delta and Yunnan, a trade operated by Kinh and Chinese traders who

transported their commerce via junk vessels (Dupuis 1879). The upper terminus of this trade system was Mang Hao in Southern Yunnan, which took Chinese traders two days to reach from Lào Cai by the river, and from where goods would be transported into China's interior by mules or porters. During the late 1800s, Kinh traders could not enter China and were therefore obligated to conduct their trade with Chinese merchants at the Lào Cai border. Trade from Yunnan flowed into Lào Cai and then down the Red River to market towns en route, and the major marketplaces of Vietnam's northern delta at Hà Nội, Hải Dương and Hải Phòng, a five or six day journey by boat (Staunton 1884).<sup>80</sup> The final lowland destination was the port of Vân Đồn in the Gulf of Tonkin, where this overland trading route intersected further with coastal and maritime trading channels, highlighting its connection to even wider international webs of trade (Leiping 2008).

Officially, colonial control of upland northern Vietnam as a protectorate commenced in 1884 with the Treaty of Huế, while France's more durable commercial presence in Lào Cai began the following year after the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin with China (Culas 2001). The latter agreement marked the official end of the Sino-French war over northern Vietnam that established the region's status as a French protectorate, compelling China to withdraw its political interests in the borderlands. Moreover it furnished the French with preferential treatment on certain trade activities. This was an added incentive for the colonizers to expand their commercial ventures in Lào Cai given its wealth of resources and good access routes to markets in China, lowland Vietnam, and Laos, tapping in to a vast commercial network (Culas 2001; Michaud 2004).<sup>81</sup>

Based on accounts from French explorer Kergaradec from 1877, Lào Cai is described by Staunton (1884:31-32):

Lao-Kay [Lào Cai] which signifies in Chinese 'old market', is a straggling town of two or three hundred houses, built, as in other parts of Annam, of bamboo, and roofed with matting. Those in the citadel are built of brick, and covered with tiles. It is the principal commercial point on the river above Hanoi, and appeared busy and prosperous in spite of

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<sup>80</sup>Hà Nội was previously known as Kẻ Chợ, literally, the 'place where markets are' and was the central node of commercial exchange knitting together the uplands and lowlands, the north and the south (Abrami 1992).

<sup>81</sup> The Treaty of Huế officially established Tonkin (north Vietnam) and Annam (central Vietnam) as French protectorates (Michaud 2000).

the discouraging conditions so often referred to. The population is principally Chinese, and the language of Canton is spoken. In Yunnan, over the border, the people speak the language of Pe-King. The first Chinese who established themselves here were a colony of Cantonese, which came about fifty years ago with an eye to commercial advantage. Their number has since been augmented by immigrants from Kouang-Tong and Kouang-Si. The town has a good commercial position; and, if order and good government are ever given, the country will be the seat of a thriving trade.

Nevertheless, beyond the commercial centre of Lào Cai town, upland rural periodic markets within the wider area also assumed a critical role in long-distance as well as local trade networks, particularly for the informal trade of the highly valued commodities, salt and opium. Early upland periodic markets of the late 1800s were situated along the Vietnam-China border, and beside main roadways, caravan trails and water routes: namely, the Red and Clear rivers and their tributaries. While rivers no longer function today as major trade channels, some of the early roadways linking upland markets have been retained, having since become national highways or secondary roads. Other formerly important land routes, such as border roads and footpaths between Vietnam and China, have diminished in significance for the national economy, yet are still in use today by small-scale traders and play an important role in the livelihoods of ethnic minority border residents (see Chapters 6 and 8; Turner 2010).

A number of large periodic markets fell within the scope of French military zoning, sometimes simply reflecting a pre-existing situation that was included into the colonial system, sometimes enhancing an old marketplace, or even setting up a new one to fit the colonialists' plans. The 4<sup>th</sup> military territory (Lào Cai) was divided by the French colonial administration into sectors - roughly the equivalent of Vietnamese sub-prefectures or districts (*huyện*) (Culas 2001). Military reports list the following five sectors for Lào Cai along the northern border: 1) Bắc Hà (called then, Pa Kha) - which also encompassed Si Ma Cai district; 2) Mường Khương; 3) So Nhieu - now Bảo Thắng district; 4) Bát Xát (called Ba-Xat); and 5) Phong Thổ – the last sector now classified under Lai Châu province.<sup>82</sup> Each district had a weekly cycle of periodic markets, with a market fair being

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<sup>82</sup>According to Culas (2001), based on the available records of population statistics from the late 1800s, there was a ratio at that time of one periodic market per every 1,000 people. This finding is interesting as the pattern is found throughout Lào Cai and appears to be independent of factors such as ethnicity and location. For instance, this ratio was the same for valley and upland areas as well as between different

held within a district roughly every two days, and with each market being held every five or six days following the lunar calendar. This meant that a market fell on different days each week, a schedule best understood by local or regular participants.

In table 3.2 below, I list the periodic markets mentioned in archived reports of French sectors 1 to 4 of the 4<sup>th</sup> military territory, and the current marketplaces in the districts where I conducted my fieldwork. As can be seen, many of these early named marketplaces are still in operation today.

**TABLE 3.2: LÀO CAI MARKETS DURING THE FRENCH COLONIAL PERIOD (1901) AND PRESENT DAY (SOURCE: CAOM GGI 66071: 1898)**

<b>FRENCH COLONIAL SECTOR</b>	<b>MARKETPLACES (1860s-1945)</b>	<b>CURRENT DISTRICTS</b>	<b>CURRENT MARKETPLACES</b>
Pa Kha	Bắc Hà, Si Ma Cai, Bao Ngai, Nam Luat	Bắc Hà	Bắc Hà, Bao Nhai, Nậm Lúc, Cốc Ly, Lùng Phìn
Mường Khương	Pha Long, Mường Khương	Mường Khương	Pha Long, Mường Khương, Bản Lầu, Lùng Vai, Lùng Khẩu Nhin, Cao Sơn, Thanh Bình, Bai Bang, Tả Gia Khâu, Market #15
So Nhieu	Ke Chau, Ban Lao, Na Loc	Bảo Thắng	NA
Ba-Xat	Ban Qua, Muong Hum, Trinh Tuong		Bản Qua, Mường Hum, Trịnh Tường, Bát Xát, Bản Vược, Bản Xèo, Cốc San, Y tế
Sa Pa	Sa Pa	Sa Pa	Sa Pa, Sừ Pán, Thanh Phú
		Si Ma Cai	Si Ma Cai, Cán Cấu, Xín Chéng, Bản Mế, Coc Cu

settlements of ethnic groups (Culas 2001). While I was unable to obtain any statistics for current markets per population, according to provincial statistics from 2006, there was one market for every 2.9 communes in rural areas and 0.9 communes in urban areas of Lào Cai (Lào Cai Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism representative 04/08/06).

The above list from the French period reveals that many of the early markets were located within close proximity to the border with Yunnan. Indeed, some market cycles involved interchanges with markets on the Yunnan side, creating larger, spatio-temporally integrated cross-border market systems.<sup>83</sup> For instance in Ba-Xat (Bát Xát) sector, market days alternated between the border as follows: 1) Ban Qua market (Lào Cai); 2) Pa Sa market (Yunnan); 3) Mường Hum market (Lào Cai); 4) Tien Phong market (Yunnan); 5) Trịnh Tường market (Lào Cai ) (CAOM GGI 66105: Ba Xat 1898). Other market cycles enabled traders to operate in circuits that threaded their way closely along the Vietnam-China border. In Mường Khương sector, markets commenced in Pha Long, with itinerant traders travelling from there to Mường Khương market, held two days later, and then Ke Chau market before completing their trade in Lào Cai town or else returning to China to replenish their supplies (CAOM 66105: Mường Khương 1898). As such, Lào Cai's periodic border markets played a decisive role within early trading networks, as key linkage points in long-distance trade between Vietnam and China that frequently intersected with localised upland trade and subsistence markets (Michaud 2009).

#### **3.4.1.1 Upland Trade Security**

Before moving on to describe the key commodity flows and marketplace actors during the mid 1800s, it is first important to note the character of the trade environment at that time. For a period of around thirty years, between the 1860s and 1890s, trade security remained a tenuous affair even while commerce continued to flourish (Leiping 2008; Turner 2010). Upland trade routes and markets in northern Vietnam were frequently taken over for periods by networks of bandits, the largest and most influential of which were the Black Flags and their rivals, the Yellow Flags.<sup>84</sup> Such roaming bands arrived from Yunnan or Guangxi in the aftermath of the Taiping rebellion to evade capture, and comprised a diverse assortment of runaway rebels of various allegiances, outlaws, and

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<sup>83</sup>Market cycles or rings are defined by Bromley (1973: 16) as interrelated groups of neighboring period markets that take place on different days.

<sup>84</sup>I only briefly introduce the role of these groups here, as a fuller account is outside the scope of this thesis. Davis' (2008) dissertation offers a thorough analysis of Flag activities in the upland Vietnam-China borderlands.



freebooters (Laffey 1975; Michaud 2000).<sup>85</sup> These parties acted beyond the reach of formal powers of governance – disrupting internal security, exacting blackmail levies, taking control over the state mining system, plundering merchants for precious commodities, and smuggling high value goods such as opium (Culas 2001; Michaud 2006; Davis 2008; Leiping 2008). Yet, they were not necessarily always antithetical to state authority, and the Black Flags and Yellow Flags in particular became significant upland powerbrokers through their ability to variously influence, ally with, or fight against the formal political authorities of the Vietnam Nguyễn, French protectorate, and Chinese Qing (Davis 2008).

The actions of these groups greatly affected trade for Chinese, Tai, Vietnamese and French stake-holders alike (Laffey 1975; Turner 2010). In particular, the Black Flags and the Yellow Flags sought to control the upper Red River valley and its riparian trade route - particularly with regards to the opium and salt cross-border trade - and during the late 1960s, vied against one another for control over this commercial artery (Laffey 1975). By the end of the 1960s, the head of the Black Flags, Liu Yongfu had installed various customs posts in the northern borderlands so that fees could be charged for the passage of commodities – domestic opium was often accepted as a fee from traders transporting salt, while silver was accepted for other items (Davis 2008).<sup>86</sup> Opium was also taxed by the Black Flags near Lào Cai town where traders transferred their loads onto smaller river vessels (Davis 2008). In 1870, the Black Flags and Yellow Flags fought over the Lào Cai riverport, and after winning, the former group moved its base to that town, commanding trade operations there (McAleavy 1968; Laffey 1975).

In addition to affecting upland commerce, the Black and Yellow Flag bandits also greatly disturbed upland ethnic minority settlements in Lào Cai - pillaging and raiding communities, forcing locals into labour, expropriating vital resources such as rice and

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<sup>85</sup>Taiping (1850-1964) was a widespread rebellion against the Chinese Qing empire, the leader of which claimed to be a ‘brother’ of Jesus Christ (Davis 2011). The ‘Flag’ bandit groups consisted of diverse parties including Muslim Chinese and Han Chinese (Jenks 1994; Michaud 2006). Moreover, some Hmong and other ethnic minorities had arrived in Vietnam in the company of, or as part of these groups (Culas and Michaud 2004).

<sup>86</sup> Fees could also be imposed at Black Flag customs posts for inspection and permission to sell (Davis 2008).

other agricultural products and livestock, and destroying local infrastructure (Davis 2008). In addition, the kidnapping for ransom (silver or opium), rape, and forced marriage of ethnic minority women and the violent abuse of children by Flag bandits appear to have been major concerns for locals at the time (Davis 2008).

By the 1890s, after Auguste Pavie had convinced White Thai leader Deo Van Tri to help Colonel Pennequin drive the last of the Black Flags back into China, the French military had become largely successful in quelling these groups' activities and gaining a foothold over these trade routes (Michaud 2006; Turner 2010). Commerce expanded, such that between 1890 and 1892 the total amount of trade conducted through Lào Cai had doubled in value (Davis 2008).

### **3.4.2 Commodity Flows and Key Upland Marketplace Actors during the Late 1800s**

As documented within French military archives, the trade in Lào Cai's markets during the colonial period consisted of four primary types of flows. This included localised trade, inter-regional trade, upland-lowland commerce, and cross-border trading with China. In the following sections of this chapter, these trade movements will be more clearly sketched out, while I organise the discussion around the main groups of actors who were engaged in shaping upland markets and trade.

#### **3.4.2.1 Ethnic Minorities and Upland Markets and Trade**

For the most part, trade in the local marketplaces consisted of goods that ethnic minorities produced and traded primarily with neighbouring ethnic minority hamlets, as well as with Chinese, French and Kinh. These goods were mostly foodstuffs (including rice and maize), livestock, handicrafts and forest products (Table 3.3). Additionally, particular ethnic minority groups in certain places occupied local economic niches as producers and traders of specific goods. For instance, pigs, poultry, and coffin wood were signal products traded by Hmong and Yao. Noted earlier, Yao in Ba-Xat (Bát Xát) sector were then, and still are now, local experts in rice alcohol production and trade - of wide-spread importance for social, ceremonial and ritual purposes - for Yao and other ethnic minorities (CAOM GGI 66105: Ba Xat 1898). Yao also had a local monopoly in tobacco

production and indigo dye (Culas 2001). Hmong and Yao from areas of neighbouring Lai Châu province, such as Bình Lư - with its milder climate and ample grazing land - were well-known for rearing tradable buffalo, much as they continue to be today. As I will explore in detail in Chapter 6, Hmong and Yao from this region had a distinctive buffalo trade network with Chinese buyers that functioned once per year (CAOM GGI 66105: Phong Thổ 1898). Some of these area-based specialisations in goods by upland groups with privileged access to them initially developed due to disparities in production across localities as a consequence of variations in micro-climates or access to forests.

A list of commodities that would typically be found within an upland periodic marketplace of the late 1800s is presented in following table from the markets in Ba-Xat (Bát Xát) and Mường Khương sectors (CAOM GGI 66105), as recorded by French officials:

**TABLE 3.3: LIST OF COMMON GOODS IN LÀO CAI PERIODIC MARKETS IN 1898**

<i><b>BA XAT SECTOR</b></i>	<i><b>MUONG KHUONG SECTOR</b></i>
Upland Rice	Upland Rice
Paddy Rice	Paddy Rice
Pork Meat	Pork Meat
Pork Fat	Dried Beans
Buffalo Meat	Eggs
Chicken	Chicken
Duck	Duck
Rice Alcohol	Rice Alcohol
Salt	Salt
Chinese Tobacco	Indigo
Matches	Beef
Unrefined Opium	Opium
Maize	Maize
	Sheep

Aside from opium, sheep and upland rice, the majority of these listed commodities continue to be key items found on offer in Lào Cai's marketplaces today.

The medium used by ethnic minorities to conduct market exchanges involved a mix of both barter and cash-based transactions. For the most part, bartering was the norm. Hmong and Yao often exchanged their own products in return for essential goods, or else luxury goods sold by the Chinese such as silver, thread, needles, and jewellery (Michaud 2006). Tai in Phong Thổ produced cotton fabric that they exchanged with Yao for pigs and poultry (CAOM GGI 66105: Phong Thổ 1898). Military reports also describe that ethnic minorities were engaged in cash-based trade. For example, ethnic minorities from Bát Xát more often paid in cash when trading with Chinese (CAOM GGI 66105: Ba-Xat 1898). Likewise, exchanges involving iodized coastal sea salt – an expensive commodity in high demand by ethnic minorities, discussed further below – were often cash-based, or sometimes exchanged for opium (CAOM GGI 66105: Mường Khương 1898; Culas 2001; Turner 2010). These examples show that a range of approaches were used by ethnic minorities as mediums for market exchanges to suit their own situations and requirements. Additionally, trade relations between groups of ethnic minorities with diverse languages as well as with Chinese traders in Lào Cai's border areas was facilitated through the use of a common vehicular language as it is at present, a form of Guanhua Chinese (Southwestern Mandarin) (CAOM GGI 66105: Mường Khương 1898).

Although local market exchanges were the most common, ethnic minorities were also involved in more spatially extended interregional trade networks. For instance, ethnic minorities from Bình Lư in current day Lai Châu province used the Ô Quy Hồ mountain pass as a route to take pigs and poultry to sell at the Lào Cai town military post and market, bringing salt back with them.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, ethnic minorities residing in Phong Thổ conducted a similar trade but at Mường Hum market in Bát Xát district (Culas 2001). Furthermore each year, generally at the end of the harvest season in October, Hmong men from Sa Pa would journey to distant markets in the mid or lowlands, bringing livestock and cow hides to sell, and returning home with salt and matches

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<sup>87</sup> The ethnicity of the groups involved is not specified in the report.

(Duong 2006). These early examples of ethnic minorities' use of markets, trade with external groups, and involvement in longer-distance trade activities contrasts with their common depiction in numerous Vietnamese documents as having traditionally been autarkic societies that were entirely divorced from wider economic relations (Donovan et al. 1997; World Bank 2009). Such early patterns also imply that the contemporary trade routes that ethnic minorities like Hmong have developed are not merely new occurrences owing to the recent penetration of state and market forces, but are rooted in trade designs of prolonged antecedents.

As a consequence of Lào Cai's role as a thriving border trade hub and orienting point for geographically extensive commercial webs, ethnic minorities were also connected to even wider trading networks. As Giersch (2006: 184) states, "the growth of local marketing...drew frontier people into large marketing regions and the integration of the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands into a more elaborate long-distance trade network". Important trade of special products of upland origin extended to the Red River delta and Yunnan, including forest products (coffin wood and honey), animals (water buffalo and horses), animal-derived products, and spices. Dumoutier (1890) provides a list of the following key items produced and sold by upland groups destined for external markets: cunao root used for dyeing fabric; 'native tobacco'; sticklack (*gomme laque* in French, *cánh kiến* in Vietnamese) for tooth blackening; camphor (*bang phien*); tea; indigo; paper bark; and laquer (*cây sơn*). Laquer was an extremely valuable good throughout the region, "and the trade in it [was] almost entirely monopolised by the Chinese, who collect[ed] as much as [could] be produced for transmission to their own country" (Dumoutier 1890: 145). Finally, as noted earlier some groups of Hmong and Yao on both sides of the border (Lào Cai and Yunnan) were involved in the semi-commercial production of opium. In certain areas of Lào Cai and other northern upland provinces, Hmong and Yao retained this production and trade niche as an element in their livelihoods, using it to secure essential materials such as salt, and to acquire silver bars to store wealth and make jewellery (UNODC 2003; life history interview Sa Pa Hmong man 22/02/09). Sales were made either to the French, to neighbouring ethnic minorities, or to traders (UNODC 2003).

Many of these items were also traded locally and purchased by other ethnic minorities, but most of these goods passed through upland markets and into the hands of Chinese, Kinh or Tai-speaking traders en route to larger commercial centres in mid-land or lowland Vietnam or Yunnan. Other commodities were not employed locally at all. For instance, while cunao root was highly demanded in the Red River delta, it was ‘looked down upon’ by ethnic minorities who would not use it themselves (CAOM GGI 66105: Mường Khương 1898). In the other direction, from the lowlands to the uplands moved essential commodities for upland residents that could not be obtained from the region. In particular this included sea salt, as well as manufactured items including ceramics, metals, gunpowder and fabric that were sold in upland markets by Kinh and Tai traders (Salemink 2008: 57; McElwee 2008; Michaud and Turner 2000; Michaud in press).<sup>88</sup>

#### **3.4.2.2 French Colonial Actors in Upland Markets and Trade**

The French administrators, military officials, civilians and Catholic missionaries were another key group of customers in upland markets, obtaining the essential foodstuffs and commodities noted in the table above, for which ethnic minorities were the main producers (Michaud and Turner 2000). Yet, French residents in Lào Cai province amounted to only a very small segment of the total population. For instance, Culas (2001:13) reports the ethnic break-down of the population (4,573 in total) for Phong Thổ township in 1898: 1,562 Yao; 1,060 Hmong; 838 Tai-speakers; some Chinese, Vietnamese and Lao; and just 14 Europeans. Thus, taken together ethnic minorities accounted for 75 per cent of the total population, while the French made up only 0.3 per cent (Culas 2001). The economic importance of this group in upland markets was not due to their numbers but to their purchasing power. French military posts often prompted the creation of new markets in their vicinities, and influenced the dynamics of local trade as they presented a new source of demand for goods traded primarily by ethnic minorities (Culas 2001).

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<sup>88</sup> Salt is vital to human nutrition, and in the upland Southeast Asian massif its demand has always exceeded what could be obtained via local extraction – therefore, it has remained an essential trade commodity (Michaud 2006). Mineral rock salt was available in Yunnan but it was of a relatively poorer quality (Staunton 1884).

The French took an active interest in upland markets, and in some more densely populated settlements such as Sa Pa and Bắc Hà, colonial administrators relocated markets and centralised trade into fixed market locations. During the 1930s the French also rescheduled the traditional five or six day cycle so that markets took place on the same day each week, usually on the weekend (Culas 2001; pers. comm. Jean Michaud 06/06/10). These alterations of customary local market systems made it easier for the French to access, control and impose taxes on commodities for long distance trade, and certain high value goods such as opium and salt (Michaud and Turner 2000). Such tactics are not far removed from current day state directives that I will turn to later in Chapter 5. Furthermore, the French construction of the Hải Phòng-Kunming railway was established mainly to facilitate long-distance trade, chiefly opium, which was by far the most lucrative commercial commodity flowing through and within the uplands (Michaud 2000). In order to control the trade, above all, what was entering from China, the French set out to develop an extensive opium market, establishing a colonial state monopoly in 1899 (under the *Régie Générale de l'opium*) over its production, transformation, and sale in Indochina and abroad, for which Hmong and Yao acted as some among the main suppliers (UNODC 2003).<sup>89</sup>

### **3.4.2.3 The Role of Chinese Traders in Upland Markets and Trade**

Noted earlier, Chinese traders had long assumed a dominant commercial presence in the upland markets of Lào Cai. Their wide-reaching transnational commercial activities also significantly contributed to shaping the development of Vietnam-China's upland marketplaces (Leiping 2008). Former residents of Yunnan and Canton (Guangzhou) who had relocated to Lào Cai and Yunnan's border towns featured prominently in upland trade networks (Stanton 1884). Key items sold by these traders in upland markets included clothing, opium, horseshoes, tobacco, matches, sugar, medicines, thread,

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<sup>89</sup>Hmong and Yao were the only two groups allowed to purchase opium outside of the colonial monopoly. They were able to grow opium on the provision that they delivered their surplus production (above household consumption) to collection centres in the capital town of that territory, in order to deter the smuggling of opium outside of this state controlled channel. By obliging remote households to bring surplus to the centres this served to further promote smuggling activities, as traders that would visit the hamlets themselves to procure the surplus opium at a better price, and Hmong and Yao could also sell more easily to their other upland ethnic minority neighbours (UNODC 2003).

needles and jewels (CAOM GGI 66105: Mùòng Khưòng, Bát Xát 1898). Other Chinese merchants owned permanent trade shops in upland towns such as Lào Cai, Bảo Thắng, Sa Pa, and Bắc Hà. For instance, during the late 1800s, the market town of Bảo Thắng had between 140 and 150 Chinese-owned shops selling imported commodities (Leiping 2008).

In addition, long-distance trade networks were operated by groups of mobile traders who travelled between China and northern Vietnam on an annual or twice annual basis (Leiping 2008). This included ethnic Chinese Muslim (Hui) caravan traders from Yunnan, as well as other merchants from the southern Qing provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong (Michaud and Culas 2000; Davis 2008; Leiping 2008).<sup>90</sup> Beyond their activities in upland markets, Hui travelling traders reached even the most remote ethnic minority settlements in upland border areas, leading to their special relationship with Hmong that was noted previously (Culas 2000). Hui caravan traders were often the sole suppliers of salt, metals and basic consumer items for the more isolated of communities, and bartered these commodities in return for medicinal plants and forest products (Culas and Michaud 2004).

However, itinerant Chinese merchants were the main dealers of the most important cross-border commercial commodities moving through Lào Cai during the mid 1800s, namely salt and opium. Sea salt, extracted from Vietnam's lowland coastal regions was always in high demand in China (particularly in Yunnan and Sichuan), as it was for upland populations in Vietnam. Thus, in all likelihood, the cross-border sea salt trade had been taking place for several centuries prior (Culas 2001). Salt sold in Yunnan (at Mang Hao market) in the late 1800s cost four times its price in Hà Nội, and double its price in the border markets of Vietnam (Stanton 1884; Turner 2010). As pointed out earlier, due to its high exchange value within Lào Cai's upland markets, salt transactions were either cash-

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<sup>90</sup>This group of Muslim caravan traders is commonly referred to as Haw in Thailand and Laos, Hoa in Vietnam (the same as the official Chinese ethnic minority in Vietnam), or Hui (following the ethnonym of a Chinese Muslim minority recognised in China). During the mid 1800s, groups of Muslim traders from Yunnan operated extensive mule or horse-drawn caravan routes that encompassed the eastern borders of Tibet, through Assam India, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Northern Vietnam and the southern China provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi (Lombard and Aubin 1988).



based or else bartered for the also highly priced opium (Turner 2010). Since salt was taxed heavily at Chinese custom's stations during the colonial period - at a rate of over 50 per cent once it crossed the Lào Cai border at the Hekou customs gate - a substantial amount of smuggling was undertaken by Chinese merchants (Turner 2010).<sup>91</sup> In order to evade this main entry, salt traffickers crossed at less heavily monitored - and more physically accessible - points of the border close to Lào Cai's upland periodic markets east of the Red River. For instance, Chinese traders purchased salt in Lào Cai town and brought this to storehouses near the border markets of So Nhieu, Tou Ma, and Pha Long. From there, they smuggled the bootlegged product into Yunnan (CAOM GGI 66105: Ba-Xat and Mùòng Khưòng 1898; Culas 2001).

Chinese merchants were also significantly engaged in opium smuggling into Vietnam, with nearly 60 per cent of all opium trade in Vietnam being conducted by these illicit traders, at least until the French monopolised the trade (Leiping 2008). By the 1850s, Lào Cai town had become one of the key channels in the overland/riverine China-Vietnam opium trade (Davis 2008). During that period, much of the opium being sold in Lào Cai's upland markets to local residents, as well as throughout the north of Vietnam, arrived overland from Yunnan, and was smuggled into Pha Long by Yunnan caravan traders (Culas 2001; Leiping 2008). These traders sold small quantities of opium in the local markets of So Nhieu and Pha Long, as well as in upland hamlets, which suggests that Hmong and Yao from these areas were not involved as significant producers at that time (Culas 2001). It should also be noted that some Tai-speaking groups, such as the Black and White Thai of Lai Châu, also traded smuggled opium from Yunnan and Vietnam outside the French monopoly, using their extensive networks to sell it in northern

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<sup>91</sup> Together with opium and distilled alcohol, salt was established as a monopoly good by the French in Vietnam, and was one of the goods being strictly controlled by the Chinese under the Treaty of Tientsin, which drastically reduced the ability of the French to engage in a large-scale trade with China (Culas 2001). Often, Chinese customs officials would turn a blind eye to these activities as the smuggling of salt enabled them to exact bribe money from traders (CAOM GGI 66105: Mùòng Khưòng 1898; Turner 2010). The French salt monopoly also contributed to its increasing value in Vietnam – between 1897 and 1907 its price increased by five-fold (Jamieson 1993).

Vietnam, central Vietnam and Laos (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902; Culas 2001; Le Failler 2011).<sup>92</sup>

### **3.4.3 Upland Markets during State Collectivisation and Subsidised Economy (1955-1986)**

As a general pattern, by the late 1950s the level of marketplace trade throughout the north of Vietnam began to lapse following independence (1954) and the state's introduction of collectivised agriculture, which reorganised household petty agricultural production to the larger scale of communes (Vo Nhan Tri 1990). In the few years leading up to independence, the Viet Minh had attempted to secure the allegiance of ethnic minorities in the newly liberated upland areas through the provision of subsidies on vital commodities and the free distribution of salt, aiming to "bring them closer to state commerce and increase their faith in the Party and the government (Le 1981, cited in Abrami 2002: 83). In the northern uplands, between 1954 and 1960 new local border markets were initially created to make up for local deficits and to sell agricultural surpluses, yet during the 1960s these dwindled in size (Turner 2010).

For the state, small-scale traders occupied an ambiguous and paradoxical position, in terms of their potential to become 'latent capitalists', while they had also initially been viewed as important players to the cause of independence and socialist development – even symbols of the nation and anti-colonial struggle (Abrami 2002).<sup>93</sup> In certain parts of the north, the state took measures to curtail private trade activities in an effort to control commerce and allocate labour into the cooperative system. As early as 1956 the state cracked down on both large and small traders in some areas, which resulted in a serious shortage of everyday goods (Oudin 2002). Two years later, the state relaxed on its

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<sup>92</sup>Deo Van Tri, White Tai leader of the Sip Son Chau Thai - centred on Lai Châu town - was involved in smuggling opium outside of the French monopoly, which was tolerated despite significant financial losses in order to maintain his alliance and thus the security of the frontier region (Le Failler 2011).

<sup>93</sup> In lowland urban areas such as Hà Nội, urban workers and small-scale traders in factories and marketplaces were mobilized to support the independence movement, while resistance fighters disguised themselves as peddlers and porters to transport weapons into the cities and to launch strikes along main transport arteries. In the initial years following independence, small-scale traders were looked upon to mitigate the pressing problems of social welfare, to meet basic consumption needs and fulfill commodity distribution as state-organised channels had not yet been properly erected (Abrami 2002).

position regarding traders, considering small-scale vendors as different from larger traders. Ideologically, trade was seen as tolerable as a survival strategy, but not for selfish profit-making. However small-scale traders were still encouraged to cease their activities and contribute their labour to more productive ventures outside the commercial sector, namely the farming cooperatives (Oudin 2002; Abrami 2002; Abrami and Henaff 2004). Other formerly independent small traders in both rural and urban areas were organised by the state into trading groups (Abrami and Henaff 2004). Rural households who chose to remain autonomous and outside of the socialist system faced high taxes on goods, were spatially limited to trading in their own local marketplace, and required certificates that legitimated their status as self-sufficient (Abrami 2002).

Following reunification, between 1975 and 1986 under the centrally-planned subsidised economy (*thời bao cấp*), the majority of commodity exchange and distribution in Vietnam fell under state regulation, and restrictions were placed on private economic activity (Fforde and Vylder 1996; Oudin 2002). During this time, national state officials and local cadres on the ground appeared to hold an unclear and contradictory stance towards petty trading, with periods of tolerance interspersed with heightened restrictions (Fford and Vylder 1996; Oudin 2002).<sup>94</sup>

In Lào Cai province, versions of the state collectivised farming model continued to be implemented, which partly determined upland household's basic food rations.<sup>95</sup> Upland

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<sup>94</sup> For instance, Fforde and de Vylder (1996) describe how after a state decision to relax controls over petty trading in 1980, there was an abrupt clampdown on street vendors during which thousands of traders were caught and fined. However, this reflects the lowland context, and there is scant published material available on the upland situation during this time.

<sup>95</sup> The Vietnam General Statistics office (GSO 1973) reports that by 1968, ninety per cent of all farm households in the northern uplands were part of socialist agricultural cooperatives. According to Quang Canh (1968: 97), by 1961, more than 70 per cent of all ethnic minority households had “joined agricultural cooperatives of a less advanced type (semi-socialist)”. Yet, it appears that the composition of agricultural cooperatives varied widely in Lào Cai, as did upland households' participation in them, with many ethnic minority households modifying the official model – such as by combining customary and official land use models (c.f. Mellac 2011). For instance, Hmong informants from Sa Pa district explained that while they had to ‘come together’ to work the rice terraces at that time, some families kept upland fields as they did not receive enough to live off from the cooperative system. According to one elderly Hmong woman from a hamlet in Sa Pa district, “during the subsidised time, some areas were organized into rice producing cooperatives, like the hamlets close to Sa Pa town like Hàu Thào, Lao Chải and Tả Van. People would come together every day at 6 or 7 in the morning and would have work together until 6 at night. After that, they were free to go off and do what they wanted. So aside from this land that they had to work on together,

marketplaces in town centres effectively became district-run cooperatives. Here, cloth, salt, kerosene, metals, alcohol, tools, all industrially produced items, meat and rice were considered “limited goods,” and allowed for sale according to state management (Sa Pa Dist. People’s Committee official 03/09/06; LC Prov. Dept. of Commerce and Tourism representative 03/08/06). Goods that were not fully controlled by the state included local and lowland fresh produce, dried sea fish, and certain land products such as hemp. The trading of medicinal cardamom was also managed by the state, and pharmacies and traders were restricted from selling it openly (Sa Pa Dist. People’s Committee official 03/09/06). Other goods such as matches could not be found through state channels, and were sometimes sold on the ‘black market’. Industrial consumer goods were also in scarce supply due to the state’s prioritisation of heavy industry over light industry (Vo Nhan Tri 1990). According to a market official in Bắc Hà town (27/05/07), marketplace trade for local consumption there became limited to small amounts of certain goods including tobacco, shoes, and clothing. State-run shops supplied essential commodities to local residents, obtained in exchange for ration coupons that households were provided according to the amount of work they contributed to the cooperatives (Kinh life history interviewee, Sa Pa town 23/03/09; Hmong life history interviewee, Sa Pa district 24/02/09). Goods that were not rationed could be obtained with cash. Certain products could also be bartered at state shops for opium by ethnic minorities, who also sold this item to the state shops until the early 1980s.

Still many upland marketplaces and private trades were sustained, as alongside these state shops, traders continued to barter and sell their surplus local produce from their allowed five percent household plot, and other products on a small-scale (Michaud and Turner 2000; Abrami 2002; Oudin 2002; Michaud 2012). Indeed, according to Lào Cai state

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some people would have a little bit of their own land to plant by themselves for their own family, and keep this harvest separate from the cooperative land. As long as this was a little amount of land the government didn’t get upset, but if it was bigger then they would be angry. Some families had very little labour so they invested a lot of work into their private land for their own needs. Since they didn’t put enough effort into the cooperative land they would be penalized and wouldn’t get a ration, which made it harder for them to feed their family. So that’s how they would suffer” (Elderly Hmong woman life history interviewee Sa Pa 24/02/09). Aside from these rice production agricultural cooperatives in Sa Pa district there were also other subsections for fruit production (plantations of pears and peaches) and livestock breeding (pigs, chicken, cows). There were also manual labour cooperatives, and credit cooperatives managed at the district level that people were able to borrow from.

officials, between 1975 and 1990, 23 new marketplaces were established in the province, suggesting a level of growth during the subsidised period in this area, as opposed to stagnation or decline. Nevertheless, these officials were unable to clarify how many of these markets had actually opened within the four year portion of this timeframe after economic renovation (from 1986-1990).

In addition, long-term residents and state officials in Lào Cai's upland districts confirmed that during the subsidised economy a significant level of informal small-scale trade was being discretely conducted, mostly of commodities that the state wished to regulate. These consisted of barter exchanges among ethnic minorities as well as between minorities and Kinh. Such covert transactions took place outside of the market, with ethnic minorities travelling to upland towns to trade with Kinh in their homes, or else Kinh would visit ethnic minority hamlets to obtain goods there. For example, Hmong from Sa Pa district distilled rice alcohol and bartered this secretly for other items, as there was a state monopoly on alcohol production and distribution - private production was seen as wasteful and immoral during collectivised agriculture, and its open sale on the market was prohibited (Kinh life history interviewee, Sa Pa town 22/03/09). Hmong from that area also sold hardwood and other forest products including cardamom to Kinh, while Sa Pa town dwellers would bring kerosene lamp oil to the surrounding hamlets, exchanging it with Hmong or Yao households in return for dogs and chickens (Hmong life history interviewee, Sa Pa district 20/02/09; Kinh life history interviewee, Sa Pa town 22/03/09). Some Hmong would also barter some of their surplus rice in return for salt, while opium continued to be used for high-value exchanges, such as to obtain bars of silver from Chinese traders (Kinh life history interviewee, Sa Pa town 22/03/09; Hmong life history interviewee Sa Pa district 20/02/09)<sup>96</sup>.

By the end of the 1980s, the state collectivised farming system was being dismantled, and restrictions were withdrawn on private sector commerce with the state's launching of *đổi*

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<sup>96</sup> The cultivation of opium was officially banned by the Vietnam state in 1993.

*mới* economic reforms (Hardy 2001).<sup>97</sup> This resulted in a dramatic upsurge in petty trade, such that between 1991 and 1995, these activities accounted for as much as 95 per cent of the national total employment in commerce (Abrami and Henaff 2004). Numerous district and local officials throughout Vietnam endorsed the construction or renovation of marketplaces in order to prepare for what was predicted to be a dramatic boom in consumption (Leshkowich 2008). In the northern uplands, market trade activities began to expand, accompanied by a substantial growth in the number of new district-managed marketplaces (Lào Cai Dept. of Tourism and Commerce official, 05/24/2007). In 1987, the state removed restrictions on inter-provincial trade which encouraged growing numbers of Kinh traders from lowland areas to seek out new commercial opportunities in upland market towns (Sikor and Pham Thi Tuong Vi 2005).

By 1990, the official number of markets in Lào Cai province had more than doubled from 1975 to forty. Since then, new markets have continued to proliferate, with 71 officially recognised markets in 2007 (Lào Cai Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism 04/08/07)<sup>98</sup>. Fifty of these markets are rural markets, while 21 are considered ‘urban markets’ – although this includes markets in small upland towns (IPSARD Online: 2010). While certainly, a great deal of this marketplace expansion is based upon growing local demand, it is also the result of state interest in creating new upland markets as a means to transmit economic growth and encourage market integration, as I will devote more attention to explaining in Chapter 5.

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<sup>97</sup> In 1993, the Land Law introduced land tenure ‘Red Book’ certificates that granted households 20 year leases of rice paddy land, and 50 year leases for forest land, while this did not cover swidden land (Scott 2000; Neef 2001; Corlin 2004; Sowerwine 2004). Central policy blueprints for land allocation were based on household size, with families receiving portions of agricultural land of differing qualities to guarantee fairness, while the actual allocation was supervised by district People’s Committees. However land allocation in the uplands has been a highly heterogeneous process, with conflicts and adaptations ensuing due to conflicts and coexistences of state property arrangements with a diversity of customary land use models used by ethnic minorities (Scott 2000; Corlin 2004; Vuong Duy Quang 2004; Mellac 2011). Moreover, in some instances, low paid local officials in charge of settling local land disputes, have taken advantage of ethnic minorities by exacting extra payments for their services, while wealthier lowland groups are contributing to upland households’ landlessness by buying them out (Corlin 2004; Yao woman Sa Pa district 25/09/07).

<sup>98</sup> However only 14 of these are classified as highland marketplaces by the Lào Cai provincial government (Lào Cai Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism 04/08/07; Van Hoa Lào Cai, online)

#### 3.4.4 Building an Upland Marketplace Typology

During the timeframe of this study, a considerable volume of the trade conducted in Lào Cai province continued to be based within physical marketplaces. By way of illustration, in 2005, marketplace trade accounted for *35 per cent of all trade* in Lào Cai and amounted to between 400 and 450 billion VND (Lào Cai Dept. of Tourism and Commerce official, 05/24/2007). By 2008, annual sales from marketplaces in Lào Cai had risen to over 500 billion VND (LCDIT Online: 2008). Yet, Lào Cai officials were unable to provide me with a further break-down of this figure into urban lowland and rural upland market categories, and far more trade likely takes place in the former. Today's upland markets continue to be tied into a vast network of trade that links together larger township and smaller periodic markets in Lào Cai province and the inter-upland region with trade networks extending to the lowland Red River delta and also across the border to Yunnan.

In geography, much of the early work on the formal analysis and classification of market systems was based on ideas from central place theory - most notably, Skinner's (1964 and 1965) work on spatio-temporal patterns in the historical development of Han peasant marketplaces in rural Sichuan, China. Skinner's model of rural market development reflected an integrated hierarchy of market systems based on administrative units that would progressively evolve a pattern of even distribution across the landscape.<sup>99</sup> Central place theory has been useful at demonstrating trade and market hierarchies that go beyond purely economic to political, as well as for showing the regional integration of traders, products and communities.

However, within the geographically and socially diverse uplands of Lào Cai, it appears that a more varied, multi-layered, and shifting market structure has developed than can easily be interpreted by central place theory. Firstly, due to the geographical proximity

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<sup>99</sup> According to this model, the standard market town was the basic market unit serving a given area. Each standard market town was nested within a hierarchical system that linked to intermediate market towns, which linked in turn to central market towns. The central market collected goods from rural areas and exported these to other regions. Central markets also collected goods from external regions and passed these along through the intermediate markets and standard markets to the region's rural interior. Under this model, Skinner also assumed common characteristics amongst market traders such as economic rationality to maximise efficiency and profit, as well as equal access to market information.



between Lào Cai and Yunnan, the expansion of commerce on one side of the border plays an influential role in transformations on the other side. This special feature was clearly revealed by my demonstration of how early developments of marketplaces in Lào Cai were intimately tied to markets and trade networks with China (Section 3.4.1). In this context, isolating district, provincial, or national administrative boundaries as primary units of investigation is problematic as spatio-temporal patterns and hierarchies of market systems are contingent upon wider transnational market and political events and transformations (such as banditry and taxation). Secondly, the physical terrain of the mountainous region has had an important effect on the orientation of trade and transportation routes, making a more even distribution and development of markets less possible than in the lowlands. Thirdly, the upgrading and development of roads starting in the 1990s (discussed in Chapter 5) has facilitated direct commodity flows from the lowlands to upland market towns, entirely bypassing the commercial market centre of Lào Cai city, which according to Skinner's model should play a critical function in commodity redistribution. Finally, the composition of Lào Cai's market linkages and trade flows depend on the particular commodities being traded as upland markets serve vastly different upland consumer groups. Market hierarchies and trade flow patterns therefore vary according to place and the specific commodity and groups of traders involved. Therefore, throughout this thesis, I maintain an approach to analysing upland markets that investigates their connections through different networks of people, goods, and information, rather than attempting to evaluate the overall economic status of markets or attempt to assess their locations within an overall hierarchical model of market systems.

Bromley and Symanski (1974) explain that markets can be classified and distinguished according to a number of different criteria. These include: 1) market frequency; 2) the volume of commercial activity; 3) number of participants; 4) commodity specialisations; 5) the market's role in commodity flows; and 6) the ethnic and socio-economic composition of the groups that attend them. In this study I give attention to each of these aspects, but for the general purpose of illustrating the main categories of market types in



Lào Cai province, I will use the key distinctions of market frequency and volume and type of commercial activity, following a similar classification used by the state.

Marketplaces in Vietnam are formally classified by the state according to three different types based on capacity, infrastructure, administration and frequency of operations. Class 1 marketplaces are the main type of markets, which run on a daily basis. These are the largest, normally central markets of lowland areas. They are generally located in the key commercial centres of provinces or cities, or else in other designated economic zones. They contain greater than 400 business units, and have been built with state investment, and have fixed infrastructure consisting of permanent structures. Class 2 marketplaces are located in economic exchange centres of regions and are held either regularly or irregularly. These are smaller, containing less than 400 business units, but more than 200. In more remote rural and highland areas, Class 2 daily markets may also serve as the central market. Market structures can be fixed or consist of semi-solid infrastructure and have had (until now) limited state investment. Class 3 marketplaces have less than 200 business locations each, or else have not yet been invested in, and are built either solidly or semi-solidly.<sup>100</sup> These markets mainly serve the trading demands of people in communes and wards in the local vicinity (SRV Decree No. 02/2003/ND-CP; Lào Cai Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism official 04/08/06). Class three markets also comprise the majority of markets in Lào Cai, accounting for 45 of the total 71 marketplaces in the province (LCDIT Online: 2008).

Using this official classification of marketplaces as a basic framework, in the next sections I sketch out the broad contours of upland marketplaces in order to provide the general overall context. A more detailed examination of upland market developments, trade networks and activities, and commodity chains forms the basis of my Results Chapters (5 to 8). Accordingly, within Lào Cai province there are three main types of marketplaces: wholesale markets, daily markets and periodic markets. Only the last two types exist in rural upland areas of the province. Each upland district capital town

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<sup>100</sup> Here, ‘solid’ markets refer to those built to ensure a use duration of more than ten years, while ‘semi-solid’ markets are classified as lasting between five to ten years (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP)

contains a central daily market (Class 2). In addition, a set of smaller periodic markets (Class 3) are located within communes throughout each district. According to provincial officials, the spatial distribution of marketplaces within the province is uneven at district and commune levels, but on average there is roughly one marketplace for every three communes (Lào Cai Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism 04/08/06). The province's wholesale marketplaces, namely Cốc Lếu, Nguyễn Du, Kim Tân and Cam Đường are all situated within Lào Cai city. Cốc Lếu market is the largest commercial centre in the province, and assumes a key position in the wholesale redistribution of products from Yunnan, China to Lào Cai's markets and beyond, such as foodstuffs, manufactured consumer goods and electronics, and industrially-made handicrafts for tourists. It also sells produce and medicinal products sourced from Lào Cai, as well as handicrafts from the northern delta of Vietnam.

Wholesale activities also include the bulk collection of seasonal local products by traders at points along the side of roads or on the periphery of markets in upland towns, while some trade does not appear on marketplaces at all where collectors buy from directly from producers in upland hamlets. Furthermore, there are also wholesale shops in upland towns for local specialty commodities such as home-distilled rice and maize alcohols, such as in Sa Pa town, Bắc Hà town and Lào Cai city. Both of these activities are explored further in Chapters 5 and 7.

Beyond this overall broad classification of upland markets, another distinction may be made for what I refer to as 'specialty' marketplaces. These markets feature additional attributes that set them apart from other upland markets in terms of their specialisation and functioning. Firstly, this comprises markets which contain large segments devoted to the trade of specific commodities not commonly found in every market throughout the province. An example of this the large livestock markets of Cán Cấu commune, Bắc Hà town, and Cốc Ly commune that have specific areas to accommodate the trade of large domestic animals such as water buffalo, horses, and buffalo (Chapter 6).

Secondly, this includes markets that Lào Cai province has officially designated as ‘cultural markets’, consisting of the markets of Sa Pa, Bắc Hà, Mường Khương and Mường Hum. These markets are classified as such because of their long histories – operating at least as far back as the mid 1800s – and are considered by the state to have remained important sites where ethnic minority ‘culture’ is on display, and thus part of the province’s cultural heritage (Lào Cai Dept. of Commerce and Tourism official 04/08/06). Closely related to this are the upland markets being marketed for tourism, an economic sector that the provincial state and private interests are keenly interested in developing through ‘cultural tourism’ initiatives in Lào Cai (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/QĐ-TTg). In 2007, the key markets designated for tourist visitors were Sa Pa, Bắc Hà, Cốc Ly and Cán Cấu, while the province and districts, along with the tourist sector, continues to introduce and promote additional upland marketplaces as tourist attractions (Lào Cai Dept. of Commerce and Tourism official 04/08/06). Indeed, the Sa Pa town market has been a cultural tourist attraction since it re-opened to international visitors in 1993, and contains a permanent section specifically designated to the handicraft trade for tourists (Chapter 8).

Yet, accompanying this tourist promotion of upland markets has been a tendency for the Vietnam state, media, and wider Kinh society to misunderstand and misrepresent the non-economic use of the market by ethnic minorities. As I discuss in Chapter 5, this perception also reinforces lowland stereotypes that describe upland ethnic minorities’ use of the market as ‘play’. This is illustrated by what have been wrongly-termed ‘love markets’ (*chợ tình*) by Vietnamese media and western travel guides, such as Sa Pa market in Lào Cai, and Khâu Vai market in Hà Giang province. Stories abound of ethnic minorities’ ‘exotic’ and ‘sexually liberal’ activities at these markets, engineered here as in China (Lugu Lake being a prime example) to titillate lowland Kinh (or Han) imaginations. Yet, ‘love markets’ are a concept created by non-ethnic minorities. Hmong for instance, have no such term in their vocabulary (Duong 2008). As a Hmong former chairman of the Committee for Ethnic Minorities (CEM) is quoted in Nguyen Van Chinh (2010:4):

Sa Pa market, Khâu Vai market, etc. are where cultural, communication and social activities happen, but some people told exaggerated stories that Sa Pa market is where

young men and women freely make love at night in order to attract curious tourists. Or they say that in Khâu Vai market, ex-lovers meet up to make out, or they can do anything with each other. That is a sheer lie. The unique cultural values of these markets are totally twisted and misunderstood.

Alternately, another perspective spread by the mass media and which was also expressed to me by Vietnam state officials in Sa Pa and Bắc Hà, is a lament that the influence of tourism and market incentives on ethnic minorities has resulted in the loss of ‘the real love markets,’ and that what is now on offer is staged authenticity for guests (also see Duong 2008).

#### **3.4.4.1 Lào Cai’s Class 2 Upland Market Towns**

Since the 1990’s, all of the marketplaces within the main towns of the five districts included in this study - Bát Xát, Sa Pa, Mường Khương, Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai - have become daily markets. While there is some variation in the architecture and physical layouts of these markets, the common structure involves concrete, roofed buildings, with or without individual market stalls, set within the paved grounds of a main plaza. Inside the market buildings, groups of daily traders rent-out fixed spaces, a process which will be described in Chapter 5. Here, petty traders sell basic everyday goods such as fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and fish, dried and packaged foods, household utensils, and clothing. Town markets often also have a state shop which sells key essential lowland commodities at subsidised rates, such as salt and oil, and may also buy seasonal products from local farmers to sell in the lowlands. Moreover, surrounding the town marketplaces are small convenience shops that cater to supplying town residents with their daily necessities. In Chapter 6, I investigate how these market towns are connected to wider market systems by investigating specific trade and commodity networks with the lowlands, China, and the market centre of Lào Cai city.

Based on data provided by Market Management Board (MMB) officials from each town in 2007, the numbers of daily traders varies significantly by district, ranging from as many as 225 to as few as 30.<sup>101</sup> The vast majority of these sets of traders are town-

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<sup>101</sup>Based on data collected from market officials in 2007: 1) Sa Pa town market had the most daily traders, comprising 225 Kinh traders and 50 ethnic minority traders; 2) Bắc Hà town market had between 100-150

dwellers of Kinh ethnicity. There are a few exceptions to this ethnic differentiation in terms of the arrangement of trading, such as the Sa Pa town market which, as mentioned earlier, has a handicraft section run by ethnic minority - Hmong and Yao - traders, an activity explored in Chapter 9.<sup>102</sup> In the Si Ma Cai market a few Nùng and Hmong women run daily stalls, while in Bắc Hà market one Hmong alcohol trader rents a stall, though predominantly for storing her heavy goods, while she prefers to trade on the outer edge of the market with other Hmong alcohol traders and where customers can more easily spot her. Indeed, based on my observations in Lào Cai province, it is more common for ethnic minorities who trade on either a daily or more frequent basis to operate in a cycle of periodic markets, or to conduct their trade on the periphery of the marketplace, rather than from a more permanent kiosk rented from the state. I will return to the implications of these ethnic-based differences in trading styles with regards to how market infrastructure is used in Chapter 5.

As well as operating as daily markets, the upland town marketplaces of Lào Cai continue to also function as periodic markets (*chợ phiên*), with a peak day of market activity occurring either once or twice weekly. The Lào Cai provincial level authorities continued the French system of a fixed weekly market schedule, but during the 1990s, some of the timings were shifted by local officials to reduce overlapping market days within a given district (Mường Khương MMB 31/08/06; Cao Sơn People's Committee official 03/10/07). As such, most district *town markets* within the province now have a main market day on Sundays, with the other periodic markets held on different days of the week.

While consumer demand is enough to support some level of daily trade in these district markets, on non-market days trade activity is relatively quiet, catering mainly to town

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daily traders; 3) Mường Khương town market had between 50-60; 4) Si Ma Cai had 40; and 5) Bax Xat had 32 daily traders. In 2008, the Lào Cai Department of Industry and Trade (Online: 2008) estimated the total number of traders operating in all of Lào Cai's marketplaces at 6,000. While it was not specified, this statistic likely reflects the number of daily, fixed traders that can be more easily accounted for.

<sup>102</sup>While the local state intended this section to be for tourist handicraft trading, a group of around eight Hmong traders from Mường Khương district also work in this section – selling items from China such as material, manufactured Hmong clothing, agricultural inputs and seeds – however their trade is oriented towards Hmong and other ethnic minority consumers.

dwellers, the majority of whom are of Kinh, Nùng or Tày ethnicity. The exception to this is the tourist centre of Sa Pa town, which receives large numbers of customers to its market throughout the week. Throughout the upland districts of Lào Cai province, on ‘market day’, the number of market attendants and level of trade spikes dramatically, with ethnic minorities taking over as the bulk of traders and customers, arriving from all areas of the district and even beyond (Bắc Hà MMB 27/05/07). Market day vendors often triple the number of daily traders, and peak days can receive over 1,000 visitors. Seasonal differences are also dramatic, with more traders and customers in the post harvest months, and period leading up to the lunar New Year – from around October until February - as well as before rice planting season in March and April (Mường Khương MMB 21/05/07). On periodic market days, for both classes of upland markets, a greater variety of services are also on offer. These include travelling photographers patronised by ethnic minority youth decked out in their market day finery, as well as other service providers such as food stalls serving local delicacies, barbers, dentists, blacksmiths, cobblers, herbalists and fortune tellers.

#### **3.4.4.2 Class 3 Upland Periodic Commune Markets in Lào Cai**

The majority of Lào Cai’s upland markets are Class 3 periodic markets located in or near a commune centre, which feature a wide range of local and long-distance traders of different ethnicities, varied assortments of commodities, and a range of services as above. The bulk of traders are ethnic minorities from surrounding hamlets, who come to the market to sell surplus seasonal produce, forest products, home-made alcohols, animals, textiles and cooked foods. Other key groups include itinerant Hmong traders who sell ethnic minority-oriented goods such as textiles, seeds, agricultural inputs and equipment, and VCDs/DVDs, as well as Kinh or Tai from the district town who sell manufactured clothing and packaged or dried foods. Secondary markets tend to serve a much smaller base of customers, primarily from the neighbouring communes. However, some speciality marketplaces, such as the livestock markets and border markets - receive traders from a wider spatial range, including from China and the lowlands.

Market days are typically a short-lived affair. Merchants arrive at the trading grounds around 6 or 7am to arrange their wares and prepare, the market buzzes with activity from around 8-12pm, and then traders usually pack-up and depart by about 1pm. In the past, periodic markets were often conducted on earth grounds with some stall structures built by traders to protect people and goods from inclement weather and the sun - made from bamboo poles and roofed with thatch. Since the mid 2000s, while they still have more limited infrastructure than town markets, most secondary markets have undergone structural ‘improvements’ by the state, which has involved the building of more permanent, concrete buildings (explored in Chapter 5).

Taking into account my earlier discussion of the historical role of periodic border markets in Lào Cai, these Class 3 markets were formerly very significant for powerful commercial stakeholders. For instance, during the late 1800s, Pha Long market (Mường Khương district) and Mường Hum market (Bát Xát district) were described by French military observers as the central markets of their respective regions, due to their key positions in cross-border trade. With the post-independence re-shifting of political and economic powers to the Vietnam state, the importance of these markets on a national and provincial scale has dwindled. Yet the relevance of these markets to the livelihoods of upland residents continues to grow - now supporting a dynamic and flourishing small-scale cross-border trade, which will be investigated in Chapter 8.

### **3.4.5 The Role of the National Border in Upland Trade**

As we have seen in this chapter, for at least the last century cross-border exchanges have featured in the economic activities of upland societies as well as for more the more powerful political and commercial actors of the day. Yet, during the past century the overall character of this trade has shifted, with upland periodic markets on the Vietnam-China border and the trade routes that link them waning in their importance for larger stakeholders. The international border gate between Lào Cai city in Vietnam and Hekou city in Yunnan (formalized as an international crossing in 1993) now commands the majority of the cross-border trade flows and is dominated by Kinh Vietnamese and Han Chinese (Schoenberger 2006). At the same time, Lào Cai’s upland Class 3 periodic

markets, accessed via national and auxiliary border crossings, have assumed an increasingly significant function within the small-scale trade activities undertaken by ethnic minorities (Turner 2010).

During the late 1970s, mounting political tensions between Vietnam and China led to impacts on cross-border trade that lasted for nearly a decade into the 1980s. This conflict was a reaction by China over Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in an effort to topple the Khmer Rouge, combined with Vietnam's mistreatment of Chinese nationals living in Vietnam. In 1979, China invaded six of Vietnam's border provinces including Lào Cai, leading to a year long war (Chau Thi Hai 2000). The province's border communities experienced substantial damage to housing, infrastructure, livestock and agriculture, and many residents fled or were forcibly removed to areas further into Vietnam's interior, while Chinese nationals living in Lào Cai were repatriated (Long term Bắc Hà resident 28/07/07; Corlin 2004; Turner 2010). The militarisation of the border lasted until 1988, with formal trade and population movements curtailed, and only small-scale economic exchange and cross-national visits by border resident ethnic minorities were sanctioned by the Vietnam state (Chau Thi Hau 2000). Following this, Vietnam-China diplomatic ties began to normalise, such that by 1991 trade had resumed, and a host of new policies to promote trade between Vietnam and China had been put into effect, accompanied by greater levels of regulation (Schoenberger 2006; Turner 2010). Since then, cross-border trade has continued to expand, and new trade opportunities have emerged for different groups of small-scale traders living in the border areas.

#### **3.4.5.1 Border Crossing Regulations and Implications for Small Trade**

At present, Lào Cai province has three different types of border gates with China through which trade takes place. Each of these limits border crossing access to different groups, based upon nationality and residency. Firstly, Lào Cai province's only international border gate is located between Lào Cai city and Hekou city, Yunnan. This crossing is open to Vietnam and China nationals (with passports and visa or border resident passes), as well as third country nationals with proper documentation (passport and visa). Secondly, there are national gate crossings located in Bát Xát and Mường Khương



districts. These crossings may be used by all Vietnam and Chinese nationals holding a passport and visa or else border resident pass-holders. Thirdly, there are at least eleven auxiliary crossings which can be used only by border residents of the districts on either side of the gate (Schoenberger and Turner 2008). Nevertheless, regulations on auxiliary gate crossings are more complex in practice and can differ between areas, as these are under the jurisdiction of the commune-level People's Committee and the Office of Border Defence (Schoenberger 2006).

Cross-border transportation regulations, implemented by the Vietnam state in 2005, have influenced the scale, type and social composition of trade that takes place at each type of border gate (Schoenberger 2006). Trucks are only permitted to cross at the international gate in Lào Cai city, with around 70-80 per day crossing from Vietnam into China, and 500-600 per day crossing in the reverse direction (Schoenberger 2006: 94).<sup>103</sup> Cross-border trade via the international gate is also served by bicycle and cart porters of which between 400 and 600 ply this route each day (Schoenberger 2006). This gate is also served by a rail line which passes from Kunming (capital city of Yunnan) via Lào Cai city to Hà Nội (capital of Vietnam) and Hải Phòng. However, motorbikes are not allowed to cross at any level of border gate.

For other crossings, the transport of goods must be done by traders themselves on foot or else via packhorses or bicycles (Hmong resident Ma Guan, Yunnan 21/06/10). As a consequence of these regulations, large-scale trade is restricted to the international-level crossing, while the trade passing through the national and auxiliary border gates remains at a much smaller scale and is undertaken primarily by ethnic minorities (Schoenberger 2006).<sup>104</sup> Thus, the national and auxiliary border gates located in upland rural areas of

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<sup>103</sup>Trucks must be registered in Lào Cai province and are not able to travel further inland into China than Hekou (Schoenberger 2006).

<sup>104</sup>To reflect the scale of crossings at each type of border (based on statistics from 2005): 1) at Lào Cai international border gate 9,000-10,000 people cross *each day*, almost all of which are Kinh, Han Chinese and a few Giay; 2) at Mường Khương national border gate, 13 Vietnam nationals and 40 Chinese nationals cross *each week*. These are primarily Han Chinese, Hmong, Nùng, and a very small number of Kinh; 3) at the auxiliary gate of Pha Long, 100-150 Vietnam nationals and 10 Chinese nationals cross *each week*. These are mostly Hmong from Vietnam and China, Han Chinese, Nùng and other ethnic minorities (Schoenberger 2006).

Lào Cai play the most decisive role in ethnic minorities' cross-border trade activities. Ethnic minorities from Vietnam visit the contiguous border markets in Yunnan to stock up on goods which they sell on directly, or use to make products, which are traded in Lào Cai's upland markets – trades which are aimed entirely at ethnic minority consumer markets. Chinese nationals, both Han and ethnic minorities, also work as cross-border traders in products oriented for Vietnam resident minorities in select upland markets near the border. The activities of Vietnam and China cross-border traders in upland markets will be investigated in greater detail in Chapter 5 and 8.

Noted above, auxiliary border gates are characterised by their relative ease of entry requirements for local border residents, consisting of a crossing permit which can be renewed for a fee either every three or six months, and very low fees on goods being imported. Indeed since 2010, the import of certain types of commodities by border residents - for purchasing, sale or exchange in the border area - are free from duties and other taxes when amounting to below the value 2 million VND per person/day (SRV Decision No. 254/2006/QĐ-TTg ). However, while official access to these crossings appears convenient for border residents, differential restrictions exist, such as how far border crossers can travel on the other side, the implications of which will be delved into in Chapter 9 (Schoenberger and Turner 2008). For example, on the Vietnam side, China border resident traders are generally only permitted to travel as far as the nearest marketplace, and to remain for one night in Vietnam. However, in Si Ma Cai district, Chinese traders are able to trade at two markets near the border that occur on consecutive days, but not at any other markets within that district or beyond it. I was unable to confirm precisely how such rules governing movement might operate on the Chinese side for Vietnam border residents. However, some China border inhabitants I spoke to in Jinchang, Yunnan (a town bordering Xín Mản district of Hà Giang province, Vietnam), believed that Vietnam was far stricter than China in allowing people to cross, with Vietnam border residents being allowed more flexibility of movement when visiting China (Field notes 29/06/10). The implications of these restrictions on the activities of China nationals trading in Vietnam's upland markets will be explored further in Chapter 8.

In sum, since the 1990s a number of factors have worked to provide new small trading opportunities for Vietnam-China upland border dwellers, including more open state controls over local border crossings and the availability of cheap, ethnic minority-oriented commodities from China. Furthermore, as I will illustrate in Chapter 8, access to the necessary cultural and social capital is also a vital resource for cross-border trade participants. However, because the Lào Cai state perceives these activities as economically trifling relative to the cross-border trade at the international crossing, it has shown minimal interest in developing these cross-border activities or in recognising their contribution to ethnic minority livelihoods, aside from the eased entry regulations and fees (also see Gu Xiaosong and Womack 2000). Indeed, Schoenberger (2006) explains that although there is formal recognition of the importance of small-scale trade in relation to the socio-economic development of the border region, the main emphasis of the Vietnam state appears to be in ‘scaling up’ trade. While the current master plan for socio-economic development in Lào Cai province explicitly includes a section on improving the quality of border gate economic zones to facilitate trade and new enterprise, the priority is on developing the international-level crossing (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/Qđ-TTg). Moreover, the two auxiliary gates that are noted in this document for having future “potential” in cross-border trade - Bát Xát town (Bát Xát district) and Bản Phiệt commune (Bảo Thắng district) - are urban-focussed linkages between Vietnam and Hekou city, Yunnan and are not the key crossings used by ethnic minority traders (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/Qđ-TTg). Thus, the Vietnam state’s overall development approach to cross-border trade in Lào Cai decidedly appears to be based on an economic growth model rather than a livelihoods focussed one.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have detailed Lào Cai’s marketplaces and trade-scapes - how these have been shaped by different groups of social actors, as well as by wider currents in state economic policies and political relations. I started by briefly introducing the biophysical landscape of Lào Cai, before concentrating on demographics and the social landscape - introducing the key ethnic groups that comprise the main trade actors within my study, in

Section 3.3. By tracing their histories in Lào Cai, and both local and wider political, social and economic relations and activities, we are left with the impression of diverse upland societies and economies. This set the backdrop for the second section of the chapter (3.4), where I wove together a chronicle of markets and trade in Lào Cai over the last century or more. Reflecting upon its imperial and colonial genealogies, I revealed how Lào Cai has long featured as a central trade site where localised, interregional and cross-border trades intersected, knitting the uplands and people on the frontier with wider commercial networks. While the more powerful commercial actors on the scene - namely the French, Chinese, Kinh and Tai-speaking traders as well as upland bandit groups - played a major role in forming, shaping, and driving upland markets and trade, Hmong and Yao minorities also participated in important trade networks and niche activities, some of which have persisted up to present day. While market activity diminished during the subsidised planned economy, I illustrated how ethnic minorities continued to be involved in trade nonetheless, performing hidden transactions with each other as well as with Kinh. In my discussion of the current market types in Lào Cai, I argued that a nuanced understanding of upland markets in this context requires closely following the specific trade networks and commodities that flow through them, as well as investigating the histories and socio-political dynamics that underpin these. Such linkages indicate a much greater market network complexity than can be reflected through a generalized model based on market hierarchies, and necessitates an investigation of the multi-faceted economic pursuits and diverse consumer markets that characterise the uplands.

Having now laid the groundwork for my subsequent exploration of research results, I turn to analyse the impacts of the Vietnam state's current marketplace development plans, upland trader's everyday realities, and case studies of key commodities traded by Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities in Lào Cai. However, before doing so, in the next chapter I introduce the research methods used to accomplish this study, and reflect upon the unique politics of doing fieldwork in Socialist Vietnam, highlighting some of the ethical and practical concerns I faced in conducting marketplace research among traders in the border uplands of Lào Cai province.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH METHODS, GAINING ACCESS, FIELDWORK ETHICS, AND PRACTICAL CONCERNS

#### **4.1 Introduction**

For non-nationals, conducting field-based research in socialist Vietnam remains an activity that receives state attention and monitoring, and moreover requires that the proper official contacts have been made and formal channels for field access have been followed (Bonnin 2010). This is particularly so for research on topics the Vietnam state considers politically sensitive, such as studies involving ethnic minorities and situated in upland border areas. In this chapter, I explore the various negotiations I had to broker in order to undertake this study, as well as outlining my research strategy in terms of selecting field sites and data collection methods.

Thematically, the chapter is essentially divided into two main sections. In the first half of the chapter I focus on research methods, while in the second half I concentrate on issues of positionality, power and fieldwork dynamics. I begin, in Section 4.2., by explaining my choice of field sites and research methods. In Section 4.2.1., I then describe the data collection methods I used to conduct the research.<sup>105</sup> Following this, in Section 4.3., I shift to a discussion of my positionality in the field, as well as the power and fieldwork dynamics involved when attempting to conduct fieldwork within the politically sensitive context of the Lào Cai border uplands. I pay particular attention to the specificities of state and institutional regulatory cultures which permitted levels of access while also imposing certain guidelines, checks and limits upon my research, and the strategies I used

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<sup>105</sup> As my study depended upon research involving human subjects I acquired ethics approval from the McGill University Research Ethics Board prior to entering the field. I obtained informed consent orally from research participants as this was the most appropriate way to address the variation in written literacy skills amongst informants, as well as to mitigate potential discomfort for subjects posed by using a written informed consent. Within the context of my fieldwork, written informed consent may be perceived by informants as official-looking and can hold political connotations that put informants at unease. My procedure for engaging informants involved first introducing myself as a student researcher from a Canadian university, followed by a brief explanation of my purpose for wishing to speak to them. I then asked prospective informants if they would be willing to talk with me, making it clear that they could end the discussion at any time, and opt out of questions they did not wish to answer.

in order to navigate within them (Sections 4.3.1. and 4.3.2). I move on in Section 4.3.3., to discuss the operation of important gatekeepers in the field, how they worked to control aspects of the research on the ground, and their agency to contest higher-level research authorisations. Then, in Section 4.3.4., I reflect upon the vital role of language assistants in my fieldwork, particularly with regards to respect and sensitivity towards ethnic difference which was of heightened significance for this project. In the final Section 4.3.5., I highlight how the particularities of my field research context, involving multi-locale and transient study sites and targeting a mobile population, presented unique opportunities as well as barriers and necessitated some creative adaptation and coping strategies in order to achieve my goals.

## **4.2 Field Site Selection and Research Strategy**

This thesis relies on primary data that I collected through fieldwork in Lào Cai over a period of more than 15 months. It consists of ongoing visits to the field between 2005 and 2010, concentrated during the following periods: 1) an initial exploratory research trip to my field sites between May-July 2005; 2) a second field research period between June-October 2006; 3) a third field research period between February-December 2007. The extension of fieldwork through all points of the year was important for enabling me to observe seasonal changes, particularly those relating to markets and annual agricultural cycles. I continued to make further field visits throughout 2008 and 2010 in order to gain confirmation of findings, gather any additional information that I felt was lacking, and to document any changes that might have taken place. The tourist town of Sa Pa became my main ‘home base’ during fieldwork, because it offered me good access to vital research resources such as Hmong and Yao-speaking research assistants, as well as jeep and motorbike rentals. From Sa Pa, I made weekend or day trips to other upland markets, although I sometimes remained for a week in other upland towns to observe activities outside of the main market day.

Following my initial field visits, I decided upon a multi-sited and multi-method research approach, drawing chiefly on qualitative ethnographic research methods, which I detail below. The field site locations I selected and the strategy I adopted in carrying out my

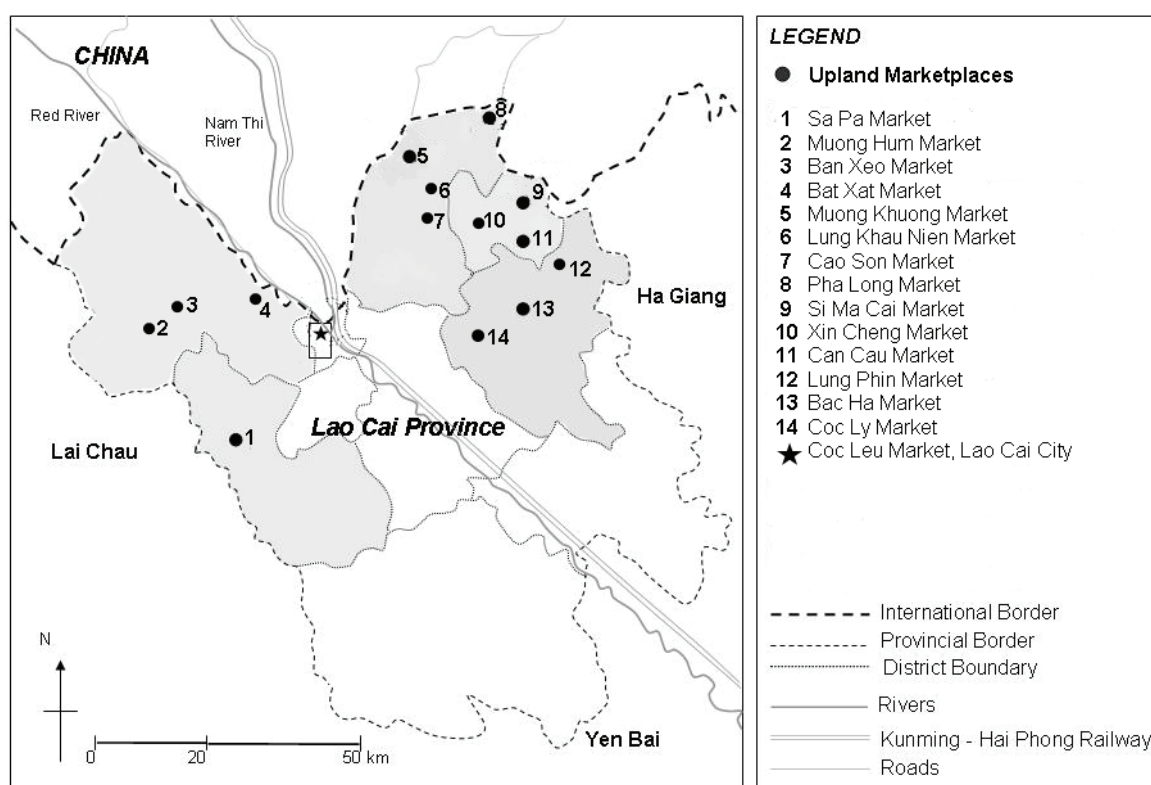
project can be described as following a multi-locale methodology. This involved constantly moving between and across multiple locations throughout the course of the project, “covering a network of sites that encompass a process, which is in fact the object of study” (Marcus and Fisher 1986: 94). Using such an approach, I decided to focus my examination of upland markets and trade on two key areas of analysis, each of which encompassed a number of field sites.

My first analytical entry point was to research how upland marketplaces in Lào Cai province operate, and how upland small-scale traders are engaged in these trade sites, as well as how marketplaces are linked to one another. This involved gaining a detailed understanding of market histories, networks, organisation, informal and formal modes of regulation, and development planning. I approached my analysis of market networks by investigating key trade patterns and commodity flows through upland markets, encompassing local, interregional, national, and international flows.

Initial research revealed that there were a total of 71 (officially registered) marketplaces in Lào Cai province (Lào Cai Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism official 24/05/07). For reasons of logistics and feasibility, I decided to concentrate the research in districts that comprise the most upland regions of the province, and where ethnic minorities are most populous: 1) Sa Pa; 2) Bát Xát; 3) Mường Khương; 4) Bắc Hà and; 5) Si Ma Cai. Moreover, three of these districts shared a national border with Yunnan China: Bát Xát, Mường Khương, and Si Ma Cai. Within each of these districts, I undertook recurrent market visits to all of the 5 town marketplaces, as well as a selection of nine secondary markets, as listed in Table 4.1, and represented in the Figure 4.1 map.

**TABLE 4.1: KEY MARKETPLACE FIELD SITES IN LÀO CAI PROVINCE**

DISTRICT	TYPE OF MARKET	
	<i>TOWN MARKET (DAILY)</i>	<i>SECONDARY MARKET (PERIODIC)</i>
<b>1 SA PA</b>	Sa Pa	
<b>2 BAT XAT</b>	Bát Xát	Mường Hum, Bản Xèo
<b>3 MUONG KHONG</b>	Mường Khương,	Pha Long, Cao Sơn, Lũng Khẩu Nhìn
<b>4 BAC HA</b>	Bắc Hà	Cốc Ly, Lũng Phìn
<b>5 SI MA CAI</b>	Si Ma Cai	Căn Cẩu, Xín Chéng



**FIGURE 4.1: MAP OF MARKET FIELDSITES IN LÀO CAI PROVINCE (SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM SCHOENBERGER 2006: 35)**

In order to compare and contrast findings from my selected markets, I made additional field trips to several other upland markets in Lào Cai, as well as in neighbouring



provinces, including: Yên Bái, Lai Châu, and Hà Giang. Moreover, I visited the urban markets of Lào Cai city and there also observed trade activities at the international border crossing in order to understand their role in upland trade flows. I also made field trips to seven border markets and market towns, as well as many villages in the area directly across from Lào Cai province, in Ma Guan county, Yunnan.

My second point of analysis was to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of how ethnic minorities are specifically involved in upland markets and trade activities. To achieve this, I undertook an additional study which concentrated on the trade of particular items of historical and contemporary importance to Hmong and Yao groups. The objectives of this study were to investigate these groups' specific social and economic positioning in upland trade, especially *vis-à-vis* lowland Kinh migrants, particular trade practices, the composition of trade systems and networks that ethnic minorities are engaged in, and what role trade plays in terms of their broader livelihood portfolios.

I accomplished this by focussing on case studies of the production and trade of three of the main commodities traded by Hmong and Yao in these five districts of the province, namely livestock (water buffalo), traditional upland alcohols (distilled from maize and rice) and upland textiles. My initial choice of commodities to investigate stemmed from market observations that these were signal goods being traded by ethnic minorities throughout my field sites. However, I was also interested in these items because they encompassed commodity chains both for local-use as well as destined for external markets. I wished to explore these different trade dynamics further and how they might articulate with one another.

This research required that I “follow the commodity” both analytically as well as literally, through production, trade and consumption scenarios where possible (De Sousa and Busch 1998: 251-52). In using this approach of tracking commodity flows through trade, my field sites were in effect decided ‘for me’ by the dynamics of these movements. This took me to additional research locations, including speciality producer/supplier hamlets of these three commodities, upland marketplaces both within and outside of Lào Cai

where they were being traded, and to retail and wholesale shops that sell them. The studies also led me across the border to markets and towns in Yunnan province where some of these goods are being sourced or traded. Yet, because my overall aim was to examine the role of ethnic minorities in trade, I devoted the most attention to points in the commodity chain where these groups are involved as producers and traders.

#### **4.2.1 Data Gathering Methods**

I have used qualitative ethnographic methods to gather my data because it facilitates the development of a subjective understanding of how social actors view, experience and construct their worlds through rich descriptions (Moustakas 1994). This methodology is essential to the actor-oriented approach, which aims to uncover the multiplicity of perspectives, practices and struggles among differently positioned social actors, while highlighting “the interplay and mutual determination of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors and relationships” (Long 2001:13). I utilised this approach to investigate what it means to be an upland trader and how people are engaged in marketplaces and trade within the context of wider market and state-imposed changes taking place in the region. At the same time, I am aware that the direction of my research, collection of information, its interpretation and analysis is partial and only one ‘filter’ of reality (c.f. Haraway 1991; McDowell 1992). Within this process, my role cannot be described as objective or neutral as I came to the field with my own standpoint and conceptualisations of ‘how things are’ and of ‘how things should be’, influenced and reflected by my own personal history, cultural backgrounds, education, class, gender and other social positionings. I consider these debates further in Section 4.3.

Data collection primarily involved in-depth qualitative interviews with a wide diversity of actors, combined with participant observation. Complementing the fieldwork research and academic sources, I also reviewed development organisation reports and state policy and planning on socio-economic development, markets and trade in Lào Cai, the northern uplands, and Vietnam in general. Moreover, I drew on archived military documents produced by French officials stationed in upland Vietnam during the late 1800s and early

1900s to draw comparisons between upland markets and trade during the colonial period and the present day.

More specifically, my field work methods involved: 1) in-depth semi-structured and informal conversational interviews with different categories of small traders from various ethnic groups; 2) semi-structured interviews with officials from different state bodies at different scales of administration; 3) participant observation with market traders in the marketplace and in their homes; 4) life histories with a group of select traders and long term residents of communes/towns; 5) selective market trader surveys and trader and commodity counts.

#### **4.2.1.1 Semi-Structured and Informal Conversational Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are based on a series of predetermined questions geared at gathering specific information concerning topics that the researcher considers important to the study (Dunn 2005). While narrowing the discussion down to specific topics, researchers are still able to shift course based upon insights or questions that emerge during the interview process, allowing for new areas for exploration (Dunn 2005). Alternately, conversational interviews do not include a pre-designed set of questions but reflect a spontaneous dialogue that unfolds naturally (Kitchin and Tate 1999). During my interviews with informants, distractions in the market and other intervening traders and customers often made it tricky to stay on course, with interviews sometimes taking on the format of a conversation. While this could be frustrating if I was intent on pursuing a specific line of questions, it was also frequently rewarding as informants often provided vital information that I would not have thought to ask about. In essence, such an approach was important for raising actor-defined issues beyond an initial set of interview questions (Kitchin and Tate 1999).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with three broad groups: 1) small-scale traders across a range of marketplaces; 2) traders and producers involved in my three case study commodity chains, and; 3) Vietnam state officials. Over the various fieldwork periods noted above, I conducted approximately 300 semi-structured and/or informal interviews

with Hmong, Yao, Kinh and Tai marketplace traders in upland markets of Vietnam and Yunnan, China.<sup>106</sup> As periodic markets operate only once a week between 7am-12pm, due to this brief window period for interviews I initially went to markets with a set of memorised questions intended for traders with time to speak to me. This strategy was more suitable than working through a list of structured questions, because of the short window of time that I usually had to speak to traders in the market who were often busy, allowing me to limit the interview to 'key questions' if need be. This also facilitated a more free-flowing engagement that helped to maintain informants' interest and seemed more 'natural'. I usually refrained from note-taking during interviews, as this tended to put-off informants, especially in the more sensitive border regions which are visibly monitored by the state. If possible, in between trader interviews or else after the market session, I debriefed with my research assistants to write my notes and compare our understandings and impressions.

Within markets and hamlets in Vietnam and Yunnan, China, I undertook semi-structured interviews with the range of traders and producers working with the specific commodities that I was doing a trade network and commodity chain analysis of, grouped as follows from within the above mentioned 300:

Buffalo trade: 45 semi-structured and conversational interviews with Hmong, Yao, Kinh, Tày, Nùng and Chinese water buffalo and other livestock market traders and household buyers in upland hamlets and markets in Lào Cai, Lai Châu, Hà Giang provinces in Vietnam as well as in Ma Guan county, Yunnan China.

Alcohol trade: 43 semi-structured and conversational interviews with Hmong, Yao and Giáy producers and traders of upland alcohols and Kinh traders of alcohol. This included an informal focus group discussion with a group of 5 Yao alcohol producers. I also undertook semi-structured interviews with 11 Kinh alcohol wholesalers, a representative

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<sup>106</sup>I have grouped these together because semi-structured interviews often included elements of that would fit under the category of informal conversational interviews, as I described earlier.

of a provincial state alcohol wholesaling enterprise, and 5 commune and district-level state officials.

Textile trade: about 100 semi-structured and conversational interviews with: Hmong, Yao, Giáy, Nùng, Tày and Kinh handicraft producers and traders; and Vietnam resident Hmong and China resident Han and Hmong traders of factory-made minority textiles. Most of these interviews took place in Lào Cai province, but also in Yên Bái, Lai Châu, Hà Giang provinces and Ma Guan county, China. I also interviewed Kinh (n=9) and Han (n=1) wholesalers, shops and larger scale distributors of handicraft and factory-made textiles in Lào Cai province and Ma Guan county, China.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of numerous state departments in order to gain the ‘official line’ as well as cadres’ personal insights and opinions. In each of the five districts that featured in this study, I interviewed state officials responsible for market administration at local and district levels n=14, either the Market Management Board or People’s Committee (explained in Chapter 5). In addition, I interviewed representatives from the Lào Cai People’s Committees (provincial, district, and local levels), the provincial Department for Commerce and Tourism, and Department of Economy and Planning to find out about the overall current and future market development plans at the provincial scale. Information about the implications of state policy on ethnic minorities’ wider livelihood portfolios were derived from interviews with district agricultural extension officials (n=2). In addition, I interviewed representatives from NGOs and fair trade development-oriented initiatives (n=4) that were operating in Lào Cai in order to learn about their projects, how ethnic minorities were involved, and their views on upland markets and trade.

#### **4.2.1.2 Participant Observation**

Participant observation was an important activity that I undertook within upland markets on almost a daily basis. This was particularly so during the periods when I was at my ‘home base’ in Sa Pa town. I often spent my days in the marketplace’s handicraft section or on the streets with Hmong and Yao tourist traders. The buzz of the marketplace, and

the fact that I was secretly delighted to have been designated a place there at a stall belonging to my friend's aunt, made me feel comforted and welcome. In research terms, the purpose for utilising this method was to try to gain a deeper understanding of people's everyday subjective experiences as market vendors, by immersing myself with this group and engaging to the extent possible in their daily activities (c.f. Cook 1997; Bryman 2004).

I learned a great deal by simply being present to watch the everyday goings on, the friendly banter, the cooperation, betrayals and heated arguments, the ups and downs of vendor relationships with the market officials, and vendor's selling strategies. I also tried to get involved in daily market activities to the degree I was able or that it was helpful (doing my best to avoid being a hindrance or annoyance!). Mostly, this involved child minding, as well as supporting ill traders by purchasing medicines and accompanying them on hospital visits, which were frequent sources of anxiety (see Bonnin in press). It sometimes also worked to trader's advantage to have a 'foreigner' behind their stall – I was novelty who caught the eye of potential tourist customers, and someone who often helped persuade them on behalf of traders as to the fair prices to be paid. My admittedly very biased engagement as a researcher in these activities stands in stark contrast to the classical ethnographic tradition of striving to remain an impartial, detached, 'neutral observer' (c.f. Langness 1965). Yet, undertaking research as a participant observer arguably necessitates attachment and unavoidably results in a loss of detachment over time at any rate, as a consequence one's long-term connection with a group (Dowler 2001). While the goal and possibility of truly being a neutral observer has long since been discredited (particularly by poststructuralist and feminist critiques), my own actions stemmed from the sense that I was gaining knowledge about a particular setting and situation and, as a moral agent, wished to offer support (c.f. Stearns 1998). At the same time, this highlights the importance for researchers to be reflexive about how and why they choose to act and consider the implications of their actions.

Participant observation activities also involved frequent visits and overnight stays with Hmong and Yao traders at their home hamlets or their rented rooms in Sa Pa town.

Through these hamlet trips to individual households, I learned more about and took part in a number of daily activities such as cooking meals, weaving hemp cloth, embroidering textiles, grazing buffalo, collecting animal fodder, making pig feed, distilling alcohol, as well as seasonal activities such as harvesting hemp and rice. During hamlet visits I was also able to attend festivals that were open to me such as lunar New Year celebrations, or to which I was personally invited such wedding celebrations and ritual ceremonies conducted by Hmong healers and shamans. While such activities were not always directly related to my research aim they were invaluable for obtaining further insights into local Hmong and Yao socio-cultural dynamics and livelihoods, as well as for developing and strengthening my relationships with informants and their families.

#### **4.2.1.3 Life Histories**

I undertook a small number (n=15) of life history interviews with informants I developed a close relationship with, namely young and old Hmong (n=6), Yao (n=4) and Kinh (n=5) long-term residents of Lào Cai. These were informant-led reflections on events and personal experiences throughout the course of their life (Hays 2000). Life histories enabled me to piece together important events and transformations relating to markets and trade and how people have coped with and adapted to these shifts. This included changes in marketplaces, trade and commodities, insights and experiences of the subsidised and collectivised era, the arrival of Kinh migrants, and livelihood strategy variations.

#### **4.2.1.4 Trader Surveys and Trader/Commodity Counts**

In four of the main town markets (Bắc Hà, Si Ma Cai, Mường Khương and Sa Pa) and two of the secondary markets (Cán Cấu and Cốc Ly), I completed brief surveys with, and trader counts of, key categories of traders. This included: daily traders, tourist traders, factory-made textile traders, market circuit traders, long-distance traders, and cross-border traders. These were very short, structured questionnaires which I used to find out: trader's current and original place of residence; how long they had been trading for; what goods they sold; and what other markets they traded in. The purpose of these surveys was

to confirm local, regional and cross-border trade and commodity flows in order to further establish overall patterns.

#### **4.2.2 Sampling Strategies**

As my goal was to gather data from sources that would provide in-depth descriptions and a range of perspectives to shed light on my research questions, I employed various purposive sampling techniques (Bradshaw and Stratford 2000). This involved strategically selecting cases which fit into my particular research criterion. I used four different types of purposive sampling to access the information I was seeking, depending on the group and context: criterion sampling, opportunistic sampling, snowball sampling; and convenience sampling (Patton 1990).

I used criterion sampling to select and include representatives of key groups of market traders. As noted above, this included traders from different ethnic groups and different categories of trader types (described further below). For my commodity case studies I also used this technique to initially target traders in the market who were involved in these activities. To access further informants participating in these commodity networks, I used snowball sampling, gaining new contacts from informants to other potential participants. This was vital for identifying others involved in a particular stage of production or trade and for gathering leads on participants at other stages of the commodity chain.

I also used criterion sampling in order to target state officials, focussing on particular agencies/departments and different levels of state administration. Nevertheless, as will be discussed in greater detail below (in 4.3.2), because of the official regulations and restrictions that are at times imposed upon non-national researchers, my sample was limited to state bodies and individuals who would permit me interview access.

I also sometimes relied on opportunistic sampling because my research took place in multiple and fleeting (periodic market) settings, and included extremely diverse groups of traders, many of whom were mobile. I remained open to taking up unexpected



opportunities to access informants and to following new leads that spontaneously presented themselves. Convenience sampling was also frequently a practical necessity given the multi-linguistic setting of my field sites (as I will explore further in section 4.3.4). As such, sampling was also limited to individuals with whom I could communicate (in Vietnamese or English), or else to the languages spoken by the research assistant I was working with that day.

#### **4.2.3 Data Analysis**

My first approach to organising the volume of data I had gathered involved arranging transcribed interviews according to different broad descriptive categories such as trader group, commodity type, market or hamlet location, and ethnicity. Next, my initial method of data analysis used *a priori* codes that I developed based on themes derived from my conceptual framework and research questions (Cope 2005). I used these descriptive and analytical codes to categorise data as I combed through the content of my interview transcripts and field notes for key themes, keywords and concepts. In the course of this process of organising data according to these broad codes, more specific, related themes evolved, leading to a refinement of the initial codes or clusters of codes as *a posteriori* codes. Other recurring themes, ideas and keywords also emerged from the data which were developed into additional categories (Cope 2005). These categories underpin the analysis presented in my Results and Discussion Chapters (5 to 9) of this thesis.

#### **4.3 Positionality, Power and Fieldwork Dynamics**

In this second half of the chapter I move on to reflect upon my positionality in the field, before turning in Section 4.3.1., to explain the organisational structure that greets the non-national researcher, and within which one must operate. Then in Section 4.3.2., I explore how possessing the proper research authorisation still does not necessarily guarantee fieldwork access, given the power of local state officials to make the final decision. In section 4.3.3, I continue this line of discussion, extended to the role of other gatekeepers on-the-ground, and provide examples illustrating this from my fieldwork. I move on to look at researcher/field assistant dynamics in 4.3.4, and finally to some of the

practical challenges relating to the specificities of my field sites and target groups in 4.3.5.

Within geography, feminist researchers were among the first to raise and debate the significance of being reflexive about one's positionality when undertaking fieldwork, and of being aware of the politics of knowledge production, research process, and outputs (c.f. Bondi 2003; England 1994; Gilbert 1994; Katz 1994; Moss 2002). As a Canadian woman of 'mixed' ethnicity (Filipino/'white'), the perceived ambiguity of my background by others in the field - based on my physical appearance - often made it a matter of speculation, and I was frequently ascribed different 'labels'. For instance, at the outset I commonly (and automatically) 'passed' in the field as Vietnamese or overseas Vietnamese (*Việt Kiều*). For the most part, I was good natured and welcoming about this curiosity over my identity or momentary 'insider' status when it came from Kinh informants. Chatting with them about my actual background was very interesting and quite effective for building rapport. Yet alternately, when speaking with Hmong and Yao minority individuals, I observed myself making overt efforts from the start to clarify my status as "Canadian", in order to avoid any assumptions that I was Kinh. This was because of my own anxieties about minorities' misgivings of ethnic Vietnamese, and how this might negatively affect the way I was perceived and my ability to connect with Hmong and Yao informants.

Furthermore, the way I wished my identity and role to be perceived by the individuals I was interviewing, and how this assessment was influenced by their communities' historical memory of and current experiences with outsiders also affected the research process. For example, people's prior encounters with other groups of outsiders such as journalists and development practitioners sometimes led to misunderstandings of my function or abilities, resulting in certain expectations being made. Despite my effort to be as transparent as possible with informants about my role as a student researcher, there were still instances in which this was not fully understood. At times traders believed that I could directly influence the state to grant a small business loan. In one case, a Hmong alcohol trader thought that I might have some sway with media representations of upland

alcohols from his village since he knew that other journalists had visited neighbouring areas and done this.

These personal experiences reflect the complex ways that researchers are situated in relation to their informants, and how informants' observations and conclusions about researchers - including their identity, goals, and power - can shape the research encounter (Nagar 1997). Likewise, this highlights how I myself was self-conscious about how I was being perceived and evaluated by others and became aware of how I occupied multiple subjectivities that continually shifted and recomposed according to how I was situated within relations in the field. This points to how my research encounters and experiences – in markets, homes, and state offices - far from simply being a solo researcher-driven activity, were shaped within social arenas of interaction involving the negotiation of different worlds (Nast 1994). Yet at the same time, my role was always one of power to determine the outcome of the project, and how I ultimately represented my informants' voices and moreover, what voices I decided to include (England 1994; Svensson 2006). These debates and concerns are discussed more in the sections that follow.

#### **4.3.1 Organising Formal Research Access in Vietnam: From the Top Down**

From the 1950s up until the latter half of the 1980s when *đổi mới* was initiated, upland and national border regions were almost entirely off-limits as field sites to both domestic and non-national researchers alike, stemming from the Vietnam state's political security concerns in this frontier area (Scott et al. 2006; Taylor 2008). In the last twenty years since economic renovation began, the situation for undertaking fieldwork in upland and national border areas of Vietnam has become more open, reflecting a relatively greater openness of the state to outside researchers as well as to some level of critique from domestic researchers (Taylor 2008). Yet in spite of this, Vietnam shares a degree of similarity with its socialist neighbours Laos and China, in that political security imperatives, including concerns with maintaining national cohesiveness, a desire to control how the state is portrayed, and monitoring the activities of outsiders, mean that the state continues to exert direct control over researchers' activities through a variety of means (Cornet 2010; Daviau 2010; Gros 2010).

As such, non-national researchers must abide by an ‘official route’ in order to gain research access in Vietnam. Yet, the actual implementation of these regulatory procedures on the ground can differ dramatically depending upon the current political climate in Vietnam, the host institute, location of the field sites, subject matter of the research, and groups of people selected for the study, with greater or lesser degrees of restrictions to be found. Nevertheless in general, the process involves moving down an administrative hierarchy, with authorisations required first at the central level, and then subsequently, at provincial, district, and commune levels (also see Sowerwine 2004; Scott et al., 2006; Schoenberger 2006; Tugault-Lafleur 2008; Bonnin 2010).

In order to access these authorisations, most non-national researchers are sponsored by a host institute, usually a state research or academic institution. It can be difficult for novice researchers who lack the crucial contacts to approach research sponsors independently, so for many like me, these linkages are facilitated through institutional collaboration between Vietnamese institutes and one’s home university.<sup>107</sup> Officials at my host institute, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), assisted me with obtaining the initial research visa, and an official letter of permission affixed with a ‘red stamp’ – signifying I had followed the legitimate route to conduct my study. In addition, my sponsors provided me with research assistants who were to accompany me to Lào Cai and remain there with me throughout the duration of my fieldwork.

Some researchers in socialist Asia have noted the difficulty of getting official approval because their subject is regarded by the state as sensitive or problematic (Hansen 2006; Bonnin 2010; Daviau 2010). Thus, both the timing of a project, as well as how it is ‘framed’ become important (Svensson 2006). For example, in order to have their study accepted non-national researchers in Vietnam sometimes rework their original topic, ‘toning down’ elements that might be perceived by the state as a political critique, while emphasising aspects likely to be perceived as safe or potentially supportive to state

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<sup>107</sup> My research was sponsored by the Center for Environment and Sustainable Development of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences through a research partnership with McGill University and Université Laval in Canada.

agendas (Sowerwine 2004; Scott et al. 2006). For my project, it was fairly easy to ‘pass’ this inspection process as many upland marketplaces in ethnic minority areas (*chợ vùng cao*) are regarded as ‘cultural markets’ (*chợ văn hoá*) (Chapter 3). While currently used by the government as entry points for upland socio-economic development, cultural marketplaces tend to be viewed by the state on folkloristic terms - as traditional meeting spaces where ethnic minorities can exhibit selective, aesthetic cultural elements through song, dance, food and drink, clothing, games and romantic flirting practices. They are therefore of interest from a cultural perspective but considered politically neutral subjects of study.

However, I was still obligated to meet other official procedures that worked to control my movements and activities in the field. For instance, to obtain my central level permits I had to submit a programme of work to my host institute for approval. This consisted of a timetable that indicated precisely where - what district, commune, and marketplace - I would be conducting research and on what days. I did not find this system to be ideal for my research as I had hoped to follow a more flexible field schedule which could evolve based upon what I was learning.

After receiving central level authorisations, I then had to meet with provincial representatives at the Lào Cai People’s Committee to have further red stamp permits issued for each of the five districts where I would conduct fieldwork. Following this, I made contact with individual district People’s Committees to specify the communes outside of the main town that I wished to visit and the state bodies I wanted to interview. Accessing all of these permissions required patience and flexibility as they often took some time to arrange and a number of formal meetings.

#### **4.3.2 Challenges to Official Access in the Field**

Further hurdles for non-national researchers include the way the official system for regulating research is actually operationalised in the field, which can often be ambiguous. In particular, this owes to the power vested in local state actors to interpret these rules and the validity of research authorisations. My attempt to interview at the Lào Cai

Department of Ethnic Minorities illustrates how the right to access state information can be contested at times by local officials, as well as how rules pertaining to foreigners are open to interpretation and subject to unexpected change. When I first visited this department, I was told that in order to speak to anybody there I would need to get an additional special permit from my Hà Nội-based host institute. After doing so, I was next informed my permit was insufficient, that I also required approval from the Provincial People's Committee. Yet, the Lào Cai People's Committee then refused issue a permit to me at all. A representative there explained a 'new decree' had just come into effect, which meant they could no longer issue permits to foreigners wishing to visit 'certain departments.' Contacts at my host institute were clearly in the dark about this new development, believing they had supplied me with the correct authorisations. With no overt means of recourse, given these shifting parameters of government rules on the ground, I adjusted my initial strategy and posed some of my questions instead to other state bodies that I was permitted to interview, such as the various People's Committees and planning departments.

In other instances I found that proceeding along official routes to facilitate and ensure my research access could actually work to hinder access, even to willing interviewees. At the start of my fieldwork I wished to interview officials from the Economic Department in a district bordering China. My state-appointed field assistant and I both thought that in order to demonstrate respect for local authority, the correct approach would be to first introduce ourselves to the District's People's Committee and explain our purpose. Although we felt we were well received, during an interview with a representative of the Economic Department an hour later, the police telephoned. They had been alerted by People's Committee officials of our presence, and wanted to inquire specifically what questions we were asking. After hanging up, the representative apologetically informed me the interview was being terminated. He did not offer any explanation. While the validity of my formal authorisations and 'right' to access the field were therefore challenged on occasions by actors who wielded the local power to contest this, whether this happened out of a sense of urgency to protect political imperatives, conceal state

information, demonstrate ability to exert control over a non-national's activities, or some combination of these factors, remains opaque.

#### **4.3.3 Gatekeepers On-the-Ground**

After negotiations with these key official gatekeepers - important to be able to initiate research in Vietnam - in the field a whole range of other social actors also served as gatekeepers in terms of my ability to engage with informants. By this larger set of gatekeepers, I am referring to individuals who directly or indirectly facilitate or inhibit researchers' access to resources such as people, institutions, information, and logistics (Mandel 2003; Campbell et al. 2006). Their role can be formal and obvious, as in the case of state officials and hamlet heads, or informal and less obvious, such as recognising important community members who should be approached first given their knowledge on a subject or ability to aid contact with informants or social standing. A researcher's association with these individuals can be double-edged, in that while a relationship may open certain doors, simultaneously others may close. This can be particularly true for research in Vietnam, where, as I have explained, official sanction is essential, and one may have to go through - or become so sensitised to feel that they should *always* go through - formal channels in order to engage informants.

Let me take an example. The Market Management Boards (MMB) - which I will explore in-depth in Chapter 5 - in upland marketplaces are state bodies tasked with overseeing local market operations. Market officials were vital to my accessing data on market statistics, histories, and policy and planning, and during visits to some markets staff members wanted to personally show me around. In one town market in a newly created district bordering China, the market official, Tien was a single 35 year old man, originally from Hà Nội. He enjoyed socialising with my field assistant and we often had lunch with him as well as the occasional karaoke session along with other young state officials. When first assigned his post in 2006 it was to replace the former manager who had been too 'easy going' - under-collecting trader's fees and allowing the market to remain 'unruly', with traders selling wherever they pleased. While I welcomed these visits with Mr. Tien, I started to observe that a number of traders did not hold him in high

regard, often waving him away during collection rounds. His position as a more ‘hard line’ market official and his different class status from the majority of female market traders - a university-educated man from the capital city - caused him to be a resented figure in the marketplace. I sensed that some traders formerly keen to converse, became more reluctant to do so after spotting me with this particular official. Through associating with Mr. Tien, my positionality had shifted for some traders - perhaps it looked as though I was on ‘his side’ or that I agreed with his actions and treatment of them. After that, I tried to avoid meeting this official on market day until I had finished talking with traders, in an attempt to prevent further loss of their trust. I learned a crucial lesson to be more reflexive about how my positionality might be influenced by those to whom I appeared to be linked to in the field – especially when it came to state officials (cf. Turner 2010).

In another instance, I found that although my contact with the head of the Women’s Union in one commune allowed me to officially access Yao women involved in a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) handicraft project, this connection was not as beneficial as I had thought for enabling me to engage with participants. During interviews with women introduced by this leader, I had a growing sense that informants were withholding their own views and providing responses that sounded to me like an ‘official line’. Later, in a conversation with another Yao woman from the same commune, I learned the union head was disliked by some in the community. Quite naively, I had assumed a shared social location between the union leader and the other women in the commune that would facilitate my access to informants. Rather, I found out that her position was not fully supported by all members, as some felt she had been using this role to her (economic) advantage. I had overlooked the possibility of internal class differences in this upland Yao community that seemed to me as fairly equal along socio-economic lines, initially. For me, such uncertainties highlighted the importance of being aware of diverse ways of accessing insider knowledge, and of spending more time observing local power dynamics rather than making ill-informed inferences about appropriate gatekeepers.



These gatekeeper examples also underscore what might arguably be considered a unique feature of fieldwork in Vietnam, and indeed, socialist Asia. Here, official representatives and research assistants bring researchers to official organisations - such as the Women's Union - where spokespersons are linked to the Communist Party, and the group is itself a branch of the Party. Likewise, in the case of ethnic minority areas, ethnic Kinh official research assistants seek out informants who can speak Vietnamese – and such individuals are *more likely* to be Party members than those who lack fluency. Consequently, the reality is that researchers unaware of these dynamics will likely end up engaging most with gatekeepers/informants who tow the official Party line.

#### **4.3.4 Field Assistant Dynamics**

Due to the multi-ethnic nature of my study, fieldwork assistants who also acted as translators were vital to my research, as many ethnic minorities do not speak Vietnamese fluently or feel more comfortable communicating in their native language. Beyond this fact, fieldwork assistants were also initially assigned to me by my official host institute. Therefore, to try to access these different informant voices, over the course of my fieldwork I worked with 11 different assistants. These were native speakers of Vietnamese, Hmong, Yao, and Chinese. These assistants also functioned as important gatekeepers, particularly in the interview context where they assumed a unique position in directing the flow of information and production of knowledge (Temple and Edwards 2002; Heller et al. 2010). Indeed, the language assistant's presence is often more important than the researcher's, as it is frequently the assistant who is the main medium for dialogue and interaction (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). Their tone of voice, speaking manner, body language and behaviour are all important for developing a welcomed engagement with informants. Each assistant will obviously have different strengths in different interview contexts, according to their training/experience, positionality and personal biography.

At the beginning of my research, I worked closely with three Vietnamese assistants assigned to me by my state host institute.<sup>108</sup> On the one hand, my hosts considered designating these employees to work with me as part of their role as research collaborators. On the other, this functioned as another way of monitoring my fieldwork. I was aware that my field assistants were being phoned regularly by my contact at the institute to inquire about our progress, as well as whom I had been speaking to and what I had been asking. All of these assigned assistants were young, university educated middle-class *Kinh* women from lowland areas and all had limited to no professional or personal experience in upland areas and with ethnic minorities.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> These assistants were assigned to me, with my only available preference being the gender of my assistant. I requested female assistants because I believed that working with women might be easier for establishing good personal and working relationships. I also thought that working with women would be more beneficial for gaining rapport with informants most of whom I anticipated would be women traders.

<sup>109</sup> In Vietnam, working for the state is considered to be secure employment. Although not high paying positions, they are seen as stable with good status. Frequently, these positions are secured through personal connections, such as family members. My state assigned field assistants held low, entry-level positions, and their motivations for working with me had more to do with the need to prove themselves within the institute than any interests in my project or with gaining research experience in the uplands or with ethnic minorities. Indeed, upland and rural contexts are not generally viewed as attractive working environments by urbanites (Scott et al. 2006; Turner 2010). Furthermore, as young urban women (one of whom had recently married and was interested in starting a family) long periods of time away from home were undesirable. Therefore, I was unable to work consistently with one person, which I would have preferred in order to develop a good rapport, and so that my assistant would grow familiar with my study and desired approach. I often found myself dealing with what I perceived as signs of unwillingness to work with me, such as avoidance of my phone calls, constant postponements of start dates, and renegotiations over the terms of work once in the field - albeit these assistants never once voiced their anxieties or concerns directly. Over time, I came to understand such approaches as being reflective of local gendered customs of communication in many parts of Southeast Asia, where face-to-face contact is avoided if people feel they will not be able to uphold expectations, or are unwilling to carry out prior commitments (Karim, 1995). I believe that my key contact at my sponsoring institute eventually realised the impracticality of having one of their staff assist me for the whole fieldwork duration. Towards the end of my second (July-September 2006) and into my third period in the field (February-December 2007), I experienced increasing leniency to be in the field unaccompanied. Seemingly a 'blind-eye' was being turned towards that formality, possibly given the inconvenience of my research plan for my host institute, or perhaps because they thought I was just about done. All told, my experiences with official assistants highlight the difficulties that can emerge for non-national researchers wishing to undertake ethnographic fieldwork within a setting where research cultures are quite different. In Vietnam, the tradition of shorter-term fieldwork methods based on quantitative instruments was at odds with my wish to be in the field for an extended duration. At the same time, this situation enabled me to utilise an approach to my fieldwork that combined formal and informal strategies for hiring research assistants. In mid 2006, I independently hired a young *Kinh* woman, Vi, who had been my Vietnamese conversational language-partner in Hanoi as my long-term field assistant. I felt that she would be an appropriate assistant as she was actually interested in the project, was eager to learn about and engage with ethnic minorities in a respectful manner, and was willing to commit to a lengthy period of time working for me, after recently graduating from university.

My state institute assigned assistants were skilled at developing rapport with officials as they were familiar with state styles of formality. All of my Vietnamese assistants, both state-appointed and otherwise, were also good engaging with Kinh traders, especially if they shared the same lowland home province. However, some of my state-assigned assistants were not helpful in connecting with Hmong and Yao informants. Part of this could be due to the fact that these informants would have preferred to speak in their first language, or felt wary or intimidated in speaking with Kinh women from the capital. Yet more often, I sensed that the demeanour of my assistants was sometimes off-putting or disrespectful to informants which I felt reflected a lack of cultural sensitivity. This included instances of cutting-off informants while they were speaking, making facial expressions that signalled a lack of interest or displeasure, speaking sharply, and fondling informants' garments or trade wares. I found such instances disconcerting because I did not wish to place informants in a position where they felt uncomfortable or disempowered. I also had to seek careful ways of addressing these issues with my assistant in order to avoid straining my own relationship with them. As such, the choice - or necessity, if appointed field assistants by one's research sponsor - to use Vietnamese field assistants when interviewing with ethnic minorities may pose a number of ethical difficulties, especially if these assistants have had limited prior engagement with these groups.

On two different occasions, I worked with Kinh male assistants in an effort to develop better rapport with water buffalo traders, an activity dominated by men. I had struggled to have fruitful interviews with this group of informants when working with female assistants because we felt that we were not being taken seriously, and in a few instances, were even jeered at (I had a similar experience when I interviewed buffalo traders in markets across the border in Ma Guan county, China). While these male assistants were indeed better at bonding and conversing with buffalo traders, I also felt them to be very authoritative. For example during interviews, my assistants would often supply their own responses to my questions because - it appeared to me - they felt they already knew what the appropriate answers were, such that I struggled in my attempts to exert direction over

the dialogue (also see Scott et al. 2006). While I believe that my assistants were acting in a manner they thought best and appropriate to the goals of the project, this points to how problems associated with different ways of relating based on gender can be amplified in cross-cultural work settings.

My most positive research episodes occurred when I worked with Hmong and Yao field assistants.<sup>110</sup> They opened many doors for me to speak with Hmong and Yao traders and residents. Conversations were less tense and more free-flowing, and I was not as hesitant to ask about state activities or for historical information - topics that I knew could be sensitive and that I tended to steer around with Kinh assistants. When I went on the road with Hmong field assistants – all of whom were from Sa Pa district - to other areas of the province, or neighbouring provinces, they were adept at building rapport with other Hmong who were eager to find out more about Hmong from elsewhere. During conversations about trade, informants frequently posed questions at my assistants in order to compare things in their locality with the situation in Sa Pa. For me, this flow of information was unexpected and empirically rewarding. Conversations were more egalitarian, in the sense that informants would initiate and guide the discussion to a greater degree.

#### **4.3.5. Challenges Related to Field Site Contexts and Accessing Target Groups**

A number of methodological and logistical challenges are unique to multi-sited research, which may become even more complicated for projects that involve transient places or mobile groups, requiring creative coping and improvisation strategies (Lozanski and Beres 2007). As noted earlier, my research involved recurring visits to marketplaces spread throughout the province, and even beyond. While five were central town marketplaces, operating on daily basis, nine were periodic marketplaces, taking place only once a week. As many periodic market days overlap, in choosing to attend one market, I was missing out on others. Moreover, periodic markets operate from 7 am to

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<sup>110</sup>The development in tourism in Sa Pa has resulted in a number of young Hmong and Yao women working as tour guides, taking foreign and domestic tourists on treks to nearby villages and on trips to visit upland markets in other areas of Lào Cai. This group of women have become increasingly proficient in speaking English (and other foreign languages). Fortunately for me, tour guides' daily experiences working with tourists who ask repetitive questions meant that they were also extremely patient as field assistants.

noon and some took us between two and a half to three hours to reach each way, on rural, narrow, often unpaved roads. Therefore, I had a brief, weekly window of opportunity for interviewing traders at these sites, and my assistant and I had to start travelling to our destinations very early. As such, a lot of the logistics in terms of accessing markets revolved around their timing and location, which imposed an additional structural limit to my research design that I had to work within and adapt to.

While I used public transportation at the start of my fieldwork so that I could observe traders' activities on buses, the slow speeds, frequent breakdowns and accidents, and poor connectivity made me soon realise that this was impractical. Before long, I switched to hiring private jeeps or motorcycles, or joining tourist buses to reach my destinations in a timely manner. Repeated landslides, flooding over of roads, and poor weather during the rainy season meant that market visits were sometimes cancelled, usually while already on route, because weather patterns within the uplands fluctuate dramatically over relatively short distances. Exhaustion was also a major issue for both my field assistant and me because of these constant, lengthy journeys and extremely early starts. Marketplaces were also noisy, busy and hot in the summertime, which added to our fatigue. To avoid over-exhaustion, I opted to divide the work schedule between research 'on the road' and more restful periods when we remained in Sa Pa town, interviewing traders in and around our base.

The transient nature of periodic marketplaces also meant that the people engaged in trading at them were a mobile and therefore variable group. This sometimes made individual informants difficult to access on an ongoing basis. Although for the most part, I could count on a particular informant being in a certain marketplace on a weekly basis, it was not always guaranteed, particularly given seasonal patterns influencing trade and other livelihood tasks such as rice and maize planting. This posed problems when I wished to engage in follow-up interviews or to conduct life histories. I was able to overcome some of these constraints by visiting traders at their home, but this added further logistical complications if they resided in distant hamlets and my transportation was hired for a set period of time or distance. I overcame some of these difficulties by re-

interviewing traders from hamlets closer to main towns I could travel to easily and where I could base myself for longer durations. Such repeat interviews with informants were advantageous for learning additional information, reconfirming findings or correcting earlier interpretations.

Because many traders worked within a circuit of marketplaces, often fairly distant from each other, one benefit of researching such a mobile group was that encountering the same traders in different marketplaces helped dramatically in building rapport. Traders responded with surprise and delight when meeting my field assistant and me in places outside of the expected, particularly if this was distant from their home, as they too were then in an environment where they were to some degree an ‘outsider’. For instance, Paj, the elderly Hmong woman whom I described at the very start of this thesis, is a long-distance trader who covers a distance of over 150 km in her trade route (including trips across the border to markets in China) - spending over a week at a time far away from her home. Whenever we crossed paths in a marketplace she was keen for us to spend time catching up with her.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed overview of my research methodology including my rationale for selection of field sites, data gathering and sampling methods. I also discussed some of the important practical and ethical challenges I encountered and attempted to navigate as skilfully as possible while conducting fieldwork in upland northern Vietnam. I reflected upon important elements that are part and parcel of conducting field-based research, such as my shifting positionality in the field, and I explored the fluctuating power dynamics in fieldwork in terms of my professional and personal relationships with formal and informal gatekeepers, research assistants and research informants. With all these aspects in mind, and building on my contextual overview in Chapter 3, in the following chapter, I begin my presentation and analysis of research results.

## CHAPTER 5

### STATE MARKETPLACE DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND TRADER'S EVERYDAY REALITIES

#### 5.1 Introduction

Far from static, traditional vestiges of a nostalgic past, upland marketplaces in Lào Cai are in fact dynamic sites which frame and embody a number of large and small contestations of power. At a more macro-scale, these markets are being restructured by national and provincial state development agendas in terms of their form, location, organisation, and regulation. At the everyday micro-scale, traders seek out new opportunities and work to defend or improve their livelihood strategies in upland markets as they respond to, resist, negotiate and adapt to the changing trade environment.

In this chapter I engage with all of these dimensions through a critical analysis of the contemporary development of upland marketplaces in Lào Cai province in the post *đổi mới* period (after 1986). I begin in Section 5.2, with an examination of the bigger picture – how the Vietnam state equates physical marketplaces as the ‘missing link’ to upland market integration and development. Here I review the main national and provincial policies that have acted as the framework for recent changes. These state directives may be described as an overall scheme for which purpose is to add-in, modernise, stabilise, formalise, and regulate marketplaces.

After reviewing the role of the Vietnam state in upland marketplace transformations, I consider how these ‘developments’ are actually impacting traders in Section 5.3. I explore how the state’s actions are being contested, resisted and evaded by various groups of traders via a number of overt and more subtle strategies. I then examine how national and provincial policies are frequently ‘lost in translation’ when executed at the local scale, which I illustrate through examples in 5.3.2. I demonstrate how traders are often left out of the process, which results in their frustration, confusion and lack of cooperation. I round off the section in Section 5.3.4, by arguing how the state’s current

take on upland marketplaces is an effort to re-orient them according to a standard (lowland, Kinh) model. I contend that there are a number of reasons why this is problematic, particularly for ethnic minorities - precisely the groups the state is attempting to benefit. State visions of how these markets should look and operate may well be undermining the very market channels that upland traders currently use and depend on.

Having interpreted the state, then in Section 5.4, I introduce other factors that have led to transformations in upland markets and trade-scapes. These ‘distance demolishing technologies’ (Scott 2009) are modifying the spatial composition, orchestration and organisation of social networks, facilitating connectivity, access to markets and affording new trade opportunities for uplanders – however, they are however not without their downsides. Completing the chapter, in Section 5.5, I bring to light the actors currently operating within upland marketplaces. I investigate the various categories of upland traders and their trading activities and networks, painting a picture of the wide diversity of marketplace activity that occurs. Moreover, I emphasise the key role that traders play in expanding trade networks throughout and beyond the uplands. Through an attention to trade, it becomes clear that the uplands are far less detached and remote from the centre than they are often depicted. This analysis underscores the mutually constitutive nature of the uplands and the lowlands, whereby flows of people, commodities, resources and benefits move in both directions.

## **5.2 The State’s Vision: Policies on Upland Socio-economic Development**

The current changes being imposed by the state on upland marketplaces are a reflection of wider overall transitions within national development policies, in which Vietnam’s remote upland areas have become the key target regions for socio-economic development and market integration. Following economic renovation, during the mid-1990s, national rural development policy objectives underwent a clear shift in focus. The previous emphasis on large-scale agricultural production under collectivisation was replaced by socio-economic development initiatives aimed at local level poverty alleviation. Likewise, this adjustment of rural development policy was accompanied by a



reorientation of geographical focus away from lowland rice growing areas to the mountainous and border regions, as well as other areas of the country with high incidences of poverty and poor agricultural conditions (Phan Si Man 2005).

Since the mid-1990s, Vietnam's overall national socio-economic development and poverty alleviation framework has remained strongly directed at the provision and upgrading of rural infrastructure. Prior to *đổi mới*, infrastructure support from the national level was mostly reserved for irrigation works in the rice producing areas of the lowlands. Rural infrastructure in villages and communes such as roads, electricity, marketplaces, schools, health stations, and cultural houses received very limited assistance from the national budget. These were constructed mostly through the efforts of individual communes or agricultural cooperatives using local resources and labour (Do Hoai Nam and Le Cao Doan 2001). However, a decade after economic renovation reforms, the creation of rural infrastructure facilities in poor and isolated communes became a key concern of the state, linking the socio-economic development of these areas to overall national development (Phan Si Man 2005; Vu Tuan Anh 2005). As a result, a wide array of different resolutions and policy documents have ensued, which have shaped subsequent socio-economic development plans, projects and programmes in upland regions.

To illustrate, by 1998 the Vietnam government had 21 different national policies and projects focused on socio-economic development and poverty reduction in ethnic minority and upland areas (Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong and Baulch, 2007: 1). While the list remains extensive, many programmes have since been streamlined and integrated into two key national target programmes: 1) the Programme for Socio-Economic Development of Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic, Mountainous, Boundary and Remote Areas (P135), and; 2) the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Programme (HEPR, or Programme 143) (outlined in Figure 5.1).<sup>111</sup> For both Programmes, the improvement of basic physical infrastructure in rural areas is perceived to assist market integration and foster economic development. To this end, between 1999 and 2004, 95.5

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<sup>111</sup> Other programmes have a more thematic concentration on land, forest, education and health.

per cent of P135's budget went towards the construction of commune-level infrastructure (CEM 2004).

**Programme 135 (P135):** Initiated in 1998, and implemented by the Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas, the programme operates in 81 of Vietnam's provinces. P135 is targeted specifically towards socio-economic development within what are categorised as 'communes meeting with exceptional difficulties' in areas with high populations of ethnic minorities, and upland, border and remote regions. P135 includes the following key components: development of commune centres, resettlement, production support, and agricultural training. In 2000, some elements of an earlier program (P133) regarding resettlement and sedentarisation, support for ethnic minorities, and commune centre development were merged into Programme 135. Between 2001 and 2010, 2,300 target communes were to be included in this programme, the majority of which are in upland areas.

**Programme 143 (HEPR):** In 2001, Programme 133 (which began in 1998) merged with Programme 120 (an employment creation and vocational training programme) to become the Hunger Eradication and Reduction program, HEPR. The most recent objectives of HEPR are: to reduce the poverty rate, abolish chronic hunger, guarantee that poor communes have access to basic infrastructure works and social services, create new employment opportunities, and reduce the urban unemployment rate (Nguyen and Baulch 2007).

**Overlap between the two:** Programme 143 (HEPR) is the main nationally targeted development programme, and functions independently of other programmes, although it often overlaps geographically with Programme 135. In instances of overlap, HEPR is often integrated into Programme 135 at the commune level (Oxfam 2001; Nguyen and Baulch 2007).

#### **FIGURE 5.1: KEY NATIONALLY TARGETED DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMES IN VIETNAM**

Another explanation for this national policy shift lies with the Vietnam state's ongoing security concerns in mountainous and border areas (Phan Si Man, 2005). As explained in Chapter 1, whether expressed through more overt or subtle policy guises, national unity and security, and the assimilation and sedentarisation of ethnic minority groups, have remained pivotal concerns of the Vietnamese State since independence (Michaud 1997b, 2000; Sowerwine 2004). However, efforts to bring the livelihoods and lifestyle practices of these diverse groups under control and regulation are now being expressed in terms of specific targeted socio-economic and poverty alleviation programmes.

A number of state commissioned research studies undertaken in the early 1990s confirmed that the majority of the country's poor were concentrated in remote

mountainous areas and were comprised of ethnic minority groups<sup>112</sup>. Inadequate, or lack of basic infrastructure, was determined as a consistent feature of these communities and a major contributing factor to the persistence of poverty (Nguyen Sinh Cuc 1995). The number of communes having access to electricity, roads, secondary schools, marketplaces and other essential basic infrastructure in many of the mountainous regions, and especially in the northern uplands, was found to be extremely low relative to the rest of the country (Phan Si Man 2005). Behind upland development policies for targeted commune support was the need to improve living conditions alongside the extension of state presence in these localities – to maintain political and social stability and ensure national security (Phan Si Man 2005).

### **5.2.1 The State's Role in the Development of Physical Marketplaces**

Physical marketplaces are a main component within the above-mentioned emphasis by the Vietnam state to develop upland local infrastructure (Phan Si Man 2005; SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP). The absence of, or lack of access to, a marketplace or other facilities for commodity trade is described as a barrier to the development of commercial production, market expansion and the ability for local populations to meet their demand for goods exchange (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).

Officially, the Vietnam state maintains two separate lists for identifying 'poor communes', in both of which poverty is evaluated based on a combination of poor households (percentage of people below the food or poverty line) *and* the absence of critical commune-level infrastructure, including a marketplace (Conway 2001).<sup>113</sup> Targeted communes for national poverty alleviation programmes P135 and HEPR, were initially determined according to a rating system combining the availability of basic infrastructure - road connecting to the commune centre, primary and secondary schools, irrigation systems, electricity from the national grids, access to clean water, health clinics,

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<sup>112</sup> The studies include the Household Living Standards Survey conducted by GSO in 1992-93, the 1994 Rural and Agricultural Census, and the Socio-Economics Survey in 11 Provinces in the North Mountainous region conducted by the Institute of Economics in 1992/1993.

<sup>113</sup> These two official lists are: 1) the list of 'poor communes' maintained by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Assistance (MOLISA), the majority of which are located in lowland areas; and 2) the list of 'especially difficult mountainous and remote communes' maintained by CEM and used for commune identification for inclusion in Programme 135 (Baulch 2002).

and permanent *market halls* - in addition to the number of poor households (Vu Tuan Anh 2005). The state's primary solution to a lack of access to markets has been to ensure the construction of modern, concrete market structures within communes or commune clusters. This improved marketplace infrastructure is intended to facilitate the development of a market economy at the local, commune level (c.f. World Bank 2009).

Included within both the Vietnam state ten-year (2001-2010), and the more recently promulgated five year (2006-2010) national socioeconomic development plans, the expansion and improvement of physical marketplaces is prioritised, with overall attention given to rural areas, and to remote and mountainous regions in particular. Additionally, three key national documents formulated during this period directly prescribe the agenda for marketplaces and their development:

The national *Decree on the Development and Management of Marketplaces* is the overall guiding policy on physical markets. This includes the procedural framework for the development, investment, classification, organisation, regulation, and management of all marketplaces throughout Vietnam (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).

The national *Decision of the Prime Minister Approving the Programme on the Development of Marketplaces until 2010*, focuses more specifically on marketplace development. It establishes target goals to be achieved by 2010, namely: developing pivotal market centres for key commodities; upgrading urban marketplaces and developing supermarkets; constructing or “modernising” marketplaces in rural, mountainous and border areas; “professionalising” the management of marketplaces, and; ensuring that marketplace organisation is “ordered and disciplined” (SRV Decision No. 599/2004/QD-TTg).

The more recent national *Decision Approving the Scheme on Rural Trade Development During 2010-2015*, places additional emphasis on the development of market networks. Specific targets by 2020 include: renovation of 31 and construction of 82 agricultural

produce wholesale markets; building 3,000 new commune markets, and; 1,500 new border markets (SRV Decision No. 23/QD-TTg).

Additionally, since 1998, the main national poverty alleviation P135 has stressed the planning and development of markets in upland areas through its concentration on the construction and upgrading of commune-level infrastructure (Vu Tuan Anh 2005). Under this programme, by the end of 2003, of the 2,362 communes covered, 48 per cent had either constructed or improved market halls (CEM 2004). Another key project - which overlaps geographically and thematically with P135 - is the Northern Mountains Poverty Reduction Project (NMPRP), which ran from 2002 to 2007.<sup>114</sup> The NMPRP targeted 368 mountainous communes in six upland northern provinces (including Lào Cai), and also strongly concentrated on infrastructure development (Dang Kim Son 2007). Around 30 per cent of each province's total NMPRP budget was allocated towards rural marketplace and road construction. Due to the intersecting focuses of P135 and NMPRP and similar 'menu' of infrastructural projects, it is difficult to determine precisely how these two programmes interrelate on the ground (WSP 2005). However, P135 is directed at the commune-level and based on state assessments of local needs, while NMPRP is oriented at the village level and is more participatory in that it incorporates resident-defined needs (WSP 2005).

To summarise, the three state documents highlighted above together set out the overall state guidelines and priorities regarding marketplaces. Broadly stated, the overall main objectives are: 1) to develop and expand marketplace networks; 2) to renovate and upgrade marketplace structures and layouts; 3) to facilitate market integration by increasing the circulation of goods and services, and; 4) to improve the organisation and management of marketplaces. Although the scope of these plans apply to all of Vietnam, special priority is given to marketplaces concentrated in upland ethnic minority communes as well as border communes, where the state feels marketplaces are an "urgent need" (SRV Decision No. 559/2004/QD-TTg). According to the Vietnamese government,

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<sup>114</sup> This project has become the Second Northern Poverty Reduction project 2010-2015.

remodelling the current systems and infrastructure of marketplaces will help to promote socio-economic development, hunger elimination, poverty reduction and sedentarisation.

What is clearly discernable from these documents is that the new plans are intended to further the formalisation of marketplaces through the extension of greater state ownership and governance. This is taking place through the state's regulation over the design, renovations, upgrading, relocation, and building of new markets, as well as through the formalisation of individual marketplace organisation and administration. Under these ambitious goals, the renovation of 25 per cent of all rural markets was to have taken place by 2005, with the rest to be completed by 2010 (SRV Decision No. 559/2004/QD-TTg).

Pertaining more specifically to upland marketplaces in Lào Cai, these national goals are mirrored within the current (2008) Lào Cai provincial *Master Plan on Socio-economic Development to 2020*, in which key objectives are:

To build permanent markets; [and to] strive to reach the target that by 2010 all makeshift markets will be abolished. From 2008-2010: to renovate and upgrade 11 markets; build 18 new markets; and develop 8 new markets. From 2011-2020: to renovate and upgrade 20 markets and develop 15 new ones (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/QD-TTg).

Although data is not yet available as to what extent these targets have been met, my observations of the numerous market projects underway in Lào Cai over the course of field visits between 2006 and 2010, are that significant headway has been made by provincial and local authorities towards this goal. However the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD Online: 2010) reports that construction funds for market infrastructure from the state have been insufficient, such that the proposed state targets have not been fully reached. Moreover, the same document states that in 2010, of the 71 marketplaces in Lào Cai, twelve were still of the status “semi-permanent”, while 14 were “temporary” (IPSARD Online: 2010).

Capital funds for market infrastructure construction and upgrading in Lào Cai come from a variety of sources. This includes portions from: the central state, provincial and district budgets; funds from donor agencies; private investment (from enterprises and business individuals); contributions collected from traders as advance contracts or via business

license and rental fees; as well as contributions from the local population (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP; LC Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism 03/08/06).

Communes under P135 also receive funds from the Asian Development Bank. The government strongly encourages organisations and private enterprises/individuals to invest or join the state in investing in marketplace construction (that have gained approval and meet current state regulations) (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).<sup>115</sup> Moreover, local residents are encouraged to contribute their labour and other resources towards such commune and hamlet infrastructural projects (Phan Si Man 2005).

### **5.2.2 Upland Marketplace Organisation and Arrangement**

Through the market development policies I have described above in Section 5.2.1, it can easily be argued that the Vietnam state is acting to bring upland marketplaces more effectively under its gaze. While initially, upland periodic marketplaces appear to be overwhelmingly crowded, colourful and confusing amalgamations of buyers, sellers and visitors, complex local systems of organisation do exist – underlying and orienting the activities of social actors participating in these trade sites. Today, many of these arrangements have been superimposed by the system introduced by the state. Nevertheless, a variety of informal rules, norms, modes of organisation, and resistance strategies developed by traders continues to prevail.

At the provincial level, the overall national plans for marketplace development (set out by the Ministry of Planning and Investment), are then disseminated to the districts, which in turn repeat this process at the commune level. District and commune officials draw up their market plans based on these overall guidelines, which must be approved by the provincial or district People's Committees before they can be put into effect.<sup>116</sup> However, in terms of direct market operations, following *đổi mới*, the government decentralised the management of marketplaces. Market Management Boards (MMB), *Ban Quản Lý Chợ* were set up as the designated agencies in charge of overseeing local state-owned market

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<sup>115</sup> Incentives for marketplace construction investors include preferential policies for their activities (see SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).

<sup>116</sup> For example the Market Management Board of Xín Chéng commune wanted to have an additional market day on Sunday, but they had to make a prior request for this with the district (Xín Chéng MMB representative 12/09/07).



operations. These boards are responsible for ensuring that the central market model is transmitted and implemented at the local level (SRV Decision No. 599/2004/QD-TTg).

The various functions of the MMB are to: assign stalls and issue and manage rental contracts with vendors; implement internal marketplace regulations and handle violations; organise marketplace activities; maintain marketplace order and settle disputes; monitor traders' selling practices; impose and collect fees and rents; ensure sanitation, food security and safety in the marketplace; keep a record of business activities; and produce periodic reports for the Ministry of Trade (Lai Cai Province Dept. of Tourism and Commerce official 05/24/2007)<sup>117</sup>.

In the past, market officials have generally been from the local community and did not always have specific training for this role – often transferred in from other state positions. Under the recent national guidelines, the “streamlining” of these market agents is being called for, with a target that 40 per cent of all market officials in upland areas have professionally training. This means that some local officials have been replaced by more ‘qualified’ staff, often from lowland areas, while others have temporarily left their posts to undergo a period of training under the Ministry of Trade (SRV Decision No. 559/2004/QD-TTg). The official training of market staff is an important way for the state to ensure that the national framework for market organisation and regulation is being applied consistently in a top-down fashion.

Previously, upland traders selected their own locations in the market by sampling the best spots. In the past, this was fairly easy with fewer traders and a more open market design,

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<sup>117</sup> Market management cadres represent the state's authority within individual marketplaces. For Class 1 markets, these officials are selected by the provincial People's Committee, while for Class 2 and 3 markets, selections are made by the district-level People's Committees. Class 3 markets also sometimes do not have a management marketing board and are looked after instead by the commune-level People's Committees and authorities (See Chapter 4 for official marketplace categories). This also means that there are persons designated by the commune to ensure the collection of trade, environment and sanitation fees. Class 1 and 2 market management board officials also receive a state salary whereas Class 3 markets do not, although they are responsible for collecting trader fees. Moreover, a portion of revenues collected from traders are used to remunerate market cadres (LC Province Dept. of Tourism and Commerce 05/24/2007). Some markets which have been constructed by private investors may not have a state-run market management board, but is required to have staff members who serve these functions (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).



such as when traders built market structures by themselves. It is no longer as possible to do this under the new state regulations, with the fixed allocation of market spaces, and the growing numbers of trade participants (Bát Xát MMB official 28/05/07). At present, the internal organisation of individual state-owned marketplaces is performed by the MMB. The board assigns fixed areas for selling different categories of commodities, such as produce, clothing, textiles, utensils and equipment, electronics, meat, grain, alcohol, prepared foods, and livestock. It also often designates separate locations to different categories of vendors such as fixed daily traders, periodic market traders (referred to in state documentation simply as “infrequent traders”), and cross-border traders (such as from China) (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP). The state’s logic behind these arrangements are to make it easier for customers to locate the goods they want, to ensure less variation in pricing between similar commodities, and to facilitate the collection of fees – which fluctuate between different groups of traders (Section 5.5) (LC Province Dept. of Tourism and Commerce 05/24/2007).

Traders must pay a variety of fees in order to sell in the market, which depend on the type of trader (such as daily, weekly, cross-border and so on), the size of the enterprise/stall, the type of merchandise sold, and the trader’s location in the marketplace.<sup>118</sup> Market officials explained how monthly fees for the prime locations cost roughly double the amount for the less ideal spots (MMB Bát Xát official 28/05/07). The different fees that market traders must pay are as follows: 1) a daily amount to trade in the marketplace for all traders; 2) a monthly amount for renting the market stall for those with a business license and a signed contract with the MMB, and; 3) service fees for sanitation (cleaning the market and collecting waste), water, electricity, and for keeping order and security. (MMB Mường Khương official 31/08/06, Chamber of Commerce and Tourism official Sa Pa District 03/08/06).

Fees also differ between marketplaces, and are in part determined by market category (see Chapter 3). Moreover, in some daily town markets, the rights to trade have been

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<sup>118</sup> These decisions are officially under the jurisdiction of, and must be approved by, the provincial People’s Committee. The minimum standard for fixed market stall size is 3m<sup>2</sup> (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).

more permanently regularised through lump sum payments for long-term use contracts. For example, the 20-year stall leases in Bắc Hà town market to traders with household business licenses were determined through a process of ‘random selection’ of bidders. However, the current demand for fixed market spaces far exceeds the supply in most of Lào Cai’s long-established upland town markets. Some traders decide to profit from transferring over their valuable market contracts by selling out or subleasing their stalls to other traders, or through other sharing arrangements – practices which are not restricted by current market regulations.<sup>119</sup>

Traders held differing opinions about the state’s arrangement of the marketplace and assignment of stalls. Some who have managed to secure the best spots were satisfied with the situation, such as Hanh (09/16/07) a Kinh trader from Bắc Hà town who explained, “I was able to buy my kiosk for a period of 20 years. I can’t move to another place in the market now, but I don’t really care to because my spot is so good, I guess it is one of the top spots in the marketplace so I am lucky.” Others however, are far less content with the places they have been designated such as Nam (09/16/07), another Kinh trader in Bắc Hà who said, “I rented my stall for 20 years and have been here for nine years already. I’m not happy with the location and wish to have a stall in another part of the market but I can’t because all of the goods stalls are already occupied.”

Traders without a fixed stall, who sell on a weekly or less regular basis within the market, must also abide by the MMB’s arrangement scheme. According to Aiv (09/06/07) a Hmong textile trader in Bắc Hà, “this section for trading textiles was arranged by the market board so that we don’t occupy the wrong places. If last week I sold at one place, then the following week I should sell at that same place. If I sell at a different place, I would be dismissed by the market cadres”. Another Hmong textile trader, Zam (09/06/07) also from Bắc Hà market, stated “now that there are separate sectors in the marketplace, I have to sell in the section for Hmong people. I’d love to sell close to the

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<sup>119</sup> Traders may also mortgage their market stalls in order to borrow loans from commercial banks (SRV Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).

market entrance but I'm not allowed because that part of the market has been reserved for Kinh people selling garments”.

### 5.3 State Visions versus Local Realities

The Vietnam state's official rhetoric *vis-à-vis* marketplaces and small trade is decidedly paradoxical. From a reading of the full documents outlined above, it is clear that marketplaces are considered integral infrastructure for upland commerce and market integration – an instrument for local socio-economic development. Yet, they are simultaneously depicted as chaotic elements of society that require state authority and guidance in order to maintain their discipline, order, and effective functioning. While the state aims to ‘modernise’ markets, part of this process entails eliminating what the state regards as the ‘uncontrollable’ elements of marketplace trade. For instance, trade sites that originate independently through the initiative of local people are considered to be of concern and in need of evaluation. In this case, marketplaces that meet local needs and priorities may not fit with the interests and agenda of the state. The 2003, national *Decree on the Development and Management of Marketplaces*, notes the importance of:

Preventing and putting an end to the state of marketplaces emerging spontaneously or built in contravention of planning; working out plans and measures to get rid of marketplaces not included in the planning and spontaneously emerging marketplaces, first of all marketplaces held on roadbeds, street pavements, thus affecting traffic safety, environment sanitation and public order (Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP).

In a similar manner, the 2004, Programme on the Development of Marketplaces states:

For marketplaces which are formed spontaneously not under planning, and makeshift marketplaces: It is necessary to consider and evaluate them one by one; to include [these markets] in the plan[s], and draw up plans on upgrading, renovating or building only those marketplaces which are operating efficiently, meeting the purchase-sale demands of local people (Decision No. 559/2004/QĐ-TTg).

Nevertheless, the mechanisms by which such planning and evaluations of markets and their ‘efficiency’ should occur are not outlined in either of these documents. In 2006, I was informed by an official from the Lào Cai Department of Trade and Commerce that a study of the marketplaces in the province had been undertaken and a planning strategy formulated. However, from 2006-2007, I was repeatedly refused access to this document on several occasions due to the claim that it was still a draft version and not suitable for

dissemination – even my colleagues from a government research unit in Hà Nội had no luck in acquiring a copy. My sense that provincial officials were wary to reveal their market research and plans was also substantiated by another curious instance involving a marketplace repeatedly mentioned by traders located along a remote road between two border towns. While several ethnic minority individuals stated that they traded at this market, representatives of the township’s MMB and district People’s Committee denied that such a market existed at all on this route. Perhaps this was simply because it fit the category of a ‘spontaneous market’ and therefore not formally acknowledged by the state, or possibly due to its location in a politically sensitive border area and the state was guarded about my research purpose there.

At the local level, state actors such as district People’s Committee and MMB officials often appeared to have only a vague idea of the contents of future market plans. While local officials were aware of imminent plans for market re-development, they could rarely say precisely when these projects were going to occur or provide any clear details about them. In one instance, when I requested information about a plan to construct a central marketplace at a new location in one upland town, the market management cadre (01/06/05) replied:

At what time the new market will open depends on a lot of things. I am not allowed to take part and give my ideas to the committee for the new market because there is a board to negotiate and discuss the plans and I am not a participant on it. However, in my view a new market will be beneficial if it can meet with future demands because a lot of people want to trade here and there is insufficient space in the current market.

These market cadres are in direct contact with traders in local marketplaces and are the only official spokespersons from which traders can receive information and ask questions about market operations and future plans. In my opinion, a system that excludes such officials from planning meetings is impractical and unhelpful for local traders, a point I return to later in this section.

By 2010, the state intended that all marketplaces which are “temporary marketplaces, marketplaces made of thatch, bamboo or palm leaves shall basically no longer exist” (SRV Decision No. 559/2004/QĐ-TTg). As this agenda had yet to be completely

implemented by late 2010, one can only speculate on the implications of these plans for currently operating marketplaces and trader livelihoods. Based upon my observations in Lào Cai province, I suggest that provincial and district officials have often acted with urgency to put national plans into effect by ensuring that projects get underway quickly. Yet these plans are often poorly communicated to local officials and traders. Further delays and complications in their undertaking make such ‘improvements’ even more frustrating for local traders. The two case studies that follow highlight this point. They illustrate how provincial and local state planning is sometimes at odds with, or fails to take into proper account, the local livelihood interests of market traders.

### **5.3.1 Marketplace Construction Delays and Abandoned Markets**

A major construction project, with a total investment of over 12 billion VND (~\$610,000 USD), to overhaul and rebuild the town marketplace of Bắc Hà commenced in September 2006, and was expected to be completed by December 15, 2007 (Personal observations of market construction sign 08/06/07). Nearly a year after the expected completion date, in late August 2008, some new buildings had been completed but major construction was still underway and traders still occupied temporary stalls. One trader explained at that time that there had been a “big push” leading up to the May 2008, ‘Bắc Hà Tourism and Culture’ week, prioritising the construction of certain market buildings: including a giant wok, 3 metres in diameter and weighing 1.6 tonnes, for cooking a traditional meat soup (*thắng cố*), which won a Guinness Book of Records award as the largest of its kind in the world (Kinh trader 16/08/08; Thanh Nien News 30/07/10). By the time I returned again in March 2009, most of the new market buildings appeared to have been finally built, yet many temporary stalls still remained, and the new market buildings appeared abandoned and unused by traders.



**FIGURE 5.2: BAC HA MARKETPLACE RENOVATION (TOP LEFT: BEFORE RENOVATION; TOP RIGHT: DURING RENOVATION; BOTTOM RIGHT AND LEFT: MARKET POST RENOVATION; SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Not surprisingly, traders were aggravated by the lengthy, drawn-out construction period, as during this time, they had to make do with what they considered to be very inadequate, temporary structures. Nam (17/06/06), a male Kinh daily market trader in his forties, had a great deal to say about his frustration with the state's handling of the new market construction project. In his words, which are worth repeating at length for his nuanced argument:

I am very upset with the temporary market that we were relocated to. Before we were moved, the government promised that we would be given support with a small amount of money. We were also told we would not be asked to pay rent for our stalls while in the new temporary market. But in fact, the market board still collects money from us for fees and rental space! So in comparison with the old market, the total amount of money that we have to pay now is even greater than before. In 1996, my wife and I paid 16 million VND [~800 USD] to rent our stall for a 20 year period in the old market. That means in the new market we should be entitled to have a spot for another 10 years...that's the time left on our rental agreement. But I don't think that the new market will provide enough space for all of the traders who want to work there. This will cause many difficulties for people applying for a space. The District has offered us two solutions. People who still have time left over from their rental agreement in the old market will be reimbursed a certain amount of money. Or, they will be provided a spot in the new market for the duration they have left



over on their rental agreement, if there is room. But me and most of the others don't want the money back and prefer to be given a new spot for trading in the new market...

The District built a very poor temporary market for us. They provided no solution for waste and sanitation. The sewage system is non-existent and it is so polluted here that we cannot run our business as well as before. It is not a very pleasant place to be working, it isn't healthy. They also used shoddy materials for the buildings in the temporary market and I am concerned that it cannot last a year more. We even had to build parts of the infrastructure by ourselves. Like, we built the concrete flooring on our own. Some of us even built our own individual stalls. Many traders sleep in the marketplace because they need to protect their goods from being destroyed or stolen since the stalls are so flimsy. In the old market, we could feel safe to lock the door and keep our goods in the market at night. Only a few years ago, an NGO built a water supply system for the market but now it has been torn down. The previous market was just built in the 1990s and it has now been torn down again! It was built with stable materials but was destroyed when the government decided they wanted to build another one. In my opinion, this seems to be a big waste of money and time. The authorities aren't taking traders' needs into consideration properly...

Officials are saying the market will be finished in another two years. But when we look at the construction and all the destroyed areas, we really aren't convinced that they can finish it on time. The people in power, the authorities, change their plans so quickly and they have no long term plans. I wish they had better long term plans...I think that would make our trading much easier. Now everything is temporary and feels temporary. This makes it hard for us to make any long term plans about our own business. We just have to operate from day to day to get by.

Traders such as Nam view this 'development' as an unfair and highly unwelcome interruption to their ability to make a living. Nam is deeply upset by the lack of follow-through on promises made by the local state and failure to uphold its duty to its citizens. Moreover, he is resentful at being obligated to pay for a temporary stall space – one for which he had to invest his own resources into making it acceptable. This level of everyday insecurity, an ongoing experience of uncertainty, and the risk of losing the right to productive capital – here, market stall space - prevents traders from feeling confident to make longer term plans and investments (c.f. Bonnin 2004). Their livelihoods have become even more unstable and uncertain, due to the poorly executed actions of the state to upgrade the market environment. Such striking sentiments were also voiced by another male Kinh trader, Thanh (23/06/07), who feels that the district state's actual priorities lie more with developing the area for tourism than where its moral obligations are, with the people – and in improving the Bắc Hà marketplace to assist its petty traders.

I think that the government's main purpose for building the new market is to draw more tourism because we already had a good market here! But in reality, tourists were coming to Bắc Hà market because they were attracted by the traditional characteristics of it and the

culture of the people, so they don't want to see it change. Traders here called the People's Committee Provincial Courts in order to complain about having to relocate to this temporary market because the compensation and the design of the temporary market were unacceptable to us. It was reported by a Lào Cai newspaper that 47 trader households took the People's Committee to court. I was interviewed by journalists from that newspaper and from a Hà Nội newspaper too. I feel that the state policy is often good, but in practice the actions of the People's Committee are not good.

Within a socio-political space such as that which currently characterises socialist Vietnam and China, civil society remains highly circumscribed and such examples of overt resistance by market traders are not commonplace (but see Leshkovich 2005; 2008). However, popular complaints and contentions over state actions are often articulated through what has been termed 'rightful resistance' (O'Brien and Li 2006; Labbe). What makes these approaches differ from the more common, everyday forms of subtle resistance to state policies is that they are obvious, vocal, and aimed at direct recognition by the state. Moreover, as Nam and Thanh illustrate, rightful resisters are not calling into question the authority of state laws or its core principles. Rather, their complain lies with the failure of the state to follow through on its duties to citizens in protecting their rights to livelihood (Labbe 2006).

While the state's clear intent is to advance rural trade and marketplaces, – and therefore, overall socio-economic development - examples such as the Bắc Hà market renovations illustrate how these projects are often carried out in a haphazard manner. Plans are not communicated properly to traders, often leaving them in a worse financial situation than they were in to begin with.

In another example, the Bát Xát township market was relocated to a larger area in August 2008, and was in the process of being reconstructed when I visited in February 2009 (Kinh trader Bát Xát 15/02/09). While it was not the main market day at the time I arrived, I observed far less traders than the 32 who had worked daily at the former Bát Xát market (Bát Xát MMB representative 28/05/07). One female Kinh fruit trader whom I knew from the old market thought that the building would be finished by 2010, and told me the monthly rent on her stall in the new market (although not yet finished) had increased by 13 per cent. Other traders I spoke to were unaware of what was going on,



why they had been moved and what the future plans for the market were. They were annoyed by this lack of consultation and resigned to ‘stick it out’. The state’s failure to involve those who use upland markets the most makes traders resentful when in practice, such ‘improvements’ directly endanger their means of subsistence.

Moreover, another problem is that because upland residents have been left out of the decision-making process, markets have been constructed in inconvenient or inappropriate locations where they are not wanted or needed, leading to a situation of barren markets and wasted funds. A news article from 2010, reports that there are at least a dozen such newly built but completely abandoned market structures in Lào Cai province, including: Thanh Phú (in Sa Pa district), Bản Mế (in Si Ma Cai district), Cầu Nhò (in Bảo Thắng district) and Dương Quý and Chiềng Ken (in Văn Bàn district), humorously describing some as “left fallow”, or as places for drying cassava and children to play football (Dan Tri Online: 2010). A newly built “handicraft market” in Tả Phìn commune (Sa Pa district, see Figure 5.3) – but made to represent an apparently more ‘traditional’ style to appeal to tourists has similarly never taken hold. Here, Yao and Hmong local handicraft traders continue to prefer their approach of following tourists on a village walk, trying to entice guests to visit their homes for a sale, or else to wait near the car park where all of the tour busses unload.



**FIGURE 5.3: AN UNUSED COMMUNITY HANDICRAFT MARKET (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

### **5.3.2 Conflicts over Marketplace Relocations**

Other conflicts between state development goals and local interests occur directly over marketplace relocation decisions. This is clearly illustrated by the case of Cốc Ly periodic market in Bắc Hà district, held every Tuesday. Situated on the high banks of the Chảy River, the market has been in operation since at least 1980. While formerly an exchange site for local residents, the upgrading of a tertiary road connecting the commune to the main road in 1999 expanded the market with the arrival of new traders from outside the area (Cốc Ly commune official 12/09/06; Ta May 04/09/07). According to the General Secretary of the commune (12/09/06), the market was not planned by the state but rather came into existence through the initiative of local residents and traders. Important goods at this market include local produce and upland artisanal alcohols, food stalls featuring ethnic minority cuisine, minority brocade, manufactured clothing, basic necessities, agricultural products, and a vibrant livestock market.

In early 2000, the marketplace was included on the cultural tourism trail of periodic market visits because it was located in a picturesque spot, still retained its traditional thatch roofed structure, and was visited by a wide variety of minority vendors and customers clothed in ‘colourful’ customary dress. New groups of Kinh and ethnic minority tourist-oriented traders began flocking to the market, expressly to sell handicrafts to tourists. Tourist buses arrived in droves each Tuesday, and market visits were followed by a scenic boat trip down the Chảy river with an added excursion to a Tày hamlet on its banks.

In 2005, a nearby construction scheme to build a hydropower plant on the Chảy river commenced with the aim of supplying local power resources and joining the national power grid (CDM 2011). Construction lasted five years, during most of which time the roadway connecting Cốc Ly to the highway was in extremely poor condition and noise and dust pollution was high from the construction works. According to an official report on the project, a total of 866 households (4,449 people) have been affected – with 66 relocated households (325 inhabitants) (CDM 2011). The document affirms that all of those impacted were compensated for land, agricultural crops, and resettlement.

Locals I spoke to were aware that plans were in the works to resettle households in this commune as well as to relocate the marketplace.<sup>120</sup> However, during the construction phase, informants expressed that they had no idea of when this was to occur or how they would be compensated. This confusion was voiced by Ta May (04/09/07), a Yao food stall operator:

I know this market is going to be relocated to Lung Xa, at first. This will be temporary until they build a new bridge, and then they will relocate us again to Tham Phuc. I don't know when the market will move because a few months ago they told me I would already have to be moved by now, but it still hasn't happened yet. All residents of this community will also have to move to Tham Phuc. But local people are waiting for their compensation from the government before they will move. I'm not sure of the amount that we will be given, but maybe they will determine it based upon hectares of land? I've heard each household might receive 30-40 million VND. I will move, but only because I have to move. I would prefer to stay here because I am familiar with this place and I know how to trade here. If I move to a new place I'm afraid I will have to start all over again and won't know how to deal with my livelihood...

For my house I am supposed to be compensated 20 million VND but I haven't received it yet. The compensation will be provided by the company responsible for the dam construction. They are paying compensation on behalf of the government because they are the builders and the dam belongs to a private company, not the government. I have no idea where and when I will be relocated.

Contradicting Ta May's account, during an interview with a planning department officer for the dam construction company (02/10/07) I was told that Cốc Ly traders were blatantly refusing to move to the new market site. The company representative stated in disgust that the traders "are aware that a new market now exists for them, but they refuse to go there until December when this area will be flooded!" Indeed, traders were

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<sup>120</sup> According to the project design report, the total estimated compensation for the hydropower plant is 153 billion VND – "of which compensation paid for land, crops, and resettlement is 84 billion VND and compensation for affected households is 45 billion VND" (CDM 2011: 33). Households being compensated were entitled to receive financial support for livelihood and new houses, "with toilets, kitchens, water tanks, animal sheds, discharging ditches etc...[and, for the community] a water supply system, electric lines, and a rural road for [the] two resettlement zones" (CDN 201: 33). The head of the Cultural Department (09/10/07) explained that compensation depended on household land size and value of the house, but additionally, if a household registered to live in a spot within the resettlement area then they would receive a partial compensation, whereas if they wanted to find a place to live elsewhere, they would be given a larger amount. However, the planning department officer of the construction company told me that the population of the commune would be divided up for relocation into different resettlement areas, some of which were 5-10 km away from Cốc Ly commune (02/10/07). Given these discrepancies in information from supposedly knowledgeable stakeholders in the project, it is no wonder that traders and residents felt insecure and upset about the project.

confused about the plans and the existence of a new market, but also seemed to be holding out in the old familiar location for as long as possible. A lack of knowledge regarding trade conditions and infrastructure, as well as rumours regarding the lack of such resources at the new site, was making them hesitant to move. According to a Hmong woman named Mos who worked as an itinerant trader in the old market (09/10/07):

There is a new market now on the other side of the river bank, but it doesn't have water for sanitation or cooking in the food section. The People's Committee wants us to move there but traders want to stay on this side of the river. We prefer it here. But when the new market gets water then I guess I will have to transfer. I like this place better because I am comfortable with it and if I move to another place I worry that I may not be able to do as well over there...I just don't know.

Nonetheless, it is not only traders who were concerned about the closure of the old traditional-style market. Local officials too expressed anxiousness as to how this would affect tourism. The head of the Cultural Office (09/10/0) voiced her concerns as follows: "I think the relocation will have an impact on tourism here as tourists come to this market because the surroundings are picturesque, and maybe the new market location will not be as beautiful as this place." Given that the 'cultural preservation' and 'cultural heritage' of ethnic minorities are recognised by the Lào Cai provincial state authorities as important - both to 'shared national culture' and for tourism market purposes - this plan to destroy what was a vital, vibrant market space attracting numerous guests appears incongruous (c.f. Director of LC Province Dept. of Culture, Sports and Tourism reported in Vietnam News Online: 2010). As of 2008, the old market has shut down and the new market opened on the other side of the river. While I did not have an opportunity to visit the new location while completing this thesis, as feared by the head of the Cultural Office, Hmong tour guides from Sa Pa who brought tourists to the new market in 2011, explained to me that visitors were very disappointed and did not find the set-up appealing (Bee and Mai 18/07/11). Moreover, far fewer traders are in attendance, perhaps because of the lack of tourists, or because they have decided to try their luck elsewhere (Bee and Mai 18/07/11).

Such case studies point to the conflicting aims of official development procedures, from the local to provincial to national levels. At the local level, ethnic minority traders are faced with a lack of information regarding market reconstructions and relocations that

impact directly on their daily livelihoods. The market management board is left in the dark over market planning, and there is little communication between state representatives and upland traders. When relocations do occur, they have been disorganised with no consistent information provided about new trade conditions and infrastructure. At the provincial level, tourism to upland ‘cultural markets’ is seen as an important economic bounty, yet local market relocations hurt the tourism coffers. National level plans, when carried out at the very local level, thus have numerous unforeseen, and often unwanted consequences.

### **5.3.3 Local State Actors vs. Small-scale Traders**

As the face of the state within the marketplace, the encounters between market officials and traders should be delved into further. This relation reflects a social interface where contestations over value, meaning and power frequently come to the surface, to be negotiated through a number of different overt and covert ways (c.f. Long 2001). In this section, I look into these official-trader interactions in Lào Cai’s upland marketplaces by providing some examples to demonstrate how gender, ethnicity and everyday strategies of resistance are significant features that are implicated within this dynamic.

Market management positions tend to be highly gendered at town and commune levels. I noted only five female cadres out of all the markets I visited in Lào Cai, and they were responsible for finances and compiling statistics, but did not participate in fee collection rounds. During one interview, a male market official stated how “a man is more appropriate to solving disputes in trade. Men are stronger and less hot tempered and sharp tongued than women, and therefore better at intervening when problems happen.” At the same time, the majority of small-scale traders in upland markets are women. The male gendering of the official regulation of marketplace trade in Vietnam has also been noted by Leshkovich (2008). She writes (2008: 25), “traders might be described, on the one hand, as ignorant disorderly women in need of authoritative male supervision or, on the other, as hard-working wives, mothers and sister traders victimised by lazy and greedy men.” Such paradoxical visions of small-scale traders were certainly evident in my discussions with both market officials and market women about the other, as well as from

my observations of the dynamics between these two groups (such as I described in Chapter 4).

Other important point to make about market management relates to ethnicity, and to the possibility of interethnic tensions between market authorities and petty traders in their everyday encounters. I observed very few market officials who were ethnic minorities, particularly in town markets, while there tended to be more representation by ethnic minority market cadres in commune marketplaces. One commune market official expressed that he had an easier time dealing with local traders because he was also an ethnic minority compared to his associate, a lowland Kinh migrant who was a market official in the neighbouring town market. This commune market official identified himself as Thu Lao, and could speak Hmong, Tày and Vietnamese<sup>121</sup>. In his words (12/09/07), “because this area is mostly ethnic minority people, I think it is easier for me to manage the market and have conversations with traders because I speak their language, unlike my colleague here who speaks only the Kinh language.” Another example is the Sa Pa ethnic minority handicraft market. Here, disputes are handled by a male Hmong volunteer who acts to inform the market board if any major problems occur, such as theft or fighting. This man was selected to assist market officials because they felt he would have a better rapport with traders since he was also an ethnic minority, compared to the all-Kinh market management board there, as well as because he “spoke Kinh language well” (MMB representative Sa Pa town 01/06/06).

On a more general level regarding the market authority-trader relationship, for the most part, the officials I interviewed tended to echo the central state’s vision of the market as a potentially disordered space that needed to be structured, and particularly so regarding traders. A number of insights into market officials’ relations with traders emerged from my observations of these cadres performing their rounds to collect fees and monitor activities. During my time spent in the markets, I witnessed a variety of different ways that market officials and traders managed their identities and attempted to represent their positions to one another in order to achieve their own objectives.

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<sup>121</sup> Thu Lao are officially classified by the Vietnam state as a subgroup of the Tày ethnic minority group.

In some markets, officials maintained a personal distance from traders as a way to establish and maintain a relationship of authority (MMB Si Ma Cai representative 29/07/07). In others officials and traders had developed a more friendly, or joking manner. For authorities this helped to ‘smooth over’ the aspects of their position that make them unpopular market fixtures – particularly, fee collection – while for traders, such rapport helped in relaxing regulations. For instance, in the Sa Pa handicraft market, which is dominated by female ethnic minority (mostly Hmong and Yao) traders, I once witnessed several elder traders band together in cajoling a young, male Kinh fee collector into not bothering with collecting their fees for that day because it was “very small and unimportant” (Field notes 30/06/06). In a manner that seemed to me as more teasing than aggressive, a few of them pinched the official and slapped his bottom, destabilising his authority by sexualising him as a young male and asserting the market as a female domain. This clearly appeared to do the trick – at making the official uncomfortable - as he waved these women away with an awkward grin and beat a hasty retreat from that section.

On the other hand, there were many instances where traders responded outright against state regulation, sometimes as an appeal or other times even angrily – for instance, expressing indignation at having to pay fees or in the case of ambulant vendors, having their goods confiscated by the police (see Chapter 8). In these cases, traders more often highlighted their victimisation by claiming how officials interfere with their right to provide for their families (also see Koh 2006, for similar tactics by traders in Hà Nội). A market official from the Sa Pa township market (01/06/06) also stated:

Sometimes when the collectors make their rounds the ethnic minorities do not want to pay because they haven’t been able to sell anything on that day and don’t have enough to pay the fee. When this happens, it may be dealt with on an individual basis [at the discretion of the collector]. Maybe they will have to pay back the next day, but I don’t really know because I don’t go myself to collect the fees. In fact, there are more problems with the Kinh sellers because they pay more for taxes and for their fixed spot. If they pay slowly then they will be punished.

This official’s comment highlights how the formalisation of marketplaces can adversely affect the livelihoods of economically vulnerable groups, particularly when traders take a



loss by paying fees during slack periods. In these cases, a more flexible payment arrangement that follows seasonal patterns - such as higher fees in the period leading up to the lunar New Year when more market transactions occur - would be a more suitable approach. This points to some of the problems with having an overall model as a goal for market organisation and regulation, and the need for an approach in the uplands that remains flexible for adaptability to local context.

Other ‘rightful’ complaints by traders on the market authorities were based on a lack of services which they were supposedly paying for through their fees. For instance, a group of traders in the temporary Bắc Hà market (discussed earlier in Section 5.5.1) moved out of the market to a new spot along the road within close visibility of the People’s Committee and other state offices. According to one female Kinh trader, Tuyet (01/09/07), “we came here because we can’t stand being in the market anymore, it’s so disgusting.” Their decision to relocate to this noticeable location and refusal to pay fees was their means to protest the state’s poor handling of the market construction. On another occasion, several Hmong women in the Sa Pa marketplace were irritated because a theft of their wares had occurred. They argued to the market officials that there was no point in paying fees when no one was looking after their goods, and that the market board was failing at its job of ‘maintaining security’ in the marketplace. While all of these above responses (whether more joking or more hostile) to market authorities come from very different types of market traders, what they share in common is a moral critique of state burdens on their livelihoods – the unfairness of fees imposed on those who are poor, or the state’s failure in its duty to provide adequate essential services.

In addition to such overt or vocal acts of remonstrance by traders against the demands or limits placed on them by market officials, other traders dealt with this through more subtle strategies of everyday resistance. Most commonly taking the form of deception or evasion, these involved such varied acts as: underreporting sales; evading regulation by locating on the market periphery or remaining ambulant; and decreasing the size of market space occupied. Let me highlight a few cases of such covert resistance in order to illustrate further. In 2007, in one upland periodic market, livestock traders were required



to pay a market fee, but only if they were able to sell an animal. However, the market official (04/09/07) there told me, “I have to wait around here and watch them all day because some traders will lie and say they didn’t sell an animal to avoid having to pay”. Feigned accommodation, such as by ‘foot dragging’, was another way for traders to manoeuvre around trade regulations. For instance, in July 2010, Hmong and Yao street vendors selling to tourists in Sa Pa town were being told by the authorities to move away or their goods would be confiscated. I observed that these traders appeared at first to quickly comply, but in fact, they were taking their sweet time collecting their wares. When they saw that the officials had finally moved well on down the road out of sight, they simply stopped packing and stayed put. In another periodic market, I once witnessed market cadres visiting makeshift bamboo stalls - erected by traders themselves - with a measuring tape to assess their size. Hmong textile traders responded by hurriedly packing up and shrinking their displays. These examples of understated modes of resistance to market regulation reflect traders’ creativity and ingenuity in finding ways to escape unwanted or onerous obligations placed upon them.

### **5.3.4 Inappropriate Lowland Marketplace Models for the Uplands?**

Further evidence of incompatibilities between state marketplace development agendas and traders’ livelihood priorities emerge when we consider *how markets are actually used* by different groups of social actors. The ultimate goal of permanent, daily market structures with set kiosks appears to fit better with a lowland Kinh ideal of more ‘modern’ marketplace organisation than with the upland periodic market fairs that have featured for centuries in ethnic minority trade and socialisation. As such, the restructuring of upland marketplaces by the state aligns them more closely with the prerogatives of lowland Kinh trading conceptualisations and practices. As noted in Chapter 3, Kinh traders in upland markets stand to benefit most from these transformations – notwithstanding my examples of how these projects have harmed traders - due to their greater access to financial capital, market information, and extensive trade networks. These factors afford them an advantage over ethnic minorities within lowland-style market systems (World Bank 2009). This latter point will be returned again in Section 5.5 and is also explored in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

For many Hmong and Yao households in Lào Cai, the agricultural subsistence core of their livelihoods is prioritised and is linked to local models of wealth and well-being – performing these activities are also valued for their own sake. As such, it is important that other livelihood diversification strategies be oriented and timed around this core. While imposing greater formality, new state market arrangements do not always allow for the flexibility that ethnic minorities have been accustomed to and require for their trade activities. Yet, it is precisely flexibility in response to change, that through time, has become a longer term ‘way of doing things’ that enables Hmong and Yao uplanders to adapt to changing circumstances and take up new opportunities as they arise (c.f. Turner and Michaud 2008). A less temporally and spatially elastic commitment to trade does not make sense for many ethnic minorities who carefully shift their livelihood activities according to their seasonal agricultural calendars. Major market periods tend to be from the post-harvest time after October until the lunar New Year, and March or April for purchasing agricultural inputs (MMB Mường Khương representative 21/07/07).

Other ethnic minorities participate in niche trading and market systems that are almost entirely overlooked and not clearly supported by state development plans, as I demonstrate in more detail within Chapters 6 and 8. A number of these activities involve commodities oriented for ethnic minority consumers, and goods that are of not much interest to non-minorities or much bearing on national economics. The state also frequently continues to misunderstand and stereotype minorities such as Hmong and Yao as lacking business aptitude and in need of being ‘taught’ how to trade with outsiders (McElwee 2008; World Bank 2009). This is in spite of the fact that these groups have a long history of association with wider trade networks, as I have explored in Chapter 3.

Some Kinh officials I spoke with reflected this opinion that ethnic minorities had not yet developed the skills necessary in order to be ‘real traders’. For these officials, a real trader is one that sells in the market on a daily basis from a fixed location, not one who trades weekly, on a seasonal basis or according to a more flexible schedule. In one instance, where plans had been drawn for a new commune market, a Kinh People’s

Committee representative (03/03/06) explained to me that it had yet to be constructed, “because the local people [ethnic minorities] in this area still do not understand the concept of daily trading from a fixed selling space”. As such, he felt that ethnic minorities would not use a new market efficiently. Other officials appeared to have a slightly more nuanced understanding of upland trade, such as one Sa Pa town market Kinh official (01/06/05) who noted ethnic minority trade patterns changing over time. He explained:

At the beginning [late 1990s] the state opened the cultural market for ethnic minorities. Previously, they used to go to the market to play or just to sell simple goods. But now I think this area has evolved into a place where minorities come to make more money. The reasons why ethnic minorities come to the market now are more serious – they are starting to take trading more seriously.

This notion that ethnic minorities need to be educated in how to trade was also illustrated by an official from the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism for Sa Pa District (03/08/06). This Kinh official explained that because ethnic minorities tend to have much less financial capital than Kinh, “they should not have to pay taxes...however they should be shown the *proper way* to be involved in the business sector, have the correct documents, and be provided with the information on how to do business in the *correct way*” (emphasis added). Here, the state representative identifies the ‘correct way’ to trade as through formal official channels, and as full-time trading with the right legal documents.

I argue that this state emphasis on physical marketplaces and the trade that occurs in them, serves to perpetuate the stereotypes and rhetoric noted above. First, it constructs a limiting model of a ‘good marketplace trader’ as one who trades all-year round, is fixed in one place, and has good financial capital flows - in other words, one who resembles a lowland Kinh trader. Second, it amounts to an official blindness as to the great deal of commerce occurring external to marketplaces, often within hamlets. Substantial amounts of trade and various types of exchange based on social networks are carried out among inhabitants of ethnic minority hamlets and between contiguous hamlets (explored in Chapters 6, 7 and 8). Third, it overlooks the notable hamlet trade conducted by ethnic minorities at the ‘farm-gate’ with travelling intermediaries and traders (who are often Kinh), including commodities such as cardamom, forest products, maize, livestock, and

artisanal upland alcohols (see Section 5.5.6; Chapter 7; Sikor and Pham Thi Tuong Vi 2005; Tugault-LaFleur and Turner 2008; World Bank 2009). At the same time, the official invisibility of these alternative trade spaces enables ethnic minorities to continue to engage in economic transactions free from the burdens of regulatory fees and other formal access constraints (such as fixed space availability of market stalls).

In sum, state failure to recognise this diversity of trading styles and spaces because it does not fit into a narrow concept of ‘trading,’ serves to perpetuate the notion that ethnic minorities do not trade or know how to do so. Moreover, it marginalises the adaptive or innovative responses by ethnic minorities to new market opportunities (c.f. Sowerwine 2004). It has been clearly established that participation in marketplace trading by ethnic minorities is much lower than Kinh – both in terms of frequency and financial profits (World Bank 2009).<sup>122</sup> Even so, while marketplace trade by groups such as Hmong and Yao in Lào Cai may take place on a much smaller scale, capturing a more minute market share when observed overall, such activities should not automatically be assumed to have less relevance for their livelihoods.

By overlooking upland trade diversity, the state is also excluding the role of vital alternative exchange practices such as barter and a wide variety of reciprocal exchange arrangements, as I explore in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, for water buffalo, upland alcohol, and textiles. Based on moral economy norms upholding the right to subsistence and underpinned by mutuality (c.f. Scott 1976) such approaches are used in order to redistribute, circulate and accommodate peoples’ access to needed goods and both ceremonial and physical capital materials, thus sustaining upland communities. Yet, it is not just outsider perceptions, and state constructions or relocations of markets that are impacting upon upland livelihoods. Upland developments in roads, transportation and communications technology have played crucial roles in expanding the trade activities and market opportunities for diverse groups of traders, discussed next.

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<sup>122</sup> In a World Bank (2009) survey that included 2,000 respondents from several ethnic minority communities within numerous provinces of Vietnam, it was concluded that 27 per cent of Kinh earned income from trade compared to only 2 per cent for ethnic minorities.

## **5.4 ‘Distance demolishing technologies’: Roads, Transportation Options and Communications**

Above and beyond the creation and upgrading of market infrastructure, the development of other, complementary forms of physical capital have facilitated upland resident's access to markets. This includes connective infrastructure such as public buses, private transportation and telecommunications - particularly mobile phones - which work to improve physical mobility, information flows, and overcome the “friction of terrain” and “friction of distance” in the uplands (Scott 2009: 45 and 47).<sup>123</sup> These forms of physical capital have enabled traders to consolidate older upland trade operations and networks as well as develop new ones - drawing attention to the important role played by the ‘material worlds’ that mediate, organise and enhance the size and reach of social networks (Urry 2003).

Yet, analysts such as Scott (2009) maintain that while facilitating market access and providing new livelihood opportunities, these infrastructural developments are also elemental as the latest apparatus by modern nation states in the final period of enclosure for upland societies and spaces. Scott (2009: 10-11) explains how, since the 1950s, nation states of the upland Southeast Asian massif have

worked to assert their sovereignty over these regions by colonising the periphery itself and transforming it into a fully governed, fiscally fertile zone...This truly imperial project [has been] made possible only by distance-demolishing technologies...all-weather roads, bridges, railroads, airplanes, modern weapons, telegraph, telephone, and now modern information technologies including global positioning systems.

I now turn to examine how these distance demolishing technologies are being implemented by the state and put into use by upland residents in Lào Cai province.

### **5.4.1 Improved Market Access through Road Network Enhancements**

It has long been recognised that rural access to markets and trade opportunities are strongly affected by the improvement of road networks. However, more recent research has demonstrated how roads may also work to exacerbate spatial or social inequalities,

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<sup>123</sup> The concepts ‘frictions of terrain and distance’ reflects the notion that prior to the revolutions in modern transportation, rugged upland landscapes constricted state control and appropriation as well as social and economic exchanges (Scott 2009: 47-48).

leading to unintended differential economic impacts (Porter 1995; Bryceson et al., 2008). For instance, a study conducted by Porter (1995) in rural Nigeria found that road construction reoriented the focus of trade flows to nodes along the new roads, leading to a decline in off-road periodic markets as well as a deterioration of ‘bush tracks’. The impact of this shift in trade linkages was felt most by the least mobile, in this case small-scale women traders.

In the context of Vietnam, the state has regarded road network improvement as part and parcel of its poverty alleviation and market integration programmes in upland regions, and this has been a component of both P135 and HEPR investment (RNIP 2003; World Bank 2009). Data derived from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey indicate that “households living in communities with a paved road...or with a market are more likely to escape poverty than households who live in communes where these facilities do not exist” (Glewwe et al. 2002: 784). The Vietnam state anticipates road improvements in the northern uplands to yield the following socio-economic benefits:

[A reduction in] road transit times within remote areas of northern Vietnam; [reduced] vehicle-operating costs through the improved road segments; [improved] overall road access to poor, isolated agricultural communities; and [enhanced] delivery of goods from agricultural production centers to marketplaces by creating more efficient and faster traffic conditions (RNIP 2003).

A major target of the second phase of P135 is for over 80 per cent of all upland communes to have motor vehicle roads that can at least accommodate motorbikes, connecting commune centres with all hamlets (SRV Decision No.07/2006/QD-TTg). This focus on commune centres may mitigate the problems identified above by Porter (1995), as smaller road networks linking interior areas to main roads are included. More specifically, the current *Master Plan for Socioeconomic Development in Lào Cai until 2020*, contains a number of road development projects. These include border roads to connect Lào Cai with Hà Giang province, upgrading of provincial border roads, national highways and intra-provincial roads, and new roads to commune centres (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/QD-TTg)<sup>124</sup>. Finally in 2009, a major project to build a highway connecting

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<sup>124</sup>The detailed plans consist of the following: “To develop ring roads: 1A (border ring), which will basically run in the same direction with the border corridor road from Hà Giang town along national

Hà Nội to Lào Cai City was initiated – planned to link at Lào Cai city through the border town at Hekou and eventually onwards to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. When completed, the highway will cut the time of motor travel between these cities in half, and will undoubtedly have dramatic impacts on the lives and livelihoods of upland residents in the province.

#### **5.4.2 Improvements in Public Transportation**

However, it is not only developments in roads and road systems that are acting as a catalyst for the expansion and reconfiguration of small-scale trade and upland market networks. More importantly, a diversification of transportation opportunities in Lào Cai has accompanied upland roadway developments (Bryceson et al. 2008). Prior to the late 1980s, the majority of upland minority residents travelled to marketplaces by packhorse, bicycle or else on foot, and such trips were often a major time commitment. This is still the case for many weekly market traders who sell in their closest commune market. However, since the 1990s, a dramatic expansion and improvement in upland public transportation has enabled traders and wholesalers to take advantage of buses for moving commodities, augmenting long-distance trade linkages (Hardy 2001).

As public bus, private minibus and truck services to an area require a certain level of population density, demand, and purchasing power, these vehicles mostly ply the main trade routes connecting upland towns to the provincial capital (LC Dept. of Commerce

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highway 4 to Mường Khương, running further along national highway 4D to Bản Phiệt – then along national highway 70 to Lào Cai city, and on along national highway 4D to the top of Trạm Tôn (Sa Pa) into Lai Châu province. From 2010, to invest in upgrading and connecting all national highways 4C, 4D... into a ring road of national highway 4, which then will be uniformly managed and upgraded to grade-IV road; ring road 1B close to the border line: starting from Lào Cai city (from the end of national highway 4E), running along provincial highway 156 through Bát Xát town to Bản Vược – Trịnh Tường – A Mú Sung – Ý Tý – Dền Sáng into Phong Thổ district (Lai Châu). Because of the importance of this road, which will be close to the border line and serve both as a corridor road and a ring road, with many sections to be used for border patrol purposes, it should be invested and upgraded soon. To study and transform this road into national highway 4E running through Lào Cai and Lai Châu provinces and upgrade it to facilitate investment, construction and management. To develop intra-provincial roads: To upgrade provincial highways, build Cốc Ly bridge linking provincial highway 153 (Bắc Ngầm – Bắc Hà road) with provincial highway 154 (Hoàng Liên Sơn 2 road); to upgrade provincial highway 155 (Ô Quy Hồ - road); to upgrade the remaining section of provincial highway 153 (Bắc Ngầm - Bắc Hà - Si Ma Cai); to build road D2 (Lào Cai city) into grade-II urban road; to upgrade provincial highway 151 (road 79). By 2010, to complete the programme on investment in roads leading to the centers of communes in which roads are not available yet, and complete the building of border patrol paths” (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/QĐ-TTg).

and Tourism 01/06/07; Bryceson et al. 2008). Nevertheless, recent road enhancements have also enabled transportation services to reach some of the more remote commune markets on a weekly basis to facilitate trader activities at the periodic markets, such as Mùòng Hum marketplace, in Bát Xát district, and Cán Cầu market in Si Ma Cai. In the latter case, the groups making use of these public transportation facilities include a number of cross-border petty traders from Yunnan.

Extending beyond the province, demand stimulated through upland-lowland trade and social networks between Kinh migrants and their home communities has also led to direct public bus services between Lào Cai city and lowland provinces such as Nam Định (see Section 5.5.4). Upland traders, wholesalers and intermediaries also make arrangements with public bus and private minibus or truck workers to have their commodities transported onwards to their trade contacts in other upland towns and cities, as well as in lowland areas, as discussed further in Section 5.5 and Chapter 7. Yet at the same time, traders often described the downsides of these modes of transportation, particularly their inadequate conditions due to the overloading of goods, crowding of passengers, dangerous drivers, and poorly maintained vehicles.

### **5.4.3 Expanding Private Transportation Options**

Concurrently, another significant recent transformation in upland transportation options is the small engine motorbike. Since 1998, the number of motorbikes registered in Lào Cai province has increased fourfold (Bryceson et al. 2008). This is connected to the import of cheap motorbikes or bike parts produced in China, and 80 per cent of those reaching the Vietnam market are being sold in rural areas (Oxfam 2001). While overall, more motorbikes are owned by middle and upper income groups, Bryceson et al. (2008: 472), found that “motorcycle ownership seems to be accessible to lower-income groups as well as the more affluent.” However, their study - which in Lào Cai was focussed only in Bát Xát district - failed to consider ethnic difference as a variable, making no comparisons between motorbike access and ownership between Kinh and minorities.



Other research suggests that while the gap between Kinh and ethnic minority ownership of motorbikes is decreasing, there is still a substantial difference, an observation that I would substantiate through my own fieldwork (VASS 2006; Hai-Anh Dang in press)<sup>125</sup>. Still, my observations in Hà Giang province of billboard advertisements produced by Lifan, a Chinese motorbike company, that were clearly targeting a Hmong audience, suggests that this group is considered an important – or up and coming - consumer market (Field notes 06/06/10). Expanding economic opportunities for ethnic minorities, particularly the lucrative trade in cardamom (*thảo quả*), has enabled particular communities of Yao and Hmong in Sa Pa and Bát Xát districts of Lào Cai province to earn substantial amounts of cash. Some households there have used this income in order to purchase motorbikes to support their trading activities (Bát Xát People's Committee representative 02/10/07; Tugault-LaFleur and Turner 2009). Nevertheless, many traders in upland markets who cannot afford their own vehicles can hire the services of private motorbike drivers (*xe ôm*) who offer more flexible and faster access to remote hamlets than public buses or private minibuses. At the same time, there are still large numbers of ethnic minorities who do not use any of these transportation modes, and packhorses are still a common sight in the more remote upland marketplaces.

Motorbikes are undoubtedly a key material asset for small traders, allowing them to expand the scope of their trade activities through better access to marketplaces and reducing overall travel times. This enables more frequent market visits and travel to markets over greater distances. Motorbike transportation has led to the emergence of groups of Kinh, Tày, Nùng and Hmong traders who operate within weekly circuits of periodic markets (Section 5.5.2). It has also enabled groups of long-distance Vietnam border resident Hmong traders to supply new types of minority-oriented consumer goods

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<sup>125</sup> While motorbikes have been downgraded from a luxury item to a normal good in Vietnam, the costs of purchasing a motorbike still remain exorbitant for the majority of the low-income rural population (Oxfam 2001; VASS 2006). For instance, “the cheapest Chinese motorbikes assembled in Vietnam are being sold at a price of VND 8 million and more. High-quality motorbikes manufactured and assembled in Vietnam by FDI enterprises are much more expensive, ranging from 15 million to nearly VND 30 million for each. Particularly, branded motorbikes like Honda, Suzuki or Yamaha made by Vietnam-Japan joint venture companies in Vietnam are sold at a price of VND 21 million or more” (Oxfam 2001). From my observations in Lào Cai, Hmong residents perceive motorbikes as an important, yet very expensive household asset.

to upland markets very distant from the national border and sites of product origin in China (Chapter 8). Improved mobility has also made it possible for traders - both Kinh and Hmong alike - to travel further in search of new marketplaces where they might find a trade niche.

Yet, as motorbikes are so costly (at least 8 million VND), many traders are unable to afford the cost of a motorbike from their own savings, and must obtain a bank or informal loan to purchase one. For instance, Tuan a 23-year-old Kinh man, used to only trade in Bắc Hà town market along with his uncle. He was then able to use his uncle's fixed market stall as collateral on a loan from the bank to buy a motorbike and diversify into handicraft trading in a circuit of upland tourist markets. In his words, "with my uncle's help, I got a bank loan for 15 million VND, and used 12.9 million VND to buy a motorbike, while the rest I invested in my new business. When I first started trading, I only worked in Bắc Hà market because I had no means of travelling, but since I bought my bike I've also started selling to tourists in Cán Cầu and Cốc Ly marketplaces" (Tuan 10/06/07). Tuan evaluated this change as a big improvement, because he could sell more at these three periodic markets each week than by working in the township market that was quiet outside of main market day. Another Kinh trader, Linh (12/06/07), who sells produce in a circuit of markets explained, "I only used to sell in Bắc Hà market because I had no motorbike. When I got one I was able to start trading in many different markets. I got a loan through people around my village but the interest rate was very high at 20 per cent."

Ly (02/02/09), a Hmong handicraft trader from Sa Pa, explained that Hmong may use low interest government loans to purchase motorbikes (at around 0.6-0.8 per cent interest per month). However, this was more complicated because, "you have to wait at least 2 months to get the loan and it is a long, complicated process with many forms to fill out." Ly explained that it was easier and quicker to get short-term loans from Kinh or Giáy informal lenders – often shopkeepers or traders - but these charged a much higher rate of interest of around 4 per cent or more per month. There are high stakes to accessing loans for motorbikes, which can put vulnerable groups at particularly high risk. Namely, they

may end up having to sell productive assets such as buffalo in order to fulfil their repayments, placing them at a far greater disadvantage than any benefit they could have gained from the investment of the loan (Hmong woman 21/02/09; DFID and LCPC 2003).

Another factor mediating access to new transportation options is gender. For instance, Hmong and Yao women traders tend not to drive motorbikes – while it is common for Kinh women to do so – and must rely on buses, or else a male relative or *xe ôm* driver to assist them. This is likely one reason why Hmong men are beginning to accompany their wives to the market as traders, particularly in areas such as Mường Khương, Si Ma Cai and Bắc Hà where improved roads have enabled Hmong to trade in a wide circuit of marketplaces (Chapter 8). In addition, several Hmong women expressed concerns over personal security and safety when travelling alone. As such, gender and cultural factors - and linked issues of security - can limit the nature of women's mobility and ability to make use of these expanded transportation opportunities. In turn, this plays a role in shaping the way women and men participate in upland trade.

#### **5.4.4 Information Communications Technology and Upland Trade**

In addition to better road networks and a diverse mix of transportation options to serve the physical travel of upland residents, the broadening of communication channels through upgraded infrastructure and the adoption of information communications technology - especially mobile phones - have played a key role in facilitating trade networking in Lào Cai. In the national decision on *Mechanisms and Policies to Support Socio-economic Development in Northern Midland and Mountainous Provinces until 2010*, the development of telecommunications is an explicit priority (SRV Decision No. 27/2008/QĐ-TTg). Under this decision, by 2010 all communes should have access to landline telephones in commune centres.

However, even more important is the mobile phone technology that has spread quickly into remote areas of upland northern Vietnam since the early 2000s. This is preferred for its widespread reliable coverage, relative cheapness over landlines, portability, and

potential for sending brief text messages (Anderson 2010; Personal observations 2006-2010). A particularly crucial factor here is that, from my observations, many ethnic minority traders are able to benefit from access to these affordable mobile phones and ‘pay-as-you-go’ services.

Elsewhere, researchers on small-scale trade have also noted the important role of mobile phone technologies in helping to sustain and expand trade networks, permitting market information to be relayed quickly over large distances (Overa 2004; Waverman *et al.* 2005; Donner 2007; Aker 2008). This is particularly relevant for traders in remote upland provinces such as Lào Cai, especially for long distance traders, dealing in goods such as alcohol and textiles (detailed more in Chapters 8 and 9 respectively). These technologies have therefore been instrumental in organising far flung trade relations at a distance - building ‘weak ties’ beyond the everyday or weekly face-to-face market encounters (c.f. Urry 2003).

Mobile phones have enabled diverse groups of upland market traders to place orders and other requests with their lowland wholesalers (see Section 5.5.5; Anderson 2010). Moreover, some Vietnamese mobile phone companies such as Mobifone, extend their coverage to reach China’s border towns and communes. This permits ethnic minority traders from Vietnam to continue their communications while conducting activities across the border. Fife and Hosman (2007) document a telecommunications project by the Vietnam state in the border areas of Lào Cai, aimed to promote cross-border trade with Chinese residents. However, whether this is for small-scale ethnic minority trade or larger Kinh trade is yet to be determined, as it is not explicitly dealt with in their article.

In sum, new and improved roads and increased transportation in the uplands are connecting ethnic minority hamlets, and mobile phone availability is facilitating market knowledge and trading ease. However, as I alluded at the introduction of this section, it is important to critique the intent behind such ‘developments’. As Scott notes in his 2009 book *‘The Art of Not being Governed’*, such actions by the state result in ‘distance demolishing technologies’ reaching the uplands. As such, the state has acquired more

sophisticated and powerful means to ‘keep an eye’ on upland ethnic minority activities and livelihoods, and to expand regulations and lowland standards as it sees fit. As I have argued in Section 5.3, this is clearly already the case with formal marketplace construction and the halting of locally-designed, informal markets that relied on resident-made structures (often far more suited to the local climate and environmentally positive). This is not to say that such infrastructural development should be stopped or that these changes are entirely negative for upland traders - far from it, - but the unexpected consequences of what might, at first glance appear to be benign, ‘development’ approaches need to be examined carefully. As such, let me now turn to explore how small traders are engaging in and navigating Lào Cai’s market trade-scapes, by presenting the different groups of marketplace participants and their activities.

### **5.5 Actors in the Markets: Categories of Upland Traders**

Upland marketplaces and the petty commerce sector in Lào Cai province is comprised of diverse groups of traders, who might be categorised on the basis of trading style, commodity specialisation, or ethnicity. I now overview the major groups of traders that operate in these upland markets by organising them according to the types of trade they undertake. I also examine traders’ roles in structuring and restructuring marketplaces and trade networks. Due to the complexity of activity that occurs within these marketplaces, it is beyond the scope of my research to cover all trader categories. Therefore, I have focussed the discussion on what I consider to be key groups of upland trade actors, namely: weekly traders, mobile market circuit traders, cross-border traders, daily market traders, lowland-upland traders, and upland-lowland wholesalers and collectors. My rationale for what groups to include here is not based on the scale of trade or the market share captured by a trader category. Rather, my intent is to illustrate the variety, range and specialisation of activity, aimed to suit the consumption needs of a wide spectrum of upland consumers. Furthermore, it must be noted that my use of these particular groupings is somewhat of an oversimplification as they are not entirely exclusive. Indeed many upland traders fit under more than one type of trade description.

### **5.5.1 Weekly or Part-time Market Traders**

Weekly or part-time market traders cover a diverse group of social actors, performing an assortment of trades. I define this set as including those who trade once a week, or occasionally, normally in the market closest to their place of residence. The majority are ethnic minorities who sell goods that they cultivate, collect, or make themselves, such as farm produce, medicinal goods, tobacco, non-timber forest products, upland artisanal alcohol, agricultural tools, textiles and livestock. These traders may or may not trade throughout the year, with some trading according to the season. Weekly and part-time traders do not have fixed stalls and are not required to pay taxes to the state – but they must pay a daily market fee to the Market Management Board (MMB). As the fixed sections in the interior of the marketplace are reserved for those who have signed a contract with the MMB, many of these traders have defined their own spaces often located near the market gates at the periphery or on the roadways leading up to it where they are more visible to potential buyers entering the marketplace. However, as discussed above, the MMB arranges traders who wish to set-up within the direct site of the marketplace according to commodity specialisation and sometimes, ethnicity or residency. Weekly or part-time traders usually visit the market closest to their place of residence, with some arriving on motorbike, but many on foot or by horseback.

### **5.5.2 Mobile Market Circuit Traders**

Groups of small-scale traders operate in a cyclical itinerary of periodic markets, visiting different markets each, or most, days of the week. As noted in Chapter 4, the logic behind this type of trade follows from a build-up of consumer demand over weekly intervals, which circuit traders take advantage of by selling in a number of periodic marketplaces (c.f. Bromley et al. 1975). Still another perspective, based on what I observed in Lào Cai, is that this type of trade sometimes enables traders to resist the state's market regulation by evasion. A mobile trader's status is not officially recognised, and thus the same regulation pertains to them as to weekly traders: a daily market fee. As such, this group avoids paying the monthly and other fees that fixed daily traders are obligated to pay, while benefiting from periodic markets packed with visitors.

As discussed in Section 5.4, cyclical market trade has been facilitated by the recent upgrading and construction of roads in Lào Cai, as well as the rearrangement of periodic market days to reduce overlap within an area (see Chapter 3). Moreover, the improvements in bus and motorbike transportation discussed above, has allowed this group to redefine and expand their activities.

This category can be further subdivided into a number of key groups. Hmong selling ethnic-minority oriented commodities (such as textiles and cloth, Hmong movie and music VCD/DVDs, medicine and agricultural inputs from China) feature prominently in the circuit based trade. For example, following road enhancement in the area, well over 100 households from hamlets in Pha Long and Mường Khương have become involved in trading within a network covering several marketplaces across the districts of Mường Khương, Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai. I explore the activities of this group in detail in Chapter 8. Another group of upland circuit traders are ethnic minorities who trade livestock such as buffalo, which I explore in Chapter 6. Other groups include Kinh, Tày, and Nùng from upland towns who travel to more remote commune periodic markets in order to sell manufactured clothing, dried foods, utensils and produce.

Since 2003/2004, a group of around twenty Kinh traders from Bắc Hà town started to specialise in a range of ethnic handicrafts for tourists. Many of these trader households rent out daily stalls in the Bắc Hà marketplace, while simultaneously operating in a circuit of periodic tourist markets that include: Cốc Ly (on Tuesday, 35 km from Bắc Hà town); Cán Cầu (on Saturday, 18 km from Bắc Hà town) and Bắc Hà (on Sunday and other days of the week). Traders explained that it was far more lucrative to follow the tourist trail than to trade in Bắc Hà market every day. For instance Quynh (09/06/07) explained how on the main market day at Bắc Hà she normally earned 1 million VND selling handicrafts, and between 7-800,000 VND at the other tourist markets. Yet, by selling clothing in Bắc Hà market outside of the peak day, she estimated that she could earn only 2-400,000 VND per day. On Bắc Hà's main market day, some of these traders even expand their business to take over additional stalls, usually operated by relatives. These Kinh tourist traders purchase textiles from Hmong living in hamlets near Bắc Hà

town, and are also involved in more geographically extensive trade networks in tourist commodities.

For instance, Thue (09/06/07) travels to Sa Pa to purchase handicrafts from Kinh and Hmong in the Sa Pa market, and sometimes sells Bắc Hà style Hmong embroidered blankets to traders there. She also travels to the Hekou market across the border from Lào Cai city to purchase wholesale manufactured ‘minority-styled’ souvenirs which she uses to supply her own trade as well as other tourist traders. Moreover, Thue and her peers have connections with wholesalers of wooden carvings and scarves from Hà Nội, as well as wholesalers of jewellery modelled on ethnic minority styles from Nam Định - wholesalers who had initially travelled to Bắc Hà in search of prospective customers. Thue now telephones these wholesalers whenever she needs supplies and the goods are delivered to her by bus. Yet another group of around 25 Hmong women from a hamlet near Bắc Hà also follow this tourist route in order to sell embroidered bags and hats. Their trade is at a much smaller financial scale than the Kinh tourist traders, and they work as ambulant traders in the market so they can avoid the market fees and have direct access to tourists.

### **5.5.3 Cross-border Traders**

As explored in Chapter 3, cross-border trade between Lào Cai and Yunnan has ancient roots. Within contemporary upland markets, cross-border petty trade conducted by ethnic minorities has become an increasingly important livelihood activity for a growing number of households. As cross-border traders will be specifically explored in detail within Chapter 8, I only briefly note here the basic characteristics of this group. Vietnam Hmong and other ethnic minority traders classified as ‘border residents’ cross via local or national level border crossings into Yunnan to purchase goods from border markets or neighbouring towns which they bring back to sell in Vietnam. Key commodities circulated into Vietnam by these traders include: ethnic minority-oriented ‘cultural commodities’ (textiles, manufactured clothing, decorative materials, Hmong VCD/DVDs), shoes and boots, medicines, seeds, agricultural equipment, and pesticides. A smaller amount of trade is conducted by ethnic minorities from Vietnam within China;



including Hmong traders of old hemp skirts and water buffalo (see Chapters 6 and 8), pigs, and horses.

Another group of cross-border traders are Han and ethnic minority Chinese border residents who enter Vietnam on a weekly basis for the purpose of trading ethnic minority-oriented commodities (see Chapter 8). As they are subject to state restrictions circumscribing their movement and the duration spent in Vietnam – described in Chapter 3 - their activities are limited to a few select border markets – namely, Mường Khương, Pha Long, Si Ma Cai, and Cán Cầu - within Lào Cai. The trade networks of both of these groups of cross-border traders largely exclude Kinh Vietnamese, for reasons I examine more fully in Chapters 6 and 8.

#### **5.5.4 Daily Market Traders**

Kinh migrants from various lowland provinces make up the vast majority of daily market traders operating fixed stalls as well as trading as shopkeepers within upland townships. This group has grown to become a major force within Lào Cai's upland markets. Noted in Chapter 3, outside of market days, daily traders supply town dwellers with essential materials. On peak market days they serve a wider base of consumers from the surrounding localities. Kinh traders do not usually sell what they produce, instead purchasing goods from wholesalers or producers, which they resell in retail quantities to rural consumers. Common commodities that Kinh market vendors specialise in include produce of Vietnam lowland or Chinese origin, a range of manufactured clothing, meats and fish, dried foods, packaged foods, and house wares.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the majority of Kinh living in Lào Cai have migrated to the uplands from provinces in the Red River Delta over the last forty years, while their residential patterns are concentrated in upland towns, in areas with greater physical accessibility, and in the lower altitude valleys (Roche and Michaud 2000; Khong Dien 2002). In Chapter 3, I overviewed the different waves of upland in-migration encompassing state-sponsored mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and later independent migration following economic renovation in the late 1980s.

I was able to observe the expression of these different migration patterns within upland markets in Lào Cai, based upon the composition of traders. Moreover, Kinh migrants from different lowland areas have tended to settle together in different upland districts, suggesting the role of kin networks in this arrangement, the implications of which I illustrate below. Most of the early groups of traders who arrived in the uplands under NEZ state programmes were encouraged to move together as villages and communities (Abrami 2002). By way of a general illustration, in Lào Cai province, many of these individuals came from Hà Nam, Nam Định, Thái Bình and Hà Tây provinces. In Sa Pa town market, many of the long-term Kinh traders originate from Thái Bình, Hà Nam and Nam Định. In the town market of Bắc Hà, a group of clothing and produce traders arrived during the 1960s – all sharing the same home commune in Nam Định. Another group of Bắc Hà market traders are more recent migrants of the late 1990s and early 2000s, from Vĩnh Phúc, Phú Thọ, Hà Nam and Thanh Hóa provinces (Kinh life history interviewee, Bắc Hà town 08/06/07). In Bát Xát town market, the majority of daily Kinh traders originate from Nam Định province (Bát Xát MMB official 28/05/07). For Si Ma Cai town marketplace, the initial groups of Kinh traders were formerly from Nam Định, whereas newer market entrants from the early 2000s have come from Lào Cai city, Vĩnh Phúc or Phú Thọ (Si Ma Cai MMB official 26/05/07). Finally, in Mường Khương market, the hometowns of most Kinh traders are Phú Thọ and Hà Tây provinces (Mường Khương MMB official 21/07/07).

Interestingly, many such Kinh migrant traders I spoke with do not view themselves as a cohesive group. A distinction is often made between traders from different migratory periods, which is in part a reflection of class status. For example, many of the older, more established migrants who were part of state planned migration flows were civil servants or Communist Party members. These groups of earlier settlers are inclined to regard the more recent, spontaneous migrants with a level of disdain. These newcomers did not arrive via the New Economic Zones programme and are often landless or lack official residency in the uplands - classified as temporary migrants - and are highly dependent on trade for their livelihoods. Indeed, some migrants choose to maintain their old residency permits instead of having it transferred to the uplands, as this enables them to maintain

their hometown ties, social networks, and state privileges (c.f. Winkels 2008). As such, I discovered that some of the newer temporary migrant traders lived under very precarious circumstances, residing in basic guesthouses lodgings, or even sleeping at their stalls in the marketplaces. According to Thu (09/09/07), a woman in her 20s who is originally from Phú Thọ province:

I came to Si Ma Cai three years ago because we were very poor, and a close friend from my home village had moved up here two years earlier. She told me that trading in the uplands was much easier compared to the lowlands. But I'm very homesick and not happy with my life here. My husband works in the post office back in my hometown, and my daughter stays with him. I sell here every day by myself, and sleep inside my stall. If I need to take a bath, I have to go to my friend's house and use hers. Many traders here sleep in the market like me, because we only want to live here temporarily, for a few years to save up money and then return to our hometowns.

Indeed, many of the newer migrants to Lào Cai's upland market towns since the early 2000s have come in search of trade prospects, a large number of whom are from Vĩnh Phúc and Phú Thọ provinces. According to Hai (22/03/09), a long-term Kinh resident of Sa Pa town, "the older migrants tend not to like these Vĩnh Phúc people [newer group of migrants]. This is because they act like the Chinese, just going after money. They have shops and they trade but they have no land." Some of the older upland Kinh traders expressed how they felt the newer migrants were crowding them out of the market. Given their longer-term residence in the uplands, the former group believes that they have a stronger claim and more established rights over the use of these upland markets.

Nevertheless, while some contempt is expressed at the new upland migrants' over zealousness in commerce, they are simultaneously accepted as being skilled at trading, and for being tenacious at seeking out new opportunities. Thue (09/06/07), a Kinh Bắc Hà market trader originally from Hồ Chí Minh city, summed up this view as "people from Vĩnh Phúc have a reputation for being good traders. They are everywhere in Vietnam and they will go anywhere to find any little remote corner that needs their product."

In Chapter 3 I described how existing social networks at both destination sites and hometowns play a key role in facilitating and encouraging this lowland-upland migration.

In terms of trade, these networks are also important for accessing vital information about market conditions and possibilities. Phuong (23/06/07), a middle-aged Kinh clothing trader explained, “I already had relatives in Bắc Hà, and then some friends of mine also moved up here. They told me they had become traders and could run their business really well up here, with far less competition than in the lowlands. Through their help, I already had trade contacts that I could draw from.” Phuong’s comments highlight how trade networks established by earlier Kinh migrants may be transferred on to new migrants; saving time and effort for newcomers in building up their own set of trade relations.

Moreover, ongoing long-distance social networks play a fundamental role in expanding and strengthening upland-lowland trade. Upland Kinh traders often move back and forth between Lào Cai and their hometowns, purchasing goods from lowland suppliers to sell in upland markets. For example, Kinh merchandise traders originally from lowland Nam Định province often travel back there every few weeks or months to purchase supplies from wholesalers in the Chợ Ròng market in Nam Định. Noted above in Section 5.4.2, these trader movements are supported by a direct public bus route between Lào Cai city and Nam Định, suggesting a significant number of hometown linkages for upland Kinh migrants. Other groups of upland Kinh traders who share kin or hometowns often cooperate to pool resources and jointly hire a minibus to visit lowland wholesale markets together for their stock (Bắc Hà Kinh traders 01/09/07; Si Ma Cai Kinh traders 01/09/07).<sup>126</sup>

While some of the newer groups of Kinh traders have relocated permanently to Lào Cai’s upland towns, others traverse between their hometown and new upland trade locations every week or every few weeks if they are moving goods. Sometimes, this consists of trade flows moving in either direction. For example, a group of traders from Vĩnh Phúc transport flowers and seasonal vegetables from Lào Cai to sell in Vĩnh Phúc, and return with produce from that area to trade in upland markets. (Sa Pa District Peoples Committee official 25/05/07). These diverse social networks link northern upland

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<sup>126</sup>This was the case for a group of traders from Nam Định province now working in Bắc Hà market, as well as another group from Vĩnh Phúc province now working in Si Ma Cai market.

marketplaces with northern delta marketplaces via ongoing flows of commodities, traders, information and other resources.

While I have illustrated that the majority of daily traders in upland town markets are of Kinh ethnicity, a smaller number of ethnic minorities are also engaged in daily trading. These include Hmong and Yao who sell handicrafts in the Sa Pa market, as well as ambulant handicraft vendors who trade on the town's streets. Finally, a small group of Hmong traders sell alcohol on a daily basis in the Bắc Hà town market. I only make a note of these groups here, as I present a thorough examination of their activities and trade practices in Chapters 7 and 8.

#### **5.5.5 Lowland-Upland Wholesalers**

Lowland-upland wholesalers also supply commodities including seasonal produce, garments, dried foods, and household utensils (ceramics and plastic wares) to upland towns. These Kinh wholesalers are mostly from the lowland provinces of Vĩnh Phúc and Nam Định, sending different goods regularly to upland township marketplaces and shops by truck or minibus. Commodity flows of fresh vegetables and fruits from the northern delta region play a particularly important role in upland markets. During the early 1990s, with freer movement on long-distance trade and improvements in transport corridors, lowland wholesalers searching for new markets responded to upland consumer demand - mostly by Kinh migrant communities in upland towns - for a greater range of produce than could be produced locally.

Most lowland produce ending up in upland markets originates, or else flows through, the major collection centres in Vĩnh Phúc province, one of the largest vegetable producing regions in Vietnam, and which also supply Hà Nội's massive Long Biên wholesale produce market. For instance, all of the fruit sold in Lào Cai's upland markets grown in south Vietnam - such as mangosteen, dragonfruit and rambutan - pass through Vĩnh Phúc's market networks first, before being redistributed to the uplands (Bắc Hà market traders 09/06/07). Within Vĩnh Phúc province there are different trade distribution centres

for produce, each of which serves to channel goods to different areas of Vietnam.<sup>127</sup> The Thổ Tang trade centre in Vĩnh Tường District serves the northern uplands. Collectors bring produce from Vĩnh Phúc and other provinces to Tho Thang market. This is then transported directly by wholesalers to various upland township marketplaces in Lào Cai, Yên Bái, Tuyên Quang and Phú Thọ provinces (Dao The Anh et al. 2005). Each day, approximately 60 tonnes of produce flow between Vĩnh Phúc and the northern upland provinces (Dao The Anh et al. 2005).

Upland Kinh traders tend to have developed long-term relations with these wholesalers, and frequently benefit from flexible credit and payment arrangements. The trade is conducted entirely by telephone – upland traders call their lowland wholesalers to place orders or make requests for specific items (Bắc Hà market trader 09/07/07). At the same time, traders cite a number of problems with such long-distance wholesale arrangements. These include deliveries running later than desired, and produce arriving in poor condition. Furthermore, upland market traders state that the range of produce on offer from lowland wholesalers is not very diverse given the limitations imposed by decay during transport. Some may be frozen so it can survive the long journey, yet traders explain this is not preferred because it ruins the freshness (Bắc Hà market trader 26/05/07). Nevertheless, traders indicated that they have some power to control these instances, as wholesalers may be willing to compensate for poor quality goods in an effort to maintain good trade relations. These dynamics between upland market traders and lowland wholesalers are illustrated by Yen (09/06/07) who trades in Bắc Hà market:

Every two days, my fruits and vegetables are sent to me by truck from my wholesaler in Vĩnh Phúc. She supplies several traders at this market. I get the produce in advance on credit and pay her back later. When the amount I owe reaches around 6-10 million VND I try to repay it, but I can pay when I want to. I send the money to her by the postal services. The goods arrive in a crate, and I don't have much control or choice over the quality of the produce. Sometimes I find the goods are damaged. If more than half of the box turns out to be spoiled I call my wholesaler and ask her to send some money to pay for it. Because she wants to maintain our good relationship, then possibly she will support me by reimbursing a little.

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<sup>127</sup> These distribution centres are Thổ Tang, Mê Linh, Tam Đường and Vĩnh Yên.

Moreover, the influx of cheap produce from China through the national border gate at Lào Cai city sometimes renders lowland wholesalers uncompetitive. Some groups of upland Kinh traders travel to Lào Cai city themselves from elsewhere in the region to purchase goods arriving from across the border as well as at the Cốc Lếu wholesale market. Wholesalers from Lào Cai city also supply Chinese produce to upland markets.

Other wholesale networks channel manufactured Kinh apparel from the lowlands to upland town markets. The bulk of these goods come from the large Chợ Ròng wholesale market in Nam Định city as well as from Đồng Xuân market in Hà Nội. Clothing wholesalers from Nam Định province visit upland town markets - such as Bát Xát township marketplace - about once per month via private vehicles or by the daily bus between Nam Định and Lào Cai city. However, as noted above, some traders prefer to go back to their hometowns themselves in order to stock up, rather than obtain their goods from long-distance wholesalers. Traders describe how this gives them greater control over selection and quality. According to Hanh (29/07/07) who trades in Bát Xát town market:

When the wholesalers from Nam Định bring things up here, I have very little influence over the selection of goods. I have to take whatever they've brought. Maybe I will end up with bad goods, or things that I can't sell very well up here. Since I prefer to sell a variety of things [shirts, pants, hats, bras, hair baubles, towels, gloves and CDs] I like to go to different specialised wholesale shops in Nam Định's Ròng Market and choose what I think will sell best in Bát Xát.

Tam (01/09/07), a clothing trader from Si Ma Cai concurs with Hanh, stating:

I go to Đồng Xuân market in Hà Nội to get these goods myself because I want to be in charge of picking out the goods I sell. I know how the fashion is changing up here in the uplands because I live here and can observe this. Wholesalers have no idea about that in Hà Nội. I can also experiment by trying to introduce new fashions over here, and see whether they will do well.

As an upland resident and trader, Tam is knowledgeable about how consumer preferences there fluctuate and is aware that she can improve her business by playing a direct role in transmitting new lowland fashions to the uplands. This potential makes her willing to forego the convenience of sourcing from wholesalers selling locally, and instead make the long journey to Hà Nội.

### **5.5.6 Upland-Lowland Wholesalers and Collectors**

A final important market group is collectors and wholesalers of upland commodities. This entails the collection of local upland specialties produced in or originating from different areas of Lào Cai province. Key commodities include: plums from Bắc Hà district; hybrid maize from Bắc Hà, Mường Khương and Si Ma Cai districts; home-made maize and rice upland alcohols from Bát Xát and Bắc Hà (Chapter 7); Hmong textiles from Sa Pa and other localities (Chapter 8); water buffalo from Si Ma Cai and Bắc Hà districts (Chapter 6); cardamom from Sa Pa and Bát Xát districts; tsako from Bát Xát district; and, more recently, cut flowers from Sa Pa.

While some of the trade networks in these products circulate within the region and nearby provinces, longer-distance flows also connect trade networks with Hà Nội and across the border to China. Within most of these trade networks, ethnic minorities tend to be the primary producers or suppliers of these commodities. They remain concentrated at the initial level trade nodes with low added value. These producers either retail to local consumers or else in bulk to Kinh collectors, who move the commodities further afield and are involved at later nodes along the chain. I shall examine the trade practices and relationships between ethnic minorities and Kinh collectors/wholesalers in depth within Chapters 6, 7, and 8 for water buffalo livestock, artisanal alcohol, and textiles.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have covered a broad terrain in my close examination of the current operation of upland markets in Lào Cai, and the multiplicity of traders that engage with these trade spaces in order to fulfil their livelihood goals and needs. I began by considering how the state's overall development priorities have undergone a major shift since economic renovation, particularly during the mid-1990s, with upland regions now assuming the key geographical focus. Moreover, ethnic minorities have now become the main target group for 'development', with the state's overall policy language and content focussed more on poverty alleviation and market integration in upland and ethnic minority areas. I used this larger state development agenda as the background context in



which to situate and explore the current transformations taking place in Lào Cai's upland markets. I have established how the Vietnam government equates the infrastructural improvement of marketplaces as a key means to stimulate a market economy in the uplands. Yet, I argue that this has been a largely 'cosmetic' approach, consisting of highly visible new market buildings, and the renovations of older markets – moving away from an older local market architecture, toward more concrete, permanent structures. New market facilities are intended to induce development, but with little consideration given to how markets are actually used by uplanders. The most telling 'development failures' are the markets that have been rejected by traders and which remain entirely empty or else are creatively adapted by locals for other purposes.

I have demonstrated how the lack of proper implementation and communication of market renovation and relocation plans to officials and traders at the local level has at times led to heightened livelihood vulnerability and uncertainties for upland residents. I examined the everyday politics of traders contesting these efforts, whether in terms of more organised court and public media arenas, or via more subtle methods such as 'foot dragging' and feigned accommodation. I investigated the social interface of the marketplace in terms of the relations between the market officials and traders and the various strategies that traders employ to resist or evade what they perceive as unfair intrusions into their livelihoods and right to a fair subsistence. Here, I also underlined how ethnicity, gender and class differences are amplified and strained in the market official-trader dynamic.

I also explored how these new national market frameworks promote the further standardisation and formalisation of markets and trade activities. This enables the state to extend its 'gaze' and market formula right down to the local scale. Moreover, I contended that these upgrades work to impose an idea of 'good' and 'bad' marketplaces and traders. 'Good' markets are modern, fixed structures, eventually to be filled by 'good' tax-paying daily traders – in effect, a lowland Kinh model of trade. 'Bad' markets have originated out of the development initiatives and needs of local people themselves, without state guidance and authorisation, with 'bad' traders selling on the streets or using more flexible

trade schedules and practices, and hence needing to be ‘taught’ how to trade. I have also established how the impacts of greater formalisation and ‘improvement’ can be negative, burdening traders more heavily with taxes and market fees. Furthermore, the confined model of good markets and traders obscures the wide diversity of trade undertaken by upland actors by marginalising any trade that does not fit within those lines.

In addition to the implications of these direct state-induced market transformations, I delved into the role of attendant ‘distance decaying technologies’, and how these are being used by upland traders in order to expand or alter their activities. I broke these connective technologies down into the categories of roads, transportation, and mobile phones. Overall, these forms of infrastructure benefit trader activities, providing access to new market areas, reducing travel times, enabling instant relay of market information over distances, and facilitating remotely conducted trade networks. However, I also pointed out that not all traders or uplanders can benefit equally from these resources, as gender, economic ability, and remoteness continue to exclude or limit the activities of certain groups.

Having set up the wider contours in which current marketplace trade is occurring, I examined the multiplicity of upland market actors and the range of trade taking place in Lào Cai province. Here, I concentrated on key groups of traders that feature in upland town and periodic markets and how they conduct their activities. This provides us with a picture of an extensive amount of trade variation, grounded in vital networks, and with interesting social dynamics between groups of older and newer market traders coming to the foreground. I asserted that by paying close attention to these trade activities, linkages, and networks, it becomes evident that the uplands are not quite as disconnected and remote as they are often considered.

In conclusion I wish to reiterate in particular that upland ethnic minorities in Lào Cai are participants in a wide range of trading types. Some are based on older practices and networks, while others have emerged and expanded in light of new market opportunities and connective technologies. In view of what I consider to be a worrisome lack of

understanding by the state as to how ethnic minorities use markets and engage in trade, I devote the next three chapters to detailed investigations of trade activities that ethnic minorities are specifically involved in. These trades involve products that have long held a significant place in Hmong and Yao livelihoods and cultural practices, namely water buffalo, upland artisanal rice and maize alcohol, and textiles. I commence these investigations first, with an exploration of the systems of upland livestock trade in water buffalo used by Hmong in Lào Cai.

## CHAPTER 6

### UPLAND WATER BUFFALO LIVESTOCK TRADE NETWORKS

#### 6.1 Introduction

Throughout Asia, water buffalo have historically been a vital resource for rural citizens, especially so for upland semi-subsistence rice agriculturalists. Yet surprisingly, their role in livelihoods has received scant attention from researchers and policymakers relative to other livestock, such as cattle, pigs and poultry (FAO 2000; Nanda and Nakao 2003; Cruz 2007). In Lào Cai province, water buffalo comprise a highly valued and essential household asset for small-scale upland farmers, particularly for ethnic minorities such as Hmong and Yao. In this chapter I map out and examine the various systems of transaction for water buffalo livestock within this province. In so doing, I reveal that there exists a mix of upland circuits of commerce through which these animals amble for exchange or trade (c.f. Zelizer 2004). These transactions are embedded in and supported by webs of social, cultural and official institutions that set the guidelines under which trade is conducted, whether in the context of community-based or more ‘impersonal’ marketplace trade (c.f. Alexander 1992). As will be demonstrated in this chapter, in some trade contexts these codes work to mediate risk, while in others they may actually add risk or complications.

While my coverage encompasses the entirety of these systems and their participants, my interest is to shed light on how Hmong residents in Lào Cai engage in buffalo trade and exchange, as well as how Hmong farmers and traders fit into broader - geographical and social – buffalo trade networks. I suggest that understanding the ways that Hmong and other ethnic minorities engage in localised and wider water buffalo exchange networks is vital given the interest by both the central and provincial state to promote animal husbandry and trade – including water buffalo - as part of the current northern uplands development strategy (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2006; SRV Decision No. 46/2008/QĐ-TTg). Hence, this case study provides a clear and important example of how local exchange and marketplace trade are being (re)crafted through the interplay of local

innovation, state efforts, and processes of market integration - linking directly to the ultimate aim of this research.

I begin in Section 6.2, by contextualising the wide-ranging significance of water buffalo to Hmong livelihoods in order to set the scene as to why upland buffalo exchange systems are so depended upon. First, in Section 6.2.1, I explore the multiple functions that buffalo fulfil within the household economy before examining in 6.2.2, how they are also crucial to Hmong local cultural dimensions as sacred animals, markers of identity, and symbols of wealth and prestige. After this overview, I turn to investigate the multiple circuits of commerce, social actors, and trade networks involved in the movement of buffalo in Lào Cai.<sup>128</sup> I start by investigating localised, intra-hamlet exchange systems (Section 6.3.1), moving on to explore trade within particular specialised ‘buffalo villages’ (Section 6.3.2), followed by the more market-oriented trade in buffalo marketplaces (6.3.3), and the role of cross-border trading (6.4.4). Throughout my exploration of these systems of trade and exchange, I weave in discussions of the different mechanisms of regulation, the role of buffalo vulnerability and its impacts on households and traders, and processes of inclusion and exclusion in trade.

## **6.2 The Place of Buffalo in Hmong Upland Livelihoods**

The type of buffalo common to Vietnam is the swamp buffalo, so named for its proclivity to thrive long periods in muddy, wet environments (Berthouly 2008). While swamp buffalo are raised throughout the country, they are more highly concentrated within the northern uplands which have the most optimal ecological conditions to support their population growth (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001). Statistics collected in 2000, revealed that 52 per cent of the total buffalo population in Vietnam was located in the northern mountainous region (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001).<sup>129</sup> To compare their relative importance to other livestock in Lào Cai, in 2010, water buffalo

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<sup>128</sup> Although I review the importance of buffalo in ritual contexts, my overall concentration here is primarily with trade flows and practices rather than on the sacrificial economy *per se*.

<sup>129</sup> According to official statistics, in 2010, there were a total of 134, 922 buffalo in the province (Lao Cai DARD: Online).

accounted for 78.6 per cent of the province's total number of animals including buffalo, cattle, and horses combined (Lao Cai DARD: Online).

### **6.2.1 The Magic Engine of the Family**

As a livelihood resource, water buffalo are central both directly in terms of farm activities as well as within wider household livelihood portfolios. They are unique as multi-dimensional livelihood assets – acting as either a source or facilitator of physical, natural, financial, social and cultural capital (Chantalakhana 2001; Iqbal et al. 2009). The contributions of water buffalo to supporting human livelihoods and maintaining food security are extensive. For over 5,000 years, people have depended upon them as an essential source of physical capital through their draught labour (Berthouly 2008). Using buffalo for traction is more cost-effective than small tractors due to savings on fuel, low maintenance costs and high resale value of the animal (Thu et al. 1995; Iqbal et al. 2009). Moreover, for upland farmers such as Hmong and Yao, mechanised ploughs are inappropriate for the steep and narrow, terraced farm terrain (Figure 6.1; Kunstadter and Kunstadter 1983). As such, buffalo retain their centrality as labour power for upland small-holder rice farming, the focal livelihood activity and core dietary staple of both groups in areas where topographic and climatic conditions permit wet-rice production. In addition to farm production, another important use of buffalo labour power is for hauling heavy items such as timber.

In terms of their direct role in food security and nutrition, buffalo are used as a source of meat.<sup>130</sup> Farmers in Vietnam however, do not tend to raise buffalo for this specific purpose. As such, the slaughter of buffalo for consumption usually only occurs after animals are no longer able to work due to age or injury - except in the case of ritual purposes, and still, in such instances the meat is eaten (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001; Berthouly 2008).<sup>131</sup> Other material contributions include buffalo hides and

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<sup>130</sup> In some regions such as India, Africa and North America buffalo are used to supply dairy products, though this is not common in Vietnam or practiced by Hmong or Yao in Lào Cai (c.f. Thu 1997).

<sup>131</sup> In Vietnam, the slaughtering of buffalo prior to the age of 12 was banned by the state until 1960 (Berthouly 2008).

horns which are used to fashion a number of products.<sup>132</sup> Water buffalo are able to subsist on the otherwise unusable by-products of farm production, consuming crop residues such as rice and wheat stalks after harvest. Their dung can be used as fuel for cooking and as biogas (Berthouly 2008). Moreover, buffalo manure is used to improve soil fertility, thus enhancing farmers' natural capital (Chantalakhana 2001; Iqbal et al. 2009; FAO 2002).

Water buffalo are often the most valuable possessions that Hmong and Yao households own. As a financial capital asset, they comprise a mobile and highly fungible source of wealth, savings, and insurance. Given the high financial costs of buffalo, they are used to hold wealth and to increase household income security over the medium and long-term. In 2009, for instance, a mature buffalo capable of draft labour in Lào Cai was priced at between 12-15 million VND – with price differences due to gender, age, health, size and strength (Khu 02/02/09). Additionally, buffalo are a highly productive mode of storing wealth, providing ongoing physical labour, while at the same time their worth appreciates as they mature and breed. Indeed, female buffalo are capable of bearing offspring until approximately 18 years of age (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001). These animals typically begin their work training at about the age of two, and will continue to supply labour up to and around the age of eleven (Berthouly 2008).

As discussed in Chapter 3, in Lào Cai province Hmong endogenous conceptions of household wealth are based on two key elements: 1) household agricultural land holding size, layout and quality, which is vital to ensuring rice self-sufficiency, and; 2) the number and state of health of water buffalo owned (also see Michaud 1997a, regarding Hmong evaluations of wealth in Thailand). A household is perceived as 'wealthy' if it possesses at least a few buffalo, while 'poor' if it has none. Research on ethnic minority wealth rankings in Lào Cai affirms that better-off Hmong households own around three buffalo, while the least well-off have no buffalo and must resort to other means of ploughing (MRDP 1999). Hmong households in Lào Cai also tended to be reluctant to sell their buffalo. As Dung (02/02/09), a Hmong man from Sa Pa district put it, "we

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<sup>132</sup> Mottin (1980) describes how the Hmong in China during the 1800s used to fashion protective breast plates from pieces of metal covered with buffalo skin. Water buffalo horns may be used as musical instruments or for 'cupping', a traditional health practice (Hong Thao 1995).



really don't like to sell them because they are so important to us, so we won't do it unless we really need the cash." Nevertheless, for Hmong households with sufficient animals to ensure all labour needs are met, accumulating further buffalo appears to reach a tipping point. When households find that feeding and caring for surplus livestock becomes too much of a burden they may then decide to sell them (Ly 02/02/09).



**FIGURE 6.1: BUFFALOES WORKING TO PLOUGH RICE FIELDS, LÀO CAI**  
(SOURCE: AUTHOR)

Water buffalo also comprise an important socio-economic safety net. In times of need or crisis, Hmong households can use their animals to generate immediate cash or as collateral. For example, selling a buffalo is a common way to cover medical expenses when a household member falls ill, or in order to pay off a loan (MRDP 1999; Jor 21/02/09). As another instance, informants explained that if a Hmong individual engages in behaviour that is considered a transgression of cultural values and norms (such as having a sexual affair outside of marriage), they may be obliged to sell or offer their



buffalo in order to pay the fine imposed by hamlet elders (MRDP 1999; Chi 31/05/10). Selling a buffalo is also a common way for Hmong households to fund a wedding ceremony in Lào Cai, as well as for the groom and his family to obtain the large sum of money and culturally specific items that are exchanged as the bride wealth – the cost of which in 2009 ranged between 6-8 million VND (Pao, 28/02/09; Chi 28/02/09).

Households owning several buffalo are also better able to obtain loans from informal lenders, with buffalo accepted by creditors as a repayment guarantee, as are several pigs or a substantial cardamom crop (Ly, Hmong farmer 02/02/09). Such loans are often used to buy agricultural inputs, rent additional terraced rice land, or build and renovate homes. Far less frequently, Hmong households may use buffalo as a deposit to diversify livelihoods, such as to raise start-up capital to become a small-scale trader in cross-border goods (MRDP 1999). Yet more commonly, informants explained that loans are used in order to acquire buffalo themselves, especially when a household suddenly loses theirs or needs one for a funeral ceremony (Ly 02/02/09; MRDP 1999). State loans to promote agricultural investment under the poverty alleviation Programme 135 (as discussed in Chapter 5), have also typically been used by Hmong households to purchase buffalo (Cox and Tran Manh Hung 2002).

In sum, the tangible livelihood contributions of water buffalo to Hmong livelihoods in the northern uplands are extensive and diverse. For Hmong in Lào Cai, water buffalo are undoubtedly the most important type of livestock, and one of the top household assets due to their special ability to contribute to the resource base of upland households spanning physical, natural, financial and social forms of capital. Moreover, these benefits often extend beyond the individual household unit to the wider family. For example, during the ploughing season buffalo are commonly leant and shared amongst married brothers and sisters - what Sahlins (1972) described as generalised reciprocal exchanges based on open-ended mutuality.<sup>133</sup> As Yeng (02/02/09), a Hmong man from Sa Pa district

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<sup>133</sup> Sahlins (1972) developed a typology of exchange, broken down into generalised reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity, which existed as points along a continuum. Included as part of generalised reciprocal exchanges are pure gifts, hospitality, help, and generosity. Sahlins' ideas on exchange were greatly influenced by Mauss (1990 [1923]) who argued that the social reproduction of

eloquently stated, these beasts of burden are indeed “the magic engine of the family”. Yet beyond their vital role in upland livelihoods, water buffalo also command a special place within Hmong local cultural identities and practices. I now turn to explore this dimension, and the more intangible values and meanings that are associated with this animal.

### **6.2.2 Buffalo and Hmong Spirituality, Identity and Cultural Capital**

For Hmong upland inhabitants in northern Vietnam, water buffalo wield great significance in terms of cultural identity, spiritual practice, and social prestige. The Hmong households I spoke to tend to be very connected to their buffalo, develop close bonding relationships with them, and hold them in very high respect. I often witnessed Hmong individuals appear to be very emotionally distraught or saddened following the death, injury or illness of their animal. Buffalo are also revered as important ritual animals that play a central role within a number of Hmong cultural ceremonies and rites in Lào Cai and neighbouring areas.

The body parts of the buffalo can be important objects, infused with special attributes or properties. For example, horns of water buffalo are customarily used by Hmong shamans as diagnostic ritual instruments. In the *ntaus kuam*, one of the most common divination rituals, the tip of a buffalo horn is split into two halves, which together represent female (yin) and male (yang) aspects known as the *kuam* (Lady and Lord Kuam or Mother and Father Kuam). The horns are tossed onto the ground several times, and the patterns they form are used to interpret the correct course of action, such as auspicious times to perform particular ceremonies, or to determine whether or not a given ritual has been successful (Tapp 1989; Symonds 1991).

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societies occurs symbolically through basic cycles of giving, taking, and giving back, and that while gifting appears voluntary and altruistic it ultimately establishes relationships through mutual indebtedness and reciprocal obligations. In terms of trade and exchange, Mauss’ point suggests an ongoing relationship among buyers and sellers or in-kind traders if one needs to pay for goods, like the buffalo, in installments, for example. Thus while a variety of purchase arrangements enable people to buy or access goods if they do not have sufficient cash, such situations may also lead to ongoing social obligations and burdens.

Hmong informants also viewed buffalo as symbolically connected and closely tied to the land. This association was expressed to me by a young Hmong man in Yunnan, China in the following way: “when a person dies, we use a cloth to wash their body and face. Then we burn it. If the ashes form the shape of a bird, it means that their spirit has gone up to the mountain. If the ashes take the shape of a buffalo, it means their spirit remains tied to the land, to work, and to this way of life” (Feng 18/06/10).

The high status of buffalo is also evident through their place in Hmong life-cycle ceremonies, especially funerals, and curing rituals. For Hmong and Yao in Vietnam, as well as many other minority societies throughout Southeast Asia, ritualised funeral meals are considered to be a key event in an individual household’s history (Hayden 2009). Large bovines such as buffalo - or alternatively, in some areas cattle - serve an important function within Hmong mortuary rites and funeral feasts.<sup>134</sup> In Lào Cai province, water buffalo are most commonly used by Hmong households for these purposes. French military reports of the late 1800s also describe this to be the case for Hmong communities – such as in Lao Chải commune of Sa Pa district, as well as Phong Thổ district, located just to the west of Sa Pa district (CAOM GGI 66105: Phong Tho 1898; EFEO ME 364: Lao Chay 1903). These findings point to the temporal and spatial continuity of this practice in the region. Hmong farmers I interviewed in Hà Giang province, Vietnam, as well as in Ma Guan district of Yunnan province, China, explained that in those locales, either buffalo or cattle may be used at funerals (Field notes 08/06/10; 17/06/10).<sup>135</sup>

In the context of Hmong mortuary rituals, the sacrificed animal is said to accompany and guide the deceased person on their journey to the underworld (Symonds 1991). Moreover, these practices are vital to the maintenance of Hmong lineage and identity, and to household well-being and prosperity. According to Tapp (1989: 89), during the funeral ceremony, the way the slaughtered buffalo is divided up and distributed “is one of

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<sup>134</sup>Tapp (2001: 172) writes that although Hmong in Sichuan used to sacrifice cattle which is “more traditional” this is now “unthinkable in present day Chinese conditions”, and boar and cocks are used as substitutes (with hens used for deceased women).

<sup>135</sup> Cattle are used for funeral rituals in areas where the agro-ecological environment does not lend itself as well to supporting extensive terrace wet rice cultivation, and maize production is the more common form of agriculture. Here, draught labour is best performed by cattle, and households tend to own more cattle than buffalo.

the main means whereby different descent groups can be distinguished.” This practice is thereby important to the continuity of cultural identity through the symbolic re-enactment of Hmong kinship structure (Tapp 1989). What is more, in fulfilling these cultural obligations, a household demonstrates its status and prestige, solidifies its social networks, and contributes to the food security of the community via food redistribution (c.f. Hayden 1998, 2009).

According to informants, the social and economic status of a deceased Hmong person is associated with the value of the animal sacrificed at their funeral. According to Khu (22/03/09), a Sa Pa Hmong woman, if a person has already reached puberty when they die, a buffalo should be sacrificed for them by their family. For the death of a child however, the sacrifice of smaller animals such as pigs or chickens are acceptable. Furthermore, the value of the buffalo sacrificed depends on a household’s current level of wealth, and the kinship or community status of the deceased person. Khu clarified this as follows:

If you are poor, you can offer a large pig or a small-sized buffalo instead and that’s ok. But if you are able to afford it, you should try to use a big buffalo, one worth around 12 million VND. This is especially true if your father, mother or a very important person has died” (Khu 22/03/09).

French military reports for Phong Thổ sector noted earlier, also described how more buffalo would be sacrificed at the funeral of a Hmong person of high social status (CAOM GGI 66105: Phong Tho 1898). This was also reflected by French Catholic missionary François-Marie Savina (1924), who reported that normally, two animals were sacrificed, while for a respected village elder this could be up to twelve. However, Hmong I interviewed in both Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces stated that nowadays, they would only sacrifice one animal, and very rarely ever two, (whether buffalo or cattle) per funeral. While I was not able to confirm the reasons for this change in funeral practice over the century, it is quite possible that this has been a response to the Vietnam state’s attempt to curtail such practices, or due to the rising costs of water buffalo (LC Province CPV Online: 2008).

Despite the fact that these culturally important life cycle rituals ultimately result in a redistribution of resources, under earlier selective cultural preservation policies of the late 1970s, following reunification, the Vietnamese state discouraged, and in some areas attempted to eradicate, animal sacrifices and funeral feasts. These practices were deemed ‘backwards’ and a wasteful use of valuable resources – a threat to socialist progress and the national integration of ethnic minorities (Salemink 2003; Michaud 2009).<sup>136</sup> In the post- *đổi mới* period, some earlier state policies have been reassessed and replaced with a more tolerant view that sees such traditions as helping to maintain ethnic minority identity, and thus of significance to national cultural heritage (Koh 2004; Tran and Walters 2010). Nevertheless, decision-making as to what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘valuable’ cultural practices worthy of preservation is still dictated by a Kinh-ruled state and Party (Koh 2004). Within a Lào Cai province official 2008 report on cultural preservation and the promotion of cultural identity of ethnic groups in the province, buffalo sacrifices for life cycle rituals are still described as a “bad practice,” and a reduction in the number of animals used for these ceremonies is encouraged (LC Province CPV Online: 2008). In Sapa town, when I asked one Hmong woman, Xi, why Hmong continued to sacrifice buffalo for funerals “even when the state considers it to be a problem?” she responded “we will keep on doing it because it is important to us. This is the way Hmong have been doing things for a very long time. For us, it’s a good thing to do, and that’s the reason why we will keep on doing it” (Xi 31/04/10).

In sum, the cultural significance of water buffalo underlies their broad appeal for Hmong individuals and families, and extends the values and meaning of these animals far beyond merely representing a physical or financial resource. Having thus conceptualised the enduring magnitude of buffalo within Hmong economy, society and culture in Lào Cai, I now turn to examine the different systems of buffalo exchange and trade that exist within this province. From the analysis that follows, it becomes evident that the multiple roles

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<sup>136</sup> Moreover, this reduction in buffalo sacrifices at funerals may also be a legacy of the cooperative farming system under which buffalo were viewed as a ‘national treasure’ and placed strictly under the control of cooperatives. Households were pressured into turning over their land and buffalo to the cooperative, while pigs and chickens could be kept for private consumption and income generation (Tuong Vu 2003).

and understandings of buffalo are embedded and expressed within many of these networks.

### **6.3 Hmong Buffalo Trade Approaches and Networks**

In Lào Cai province, Hmong household members use three main methods in order to purchase or trade buffalo. These reflect different scales of trade, from individual household-level, to small-scale trade, to larger-scale operations. They may also be characterised in terms of the spatial distances that these trade networks encompass – namely, localised trade, regional trade, and long distance (upland-lowland or cross-border) trade. Finally, each of these three ways of trading buffalo involves a particular style or set of practices. These styles reflect various informal (socially and culturally-based) and formal (official) rules and norms that operate in diverse ways to facilitate and regulate trade in differing contexts.

I find Zelizer's (2004) notion 'circuits of commerce,' a useful concept here to apprehend the overall complexity of buffalo trading approaches. Circuits of commerce refer to networks that to some extent have stable and identifiable boundaries - including certain social actors, while excluding others. Their cultural content reflects the fact that "particular forms of exchange are accompanied by specific morals, manners, symbols and rituals, which in turn, have shared meanings for people within a circuit" (Velthuis 2006: 57) Moreover, the transfer of goods within circuits of commerce are not limited to either market or non market exchange, but frequently involves some combination of both (Zelizer 2004).

Within these different water buffalo circuits of commerce, the first type I refer to as hamlet-based, consisting of intra-hamlet or more localised inter-hamlet household trade or exchange of buffalo. The second type involves so-called 'buffalo villages' - such localities have gained a reputation by uplanders within a certain region for having a large number of animals for sale. Source hamlets may be located within the same district as the buyer or even further afield such as a neighbouring province, and thus encompass local or regional trade networks. As a third way, buffalo may be traded at periodic

livestock marketplaces – which involves local, regional, as well as upland-lowland and cross-border trade networks. These three trade approaches are decidedly unique, with social actors having specific motivating reasons for choosing to engage in them. Moreover, each method possesses its own specific benefits, opportunities, drawbacks and risks.

### **6.3.1 Hamlet-based, Localised Methods of Buffalo Trade and Exchange**

Hmong and Yao informants from communities throughout upland districts of Lào Cai and Hà Giang, stated the most common way for people to obtain a buffalo for household use is directly from other households either within their own, or a neighbouring hamlet. This was also confirmed by Hmong and Zhuang I spoke with across the border from Lào Cai/Hà Giang provinces within Ma Guan district, Yunnan (Field notes 17/06/10).<sup>137</sup> This method is considered to be the safest, most flexible way to acquire an animal for household labour production. Regulated by norms of mutuality, these exchanges take place within a context of strong social networks and community sanctions that ensure trust, cooperation, and mutual obligation, thereby minimizing risk and profiteering (c.f. Scott 1976). Economic actors are linked by their social relations, but moreover, “by shared, common-sense, taken-for-granted understandings about the ways in which transactions should be conducted and the ways in which they are conducted” (Alexander 1992: 83). These collective conceptualisations are of great relevance given the high monetary value of buffalo, which as noted earlier, are generally purchased under household expectations of a long-term household asset and investment.

In the case of localised intra-hamlet trade in Lào Cai, buffalo exchange may occur between Hmong through barter, by cash exchange or as a loan. For most people, this type of trade occurs as an infrequent or one-off affair, and usually for one of two reasons that I described above (in Section 6.2). Localised Hmong buffalo trade occurs through social networks and is facilitated by word-of-mouth. Informants explained that if an individual wishes to buy a buffalo locally, they should first inquire around their own hamlet and,

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<sup>137</sup> Explained in Chapter 4, Zhuang comprise China’s largest official minority nationality and belong to the northern Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai family. In Lao Cai, Vietnam this group is defined as consisting of Tày and Nùng ethnic minorities (Michaud 2006)

following this, in neighbouring hamlets to see if one is available for sale. Hmong interviewees also described how, due to the ‘grapevine approach,’ this tactic for accessing a buffalo is generally a lengthy process (Long 20/02/09). At the same time, buffalo trade transactions contained within the local community - or between Hmong individuals in neighbouring hamlets - occur within the context of a ‘moral economy’ and set of mutually recognised rules (c.f. Scott 1976). These afford a security mechanism to both buyers and sellers, preventing either party from acting out of individual self-interest and taking advantage of - or indeed substantially profiting from - one at the expense of the other. Similarly described as ‘balanced reciprocity,’ this level of exchange is practiced most amongst closely knit social groups in order to avert strained community or kin-based ties (c.f. Sahlins 1972; Michaud 2008). This also reflects the concept of social capital as based upon reciprocal investments in the ongoing construction and maintenance of community social relations, which can be drawn upon at some time in the future (c.f. Bourdieu 1986). Yet, at the same time it cannot be assumed that all hamlet residents will have equal access to these privileges.

A primary example of how strong, hamlet-level social ties benefit buffalo trading in Lào Cai is reflected by the payment terms. With buffalo as one of the most expensive purchases that Hmong households there make, a key benefit of the intra-hamlet trade system is that buyers can normally arrange a relaxed payment schedule with sellers. For example, it is feasible to pay a portion of the buffalo in cash immediately – usually as little as half of the total – with the rest to follow at a later time. Additionally, if a household is suddenly confronted by the unexpected expense of a funeral, and must procure a buffalo but cannot pay at that time, it may be possible to negotiate an exchange with another household. Here, a buffalo is bartered in return for a similarly high-valued resource, like rice land. Bee (22/03/09), a 30 year old Sa Pa Hmong woman, explained that for funeral rituals:

If you have no buffalo, you must buy one. Here, we normally buy one from the families in our village. But if you have no money, you can give away some of your rice paddy in exchange for a buffalo. Later, when you are able to buy a new buffalo, you give it to them and can then get your land back again.



For less well-off Hmong households, the future possibility that reduced paddy land will affect food security or mean altering production strategies is certainly a concern with this arrangement. Nevertheless, such prospective reciprocal exchanges within communities are important for enabling poorer or unprepared households to fulfill spiritual and cultural obligations that are paramount in Hmong society.

The localised trade approach also supports community-recognised, informal mechanisms of settling disputes. According to Long, a 55 year old Sa Pa Hmong man, when you buy a buffalo locally from other Hmong, it is generally acceptable to take the animal home for a period of time in order to “test it out”, making sure that it is healthy and capable of work. In this case, the buyer would only have to pay between half to three quarters of the total agreed amount up-front to the seller (Long 20/02/09). If after taking it home, the buyer discovers that it is a “good buffalo” then the rest of the settled price is paid. Alternatively, if the buyer finds the buffalo is acceptable but does not live up to what was promised – for instance, it is discovered to be a “slow” or “lazy” buffalo – they have the right to ask to renegotiate a lower price (Long 20/02/09). However, if the buffalo is observed to be unfit for work or is sick, the buyer can return it to the seller, although at a loss of a small percentage of the original cost, usually around one million VND in 2009 (Long 20/02/09). Vu (20/02/09), a young Sa Pa Hmong woman, illustrates this as follows:

When you go to buy a buffalo, the seller will promise you that their buffalo is very good, that it's never sick, things like that. When you buy within the village, you are able to first take the buffalo back to your home. You should bring it to your field and watch how quickly it can plough. Then, you should feed it some grass and watch the way it eats...observe it closely to see whether it is too skinny. If, after you try it out, you find that the buffalo is not very good, you can come back to the seller and ask them to change the price. If the buffalo costs 15 million VND, and I already paid 10 million, and the buffalo is so-so, then 4 million extra is enough. I don't want to pay more. The second way is if the buffalo really is not good at all and I need to return it. Here, I will lose 1 million VND, but the seller will return the other 9 million VND I paid after I give them back the poor buffalo.

With this approach, although the buyer is expected to take the burden of *some* financial loss, they are still able to return the animal and reclaim the majority of their investment. At the same time, by returning an animal, the entire community is alerted that the potential buyer is making a serious claim against the seller's buffalo. That seller will

therefore be unable to market that specific buffalo to anyone else in the hamlet – and very likely, neighbouring hamlets as well. This may affect that seller's future ability to trade animals or conduct other business, having earned a reputation for trying to sell a poor quality animal. This illustrates how being dishonourable in a community-level deal can have significant financial and social repercussions. Long (20/02/09) explains that this is, “because this buffalo is now bad luck, and you can never sell it anymore. Everyone now knows this and it is no good for you.” My analysis of this local trading method thus highlights how intra-community, embedded rules work as a form of protection, facilitating more reliable, fair trade transactions between buyers and sellers, and as an upshot, benefit the wider community (c.f. Grannovetter 1985; Evers and Schrader 1994; Meagher 2005).

### **6.3.1.1 Buffalo, Household Livelihood Vulnerability and Intra-community**

#### **Exchanges**

While Hmong in Lào Cai province depend critically on their buffalo, this precious household resource can be lost through accident, illness or death, resulting in unexpected shocks that challenge livelihood viability and sustainability (c.f. Ellis 2000). Households deprived of their key asset for labour power, wealth, savings, and insurance find themselves in a more vulnerable livelihood position. In recent years, particularly in 2008, colder than normal winters have resulted in wide-scale buffalo deaths due to exposure or starvation in Lào Cai province, as well as throughout the northern uplands. This has created a serious shortage in the number of mature buffalo. Indeed, the Lào Cai DARD estimated that during the winter of 2008, colder than normal temperatures between January and February led to the deaths of over 8,000 buffalo within the province. The loss was experienced most acutely in Sa Pa district where temperatures tend to be lowest due to higher altitudes, but other upland districts of Bát Xát, Bắc Hà, Mường Khương, and Si Ma Cai were also impacted (VN Channel.net Online: 2008). In January 2009, cold winter weather caused the death of around 30 buffalo in Lào Cai province, 20 in Lạng Sơn province, and deaths in Hà Giang, Yên Bái and Cao Bằng provinces (Vietnam Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment 14/01/09). In 2010, another bout of

abnormally cold winter temperatures is reported to have resulted in 12,802 buffalo deaths (LCPC 2011).

Following these mass buffalo deaths of 2009 in Sa Pa, affected households have been compelled to recoup at least some of their losses. Many began quickly selling the carcasses of their dead animals to Kinh and Giáy meat traders before spoilage. New stalls opened-up overnight along highway 4-D for this purpose – the main route from Sa Pa town to Lào Cai city. Here, traders sold buffalo meat to customers for as cheap as 40-50,000 VND/kg (Sa Pa residents 26/02/09; VietnamNet Online: 2009). By way of contrast, in 2007, 1 kg of buffalo meat cost 60,000 VND/kg (Yao buffalo trader, 18/12/07).

With the drop in the number of upland buffalo due to extreme weather, the price for a live buffalo has increased significantly since 2008. In 2007, Hmong reported that the cost for a “top quality” buffalo - described as one that is “large, strong, healthy and fit for work” - was between 8 to 10 million VND (Teng, 04/09/07; Pao, 04/09/07). Yet, by 2008, this had risen considerably to between 12 to 15 million VND. This new price level had remained when I reconfirmed buffalo prices in 2009, and again in 2010.<sup>138</sup>

This recent, wide-reaching loss of buffalo was extremely salient in my discussions with Hmong in Sa Pa district. Every individual I spoke to mentioned that their household had been affected – some by the reduction in productive labour, others by the loss of a saleable asset, while others still reported reduced security for dealing with future contingencies. Households owning only one or two animals prior to the crisis are now in a critical situation, without animals for ploughing. Therefore, to cope with the buffalo shortages, many households are increasingly turning to draw upon kinship, clan or hamlet-based social networks and other reciprocal arrangements in order to meet their agricultural production needs. This has been particularly so during the critical period between February and April when the ploughing of rice fields needs to be completed.

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<sup>138</sup> During a field visit to Lao Cai in July 2011, a number of informants from Sa Pa district stated that the prices had risen again to between 18-20 million VND for a top quality water buffalo.

Intra-community mutual assistance mechanisms have long been present within Lào Cai's Hmong communities – customarily based on kinship or clan. Yet, as livelihood researchers explain, during times of crisis these support systems often assume a far more critical role (c.f. Ellis 2000). For some households, this involved simply borrowing a buffalo from relatives. Others relied upon exchange arrangements between kin or with neighbours – for instance, agreeing to also plough the other household's fields, plant their rice, or by bartering an equivalent value in post-harvest rice in return for a period of use of their buffalo's labour (Xi 20/02/09; Jor 21/02/09). The ability for Hmong communities to marshal resources and cope with the buffalo crises has depended upon local social networks and reciprocity. These have become a survival strategy and safety net, enabling households to continue to meet their livelihood needs and food security objectives (c.f. Moser 1996; Beall 2002).

If buffalo borrowing and exchange arrangements are not possible, another option might be to rent one. According to May, a 27 year old Sa Pa Hmong woman:

I used to have two buffalo, but last winter both of mine died. Now, I don't have buffalo to plough my field. This year, to work the fields, I had to go and ask to borrow a buffalo from someone in another village. And I had to rent it for money. I couldn't make an exchange with them in return for rice because I don't have much extra rice, and I need all of the rice I grow to feed my family. Last planting season, I had to give them 2 million VND to rent their buffalo. It's a lot of money for us, and that's why we have a very big problem now. And this year I think I will have to do the same thing again.

While May would prefer to be able to exchange rice for draught labour than to rent a buffalo for cash, her limited land means that she lacks the resources to do so. As all of the rice she produces is needed for her household's consumption, she is obliged to pay money to rent out an animal instead. May has begun to diversify her livelihood activities into handicraft trading in order to earn income to help support her yearly buffalo rental – as are many other Sa Pa Hmong and Yao women like her.

As the analysis in this Section 6.3, has made clear, the hamlet-based circuits of commerce in water buffalo - to which access is afforded through community-level social networks and cultural identity - is a highly flexible and fairly safe way for Hmong to procure or sell a buffalo. The embedding of these economic transactions within a deep social fabric that

discourages exploitation and emphasises cooperation makes this an important system for Hmong residents of Lào Cai who rely so intensely on buffalo. The safety and reciprocity mechanisms enacted through these approaches are accommodating to farmers with expectations of a healthy and reliable animal to meet their livelihood needs. Moreover, local systems exhibit resilience in terms of their capacity to be adapted in times of crisis, such as during community buffalo shortages. In contrast to this socially-embedded exchange system, the second key method of buffalo trade that I turn to next, offers far less social sheltering, with greater risks for buyers.

### **6.3.2 Buffalo Village-based Trade Approaches**

The second important approach that Lào Cai Hmong describe for trading buffalo extends beyond the local community level to more distant ‘buffalo villages’. This system of trade has become more important since the large-scale buffalo deaths in 2008 and 2009.

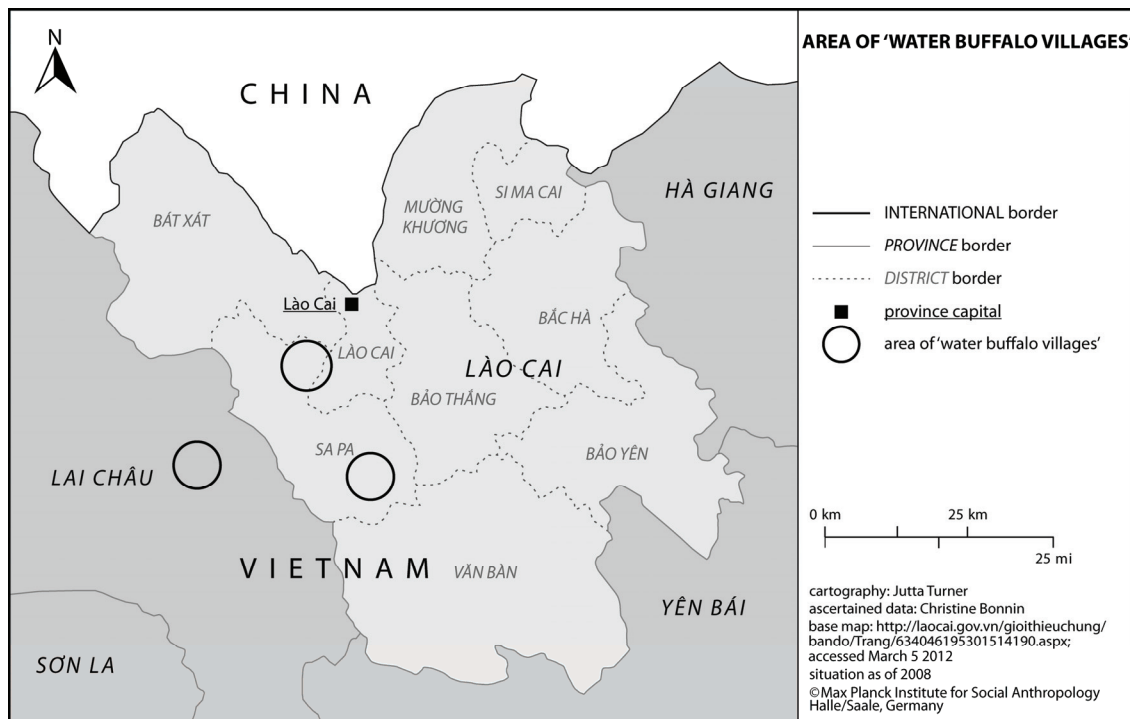
Buffalo shortages reduced the overall likelihood that Hmong households in many of the most affected regions such as Sa Pa district would have any surplus of buffalo for sale. Increasingly, Hmong from these localities explain that if they wished to obtain a new animal, they must now consider accessing one from further afield, such as from a well-known buffalo village (Khu 02/02/09).

As discussed in greater detail later in Section 6.7, no central buffalo marketplace exists within close proximity to the upland districts of Sa Pa and Bát Xát. Hmong from these districts west of the Red River rarely travel as far away as the livestock markets located in Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai districts - at least 90 km away - for the purpose of buying a buffalo for household use (Cho 30/01/09; Long 20/02/09). Mi (31/01/09), a nineteen year old Sa Pa Hmong woman, told me how once when she was little, her parents took the public bus to the Bắc Hà market to purchase a buffalo there. As they could not afford to rent a truck to transport the animal back, they had to walk it all the way home, which took several days. For many Hmong households like Mi's, the large expense of renting transportation, or the time consumed by the long journey on foot are factors discouraging them from visiting a distant buffalo market, amongst others to be discussed below. These

considerations contribute to the popularity of searching instead for an animal from a relatively nearby buffalo village.

There are a number of different Hmong and Yao communes and villages in the regions around Sa Pa, that are known for rearing large numbers of buffalo. These places are located at lower altitudes in mountain valleys, where temperatures tend to be less extreme for buffalo in the wintertime, and wider areas of flat grazing land are found (Figure 6.2). According to several Hmong and Yao informants, three such hamlets are: Trung Chải and Nậm Sài communes, both in Sa Pa district; and an ethnically mixed commune in Bình Lư district (in neighboring Lai Châu province) of Hmong, Lu and Giáy households. In fact, the latter district has served this role for centuries, which will be discussed in Section 6.3.3.1. As Ly (02/02/02), a Hmong woman in her late twenties explained:

If someone needs to buy a buffalo, they can go to a buffalo village known for having lots of buffalo, such as in Bình Lư or another buffalo village near Lào Cai where Hmong have many animals. These villages have warmer weather, where buffalo can live more easily and grow up healthy.



**FIGURE 6.2: MAP WITH CIRCLED AREAS INDICATING LOCATIONS OF ‘BUFFALO VILLAGES’ (ADAPTED FROM LÀO CAI OVERNMENT ONLINE)**

Still, to access many of these more distant buffalo villages (yet not nearly as distant as the buffalo marketplaces), Sa Pa Hmong have to travel by bus or motorbike, bringing the animal back either via a rented truck or else, more commonly, by foot. Yeng (21/02/09), a Hmong woman originally from Sa Pa district, but now living with her family in one of the buffalo villages in Bình Lư, Lai Châu province, told me that people from Sa Pa often came to her village hoping to buy a buffalo. According to Yeng, a prospective buyer begins by visiting Hmong households to find out whether anyone in the community has an animal it wants to sell. After locating someone with an available animal, the potential buyer is invited to examine it. If negotiations prove successful, given the long distance travelled, as well as to show courtesy and build relations, the seller may sometimes invite the buyer to spend the night before they make the journey home the following day (Yeng 21/02/09).

Nevertheless, the cold weather spell of 2008, has also taken its toll on the ‘buffalo villages’ with these communities themselves now suffering from shortages of buffalo for agricultural labour. Yeng (21/02/09) explained that while almost every household in the area used to have a surplus of buffalo that they could sell, this is now far less so. Indeed, she made it clear that many buffalo village residents themselves must now look to other distant areas if they wish to buy a buffalo. If Yeng now needed a buffalo, she would have to take a bus journey and try her luck at three far-away Hmong hamlets that she has heard may not have suffered as badly.

The trading style for buffalo between Hmong from distant hamlets follows quite different conventions from the more localised trade explored earlier. In this context, the protective mechanisms of familiarity and community sanctions are absent – except in instances where the buyer happens to share kinship with the seller. As such, other arrangements and rules are substituted to mitigate the risks of this high value trade between strangers. Yet, these appear to be of more benefit to the seller’s security than to buyers. To begin with, the buyer is required to pay the entire amount upfront. In the words of Vang (20/02/09), a middle-aged Sa Pa Hmong man:

It’s easy to buy buffalo from your own hamlet. But if you travel to a buffalo village to get one, you should have all the money with you when you go there. This is because you don’t

know those people, and they don't know you. So you will need to have the full sum of money to pay them...that's the best way to do it if you're going to buy from far away.

Clearly, in this type of transaction the hazards are greater. Tou, a Hmong man also from Sa Pa (02/02/09), discussed how purchasing an animal from one of the buffalo villages is risky because it is a one-time sale and therefore, long-term social networks do not need to be preserved. Moreover, the buyer does not have sufficient time to observe the animal and make sure that it is satisfactory. In Tou's opinion,

I think it's important to never leave your own village to buy a buffalo. If you do, there's no way to know whether, after bringing the buffalo back to your village, it will get sick, or if the animal cannot settle to the different conditions in your village. And then you will have lost all of your money!

Tou's comments also raise the important point of how Hmong are concerned about how a non-local buffalo will respond to being in a new location. Hmong informants explain that a local buffalo, reared and traded within one's own community, will be best adapted to and familiar with, the particular climatic and ecological conditions of that given area. Indeed, a recurrent apprehension voiced by several Hmong I spoke to about long-distance trade was the sensitivity of buffalo to new environments, as well as that a 'foreign' animal might not be able to adjust.

In addition to the less flexible payment arrangements and lack of recourse for a buyer sold a 'bad buffalo,' another feature distinguishing this trade approach from local transactions is the addition of formal, state-imposed rules. New buyers from outside of the area are required to register as the new owner of a buffalo by obtaining a permit with a certification of origin from the commune People's Committee. If the buyer fails to do this, it could cause problems through claims that the animal was stolen (Yeng 21/02/09). Yeng, the Hmong woman I introduced above from a buffalo village, explained that occasionally, new owners are accidentally accused of this by people who witness them walking the buffalo back to their village. She said that because the new owner is a stranger to the communities he or she must pass through to get home, this can sometimes raise alarm – buffalo theft is a very distinct source of anxiety due to their high value (also see Cox and Tran Manh Hung 2002). In sum, the different trade styles and rules



underpinning the buffalo trade from distant hamlets renders these transactions less flexible and more insecure - especially for buyers - compared to localised arrangements.

Interestingly, the spatial scope covered by trade also appears to play a role in terms of individual motivations for trading. To clarify this point further, Hmong from Sa Pa state that buyers who travel to the more distant buffalo villages are more likely to be doing so for 'business purposes.' On the other hand, Hmong who visit the buffalo villages closer to their homes in Sa Pa are assumed to be doing so for household and personal needs (Yau 28/02/09). This might be because the environment is more likely to be similar with a closer buffalo village, which is a factor of greater importance to buffalo buyers for household use, rather than for market sale.

Regardless of an individual's actual purpose for buying a buffalo, Hmong informants affirmed that if buying from outside one's hamlet, one should always state that the animal is for household use. Otherwise, community residents may become worried that the new, 'foreign' buffalo may spread disease to the local buffalo. A buffalo that is introduced to an area may be viewed with suspicion by that community because there is the possibility that it might be carrying a contagious illness. Yau (28/02/09) a Hmong woman from Sa Pa explains:

When you get the permit for a buffalo from the local government in the buffalo village, you must tell them that it is for your family only. If you have an intention to trade it at some time, you should not mention this. Then, after you bring it home, you should wait a period of two or three months before selling it again. Some Hmong traders buy buffalo in the buffalo villages to take to sell far away in Cốc Ly, Cán Cầu or Bắc Hà livestock markets. Only a few people do this because it's very complicated...I think maybe only 5-6 men per village.

I will return to the discussion of the implications of buffalo disease for Hmong households and trader livelihoods in sections 6.7 and 6.8. However, while I have explored the basics of the buffalo village approach in terms of buyers who are purchasing an animal for their own household needs, there are other groups of social actors that participate in these trade networks as professional trade intermediaries, who need to be introduced. These trade intermediaries operate between sellers from buffalo villages and their remotely located potential buyers.

### **6.3.2.1 Buffalo Trade Intermediaries**

Hmong can also purchase a buffalo from a trade intermediary – in Sa Pa district, informants stated that these intermediaries were normally of Hmong, Giáy or Kinh ethnicity. These traders source animals from buffalo villages or other regions and bring them back to their own hamlets for sale. In the past, a few Kinh people were involved as middle people between the buffalo villages and the hamlets near Sa Pa town (Long 20/02/09). There were also Kinh intermediaries from town who supplied Hmong buyers in nearby hamlets with buffalo that were transported up from Lào Cai city. At present, there appear to be more Giáy and Hmong assuming this role. According to Long (20/02/09), these two groups follow very different styles of trading as well.

Long described how Giáy intermediaries go to the buffalo villages discussed above, and purchase very young buffalo, which they bring to Hmong and Yao living in Sa Pa for a direct sale. A benefit for purchasing households is that they save on the cost of transportation and time spent searching outside of their area for a new buffalo. However, they still do risk buying an unfit or poorly adapted animal. In turn, Hmong intermediaries tend to bring buffalo back to their home community with the goal of eventually bartering it for another animal which they will then sell (Long 20/02/09). In this case, a Hmong buffalo trader will buy a very small, young buffalo for a low price and keep it for a few months, after which they will barter it in the hamlet for an old one, past the age of productive and reproductive labour. At this point it is safe to assume that the animal is healthy and suited to the new locality. The trader then sells the old buffalo for meat, at a profit, investing some of the earnings in purchasing another young buffalo to exchange. Long (20/02/09), clarified the procedure as follows:

A Hmong person from my community goes to a buffalo village to buy a cheap baby buffalo and then comes back here. The trader thinks that the young little buffalo can be exchanged for a very big one, worth maybe 13-15 million VND right now. This is because the future buyer has no baby buffaloes anymore, and the buffalo that they have is too old...it's finished developing, or maybe it can only work in the rice paddy for a few more years. After exchanging, the trader brings the big old buffalo to the Vietnamese and they kill it for meat. That's what the Hmong people do...then you get the money and with part of that you buy another baby and you come back to the village again to exchange it.

However, as Yau (28/02/09) noted earlier, only a very small number of Sa Pa Hmong are engaged in trade such as this. This is possibly because of the difficulties imposed by long-distance transportation, as well as the gambles that must be incurred, such as being stuck with an unmarketable animal. Or it may be a difficult trade for Sa Pa resident Hmong to become involved with due to community disapproval. However, these are only my speculations, making this a topic that merits further investigation.

As I have shown in the above analyses of more localised methods of trade and exchange versus the buffalo village trading approaches, there are a number of important, divergent reasons that lend themselves to why Hmong might choose one or the other in obtaining a new buffalo. Overall, it appears that the average Sa Pa Hmong household buyer prefers to find a buffalo *in situ*, because they can count on a reliable, fair transaction, an acceptable ‘return policy,’ as well as an animal that they know is already accustomed to the local environment. Yet, recent buffalo scarcities have meant that Hmong in dire need of an animal now have to consider more distant and risky market sources. Here, the alternative formal and informal rules in place do not afford buyers with much measure of security relative to sellers. In the next section, I introduce the third main modus of the Hmong buffalo trade which involve transactions in periodic livestock marketplaces. Here, the risks to participants are even greater still, and access to information, knowledge, and social networks are critical resources.

### **6.3.3 Buffalo Trade in Livestock Marketplaces**

My initial interest in researching the upland buffalo trade was sparked because of the livestock marketplaces I visited in Lào Cai. These were sites buzzing with activity, which were clearly attended by diverse groups of social actors that I presumed must have different reasons for being there. I began to wonder whether the marketplace was the approach that uplanders would typically take to access a buffalo if they needed one for everyday use. Having illustrated what I ultimately learned were the other, preferable ways of doing this, I now come to explore my initial entry point into this investigation: the buffalo markets. To commence this discussion, I present a brief genealogy of buffalo marketplaces and trade sketched from military reports of the French colonial period,

before bringing the discussion to present day markets in the Lào Cai province northern uplands.

#### **6.3.3.1 The History of Buffalo Marketplaces in Lào Cai Province**

French military reports on Bắc Hà, dating from 1898, describe how buffalo breeding - along with horses, pigs, chicken and goats - comprised one of the most important local industries in that area (CAOM GGI 66105: Pa Kha 1898). As this report goes on to state, the average market prices of buffalo and other livestock – information that is not present in the military reports from other areas - suggests that buffalo trade was significant in Bắc Hà district to the east of the Red River, much as it still is today. Still, the report gives no real indication as to the scale of buffalo trade.

Larger scale trade in buffalo is however noted, in military reports of the late 1800s for Phong Thổ sector - now under the administration of Lai Châu province - which lies west of Sa Pa district (CAOM GGI 66105: Phong Tho 1898). These archived reports describe an annual cycle of a vigorous cross-border trade in buffalo from Vietnam. Chinese traders arrived each year during the months of February and March in order to purchase buffalo from ethnic minorities such as Hmong and Yao in this area. The level of demand from cross-border traders was so great that it led to a 25 per cent increase in the price of buffalo being sold (CAOM GGI 66105: Phong Tho 1898). This suggests that Hmong and Yao were keenly aware of cross-border differentials in supply and demand, and were able to use this to their advantage and profit substantially from it (Culas 2001). Yet, it appears that in this region west of the Red River, buffalo trade at that time was not being conducted in markets or fixed trade sites. Rather, Chinese buyers would directly visit Hmong and Yao supply localities, indicating a similar configuration of ‘buffalo village’ based trade to the one I detailed earlier. Indeed, it is noteworthy to add that one of the places listed as engaged in this trade is Bình Lư, covering very much the same general area described by Hmong (in Section 6.3.2) as one of the main current day buffalo villages. This signifies a historical specialisation in buffalo rearing and trade in this region.

In addition to cross-border trade, a discernable upland-lowland buffalo trade was also taking place during the late 1800s. For instance, colonial military reports mention that Lục Yên - in the neighbouring upland Yên Bái province - was an important node in the buffalo trade between that area and the northern delta (EFEO ME 343: Luc-An-Chau 1903). During the winter of 1902-1903, more than 1,000 heads of buffalo were traded between Lục Yên and the Red River delta.

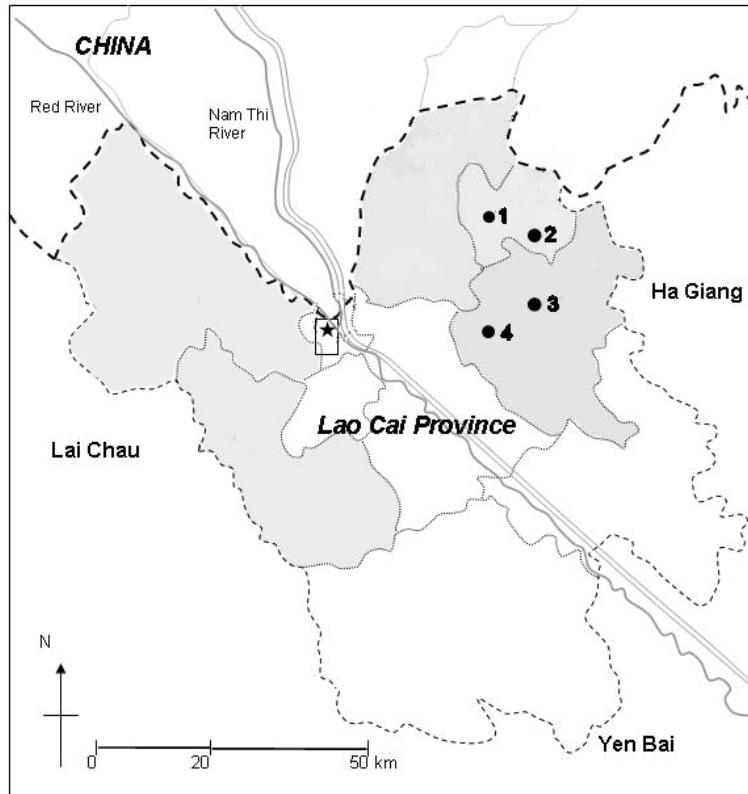
Lucien Choquart (1928) proposed that the location of upland and other livestock marketplaces in north Vietnam may have their basis in the ancient trade pathways used to convey bovines from the uplands to the lowlands of the northern Delta. For example, upland cattle were herded via footpaths to the lowlands, at the rate of 15 to 20 km per day. Intermittently, a one or two day rest was necessary for the animals and their herders (Choquart 1928). Over time, large cattle marketplaces may have developed at these stop-over points (*gites d'étapes*). Choquart traced the various livestock pathways from the northwest and northeast highlands to the northern Delta during the colonial period, and illustrated how Việt Trì in Phú Thọ province became an important market for gathering cattle from the upland provinces of Hà Giang, Lào Cai and Sơn La (Choquart 1928). It appears therefore, that buffalo market trading has been of importance in these uplands for over a century, although the specific networks and degrees of social embeddedness have altered over time.

### **6.3.3.2 Contemporary Upland Buffalo Marketplaces**

Buffalo markets with long histories exist across the upland provinces, with others having developed more recently. Since the year 2000, the state has built or renovated buffalo or cattle markets in many northern upland areas, as part of an effort to encourage livestock breeding, animal husbandry and livestock trade in pursuit of poverty reduction (CPV Online: 2006; National Agricultural Extension Centre Online: 2009; Lao Dong Online: 2009). In Cao Bằng province the Thang Hen buffalo market in Trà Lĩnh district, is reported to be the largest of its kind in the north east uplands, and supposedly at least one hundred years old (Vietnam Net Online: 2010). In 2009, in Sơn La province, the Co Mạ market in Thuận Châu district was constructed by the district and provincial state in order

to help promote cattle and buffalo breeding and trade (National Agricultural Extension Centre Online: Online). Another large cattle and buffalo market is Phúc Lâm in Việt Yên district of Bắc Giang province, which was built in 2007 (Lao Dong Online: 2009). In addition, a very large cattle market takes place weekly in Meo Vac district of Hà Giang province.

Within Lào Cai province, there operate four large buffalo markets: Cốc Ly (Tuesday), and Bắc Hà (Sunday) markets, in Bắc Hà district; and Xín Chéng (Friday), and Cán Cầu (Saturday) in Si Ma Cai district (Figure 6.3). These are all linked to local weekly periodic markets. As I alluded to briefly in Section 6.3.2, a distinct spatial pattern exists for livestock markets in Lào Cai. All of these markets are located within upland districts situated to the east of the Red River, while no buffalo markets appear in the districts to the west of it. What might be the reason for this? One possible hypothesis may have to do with the differences in upland farming systems between these areas. Broadly, the upland districts west of Lào Cai are distinguished by an agro-ecological environment that allows for more terraced wet-rice production, and possesses steeper mountain slopes. Here, more upland households own terrace rice land which requires buffalo to work it. Therefore, given the higher demand for water buffalo in these areas, it has generally been more possible for household to access buffalo with relative ease through local trade alone (or at least prior to the buffalo crises discussed above).



**FIGURE 6.3: MAP OF BUFFALO MARKETPLACES IN LÀO CAI: 1) XIN CHENG; 2) CAN CAU; 3) BAC HA; 4) COC LY (ADAPTED FROM SCHOENBERGER 2006: 35)**

In the upland districts of Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai - as well as in neighbouring Hà Giang province and Ma Guan district of China - maize production, which does not require the labour input of buffalos, is more feasible than terraced wet rice in many areas, for which cattle are better used as draught labour, as buffalo do not thrive as well in these dryer, rocky environments. This results in an overall lower level of household buffalo ownership and thus buffalo availability at the hamlet level. Yet, because they are still important animals for the available paddy and terraced rice land, buffalo marketplaces which concentrate animals in a given area, are an important way to access animals in these regions. In these eastern upland districts, households with surplus buffalo may also live further apart from each other. Therefore, they lack the social networks to rely on the local hamlet trade that prevails on the western side of the province. In addition, the four buffalo markets are in close proximity to the border with China, and hence to major buffalo markets situated in Yunnan, which as I will discuss in Section 6.8 is a key market driving demand.



Today, in Lào Cai province, the largest buffalo markets are Cán Cấu and Bắc Hà, with Cán Cấu the larger of the two in terms of number of traders and animals for sale: an average of between 200 to 300 buffalos per week (LC Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism official 04/08/06). The buffalo market in Cán Cấu, built in 1996, first began on a very small-scale, oriented primarily towards household-level local trade. It has since expanded to include a large number of commercial traders, and forms an important node in the cross-border buffalo trade with Yunnan (Figure 6.4). Approximately 100 buffalo are sold at this market each week, with an annual trade estimated at 5,000 heads of buffalo (LC Province Dept. of Commerce and Tourism official 04/08/06). Xín Chéng market is the smallest of the four, while Cốc Ly is intermediate in scale. Interestingly, all of these markets fall within a fairly direct line, running south west from the Chinese border, with Cốc Ly located the furthest away from the border, albeit only 40 kilometres.



**FIGURE 6.4: CAN CAU BUFFALO MARKET, LÀO CAI (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Buffalo markets can be characterised as decidedly gendered, male spaces of trade. While Hmong and other ethnic minority women are present as traders, they are few and far between, and most often are selling a household buffalo, not engaging in the trade



regularly.<sup>139</sup> The buffalo market is usually set in a large, flat area adjoining the marketplace. During the market, groups of men gather around the buffalo in question, some even simultaneously engaged in gambling at card games. Animated discussion is rare - rather, people speak in hushed, lowered voices, and prospective buyers carefully look over and fondle the buffalo, checking its teeth, legs, hair, eyes and tail in order to assess its physical condition (Figure 6.5; Vang 04/09/07). Then suddenly, a deal is reached and the circle of potential buyers and interested onlookers will quickly disperse, with the buyer departing the area shortly afterwards with the buffalo in tow, either heading for home, or to have the animal registered.



**FIGURE 6.5: TRADERS INSPECTING BUFFALO AND NEGOTIATING EXCHANGES (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

As noted in my methods in Chapter 4, buffalo merchants in Lào Cai, as well as in buffalo marketplaces across the border in Ma Guan district of Yunnan, were a very problematic group for me to converse with. Traders were seldom willing to engage in discussions of any reasonable length, performing ‘everyday resistance’ to me – frequently cutting our discussions short, rushing off midway, or else sidestepping, refusing to answer, or clearly being untruthful in their responses. While being very cognisant that the primary purpose of their marketplace trip was trade, their lack of engagement might also have had something to do with their wariness to talk with a strange woman, as well as factors such as buffalo disease, theft and unofficial trade, as I will discuss more below.

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<sup>139</sup> Some Kinh women were involved in buffalo meat trading, but the focus here is on live animal trade.

### **6.3.3.3 Official Regulation of Buffalo Markets and Trade**

As compared to the rest of the trade areas within the upland period marketplaces, the buffalo market sections themselves appear slightly less regulated by the government. The district states have recently attempted to impose more official organisation to these sections by adding in a new fee system in 2009. Since then, all traders are required to pay a 10,000 VND fee per animal each week to the Market Management Board, prior to entering the marketplace (Field notes 28/02/09). Prior to this, traders in some buffalo markets such as Cốc Ly were supposed to pay a 20,000 VND fee per animal, yet only if they were able to sell it that day. No fee was required if a sale did not take place, a situation that frustrated one market fee collector in Cốc Ly market (04/09/07), due to livestock traders whom he believed were being dishonest in reporting their sales.

Other forms of state regulation include quarantine and marketplace trade bans during periods of disease outbreak. The Vietnam state views the unregulated cross-border and inter-provincial movements of buffalo and other livestock as a danger in the spread of disease (MARD Online: 2006). In 2006, large numbers of livestock (buffalo, cows, pigs and goats) from Lào Cai and other upland provinces were affected by foot and mouth disease (FMD). Between March and June 2006, 227 buffaloes and 171 cows were infected with the virus in Lào Cai, which the state blames on livestock trade flows from China (MARD Online: 2006). In response, the People's Committee of Lào Cai province ordered the slaughter of 200 animals as an attempt to curb the spread of infection. Vietnam border officials stepped up their surveillance of livestock smuggling, and the Bureau of Customs, the Provincial Police, and Market Management Boards were also placed on alert for these activities (MARD Online: 2006).

In August 2006, the Lào Cai Provincial People's Committee issued Decision No: 2134/QĐ-UBND, which went as far as ceasing the operation of livestock markets and trade of buffalo and cattle in the border districts of Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai. When I interviewed the Market Manager of Bắc Hà district in September that year, the trade ban was still in effect (Field Notes 17/09/06). Three years later, buffalo traders I interviewed

in Cán Cấu market remembered this ban, and discussed the wider implications of it. According to one Nùng male cattle trader (21/03/09), “three years ago the buffalo trade was stopped for a whole year due to a disease. All buffalo markets were closed at this time. Meat could only be sold inside the village, and you could not bring it out of the village.”

Since 2006, buffalo markets have resumed their operation, and appear to be growing larger each year. Yet, as discussed earlier, anxiety over sick animals was a persistent theme in discussions with Hmong, who linked this to the less overtly embedded buffalo village and marketplace systems of trade, involving the movement of animals of unknown origin. Uncertainty over buffalo well-being is a key livelihood issue for both those who wish to purchase a buffalo for household use, as well as for professionals who are using the trade as a livelihood strategy.

It is important to note however, that buffalo trade that occurs via these upland marketplaces is not all as simple as the trader-buyer interactions noted above. These marketplaces feature as key nodes in complex, cross-provincial trade networks. In the next section I unravel these complexities. I examine the different groups of social actors that participate in the buffalo marketplace system of trade and the strategies they use to obtain, maintain, and control access to the market.

#### **6.4 Key Actors in the Buffalo Marketplace Trade**

Upland buffalo markets in Lào Cai are characterised by a diversity of social actors, encompassing a number of different ethnic groups involved in different levels of trade. Firstly, there are those involved in the household-level of trade. This includes people from nearby hamlets who either need to purchase a buffalo, or else have brought one to the market to sell. Secondly, there are localised, commercial traders, who tend to operate between two different marketplaces. Thirdly, there are multi-market commercial traders. This group tends to cover larger distances with their trade routes, involving a number of marketplaces and hamlets to source their animals, even including cross-border market trade with China. Finally, large-scale buyers of live buffalo for meat span the greatest

distances, moving buffalo from the uplands to market centres in the lowlands, purchasing several buffalo from upland markets at a time. I now turn to examine these various types of trade and the actors involved so as to gain a more nuanced understanding of how different groups engage with opportunities and negotiate constraints in the context of upland market trade. Additionally, I explore the role of ethnic difference in terms of how this influences buffalo trade and the ways in which actors shape their exchange activities.

#### **6.4.1 Household-level Trade in Buffalo Marketplaces**

For upland ethnic minority households residing in close proximity to a buffalo market, deciding to buy or sell in such a market in order to meet household needs - instead of within the hamlet - is a viable option. Yet, Hmong farmers contend that purchasing buffalo in a marketplace is still far more precarious than either localised trade or buffalo village trade. Trade in a marketplace is characterised by greater anonymity, particularly for the occasional household buyer – with participants arriving from a wide range of places. Moreover, marketplace transactions are fixed in time and space, unlike the more drawn-out, reciprocal arrangements that can occur in hamlets. Traders are not always from the local community, and moreover, the origins of buffalo are often unknown. Long (20/02/09) from Sa Pa, described the implications of this social distance between market participants as well as his own lack of trust in this type of trade:

At the Bắc Hà market people never ask where the buffalo comes from, that's not something you do. People are just expected to accept that the buffalo belongs to the person selling it. Traders bring buffalo to Bắc Hà or Cốc Ly marketplace to sell them. But these buffalo are not necessarily local, and do not always come from those places. The animal might come from very far away but you wouldn't know it. Traders only come to the market for the purpose of selling. It's all business. And buyers usually don't know the person who is selling the buffalo. It's something like this: you see me but only from the outside and you don't know who I am inside...you don't know where I come from.

Given this environment of uncertainty, access to knowledge (c.f. Ribot and Peluso 2003) is a key resource shaping who can benefit from trade in buffalo marketplaces, whether for household use or as a livelihood strategy. Clearly, being knowledgeable about how to evaluate a buffalo's physical status is vital, as buyers need to make quick decisions with little time over which to make such assessments. Traders arrive around 7 or 8 am on the morning of the market, and by about 12 noon all trading is completed. As such,

marketplace buyers need to be well experienced and skilled at gauging a buffalo's level of fitness, health, and calculating its current market value, in order to make a profitable transaction.

Nevertheless, there was overwhelming consensus by Hmong participants I interviewed in Hà Giang province, and Ma Guan district of Yunnan, that buffalo marketplaces are advantageous first and foremost because they offer a far greater variety of choice to buyers. When purchasing in one's own hamlet, a buyer does not have many options – it is unlikely that very many households will have a buffalo for sale at a given time. As one elderly Hmong man (18/06/10) from a hamlet near Ma Guan town expressed, “the ones for sale you don't necessarily want, while the one you want is not necessarily for sale.” In Lào Cai, this is even more of a concern lately given the recent buffalo deaths over harsh winters. Hence, if an individual needs to buy a buffalo immediately, unable to wait until one is available in their hamlet that meets their criteria (such as a younger or stronger buffalo), then they may have to settle for whatever animal is locally on offer at that time, or else head to market. According to Vang (28/02/09), a 26 year old Hmong trader in Cán Cầu market:

When you buy a buffalo from your own home village, you will only have around two animals to choose from. Whether you like it or not, you don't have much choice there. A lot of people here like to come to the market because they are able to choose from a lot of different buffalo. There's far more selection here.

The bulk of animals available for sale each week at the markets, and lack of social ties between buyer and seller who are not bound by local moral economies in the marketplace, also makes it easier to compete and bargain over prices there (c.f. Evers and Schrader 1994). Marketplace buffalo trade thus illustrates a genre of exchange that Sahlins (1972) terms ‘negative reciprocity’ or self-interested trade behaviour, enabled by the social distance between parties. Chi (20/02/09), from Sa Pa district, explained that Hmong who come from places with buffalo markets have long been exposed to this different type of trade. Therefore, they tend to be more skilled at navigating within and engaging with this style of trade. As she said:

In Sa Pa, we don't have a livestock marketplace, so we go to Hmong families and choose our buffalo from the village. We buy buffalo that are living in our own village already. In Cốc Ly, Bắc Hà and Cán Cầu, Hmong have buffalo markets, and because of that, they

know how to make that type of business. So, more of the people from those areas will say “we are going to the market.” They are used to that kind of trade.

Yet while Chi feels that overall, Hmong from Lào Cai’s buffalo market regions are more familiar with that type of trade, relative to Sa Pa Hmong - who rely on hamlet trade or buffalo village trade – the majority of the trading that takes place in buffalo markets are business transactions of a professional level, as opposed to household-oriented (Pao 28/02/09). Professional traders, introduced next, prefer a quick turnover, purchasing buffalo that they hope to be able to sell off within a relatively short timeframe.

#### **6.4.2 Professional Buffalo Retail Traders**

Professional buffalo retail traders – the majority of which are of Hmong, Nùng, Tày and Yao ethnicity – comprise key groups of traders within the buffalo marketplaces of Lào Cai. By professional traders, I mean that these groups are engaged in livestock trade as a part of their wider livelihood portfolios, not just as a means to gain an animal for direct household use. These traders sell to other buffalo traders or else to household-level buyers. Some buffalo traders operate at a very small-scale of trade (such as 2 to 3 animals at a given time), and this group is usually more localised, tending to focus their trade between two marketplaces. Many in this category are trading buffalo as a ‘side-line’, and maintain other livelihood activities like farming, taking breaks at planting and harvest periods. Due to their narrow geographical trade scope, this group usually lacks official permissions (Section 6.7.3) and contacts that allow for longer-distance trade.

Tuan (21/03/09), a Nùng small-scale trader who lives in Si Ma Cai district, buys buffalo on Fridays at the small periodic market of Xín Chéng, around 12 km away. On Saturday, he walks them to Cán Cầu market, approximately 16 km from his home near Si Ma Cai town, to sell them in the buffalo market there. Occasionally, he goes to Bắc Hà market if he is having difficulties selling in Cán Cầu, but normally this is too far. Tuan only sources his buffalo from the Xín Chéng market where he feels there is less competition. With fewer buyers there he can negotiate lower prices.

A second group, the multi-market buffalo traders, are engaged in wider circuits of trade and possess more spatially extensive trade networks than those who only trade in one market. Their activities involve sourcing from and selling to a range of marketplaces and hamlets, sometimes reaching as far away as Hà Giang province and across the border to Yunnan, China (Pao 28/02/09; Vang 28/02/09). This group tends to operate on a larger scale, often having several buffalo to trade at a time. They usually have greater financial capital, and the largest traders may even hire trucks to transport buffalo (Pao 28/02/09; Teng 28/02/09). For ethnic minorities, this is often a family trade. Some traders have been involved in the business for many years, and frequently the trade knowledge, skills and contacts were passed onto them by their fathers (Pao 28/02/09; Vang 21/03/09). Intriguingly, Vang (21/03/09) who learned the trade from his father, described how becoming a buffalo trader was becoming “fashionable” as a way for young Hmong men to earn money. In particular, the trade is seen as exciting because of all the travelling that it entails. Yet Vang personally feels that making a livelihood as a buffalo trader is becoming harder due with mounting competition as more people enter the trade.

Interestingly, a few Hmong professional traders explained that their ‘trade buffalo’ are kept separate from their buffalo for personal, household use. Moreover, traders rarely seemed to consider selling their household’s buffalo in the market. Moreover, they do not seem to ‘trade in’ one of their own buffalo for a new animal purchased in the marketplace (Teng 28/02/09). Indeed, ‘tradeable’ buffalo appear to circulate in a different transactional sphere. This may be due to the risks posed by mixing local and ‘foreign’ buffalo in terms of the spread of disease, or to the relational bonds developed with household animals.

Not surprisingly, access to specific knowledge and information plays a key role in enabling certain traders to gain an advantage in the buffalo trade. Some traders use their insight on local variations in contexts in order to reap greater returns. For instance, some buffalo traders stated that they were aware how Hmong from in and around Bảo Nhài commune often need money just before their annual rice harvest. At this time supplies often run short and households must resort to buying food (Chu 21/03/09). Under these



pressures of food insecurity, Bảo Nhai resident Hmong are more likely to agree to sell their buffalo to other Hmong traders at a cheap, sub-market price. These Hmong traders, in turn, bring the buffalo to Bắc Hà, fatten them up for a period of time, and then sell them at the Bắc Hà or Cán Cẩu livestock markets at a profit. In this example, no obvious broader culturally-embedded sanctions appear to apply, and Hmong traders engage in ‘negative reciprocal exchanges’ with other Hmong sellers. Perhaps this can be interpreted as a reflection of how Hmong mutuality may be based more on kin, clan and community, as opposed to ethnicity more broadly.

Another example of how control over information and knowledge is used by traders to yield financial benefits, relates to how traders make use of non-professional sellers’ lack of information on external prices. On the one hand, Kinh professional traders who travel widely and possess geographically extensive social networks are aware of current market prices throughout the country. On the other hand, ethnic minority uplanders (who are not buffalo traders) often only have local knowledge of the price for buffalo, such as within their hamlet or the nearby marketplaces. Clearly, Kinh traders are therefore in a greater position of power to set price (c.f. Alexander 1992). Buffalo traders may lie to households, supplying misinformation in order to drive prices down. Tuan Anh (21/03/09), a Kinh former long-distance trader who sold upland buffalo at lowland markets, stated that it was a common practice to take advantage of upland farmers’ limited access to information regarding lowlands prices to make a sizeable profit.<sup>140</sup>

Information about buffalo availability is also essential for this type of trade. Some traders who source buffalo widely from upland hamlets and markets have developed a network of contacts with local residents which they draw upon to provide this information. Sometimes, trade contacts facilitate introductions between buyers and sellers, or help to arrange the sale in return for a commission (Teng 28/02/09).

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<sup>140</sup>To provide some indication of the divergence in prices that can occur - although here for cattle - Kinh livestock traders in the Meo Vac livestock market, Hà Giang, stated that they made 30 per cent net profit per head of upland cattle purchased from Hmong households, after its sale in the lowlands. Much the same holds true for upland buffalo, which are growing in popularity for lowland consumers.



For buffalo trade in marketplaces, because of the high levels of risk and uncertainty present to both buyers and sellers, traders adopt a variety of mechanisms in order to create confidence and trust. Noted earlier, one of the main risks traders take when they buy in a marketplace is ending up with a buffalo that is sick, or one that falls ill, and which they will not be able to trade. Vang (21/02/09) explained that purchasers attempt to mitigate this danger by only sourcing buffalo from market traders with whom they have developed long-term connections, or else with traders who have been recommended to them. However, Vang himself had experienced losses after buying buffalo that became sick and could not be sold.

Another important reason why traders work to establish trust is because of the anxiety over trading stolen animals. Traders and household purchasers also state that some of the buffalo being smuggled across the border into China are stolen property, as is it is easy to get away with the theft once buffalo have been sold in a distant market (Nam 21/03/09; Vang 21/03/09). Buyers often take cues as an indication of a sick or stolen buffalo – such as an oddly low price (Vang 21/03/09). In order to overcome such suspicion, some traders rely on the authority of formal contracts to create trust and confidence with buyers. For example, Pao (28/02/09) carries letters of ownership signed by both the former buffalo owner and a People's Committee representative of the commune the buffalo originates from. While this is not a formal requirement for traders, Pao does this in order to prove that he legitimately bought the animal so that buyers will feel assured.

#### **6.4.3 Long Distance Meat Traders**

At this point, I want to shift attention slightly to another important trade network that runs through Lào Cai province, that of buffalo meat, rather than live animals. I consider it important to include this trade as part of this study due to the large numbers of uplanders involved, the role of the Vietnam state in facilitating it, and because it demonstrates how upland commodity chains are interlinked through wider commodity networks to the lowlands and larger trade and market systems.

In Vietnam, buffalo accounts for 50 per cent of the total bovine meat consumption in the country (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001). Yet at the same time, a wide-spread belief prevails in lowland Vietnam about the inferior quality of buffalo meat in terms of its nutrition and appearance, resulting in a low consumer preference.<sup>141</sup> Part of this may stem from the fact that it is mostly old buffalo that are slaughtered for meat (Berthouly 2008). However, buffalo meat from the northern uplands has a reputation for being of a higher quality – better tasting and more nutritious because of the more natural, ‘organic’ way the animals are raised. According to one Kinh meat trader, Tien (18/12/07):

The quality of meat from the south of Vietnam is much lower than the buffalo meat from the northern uplands. This is because in the south animals are given industrial feed and are kept in a confined space, so their meat is not as good. But meat from upland buffalo is considered to be more natural, as they eat grass and are allowed more space to graze.

In the last few years the price of beef throughout Vietnam has dropped below that of buffalo meat. Concurrently, the price of buffalo meat has doubled since 2004, due to the winter losses and buffalo disease (Berthouly 2008; Chu 21/02/09). These price shifts have made the buffalo meat trade a more attractive business for those sourcing from the north.

In Lào Cai’s upland markets, the buffalo meat trade is driven by groups of long distance meat traders who supply lowland markets. This has been facilitated by improved physical access to upland marketplaces via the enhancement of upland road networks, particularly those projects which commenced during the 1990s. With reduced overall travel times, long-distance trade between the uplands and lowlands has become more feasible and of greater potential to outsiders (see Chapter 5). Meat traders are mostly ethnic Kinh – although a small number are Tày and Giáy - and operate at a large-scale (Pao 28/02/09). For meat traders, upland periodic buffalo marketplaces are ideal sites to procure large numbers of animals. These meat traders are often intermediaries who collect buffalo for very large traders in lowland market centers. They generally arrive at the market with a truck for transporting the animals, and will purchase several buffalo at one time. These

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<sup>141</sup> However, according to Nanda and Nakao (2003), buffalo meat is in fact leaner and healthier in comparison to other bovine meats, containing 40 per cent less cholesterol, 55 per cent less calories, 11 per cent more protein, and 10 per cent more minerals. It has lower saturated fat content than either beef or pork, and its taste is often indistinguishable from beef.

traders range in scale from smaller ones who reportedly handle up to 15 animals per month, to larger ones who may handle up to 100 per month (Vinh, Kinh buffalo trader 18/12/07).

Compared to buffalo purchased for household draft labour, the price of buffalo sold for meat is cheaper, around 6-10 million VND in 2009 (Chu, Hmong buffalo trader 21/03/09). Meat traders are supposed to obtain formal permits in the marketplace because of the large-scale of trade, and because they are transporting buffalo inter-provincially, across large distances. Moreover, animals being transported across provinces are required to be ear-tagged and have documentation that they have been vaccinated against foot and mouth disease (Cocks et al. 2009). However, the implementation of these rules is fairly weak. In some areas, checkpoints for monitoring livestock transporters are situated along roadways linking upland markets to lowland destinations. At these points, livestock are inspected for disease, albeit it is less likely that a very small-scale transporter will be checked (Kinh livestock trader 06/06/10). Furthermore, from my observations on two different days of a monitoring point in Hà Giang province, these do not appear to be consistently or effectively staffed (Field notes 05/06/10; 06/06/10). In fact, cattle traders in Meo Vac market, Hà Giang province, reported that it was common practice to pass through these surveillance points by paying a bribe (Field notes 06/06/10)

Once meat traders purchase buffalo, there are two main channels that they follow. The first route involves meat being sent to lowland areas of northern Vietnam, and the second involves the transport of live buffalo to other lowland areas of Vietnam for slaughter upon arrival. In the former pathway, buffalo are brought by truck to Bắc Hà town or Lào Cai city, where they are first slaughtered at an abattoir before onward transport to places such as Hải Dương, Hải Phòng and Vĩnh Phúc (Chu, Hmong buffalo trader 21/03/09). Since the 1930s, Thổ Tang commune in Vĩnh Phúc Province, has been the largest wholesale buffalo meat market in northern Vietnam, receiving many animals from upland

provinces such as Lào Cai (Vĩnh Phúc Online: 2011).<sup>142</sup> However, upland buffalo destined for sale in northern lowland markets are often slaughtered before being transported, as it is cheaper to transport meat than live animals (Chu, Hmong buffalo trader 21/03/09).

In the second commodity route, live buffalo are brought by truck to the south of Vietnam, a trip that can take up to two weeks. Buffalo being traded in the south cannot be slaughtered prior to transporting them – the fresh meat would spoil before reaching its destination due to a lack of refrigerated trucks in Vietnam (Tuan Anh 21/03/09; Vinh 18/12/07). However, this long journey imposes significant physical hardship on buffalo. Therefore, traders must often stop at some point along the way to allow the buffalo to rest for some period (usually a week) in a place where they can graze (Bang 21/03/09). Traders transporting live animals assume a much greater risk than meat traders – the chances of buffalo getting ill, injured, and dying en route are high (Bang 21/03/09; Vinh 18/12/07). These hazards implicit in this trade network are illustrated by a former long-distance buffalo trader, Tuan, in Figure 6.6 below.

Tuan, in his 40s in 2009, worked as a long-distance buffalo trader from 1997 to 1999 between Lào Cai province and Hồ Chí Minh city. At the time he started, the largest buffalo he could buy cost him about 4 million VND. Prices have skyrocketed since then, and by 2009, a similar buffalo was worth an average of 18 million. Tuan would first source the animals from many upland areas including Si Ma Cai district and Yên Bái province, buying them in livestock marketplaces as well as from farmers in the hamlets. Then, he transported the buffalo by truck to Lào Cai city, and onwards to Hanoi before beginning to head south and stopping in Nam Định province. He would let the buffalo rest in Nam Định for one week, to graze and build-up strength to survive the remaining journey. Finally, Tuan would move on, eventually making his way down to Hồ Chí Minh city, where he would sell the buffalo at a slaughterhouse. He used to transport around 20-24 animals each time in order to make the journey worthwhile, yet if just two buffalo died during the trip, Tuan would lose his entire profit. In 1999, Tuan decided to quit because he found the trade too precarious and the costs of renting the transportation and fuel were increasing.

**FIGURE 6.6: VIGNETTE FROM TUAN, A LONG DISTANCE BUFFALO MEAT TRADER**

<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, Thỏ Tang is the same place where vegetable wholesale markets supplying marketplaces in the northern uplands are located, as I discussed in Chapter 5. This highlights the nature of back and forth trade and commodity flows between uplands and lowlands.

Having discussed the local, regional and upland-lowland buffalo trade networks that exist in Lào Cai, I now move on to explore the cross-border buffalo trade with China. While lowland demand for buffalo meat stimulates an upland supply market and promotes upland-lowland trade networks, an even more significant cross-border buffalo trade exists with China.

#### **6.4.4 Cross-border Buffalo Traders and Trade Networks**

China is a major driver of the buffalo trade in upland Vietnam, with its massive consumer market for buffalo meat.<sup>143</sup> The cross-border livestock trade (of buffalo, cattle, pigs and horses) between Lào Cai and Yunnan province, China, flows in both directions depending on fluctuating (often rapidly so) market prices. However, since 2007, there has been a dramatic surge in demand from China for buffalo from Vietnam. As such, the majority of cross-border trade in buffalo now circulates from Vietnam to China, and complex trade networks link buffalo marketplaces in Lào Cai province with distant buffalo marketplaces and villages across the border in Yunnan.

There is evidence that ethnicity plays a central part in the small-scale cross-border trade of buffalo. Some Vietnam-based Hmong, Nùng and Tày petty buffalo traders who operate in Lào Cai, also cross the border to sell or buy buffalo in China. In addition, Hmong and other minority traders from China cross into Vietnam to purchase or trade buffalo at Lào Cai's Cán Cấu marketplace (the closest one from the borderline). These minority groups span both sides of the border, and access to the transnational buffalo trade is mediated through social identity, kinship and in shared minority languages and the local form of Mandarin (see Chapter 8; c.f. Ribot and Peluso 2003; Turner 2010). However, according to buffalo traders I interviewed in China in 2010, more traders from

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<sup>143</sup> This demand for buffalo is so intense that a recent study tracing livestock market chains in the Greater Mekong Subregion, found that buffalo originally from Thailand were being transited through Laos into Vietnam (at Nghe An), before moving on to the northern uplands to be traded across the border into China (Cocks et al. 2009).

China are coming to Vietnam to purchase buffalo than are Vietnam-based traders selling in China.<sup>144</sup>

While both official and unofficial channels exist for the small-scale transnational trade of buffalo, most occurs through the later, informal route (Cocks et al. 2009). This may owe to the complications posed by following the formal route procedures, as well as the relative ease with which informal crossing can occur (Cocks et al. 2009). The formal channel involves crossing at the local border gate where a fee is paid, and visiting an animal control station, where buffalo undergo a health inspection (Pao 28/02/09). Moreover, as with the village-based trade system, local collectors from Vietnam who buy buffalo in China in order to sell in Lào Cai's marketplaces will raise them for a few weeks so that they can apply for a certification of origin from the commune People's Committee. However, the political border between upland Lào Cai and Yunnan is porous, and locals have knowledge of numerous 'secret routes' that can be easily used to make the journey. According to an ethnic Zhuang man from Xiao Bazi, Yunnan (which borders Si Ma Cai district in Vietnam), who worked as a border patrol officer from 1979 to 2000:

When Chinese go to Vietnam to buy buffalo, they always go by a secret route in order to avoid the tax and animal check. They wait until midnight when it is dark and then proceed, crossing the border at unofficial points. There are many small trails on the frontier that they can use to do this. If a trader is caught going by the secret way they give him a fine or a ticket. No other punishment occurs. Most traders, especially animal traders, don't take the main road but smaller roads because in the past there was animal disease and so the government of China and Vietnam tried to control the cross-border trade. Now that they have medicine to control this illness traders still take the secret routes because they may not have the border identification card or they don't want to pay for it. Most of the cross-border animal traders from Vietnam are ethnic minorities, because the Vietnamese are afraid to get involved in that trade. The Vietnamese are not familiar with the trading situation in China, and they can't communicate with Chinese people here (China Border Patrol Officer 17/06/10).

From my observations, most of the cross-border trade undertaken by individuals is of a minor scale, as national border crossings are closed to trucks, and buffalo must be walked across in small groups. Nevertheless, research undertaken on cross-border pig trade

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<sup>144</sup> Alternatively, in 2010, ethnic minority livestock traders from Vietnam appeared to be crossing the border in order to purchase small horses (used as meat for certain delicacies by ethnic minorities such as Hmong) (Field notes 17/06/09).

between upland Lạng Sơn province and China found that lowland Kinh traders would drive trucks to border hamlets and pay local residents there to walk the animals into China (Cocks et al. 2009). Whether this practice exists regarding buffalo in upland Lào Cai is an area for further investigation. In terms of the overall scale of the cross-border bovine trade however, in 2008 the DARD estimated that each week, between 150 to 200 buffalo and cattle were being transported across the Lào Cai border into China for trade purposes via unofficial routes (reported in Saigon Giai Phong Online: 2008).

According to upland buffalo traders, the main advantage of bringing their animals to sell in China is that they can fetch a much higher price. Vietnam buffalo are highly valued in the border area of China because they are considered to be larger, stronger and healthier than those from Yunnan. However, based on my interviews with households in Yunnan, buffalo from Vietnam are not primarily sold for draught labour but for meat – moreover, it might be difficult for these Vietnam buffalo to adjust to a different environment in China (Zhuang interviewee, Yunnan 18/06/10). Vietnam based traders also state that they are guaranteed to be able to sell all of the animals they bring to China, because of the number of Chinese purchasing large quantities of buffalo at the numerous specialised livestock markets there.

When I visited one such buffalo market in Wenshan, Yunnan - the Jia Han Qing livestock market – I observed a far greater number of buffalo for sale compared with Lào Cai 's markets (see Figure 6.7; Field notes 17/06/07). There were 18 large trucks for transporting livestock, whereas I only ever observed five at most per market day in Cán Cầu. Teng (28/02/09), a Hmong trader from Lào Cai province, Vietnam, noted how much easier and more profitable it was to do trade across the border in China, “in China you can get 15 million VND for a buffalo! And they don't care or bother about checking over your buffalo. They don't pick and choose they just buy up all of your buffalo! But here (in Cán Cầu) I can only get 13 million VND for that animal.” Indeed, according to the Lào Cai DARD, in 2008, buffalo from Vietnam being traded in China were selling for between 1 to 1.5 million VND more than they would fetch in Lào Cai (reported in Saigon Giai Phong Online: 2009). One trader explained to me that he would go to China



whenever he was ‘stuck’ and could not sell his animals in Lào Cai’s buffalo markets (Tou 21/03/09). Vietnam resident Hmong traders in Cán Cấu market also stated that it was preferable to sell to China based Hmong than to Kinh traders, because the former will offer a more favourable price (Seo 21/03/09).



**FIGURE 6.7: JIA HAN QING LIVESTOCK MARKET, YUNNAN CHINA (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

With no evidence that Kinh traders are engaged in the cross-border trade in buffalo here, I suggest that this trade is based upon a small-scale, ethnically-specific network. As with the case for Hmong textile commodity chains (explored in Chapter 8), cross-border buffalo trade between Lào Cai and China is a viable livelihood opportunity that remains restricted to groups who are able to benefit through social networks, common language, and their in-depth knowledge of the border area. This highlights how the factors mediating access to particular upland livelihood opportunities, such as buffalo trading, are not fixed attributes. Rather, access fluctuates according to different social, economic and political circumstances which alter the means, processes, and relations by which social actors are empowered to acquire, control and maintain their capacity to deploy resources.



## 6.9 Conclusion

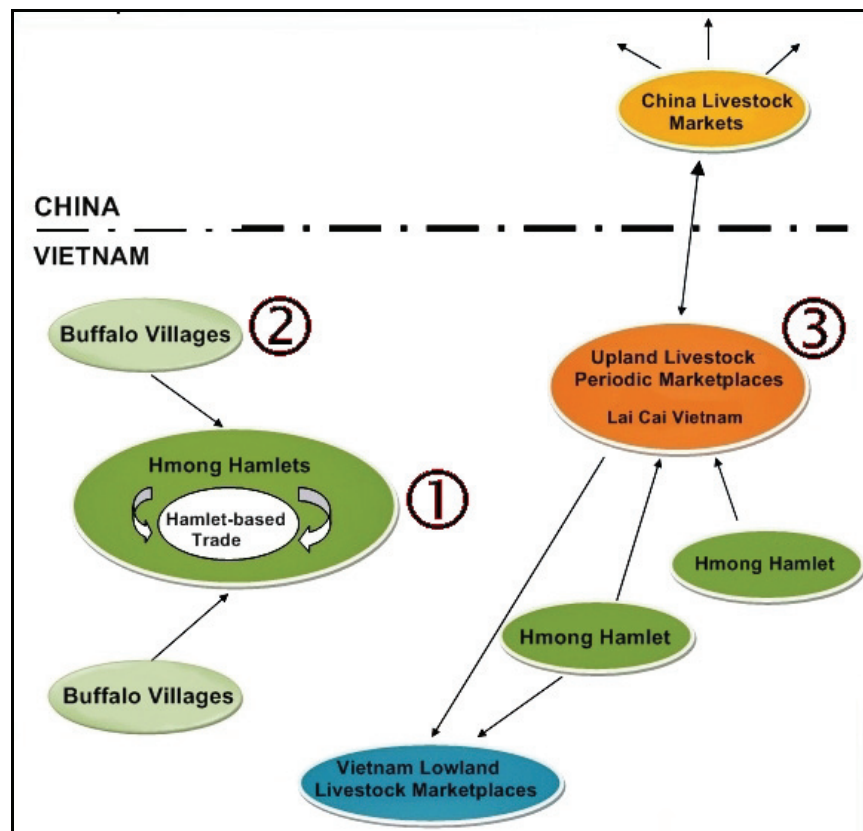
In this chapter I have demonstrated the complexity of the water buffalo trade through a close look at the upland circuits of commerce for these beasts - revealing the diversity of upland trading approaches and networks that originate from Lào Cai province. I divided these methods according to the varying styles of trade and exchange that characterise them – namely hamlet-based, buffalo village, and marketplace trade. Each of these three trading approaches and the networks they encompass, are created and sustained by specific social, cultural and official institutions. As water buffalo fulfill a vital role as a key, multidimensional asset for Hmong households, I have concentrated my analysis and discussion on the way that upland individuals engage with and use these systems, in order to fulfill their livelihood objectives or to reduce household vulnerability in times of need. Indeed, maintaining access to buffalo through a diversity of approaches and options can be viewed in and of itself as an important resource for upland livelihood security.

Firstly, hamlet-based trade and exchange is the most common, highly reliable and culturally appropriate method for Hmong to access a buffalo. I have shown how the local social and cultural norms and rules embedded within this trade approach benefit both individual households as well as the wider community. This is the most flexible method for Hmong households who require a buffalo for everyday use, in terms of a more accommodating payment arrangement, possibility of a refund, and near-guaranteed fair trade in terms of price and animal reliability. Moreover, this analysis has revealed the resilience and elasticity of the system, which in times of difficulty or crisis is adapted by Hmong individuals to permit community members to meet farm production and food security imperatives. As buffalo are one of the most expensive purchases that Hmong households must make, I argue that this system assumes a crucial function for the sustainability of upland livelihoods and in mitigating vulnerability.

Secondly, buffalo village trading systems also serve an important role for Hmong households, particularly in light of the recent wide-spread losses of buffalo throughout Lào Cai, and also for Hmong living in districts remote from buffalo marketplaces. However, the lack of social networks of familiarity between parties and communities

involved causes many Hmong to regard this trade as a more precarious option. Social distance between those participating in these transactions opens the greater possibility of an unequal exchange. Moreover, some Hmong communities such as those in Sa Pa district appear to frown upon this method of obtaining a buffalo, as well as the practice of buffalo trading for profit in general, due to the dangers that ‘foreign’ buffalo pose.

Thirdly, buffalo marketplaces encompass the greatest diversity of social actors and types of trade taking place, as well as the most extensive commodity networks. Buying or selling households, upland petty traders, large scale traders, buffalo meat and cross-border traders all congregate in these periodic trading spaces. For upland households, markets present the greatest variety of buffalo options, and offer better potential for bargaining. Yet the quick turnover rate of animals, their unknown origins, and the greater level of anonymity between market participants makes this a highly risky form of trade (Figure 6.8).



**FIGURE 6.8: UPLAND AND CROSS-BORDER BUFFALO TRADE APPROACHES**

From this in-depth analysis and discussion of buffalo trading systems, a key overall theme that emerges is how specific elements of access critically shape the nature of different approaches to livestock trade and exchange. Access to the benefits of social capital and mutual-assistance networks facilitate the hamlet-level trade, yet remain largely the exclusive domain of community members, excluding outsiders in favour of kin. Beyond the locality however, access to knowledge regarding buffalo well-being and information on current prices are essential specific resources that participants will find it advantageous to possess. Traders may exploit a lack of knowledge in order to exact a higher profit from those who do not have this valuable information. Access to social networks structured around language, ethnicity and cultural identity, as well as privileged knowledge of border conditions also enables select ethnic minority individuals from Vietnam and China border areas to engage in a vibrant, small-scale cross-border buffalo trade.

As noted earlier, the Vietnam state currently wishes to promote the development of buffalo husbandry and trade in Lào Cai, and throughout the wider northern uplands. This is evidenced within both the national Five Year Socio-economic Development Plan 2006-2010, as well as the Lào Cai Master Plan on Socio-economic Development Until 2020 (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2006; SRV Decision No. 46/2008/QĐ-TTg). However, for the Vietnam state to properly address local development and poverty alleviation through livestock development in the uplands, it is essential to understand and incorporate current upland trading approaches into these plans. Particularly, as the localised approach to buffalo access operates as an important social safety net, it is crucial that such viable support dynamics are enhanced rather than undermined. Indeed, informal exchange arrangements take place in the midst of market formalisation, and for any central state plan to succeed (at whatever level), policymakers need to consider how to incorporate such local-level practice into their initiatives. I will return to such considerations in the discussion chapter (Chapter 9). But for now, let us turn to examine another upland trade network, that of artisanal home-distilled alcohols, which is undergoing transformations due to new state and market interests.

## CHAPTER 7

### UPLAND ARTISANAL ALCOHOL PRODUCTION AND TRADE

#### 7.1 Introduction

In Vietnam, rice and maize alcohol spirits (the generic term for which is *ruou*, in Vietnamese) have long retained their central importance to Hmong and Yao ethnic minority groups for social, ritual, and livelihood reasons.<sup>145</sup> However, in Lào Cai province, since the end of the 1990s, these upland alcohols – home-produced by Hmong and Yao - have also attracted growing interest by non-local stakeholders and consumers.<sup>146</sup> Such developments are leading to the creation of expanded trade contexts for upland alcohols beyond the local scale, as brand new commodity chains are constructed and shaped, encompassing regional and upland-lowland trade flows. In this chapter, I focus on the traffic in these ‘traditional upland products’ in order to demonstrate how they have become entangled in wider webs of social relations and meanings (c.f. Appadurai 1986). I explore how the roles and evaluations of upland alcohols are being transformed in response to broadening spheres of economic interaction. This is accomplished by commodity ‘following’ work - through production, circulation, marketing, regulation, and consumption scenarios - as upland alcohols travel through local and national markets. Reflecting these products’ growing commercial value, I examine the roles of ‘alcohol producing villages’ – ethnic minority villages or communes that have adopted a reputation throughout lowland north Vietnam since the late 1990s for the specialised production of upland alcohols. The growing fame of these localities stems from a combination of factors including tourism, state investment, mass media promotion, and shifts in lowland consumption tastes. In particular, I highlight the role of the Vietnam state in the geographical entanglement of upland commodities as

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<sup>145</sup> This is not fermented alcohol (brewed, like beer) as is common in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, but distilled spirits.

<sup>146</sup> In this chapter, I am looking at both Hmong and Yao alcohol producers and traders, rather than a focus on Hmong (as with Chapter 6 and Chapter 8) due to the widespread involvement of both groups in alcohol making and selling in Lao Cai, as well as because of the growing market interest in the upland alcohols that they make.

‘brand architect’, and in the creation of “value-added places” and “value-reducing places” (Pike 2011: 9).

Commencing with a review of the social and cultural contexts in which traditional rice and maize spirits are created and consumed by Hmong and Yao in Section 7.2, I then consider the role of traditional knowledge and the local social status accorded to alcohol distilling households. Next, in Section 7.3, I explore and analyse the expanded role of upland alcohol production within Hmong and Yao livelihood portfolios, and its growing function as an income-generating activity. After providing a broad overview of how upland spirits are made in Section 7.4, I then turn to investigate the locally-oriented trade circuits undertaken by Hmong and Yao in upland marketplaces in Section 7.5.

Following this, in Sections 7.7 and 7.8, I present two case studies to demonstrate the impacts of the commoditisation of rice and maize alcohol from particular ‘alcohol specialty villages’. I use these examples as a backdrop to consider how the development of wider commercial markets for these goods is creating new opportunities for some, but also spaces of contestation or subversion, leading to negotiations and creative improvisation. In doing so, I draw upon the actor-oriented approach used by Long and Villareal (1998: 726), whereby the analysis is not necessarily oriented towards an equal focus on each stage in a commodity chain but directed at interfaces or “moments of contestation in which commodity and non-commodity values, but also livelihood concerns, social commitments and cultural identities – often at considerable socio-geographical distance - are constituted”. Moreover, I draw attention to the particular logics framing upland alcohol commodity chains, by tracing the shifting discourses, knowledges and representations through which the flow of these goods are being (re)shaped (Leslie and Reimer 1999:405). This approach is relevant to understanding not only the political-economic processes via which exploitation occurs, but also the socio-cultural processes by which meanings are manufactured.

## **7.2 The Cultural Importance of Traditional Alcohols for Uplanders**

For Hmong and Yao, as well as for many other ethnic groups in Vietnam, including Kinh, traditional alcohols occupy an important place in numerous ritual and social contexts. Indeed, locally-made alcohols embody the symbolic medium of social ties amongst Hmong and Yao residents. They possess a rich set of meanings, and have long been used within a variety of scenarios such as market fairs, communal labour activities, ancestral ceremonies, bride wealth exchanges, and during many life-cycle events, including weddings, funerals, coming of age, as well as in a number of festivals and celebrations like the lunar New Year. Hence, the local importance of artisanal alcohols for Hmong and Yao has close parallels with the last chapter regarding water buffalo, as both hold strong, enduring symbolic and cultural meanings.

For Hmong, as well as Yao, inviting guests to partake of rice or maize spirits is viewed as a sign of courtesy, respect and friendship (Symonds 1991). The provision of alcohol is also commonly offered, and expected, during Hmong and Yao group labour exchanges, or paid labour arrangements, such as for rice planting or house building. While distillers and traders can be either men or women, the overt consumption of alcohols tends to be a gendered activity. It is generally frowned upon for Hmong and Yao women to drink to the point of excess during everyday social events - as often occurs with men on market day and other social gatherings – and women are expected to temper their consumption. However, it is normal for women to participate fully in rice/maize alcohol drinking at important ceremonies such as at weddings and during the post-funeral rituals.

The consumption of alcohol, served in specially-carved bamboo cups, during Hmong marriage negotiations and weddings is an important practice (Personal observations at Hmong weddings 01/04/07, 14/06/09). For Hmong, alcohol is customarily included as a key part of the bride wealth exchanged from the groom's family to the bride's family - along with pigs, chicken, and today, money often replacing the traditional silver bars - as well as during the wedding party. The exchange of these symbolic items acts as a social contract, cementing the alliance between two clans through a marriage (Symonds 1991).

While the sum of the bride wealth varies with a household's social standing and current wealth status, at the time of my research in Sa Pa district in 2009, the commonly reported bride wealth consisted of: 40-50 litres of rice alcohol; 100 kilograms of live pigs; 5 kilograms of chicken (2-3 animals) and 10 million VND (Sa Pa Hmong women 26/02/09). In comparison, when Tsi (26/02/09), a middle-aged Sa Pa Hmong woman got married in the mid-1980s, the average quantity of alcohol exchanged was 20 litres of rice alcohol. Further back in time, Giau (20/02/09) an elderly Sa Pa Hmong man reported that for his marriage in 1968, his parents had to provide his wife's family with 50 bottles of alcohol, 50 bolts of silver, 50 silver coins, and 50 kilograms of pig meat. Moreover, my discussions in 2010 with an elderly Hmong couple (18/06/10) directly across the national border in Ma Guan, Yunnan province, China, revealed that maize alcohol was also part of the bride wealth there when they married in 1970, and continued to be the norm in 2010. These confirmations by Hmong individuals of these spirits' essential function in their marriages at different points in time and across the Sino-Vietnam borderlands demonstrate the spatial range and continuity of the practice of including alcohol as a component of the bride wealth and during wedding celebrations, reflecting its lasting and widespread significance.

Rice alcohol is similarly important for Yao marriage negotiations and at weddings. The parents of a potential groom must present gifts to the woman's family in order to request their blessing of the marriage. Nowadays, the gifts typically include 25 litres of rice alcohol, 7-8 kg of chicken (3-4 animals), 50-60 kg of live pig, and bolts of silver, old French silver coins, or money (Sa Pa Yao woman Lu May 10/09/10). During the lavish wedding feasts, rice alcohol must be on offer, with usually around 200 litres of wine provided to serve between 150-200 guests.

In addition, rice alcohol plays a key role during Yao coming of age rites – one of the most important life cycle ceremonies for this ethnic group. These ceremonies last three days and four nights and signify that a male has reached adulthood to become an official member of the community. Here, around 100 litres of rice spirits are used in the *tau chai* maturity ceremony (Tran Van Ha and Le Minh Anh 2008). Due to the large volumes of

alcohol required and high costs of production, in some areas of Vietnam such as Quảng Ninh (a coastal province bordering China), Yao households have started to substitute rice spirits with beer, or else are purchasing rice alcohol from Kinh distillers in nearby Bắc Ninh province (Tran Van Ha and Le Minh Anh 2008). However, this differs from Yao living in Lào Cai province who maintain a preference for local, home-made versions of their alcohols in all ceremonies and celebrations.

The season of high demand for upland alcohol for local Hmong and Yao in Lào Cai province coincides with the period leading up to the lunar New Year. This celebration takes place in late January or early February, but the period leading up to these events can extend from November, with alcohol consumed during numerous celebrations, social visits, and presented as gifts. During this time, households have completed their rice harvest and have more time to devote to these important social events (see Chapter 3 for an annual Hmong and Yao livelihood calendar). In preparation for this increased alcohol demand, Hmong and Yao producers start distilling larger volumes around July. Alternatively, the low period for local alcohol production and trading occurs post-New Year in late February and March. This is the onset of the rice/maize growing season, when households retain their labour for agricultural production and cash is reserved for purchasing seed and fertilizer.

### **7.2.1 Upland Alcohol Making as a Family Tradition and Household Skill**

A household-based activity, rice or maize alcohol is nowadays an item that certain Hmong or Yao families within a hamlet distil for trade or exchange with other households. For many producers, this is considered to be a family tradition. A number of informants explained how year-long distillers who trade their surplus – as opposed to households that do not distil or only make alcohol a few times a year - are families in which the skill and practice is transmitted from one generation to the next.

Human/cultural capital in the form of handed-down, local traditional knowledge is therefore considered an essential asset underpinning households' engagement and continuance in alcohol production and trade. In addition, specialising in alcohol making tends to be viewed by Hmong as a marker of local social prestige, in part because it is a



reflection of a household's wealth, as will be explained below. According to Vang (02/09/07), a Si Ma Cai Hmong man who produces and trades maize spirits:

Some households make alcohol only five times a year or so, while others do it all year-round. The households who make more alcohol are also trading it, like mine. This is something that has been passed down to us from our elders. My parents, grandparents and great grandparents also produced maize alcohol for others, so now it is my turn to continue their trade. Some families have specialized in this trade for a very long time, and these families are known about and respected by people in the village.

Moreover, for some Hmong alcohol producers like Chia - who has distilled maize alcohol for the past 18 years, following in the footsteps of his fore-parents - there is a preference to trade alcohol over selling maize grain itself. He accounts for this by saying "it's in my family's history to make alcohol and I don't want to lose my culture". Chia's desire to stick with distilling and trading maize spirits is significant here, as maize grain has become a highly profitable upland boom crop in Lào Cai since the 2000s, and supplies the lowland commercial animal feed industry.

Yao informants also described how alcohol distillation is a special family skill that not all households necessarily possess. Lu Ta May (17/02/09), an expert distiller from Thanh Kim – a commune now renowned for its rice spirits - says that just because a household has the know-how, does not automatically translate into alcohol making prowess. Lu Ta May explains:

Being able to make alcohol all depends upon talent. Men or women can do it, but our alcohol is difficult to make. You know, some families just can't do it right. These families may even have a lot of rice which they can use for distillation, but the problem is that they can't perfect how to make alcohol very well. This all depends on the family's skill. It's very difficult to make a good quality alcohol.

While most of the ninety households in Lu Ta May's village have the alcohol making knowledge, she contends that only around thirty of them are proficient enough to distil a high quality product that tastes fine and "does not give you headaches" (17/02/09).

Interestingly, the high value Hmong and Yao informants in Lào Cai placed on spirit making and trading as traditional knowledge and practice – and the social esteem associated with this - contrasts with the situation found directly across the border in Ma Guan county of Yunnan, China. Discussions with Hmong youth and elders there in 2010,

revealed that although many households used to distil in the past, today industrially manufactured maize spirits are bought in the marketplace or from shops (Hmong interviewees Ma Guan, Yunnan 15/06/10; 18/06/10). Many Hmong, as well as other minorities in this area such as Zhuang, consider alcohol making a very arduous task, and youth in particular seem disinclined to now engage in this activity (Zhuang interviewee Ma Guan, Yunnan 18/06/10). Moreover, while maize spirits have retained their socio-cultural importance, the industrially-made alcohol is now regarded as higher quality than home-distilled versions (Hmong male elder, Ma Guan Yunnan 18/06/10). As such, in Ma Guan, alcohol production is no longer framed as a local signifier of household wealth and social standing, with home-made alcohols attributed a lower status in relation to the more ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ commercial versions (c.f. Long and Villareal 1998).

Later in this chapter, I will return to this concept of distilling as a ‘special skill,’ in terms of how this notion is now being strategically deployed by different groups of social actors in relation to the commoditisation of upland alcohol – in light of the growing broad interest in these products from Lào Cai. However, I now continue my contextual overview with an examination of how local alcohol production and trade fits into Hmong and Yao livelihood practices and decision-making.

### **7.3 The Role of Upland Alcohols within Hmong and Yao Livelihood Equations**

As noted above, within Lào Cai province, the alcohol produced by Hmong and Yao in upland communes is typically made of either rice or maize. The choice of grains used is based upon staple crop specialisation within the region, owing to place-based variations in agro-ecological conditions.<sup>147</sup> More rice alcohol is produced in districts west of the Red River (Sa Pa and Bát Xát) – areas where the topographical and climatic setting permits terraced wet rice production. Maize alcohol tends to be the major type of spirit produced on the east side of the Red River (including Bắc Hà, Mường Khương and Si Ma Cai districts), where conditions are dryer and soils better support growing maize over rice

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<sup>147</sup> In some areas, alcohol is also made from root crops such as cassava. Many distillers perceive this as being of inferior quality to rice or maize spirits, and unable to fetch as high a market price. In this paper I am leaving other types of alcohol out of the discussion in order to focus on those that are the most widespread in the province and that have recently garnered the interests of outside stakeholders for marketing and socioeconomic development purposes.

(see map in Figure 1.1). Indeed, in the case of the latter eastern region of the province, maize is more important in the livelihoods of Hmong residents, in terms of household consumption, livestock rearing, and the market sale of alcohol or increasingly, maize grain for the feed industry in the Red River delta.<sup>148</sup>

### **7.3.1 Land holding size matters**

Household specialisation in alcohol distilling is in large part determined by access to sufficient natural endowments such as land, and the ability to generate a level of rice or maize beyond yearly subsistence consumption needs. Throughout Lào Cai province, Hmong and Yao household members confirmed that for both rice and maize alcohol, landholding size was the overall decisive factor influencing household specialisation into alcohol production.<sup>149</sup> Whereas many households possessed the traditional knowledge to make these spirits, not all did so consistently. Regular producers tended to be better-off households with larger land parcels in this area where, unlike the lowlands, only a single crop of rice or maize can be grown per year. As such, the production of alcohol is to some degree a reflection of intra and inter-hamlet socio-economic differentiation.

In addition, a mounting squeeze on household farmland is leading to a reduction in rice and maize spirit making in some parts of Lào Cai. As discussed in Chapter 3, both Hmong and Yao are patrilineal, and sons each inherit their own land parcels from their parents' upon marriage. Customary inheritance arrangements, when combined with other factors such as population growth, government-sponsored land allocation, resettlement and sedentarisation programmes, and in-migration, create an overall pattern of reduced household land for subsistence (Bonnin and Turner 2011a).

Until the 1990s, in many communes of Sa Pa District (such as Tả Van, Lao Chải, Giang Ta Chải, and Tả Phìn), Hmong and Yao were engaged in regular rice alcohol making on a

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<sup>148</sup> Both rice and maize are core staple foods for Hmong and Yao. However overall, rice is preferred for consumption over maize, whereas local maize (such as sticky maize) is often consumed in times of rice shortages, or is ground into flour and mixed with rice.

<sup>149</sup> By specialization here I do not mean to say that alcohol production is the sole or main livelihood activity. Rather, I mean that these households are specialized as regular producers. The majority of Hmong and Yao households in Lào Cai base their livelihoods on subsistence rice and maize production and orient other activities around this core.

small-scale, mainly for household consumption, or for sale or exchange within the hamlet. This widespread household practice in the area is referred to in French military archives from 1903 (EFEO ME: 343 Lao Chay, 1903). Today, only a few households in these communes continue to do this because the available rice growing land has shrunk, and households need more of their own land to grow rice for everyday consumption. Moreover, Sa Pa Hmong farmers explained that it is only ‘worthwhile’ to make alcohol if you rear a lot of pigs, as I shall explain in the next section. As such, nowadays most Hmong from these communes buy their rice alcohol – either from Giáy households in these hamlets, who continue to distil it at a larger scale, or else from marketplace vendors.

Altogether, it is apparent that access to sufficient land plays the most decisive role in whether or not Hmong and Yao households will take up alcohol distilling. The progressive trend towards upland agricultural land scarcity means that alcohol distilling is becoming more of a specialised activity than it was in the past. Only some households still possess enough land to support making spirits on a regular basis. At the same time, for many households in the region, the income generated through the sale of alcohol is becoming more significant as a way of earning cash to pay for seeds and agricultural inputs. By and large, this is in response to the Vietnam state’s recent promotion of hybrid rice and maize seed varieties.

### **7.3.2 The impact of hybrid seeds**

Hybrid seed varieties, recently introduced to the uplands during the 1990s, also have a number of implications for alcohol production. Noted above, in terms of *maize* dependent areas of Lào Cai, upland households are increasingly turning to plant hybrid maize seeds - such as Bioseed, NK 54/4300, LVN 10 - in addition to their local varieties, for the purpose of marketing it as grain.<sup>150</sup> Yet, hybrid maize seeds are not considered very

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<sup>150</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5, the production of hybrid maize in the northern uplands is booming due to the development of the commercial animal husbandry industry in lowland Vietnam, also since the 1990s. The demand for domestic maize by industrial animal feed companies in the Red River delta is so intense that the northern uplands are now being turned to as supply markets for grain (Hoang Xuan Thanh and Neefjes 2005; Ho Huu Nhi 2001; Dao The Anh et al. 2006. With proper inputs of chemical fertilizer hybrid maize seeds can produce 100kg of grain from 1kg of seed (Ho Huu Nhi 2001).

suitable for good quality spirits and Hmong informants in Lào Cai state that such seeds are not used for this purpose.<sup>151</sup> Thus, the dedicated alcohol makers in a hamlet tend to distil spirits from their local maize landraces only (Hmong alcohol producers 27/02/09; pers comm., Dao The Anh, Director, Centre for Agricultural Systems Research and Development, 15/05/10). Households with smaller landholdings may not be able to grow enough traditional maize to make alcohol, and sell much of the surplus hybrid grain they grow.

This dislike for using hybrid *maize* seeds to distil alcohol contrasts with the situation for Yao and Hmong *rice* alcohol makers in Lào Cai (mainly in Bát Xát and Sa Pa districts). Here, the rice being used in alcohol production is no longer from traditional seed varieties, but from hybrids, mostly imported from China (Bát Xát Yao alcohol producers 02/10/07; Sa Pa Yao alcohol producer 17/02/09). Traditional, local rice varieties remain more highly valued for their better taste and reserved for household consumption (Bonnin and Turner 2011a) - using them to make alcohol is now considered 'a waste'. Moreover, it has become difficult to generate sufficient amounts for larger-scale distilling using local varieties due to the land shrinkages discussed above. As such, the greater yields produced from hybrid rice has enabled some households with larger landholdings and surplus rice to diversify into alcohol production and trade.

### 7.3.3 Household Earnings and Income Uses

In addition to the socio-cultural functions served by upland alcohols, as well as their relevance as signifiers of household traditional knowledge and cultural capital, they also perform an important role within the financial segment of Hmong and Yao livelihoods in Lào Cai. Alcohol trading appears to be a more lucrative livelihood strategy than selling rice, and possibly also slightly so for maize grain. Lo May, a Yao woman who produces and trades alcohol in Thanh Kim commune (Sa Pa district) used to market her surplus rice, but then discovered that she could earn far more through alcohol trading. In 2009, Lo May could gross 140,000 VND by selling 40 kg of hybrid rice grain. Yet using the

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<sup>151</sup> Hybrid maize grains are also not normally used for human consumption – such as for maize flour (*men men*) which is a Hmong food staple - with Hmong preferring to eat their local varieties instead (Tran Duc Vien 2003).

same amount to produce alcohol she could gross 600,000 VND - an extremely significant mark up. It may be a little more profitable to sell maize alcohol than maize grain. For instance, at 2009 prices, by selling 60 kg of hybrid maize grain a Hmong producer could earn around 210,000 VND (3,500 VND per kilogram), while 20 litres of maize alcohol would fetch approximately 240,000 VND (at 12,000 VND per litre) made from 60 kg of maize grain. Nevertheless, the comparison with maize is not entirely translatable, given that as noted above, the traditional maize grains are not usually sold, while hybrid grains are not typically used for distilling alcohol.

Rather than comprising a stand-alone activity, alcohol production also supports livelihood diversification as it is often paired with animal husbandry, a common practice throughout much of upland Southeast Asia. The by-product of distillation – the maize or rice mash – provides a nutritionally enhanced feed for local pig breeds, as well as poultry and water buffalo (Taysayavong Lotchana 2010). Yao and Hmong households that were making alcohol on a regular basis also raised and kept more pigs for breeding, ritual use, household consumption, and market sale.

Consequently, alcohol trading in local upland markets provides a significant supplementary cash contribution to Hmong and Yao livelihoods. Revenue from alcohol sales most commonly goes back into supporting rice or maize production – for consumption and alcohol making. Access to financial capital has become an essential requirement of subsistence agriculture due to the Vietnam state's push of hybrid seed technologies in the uplands (Bonnin and Turner 2011a). Earnings from the sale of alcohol are now needed for the yearly purchases of hybrid seeds, as well as to buy the costly fertilizers and pesticides necessary for these seeds to grow optimally.<sup>152</sup> Other prevalent uses for alcohol earnings cited by Hmong and Yao are to purchase: farm equipment; food, particularly rice in maize growing areas, and meat; items for daily household use; buffalo; motorbikes; and children's education expenses.

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<sup>152</sup> For instance, as a package, hybrid rice seeds are often between 5-10 times more expensive to grow than local seed varieties (DFID and LCPC, 2003: 21).

In sum, upland alcohol production has a range of implications for Hmong and Yao livelihood equations. The decision to make alcohol is strongly rooted in cultural tradition, yet is also tempered by a number of everyday practical realities. The most important is the size of landholdings. Overall therefore, this appears to be an activity undertaken by more ‘well-off’ Hmong and Yao households within a given hamlet. The introduction of maize hybrid seeds in the uplands has also enabled households with larger landholdings and staple crop surpluses to take up trading alcohol, a more profitable option than selling their grain. Livelihoods are then further diversified by specialised alcohol producers through the important dual livelihood strategy of pig breeding, recycling the by-product of distillation as animal feed. Nevertheless, alcohol production remains a very time consuming, highly-skilled and labour intensive activity for Hmong and Yao households, which I turn to explore next.

#### **7.4 The Production Process of Upland Rice and Maize Alcohol**

Part of the reason why the upland rice and maize spirits made by Hmong and Yao from certain areas of Lào Cai have garnered recent acclaim by lowland Kinh consumers is due to the special distillation techniques and ingredients used. This includes the addition of traditional fermentation agents as well as special herbs or spices collected from the forest. In addition, within the three localities of Lào Cai that have recently become the most famous in northern Vietnam for their alcohol - San Lùng, Thanh Kim and Bản Phố - the water used for distillation is said to come from mountain springs that pass through these areas.

I briefly sketch out the general methods used for rice and maize alcohol making in this province, in order to better understand the overall production technique and to demonstrate the labour intensive and complex requirements of this activity, while keeping in mind that the specific production processes for different alcohols vary. Transformations in the technologies of production include the use of hybrid seeds (at least for rice alcohol) and manufactured fermentation agents (see below). However the basic distillation process appears to have remained much the same as what is described in the military reports of French colonial observers from the late 1890s.

The main stages involved in alcohol making (based on either un-husked rice or maize) are as follows.

1. The grains are sun dried.
2. The un-husked rice or maize grains are boiled in a large wok on an open-fire stove for several hours (producers report between 5-8 hours of boiling).
3. This mash is then cooled, and a fermentation starter and other flavouring agents are added. For instance, Yao who produce rice alcohol from Thanh Kim and San Lùng say that they add a mixture of up to twenty different herbs, spices and special leaves grown in home gardens or else harvested from the forest (Figure 7.1). Alcoholic fermentation is induced via a starter called *men*, which can be made from dough of rice or other grains, water, and a number of herbs or spices (Vu Nguyen Thanh et al., 2008). This *men* contains various microbial molds and yeasts, which trigger fermentation. For the most part, *men* is now purchased on the market in the form of industrially-made tablets, either from Vietnam or China.<sup>153</sup> *Men* from Vietnam is considered to be of a higher quality than the Chinese products, with traders often stating that the latter produces a poor quality alcohol that gives people ‘headaches’ but can achieve higher volumes (Kinh alcohol wholesaler Bắc Hà town, 21/03/09). In the alcohol specialty villages, some households are still said to use home-made traditional *men*, such as that derived from a type of millet seeds (*hồng my*) or red kaoliang seeds (sorghum). While these natural fermenting agents are said to result in better tasting spirits than the manufactured *men*, I observed few households that continue to grow these seeds, with most having switched over to the manufactured *men*.
4. The mixture is placed in a container and left to ferment for anywhere between four to ten days.
5. After the fermentation period, the mixture is transferred to a large wooden barrel. The barrel is fitted with a pipe made of bamboo that is inserted into one side, and is topped with a metal bowl containing cool water. The container is placed back

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<sup>153</sup> Cao Bằng and Bình Dương provinces are two key places where the manufactured *men* is produced.



- on the stove, and cooked at a temperature that must be strictly controlled, and requires constant monitoring (Figure 7.1).
6. The alcohol fumes rise to the top of the barrel where it condenses on the concave bottom of the metal bowl containing cold water and begins to drip down the bamboo pipe where it is captured by a funnel and transferred to a storage container. This process of distillation may be done either once or twice, with higher concentrations of alcohol resulting from a second time around.



**FIGURE 7.1: UPLAND ALCOHOL PRODUCTION (LEFT: HMONG MAN DISTILLING MAIZE ALCOHOL; RIGHT: YAO WOMAN WITH HERBS AND RICE TO USE FOR ALCOHOL PRODUCTION; SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Clearly, the investment that Hmong and Yao households make in terms of the time – up to a period of two weeks per production cycle - and the physical labour necessary for alcohol production, is substantial. This involves sourcing ingredients from the forest, making or purchasing the *men* starter agent, growing and harvesting rice or maize, and a lengthy and delicate production process that requires considerable know-how. The amount of alcohol produced from a given batch varies, depending on the technical skill of the producer, the availability of household labour, the fermentation agent used, the type

of grains, the weather, and other factors.<sup>154</sup> However, to provide a general idea, producers explained that 40 kg of rice grain generates between 16-20 litres of rice alcohol, while it takes around 60 kg of maize to yield 20 litres of maize spirits.

### **7.5 Locally-oriented Marketplace Trade of Upland Alcohol**

Before examining how alcohol commodity chains have been transforming due to their recent commoditisation, I first explore how these products have long been circulating for locally-oriented use by upland households. Beyond intra-hamlet sales or exchange of these home-made spirits, their trading for local use features prominently within Lào Cai's upland marketplaces. Within each of the markets that featured in my study, a group of traders – usually of Hmong, Yao, Nùng or Giáy ethnicity - sells either rice, maize or cassava alcohol on the main market day, primarily to other ethnic minorities from the area. Kinh collectors also visit upland marketplaces to purchase alcohol for retail and wholesale enterprises located in upland towns and cities. A small amount of cross-border trade also occurs, with flows moving from border markets such as Si Ma Cai into Yunnan province, China.<sup>155</sup>

Based upon recurrent trader counts, alcohol sellers are most numerous in Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai marketplaces – here, for maize alcohol - where they reach between 70-100 traders on peak market day depending on seasonal demand. This observation correlates with the fact that these districts are also the major maize producing areas of Lào Cai province.

The majority of these small-scale alcohol traders sell their alcohol weekly, at only one periodic marketplace. However, a few Hmong specialize in trading within a weekly

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<sup>154</sup> Maize alcohol producers state that the distillation yields more alcohol during the summer than the winter, however the quality of alcohol made during the winter is considered to be better (Hmong alcohol producers Bắc Hà 27/05/07) )

<sup>155</sup> In Si Ma Cai marketplace - located within close proximity to a local China border crossing- Hmong maize alcohol traders stated that Hmong Chinese often came there to purchase alcohol to take back to China (Hmong male alcohol trader Si Ma Cai 22/03/09). The cross border trade of maize alcohol from Vietnam to China was confirmed in 2010 by an ethnic Zhuang Chinese border guard I interviewed in Ma Guan (Yunnan, China) who worked at the Xiǎo Bǎizǐ (Si Ma Cai) crossing from 1979-2000 (China Border Guard 17/06/10). However, he believed that this trade was more significant in the past than it currently is, as households in Yunnan have now turned to buying industrially-made alcohol discussed earlier.

circuit of different marketplaces. For instance, Vang (29/07/07) from Si Ma Cai, whom I introduced earlier, has been a maize alcohol trader since the age of fifteen and sells at three different locales - each Friday at Xín Chéng market, Saturday at Cán Cầu market, and then on Sundays he heads to his local Si Ma Cai market.

Yet, only a few follow Vang's multi-market approach, in part because this requires access to expensive physical capital such as a horse or motorbike to transport the heavy and precious goods over long distances (Hmong female alcohol trader Bắc Hà 27/05/07). Interestingly, Hmong alcohol traders explain that it is also difficult to sell well in a range of markets because Hmong consumers tend to prefer the alcohol that is produced within their own locality (Bắc Hà Hmong alcohol traders 27/05/07). This partiality of Hmong consumers contrasts with the current tastes and consumption preferences of Kinh middle-class lowlanders. As I shall explore subsequently within the two case studies (Section 7.7 and 7.8), this group of external consumers is more interested in acquiring upland alcohols from one of the newly renowned alcohol specialty villages in Lào Cai, as possessing and consuming these 'authentic' upland spirits has become symbol of status. This is one example of how local perceptions can diverge from externally-determined value judgements which have become increasingly influential in upland alcohol markets and commodity chains.



**FIGURE 7.2: HMONG ALCOHOL TRADERS IN SI MA CAI MARKET (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

The amount of alcohol that traders can sell in local markets varies by season, as noted above. Biggest sales happen in the months before the lunar New Year celebrations. During this time, alcohol prices rise by around 20-25 per cent. In addition, price fluctuations are based on changes in the cost of hybrid seeds. As a whole, the cost of rice and maize spirits in Lào Cai have been steadily increasing over time. Discussing these prices, Seo (27/02/09) a Si Ma Cai Hmong maize alcohol trader, explained:

Today I brought 100 litres to the market with me to sell and I've been able to get rid of almost all of it. I sell a litre for 12,000 VND, so today I made 1,800,000 VND. In 2006, a litre of maize alcohol sold for 7,000 VND, and now the price has risen to 12,000 VND. During the Hmong New Year the cost always goes up a bit, so this year one litre was 15,000 VND.

Therefore, in both hamlets and upland marketplaces there are specific patterns etched out on the local landscapes of alcohol trade. Within hamlets that have sufficient grains for subsistence needs, alcohol production has resulted in some households being known as key, skilled producers, yet the knowledge of production remains fairly well dispersed. As well as sales in the hamlet, marketplace traders expand the local scope of trade. While still tending to sell only their own alcohol, producers make large enough quantities to see important differences in the cash earnings of their households. Local customs again come into play though, as purchasers sample before buying, keen to gain locally produced spirits that taste 'the best', resulting in specific trading routes. These trading scapes are also not immune from outside stimulus, and I now turn to examine how recent external influences have been impacting upon upland alcohol production and trade.

## **7.6 The Commoditisation of Upland Rice Alcohol in Lào Cai Province**

Following a similar approach to the earlier French colonial state's monopoly, during the subsidized economic period, the Vietnam state forbade the production and circulation of alcohol outside official channels, as noted in Chapter 3.<sup>156</sup> Private alcohol distilling was seen as against national economic goals, and moral stigmas were attached to wastefully diverting rice – the main staple food – into such a frivolous, self-indulgent purpose.

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<sup>156</sup> The French monopoly on alcohol commenced in 1897, and was heavily resisted by Kinh Vietnamese in the lowlands through the production and trade of contraband alcohol (Peters 2004). This raises the question of what happened to this trade in the mountains during this era, as well as whether ethnic minorities were exempted from such regulations.

Alcohol distribution was only sanctioned in state shops, and mainly supposed to be for supplying the New Year festivities. In Lào Cai, there was a large state production plant devoted to this purpose at this time. Nevertheless, long-term resident informants recalled that during the 1970s and early 1980s, in some upland hamlets of Lào Cai, Hmong and Yao households there persisted in making alcohol, and at times bartered it with Kinh for other rationed goods. Since decollectivisation, alcohol production has become more open again, expanding to the far more organised production that I write about in the current context.

As of the late 1990s, alcohol production has become more significant within Hmong and Yao livelihoods following the launch of hybrid seeds for staple crops in the northern uplands as already noted. Yet, new external interests and consumer markets have also acted to expand a trade formerly based upon local hamlet exchanges or marketplace sales to other ethnic minorities. Such shifts have extended commodity chains beyond the local level to reach distant lowland markets. Consequently, upland alcohols are increasingly undergoing processes of commoditisation, largely under the control of external market actors. Before introducing my case studies to highlight these elements however, I first outline the wider shifts that are leading to these market transformations in upland traditional alcohols.

### **7.6.1 Upland Alcohol Artisanal Villages in Lào Cai Province**

Throughout Vietnam, traditional alcohols – mainly artisanal-produced home-blends – remain a very popular consumer good. Indeed, a 2009 study under the Health Strategy and Policy Institute of Vietnam discovered a 96 per cent national preference for home-made alcohol over brand name products (Đam Viet Cuong and Vu Minh Hanh 2009). Moreover, the annual volume of home-based production was estimated to be 2.5 times greater than formal distilleries.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Another study found that while the estimated per capita average of adult alcohol consumption in Vietnam was 2.4 litres, while 1 litre of this was classified as ‘unrecorded’ (Lachenmier et al. 2009). The latter is defined as informally produced, homemade alcohols as well as illegally made or smuggled beverages, or surrogate alcohol that is officially not meant for human consumption, raising the issue of health safety.



There is an extremely wide diversity of types of alcohol being produced in Vietnam. Presently there are over 1,500 kinds of traditional alcohols (*ruou*), commonly made of rice, maize, herbs, fruits or cassava. Many of these alcohols are reputed to have health or other physical benefits (especially for men), such as providing strength and energy. Likewise, they are often used as the base for traditional herbal medicinal remedies made from a host of forest products or infused with wildlife, such as snakes, geckos or scorpions).

A large number of these alcohols are local or regional specialties, some of which date back to pre-colonial times - made in household or communal distilleries in villages around the country - with these localities having gained their reputation over time (Peters 2004; Lanchenmeier et al., 2009). This reflects an historical pattern of rural labour division involving village-based commodity specialisation (for craft and trades such as rice alcohol, wood carving, ceramics, furniture, paper-making, ink block printing and so on), prominent throughout the lowland north of Vietnam (Gourou 1936; Fanchette and Stedman 2009). For example, in the Red River Delta the state officially identifies over 2,000 different ‘craft villages,’ dedicated to the production and trade of different local specialties (JICA-MARD 2004).

During the subsidized economy, a number of lowland craft and trade villages waned, as the state encouraged some villages to turn to collectivised agriculture, while villages producing goods for key sectors were transformed into craft cooperatives (Abrami 2002; Fanchette and Stedman 2009). At present, the revivification or new creation of craft villages in the lowland north is considered a solution to improve floundering rural economies, as the commercialisation of agriculture and land re-zoning for industrial purposes have led to landlessness and a need for livelihood diversification into off-farm sources (Phuong 2001). In particular, since Vietnam’s accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2007, the lowland concept of ‘craft villages’ is being applied throughout the country, and the promotion of trademarks for such villages and intellectual property rights for specialty products is being pursued as a key national development strategy, as well as a means to boost exports (Vietnam Development Gateway Online: 2008). Such

initiatives have also been taken up in other areas of Southeast Asia, with similar state policies of “one village, one product” – such as the Philippines and Thailand - in order to support tourism, and urban and export sales of such place-based specialties.

However, the notion of craft or commodity-specialising villages is a more recent concept for Hmong and Yao areas in the northern uplands – yet, is another approach being taken by the Vietnam state to promote the development of the ‘economically inefficient’ mountainous region. As already discussed, upland alcohol producing hamlets have traditionally had more to do with endowments in a combination of factors such as family traditional knowledge, household access to resources - namely land - and favourable agro-ecological environments. This is now being overlaid by a state policy agenda keen for upland areas to be integrated more into market systems, although often according to schemes that replicate the lowland model – as I also demonstrated in the case of marketplaces (discussed further in Chapter 9; see also World Bank 2009).

The creation of upland alcohol specialty villages in Lào Cai is directly linked to state intervention, in conjunction with the expansion private sector tourism in the province since the late 1990s, and the endorsement of these alcohols through the mass media. In the current ‘*Master Plan for the Socio-economic Development of Lào Cai Province Until 2020*’, a major aim for developing rural industries in the province involves investing in ‘trade villages’ in order to “encourage in-depth investment, technology renewal and mechanisation of some production stages and processes in order to increase productivity and product quality; to build brand names for certain products such as maize liquor (Bắc Hà ), San Lùng liquor (Bát Xát)...for tourist and export purposes” (Decision No. 46/2008/QĐ-TTg 31/03/08).

The emerging consumer market that accompanies this state and private sector backing, are reflective of particular new consumption practices of Kinh urbanites – and associated with the acquisition of a modern, ‘middle-class’ lifestyle (c.f. Vann 2012). There are two important points to be made here as part and parcel of this process. The first, regards the increasing relevance of specialty food products that are valorized by place of origin as a

sign of superior quality (Tran 2005). For the mountainous area, this is linked to notions of naturalness (also see Chapter 6 regarding water buffalo meat). The second point, has to do with a growing interest in ‘cultural tourism,’ stemming out of a lowland fascination with ethnic minorities as the exotic ‘other’ (Michaud and Turner 2006; Duong 2008). Although long engrained negative stereotyping of upland ethnic minorities as dirty, primitive, and even fearful (such as for their power to cast spells), continue to persist, the growth of domestic cultural tourism has turned the tourist gaze towards seeking out the culturally exotic (Nate-Chei 2011). The cultural and economic values and meanings embedded in upland objects are transforming as they assume new roles, showcased as souvenirs of minority material culture – such as artisanal alcohols, medicinal products like the Yao herbal ‘leaf bath,’ and textile handicrafts.

In addition, the mass media has both reflected and reinforced new lowland consumer cultures for ‘authentic ethnic minority products’ (Koh 2004). A media trend in ‘romanticising’ ethnic minority cultures in order to attract readership has developed, supporting the growing tourism sector by publicising ‘natural’ traditional products from the uplands (Nguyen Van Chinh 2010).

As such, a specialised industry in the trade of ethnic minority-made spirits originating from Lào Cai - catering entirely to the tastes of Kinh consumers - is now blossoming. This commoditisation of upland alcohols is creating new livelihood opportunities for diverse groups of actors including Hmong and Yao producers and traders, and Kinh traders and wholesalers. Trade networks now knit producer locales with upland tourist towns and onwards to lowland markets throughout Vietnam’s north.

Yet, although rice and maize alcohol are commonly made by Hmong and Yao households all over the province, only a few upland hamlets have been recently designated and supported by the state and tourist interests as specialty producer localities. Importantly, this endorsement has occurred through the creation and reification of geographical product indicators as a marketing strategy. As such, particular commodities have become intimately tied to a specific place of origin, linking both locality and product to ideas of



purity, naturalness, authenticity, and inherited traditional knowledge (c.f. Bell and Valentine 1997). Noteworthy here is the food literature that analyses the concept of *terroir* (Moran 1993; Barham 2003; Gade 2004; Trubek 2008).<sup>158</sup> For instance, Trubek's (2008: xiv) exploration of the concept of the *terroir* via ethnographic stories set in France, Italy, and the United States, illuminates precisely how such seemingly intrinsic links between "taste and place" have developed - especially through the creation of ideological labels. In relation to upland spirits from Lào Cai being marketed to lowland consumers as regional specialities and souvenirs, one will only find bottles sold with the labels of the following three producer localities: San Lùng, Bản Phố and Thanh Kim.

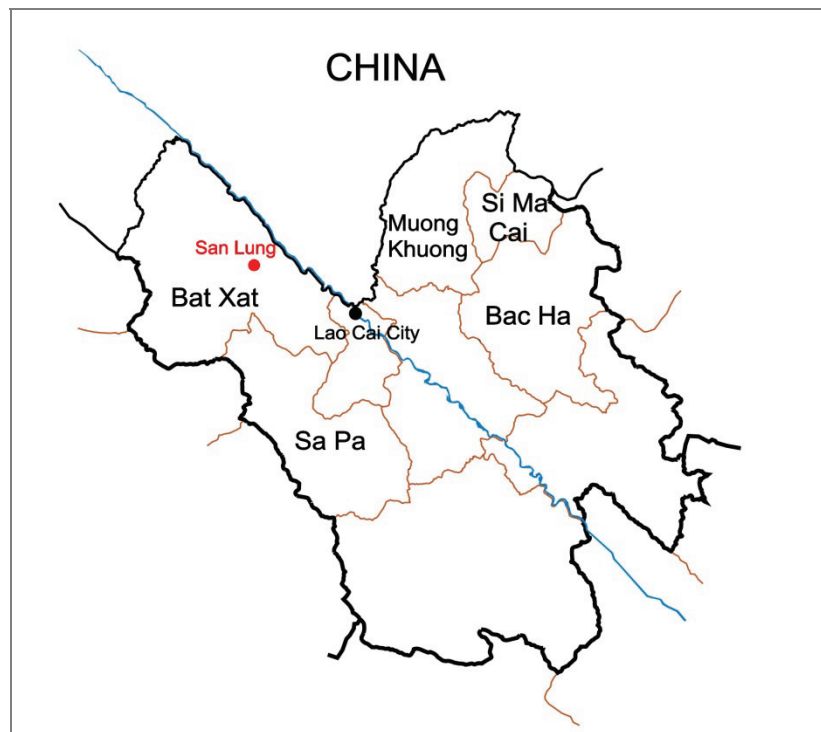
In the next section I explore these shifts in upland alcohol trade networks in Lào Cai province by way of two case studies: 1) San Lùng hamlet in Bát Xát district, where Yao are known for making rice spirits; and 2) Bản Phố commune in Bắc Hà district where Hmong distil maize alcohol. Through these examples, I show how the emerging lowland interest in upland alcohols from Lào Cai and their subsequent commoditisation, are effecting new contestations over value by different groups of social actors, namely Hmong and Yao producers and traders, the Vietnamese state, Kinh entrepreneurs, upland alcohol connoisseurs, and the Vietnam mass media. Within these arenas, social actors draw upon a range of old and new claims to knowledge, authenticity, and tradition in order to protect their interests. I explore how the involvement of new powerful entrants on the scene can work to lock out or limit the participation of other groups in alcohol trade networks, and the strategies that these latter groups devise in order to resist exclusion and to legitimise, maintain or expand their stake.

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<sup>158</sup> According to Barham (2003: 131) "Historically, *terroir* refers to an area or terrain, usually rather small, whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive qualities to food products. The word is particularly closely associated with the production of wine. A *terroir* can be identified, for example, as one that produces a *grand cru*, or a particularly excellent wine. It can also be said that a certain wine has a *goût*, or taste, of its particular *terroir*. Figuratively, *terroir* can also designate a rural or provincial region that is considered to have a marked influence on its inhabitants. It is said in French, for example, that certain customs or idioms are rooted in their *terroir*, or that a person strongly conveys a sense of the *terroir* of their birth and upbringing. This concept of *terroir* relates to a time of much less spatial mobility, when change occurred at a slower pace. *Terroir* products, in this interpretation, resulted from long occupation of the same area and represented the interplay of human ingenuity and curiosity with the natural givens of place."

### 7.7 San Lùng Hamlet Case Study – A Famous Rice Alcohol Emerges

The rice alcohol trade networks that originate from the upland hamlet of San Lùng (shown in Figure 7.3) are a clear example of the increasing commoditisation and commercialisation of upland alcohols for external markets, and the central position that the state has assumed in this regard. Here, intervention by the Vietnamese state agents has altered the trade flows of rice spirits with its promotion of San Lùng as a traditional, specialised alcohol making hamlet. In so doing, new opportunities and constraints for rice alcohol producers and traders have emerged, as well as a new assortment of competing claims by different groups of social actors working to defend their interests.



**FIGURE 7.3: LOCATION OF SAN LÙNG HAMLET IN BÁT XÁT DISTRICT, LÀO CAI PROVINCE**

San Lùng hamlet is located at an altitude of 1200 metres in Bản Xéo Commune, Bát Xát District. In 2007, this small, mono-ethnic Yao hamlet had a total of 50 households, of which almost all were dedicated rice alcohol producers (Bản Xéo People's Committee, pers comm., 02/10/07; Lào Cai Tourist Authority representative 12/10/07).

The distilling of rice alcohol within the wider area around current day Bát Xát district has been noted as far back as the late 1890s. In French military reports of this sector, the rice alcohol produced by Hmong and Yao is described as follows:

The inhabitants of the region produce an *eau de vie* [alcohol] that is an inferior quality compared to that made in the Delta due to the production process which is very basic. After the harvesting, each family, Hmong or Man [Yao], sets up in their house one or several distillation barrels which are very simple/basic. The paddy rice is kept with the husk on, and it is kept in a big jar or in a wood bucket where it ferments naturally. At the lowest level of the bucket is a bamboo pipe which the alcohol is distilled through drop by drop into an earthen container. This alcohol is not appreciated by the Annamites [Kinh]. Only the (Hmong and Yao) producers prefer this alcohol over the choum-choum [*ruou*] from the Delta (CAOM GGI 66105: Bát Xát sector, 1898).

The report also goes on to explain how rice alcohol was a key product exchanged by Yao with other ethnic minorities in the upland markets of Bát Xát region. It is interesting to observe this earlier perception of rice alcohol produced by ethnic minorities as inferior, poor quality, and basic by both colonial commentators and lowland Vietnamese alike. This contrasts with the situation at present, where since the 2000s rice alcohol from San Lùng hamlet has garnered widespread acclaim and popularity with Kinh throughout northern Vietnam. This appeal was sparked during the late 1990s, after Kinh entrepreneurs spotted the market potential in minority artisanal spirits for domestic tourists to the Sa Pa region. However, the recognition of San Lùng has been far more powerfully generated, reinforced, and disseminated by state interest in this particular hamlet. Yet before delving any deeper, let me first explore the processes at work that have led to the fame of this commodity.

Here, as with *terroir* discussed above, linking a particular geographical source with a product identity has occurred by assigning place-based attributes to San Lùng. In turn, these qualities are used to authenticate specific claims, by naturalising and historicising them. For one, the unique physical characteristics of San Lùng (discussed next) and traditional knowledge of Yao residents are stated as key features that have enabled the alcohol to achieve such a high standard. This valorisation of origin is depicted and reinforced through state marketing, mass media, and reiterated by alcohol connoisseurs and traders.

For instance, the water source used in this rice alcohol - mountain water springs found in San Lùng village – are considered to infuse the alcohol with a unique, exceptional quality, making it superior to other rice alcohols being produced in hamlets throughout the area. This is then historicised through promotional material from the Lào Cai Tourism Authority (a state owned enterprise). San Lùng alcohol is presented in the context of a ‘Yao oral legend’ which relates that the residents of this hamlet have produced their rice spirits for time immemorial in order to win the good favour of supernatural beings that have descended the mountain to the valley where three streams (or taps) flow (LC Government Online: 2010a).

A second factor used to validate the high quality of this alcohol is the local traditional knowledge of Yao from San Lùng. According to Kinh alcohol connoisseurs and traders, and as reported within Vietnam news media and via state marketing, the production technique for San Lùng rice alcohol is based upon a ‘secret traditional method’ – part of local Yao ancestral heritage. State promoters insist that this technique is carefully guarded by the Yao of that hamlet (LCIPT Online: 2009). As Tuan (30/07/07), a Kinh specialist on upland spirits from Sa Pa town, noted, “other communes in the area have some ambiguity as to the exact way the Yao from San Lùng make their version of rice alcohol. Other places just don’t know the precise way to do it, and so the quality of the alcohol they make is always going to be off.”

Such examples highlight the powerful position of interest groups in formulating and grafting a specific genealogy and essential characteristics onto San Lùng alcohol and its Yao producers. According to Long and Villareal (1998: 739) in the context of commoditisation, “labelling and other methods of attaching signifiers to particular products provide an interesting example of how such symbolisations occasion the expression of widely different opinions and cultural positions, leading in some cases to a direct confrontation of values.”

Efforts by various extra-local stakeholders to engineer and substantiate a particular, geographically-situated, Yao hamlet and their hamlet-wide ‘secret knowledge’ contrasts

with how Yao and Hmong have customarily tended to view their own alcohol production. As I discussed previously, this knowledge and skill has usually been regarded as something that is possessed by particular distiller *families* within a community. However, this upland understanding of alcohol-making ability differs from the situation in lowland northern Vietnam. As I noted earlier, in the lowlands a sophisticated system of rice alcohol production and distribution existed prior to the French colonial period. Unlike Hmong and Yao producers in Lào Cai, most of this lowland alcohol was not made by individual households for their own consumption or by specialists in each village. Rather, it was *communally distilled by specialised villages*, with a village setting its prices based upon the reputation it had acquired for its high quality alcohol-making (Peters 2004).<sup>159</sup>

#### **7.7.1 State Intervention in the San Lùng Rice Upland Rice Alcohol Trade**

Since 2000, the Lào Cai Tourism Company (LCTC) has been purchasing alcohol directly from San Lùng hamlet.<sup>160</sup> The LCTC is a state owned enterprise (SOE) set up in 1998, the role of which is to provide tourism services within the province.<sup>161</sup> The SOE has also been attempting to diversify by finding new sources of revenue, investing in new ventures to market local upland products. It saw great potential in developing a niche market for upland spirits produced by ethnic minorities. At the same time, according to an LCTC representative, the investment was intended to be a “mutually beneficial partnership” in terms of contributing to poverty alleviation by supporting alcohol production as a livelihood strategy for Yao producers in San Lùng (LCTC representative 12/10/07).

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<sup>159</sup> This village-based communal production of alcohol in the lowland north of Vietnam was undertaken in particular by villages with marginal agricultural land which would rely on alcohol making in order to trade it for rice and other basic consumption needs (Peters 2004). Important early rice alcohol producing villages included Quan Do, Cam Giang, and Van (Fanchette and Stedman 2009).

<sup>160</sup> In 2010, I learned that the LCTC’s activities in San Lùng had been taken over by the Petro Vietnam Sa Pa Tourism Joint Stock Company (PVST) with the San Lùng cooperative system, discussed next, continuing to operate. According to the website for PVST they are now “the exclusive distributor of all San Lung Bat Xat products” (PVST Online: 2010)

<sup>161</sup> Such as transportation, tour packages, and accommodation, catering in particular to Chinese tourists, crossing the border at Lào Cai city.

As an SOE, the LCTC's networks with the state acquired it a privileged position within the overall market for upland spirits, as well as within the San Lùng rice alcohol commodity chain. This includes access to state financial capital and the ability to distribute and sell the alcohol through state channels to markets in the lowlands. As such, San Lùng alcohol has now been crafted by the LCTC into a high quality, up-market product geared at largely at lowland Kinh consumers. It has since evolved into a guaranteed marker of product quality.

According to LCTC representatives, San Lùng was selected for state investment because of the high quality of rice spirits already being produced there, which were also able to pass Vietnam food safety standards (LCTC representative 12/10/07). Nevertheless, it is important to note that San Lùng itself did not previously possess any special reputation for alcohol compared to other distilling localities. This positive association, linking local knowledge, product quality and place, was not inherent but socially constructed – taking place only subsequent to state promotion (LCTC representative 12/10/07). While neighbouring Yao hamlets produce a similar rice alcohol, the state only (formally) maintains a trade relationship with San Lùng.<sup>162</sup>

While purchasing initially commenced in 2000, two years later the LCTC organized San Lùng hamlet into an 'alcohol producer cooperative.' Still in operation in 2009, supply and trade arrangements are made at the group, rather than individual household, level (LCTC representative 12/10/07). The cooperative has a leader, a local Yao producer, who collects from households and is responsible for ensuring quality standards are maintained. Every ten to fifteen days, the LCTC sends an agent to San Lùng, who also checks the rice alcohol and measures the quantity supplied before transporting it. If quality criteria have been met, the LCTC agent then pays the cooperative immediately in cash (LCTC official 12/10/07). Yao residents explained that households which are member of the cooperative have signed a contract with the LCTC. Under this arrangement, cooperative members are

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<sup>162</sup> However, news reports in Vietnam claim that the company has been involved in sourcing from outside of this hamlet, although I was not able to substantiate this.

not permitted to sell their alcohol to any *companies* aside from the LCTC (Sa La May 10/10/07; Lu May 10/10/07).

In 2003, the LCTC obtained a trade-mark branding the rice alcohol to secure control over the market in San Lùng spirits. The certification recognised the LCTC's intellectual property rights on the hamlet's name, as well as on their design style for packaging and labelling. Therefore, no other enterprises are allowed to purchase rice alcohol from the hamlet and market it as "San Lùng". An official from the LCTC proudly explained, "only we have the right to the San Lùng brand name in the market. Other companies that use the San Lùng name are doing so illegally because we have registered the hamlet name as a trademark with the Vietnamese government" (LCTC representative 12/10/07).

Cooperative members distil year-round, with individual households producing 1,000-4,000 litres on average per month. However, the amount that the LCTC purchases from San Lùng depends on how much households are able to produce, which often fluctuates over the agricultural season. Moreover, as rice alcohol production is a labour intensive activity, households with more members are able to distill larger volumes (Bản Xéo People's Committee Representative 10/10/07; LCTC official 12/10/07).

In total, the LCTC purchased 80,000 litres of rice alcohol from San Lùng in 2007, which rose to 100,000 litres in 2008. The LCTC plans to increase the annual volume of alcohol purchased from the cooperative at a rate of between 20-25 per cent. Indeed, demand for San Lùng alcohol is on the rise. In 2009, the amount purchased by consumers over the New Year period alone amounted to a total of 5,000 litres, a dramatic increase of 20 percent from the previous year. Most of this was sold by Kinh traders and wholesalers in upland areas, Hà Nội and other lowland provinces, where it was purchased for gifts (LCIPT Online: 2009). In order to meet growing lowland consumer demand, a number of San Lùng households have started to purchase additional rice in the market in order to maintain their supply to the LCTC. Therefore alcohol production for this state enterprise has resulted in a new requirement for financial capital outlays for San Lùng resident Yao.



### 7.7.2 Official Trade in San Lùng Rice Alcohol and Income Earnings along the Chain

The commodity chains of San Lùng cooperative, starting in the hamlet, soon move far beyond the local market. As noted above, the LCTC purchases rice alcohol directly at the cooperative in San Lùng. In 2009, Yao producers received a fixed amount of 13,000 VND per litre of alcohol they supplied to the company. The alcohol is then transported by the LCTC to a factory workshop in Bản Vược commune (also in Bát Xát District) where it is refined and commercially packaged in a variety of different styles, before being sent onwards to the head distribution and sales centre in Lào Cai city. Most of the value added accrues through the presentation of the alcohol. For example, basic plastic jugs are the cheapest, sold for 20,000 VND/per litre at retail, and 18,000 VND/per litre wholesale. A more up-market version is packaged in glass bottles and gift-wrapped in boxes depicting a smiling Yao woman with an idyllic mountain setting and terraced rice paddies in the background. In 2007, this cost 88,000 VND/per litre at retail, and 75,000 VND wholesale (LCIPT Online: 2008). The final LCTC San Lùng product is then either sold at the main enterprise centre in Lào Cai, or at two state shops located in Hà Nội city and Hải Dương province.



**FIGURE 7.4.: SAN LÙNG LCTC BOTTLES AND PACKAGING IMAGES (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Private traders and wholesalers purchase the alcohol from these state centres and distribute it to other shops, hotels and restaurants throughout northern Vietnam. For example, Thang (30/07/07), an alcohol trader in Sa Pa town (45 km away from Lào Cai City) telephones the LCTC whenever he needs a new shipment and they will have it sent



to him. By way of comparison with what the LCTC pays Yao producers and what the alcohol sells for, in 2009, Thang was selling a litre of the LCTC packaged San Lùng rice alcohol for 88,000-100,000 VND, a mark-up of up to 12,000 VND above the highest LCTC prices. The LCTC San Lùng is also being marketed for sale online, and when I surveyed these websites in 2010, I found that a litre cost from between 88,000 VND to 125,000 VND. Clearly, Yao producers are earning a much smaller amount – ranging anywhere from between 7,000 (for the cheapest bottles) to 112,000 VND (for the most expensive) less per litre - relative to what the LCTC and private traders are able to capture.<sup>163</sup> While I was not able to take into account the costs of transportation and other externalities, these profits occur with fairly little actual value added transformation of the commodity, aside from packaging.

Despite the control that the LCTC appears to exert over this niche market, ‘San Lùng rice alcohol’ is also traded and distributed outside of these formal state channels. I next turn to consider these commodity chains and trade networks – now rendered ‘unofficial’ - and how they articulate with the formal systems. Contestations over authenticity and economic commodity values between differently positioned groups of social actors emerge, as stakeholders with diverging interests in the rice alcohol commodity chain attempt to stake their claim. Within this processes, ‘upland culture’ is deployed as a “set of resources available for social and economic control,” while the scope for local access to the use of these resources is progressively being limited (Kneafsey, Ilbery and Jenkins 2001: 297).

### **7.7.3 Informal Commodity Chains in San Lùng Upland Rice Alcohol and Value Contestations**

While I sketch out the basic composition of the informal commodity chain, I omit a more in-depth discussion of the social dynamics of the trade interactions and networks at each node, as will be the focus of my second case study of maize alcohol. Rather, my aim here is to direct attention to the key social interfaces where conflicts between actors along the

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<sup>163</sup> This comparison is based on 2009 data that Yao producers earned 13,000 VND/per litre.

formal and informal commodity chains and trade networks have emerged (Long and Villareal 1998). These tensions have surfaced within the context of the LCTC's trade-marking of San Lùng rice alcohol.

Outside of the state trading channel, San Lùng alcohol continues to be sold to traders and wholesalers. These are normally older Kinh women from the closest towns of Bản Xéo or Bát Xát, who have specialised in the trade for many years. Kinh traders purchase the alcohol in large volumes, which is then transferred into 1.5 litre plastic containers (old mineral water bottles) or larger "Gerry cans" onto which they affix a basic photocopied label with the San Lùng name. As will be detailed further in my second case study, these wholesalers in turn, have established trade contacts in other areas and supply traders, wholesalers, restaurants and hotels in upland tourist towns, along major highway rest-stops linking to Hà Nội, and further afar in other upland towns of Yên Bái, Lai Châu, Hà Giang or the lowland centres of Hà Nội, Hải Dương and Hải Phòng to name a few.

Despite the existence of these trade possibilities outside of the LCTC, many Yao producers from San Lùng prefer selling to the SOE because it offers a slightly higher price than Kinh private traders are willing to pay. Moreover, prices paid by the LCTC do not fluctuate seasonally. After peaking at the lunar New Year, the demand for rice spirits by Kinh traders drops (Sa La May 10/10/07). As such, the LCTC is viewed as a consistent buyer that can be depended upon, whereas the private traders also visit San Lùng with far less regularity.

Beyond San Lùng hamlet, the success of the state's marketing campaign has worked to exclude certain groups, while drawing in others who wish to capitalise on the fame of its name. Branding has introduced new systems of control into the trade which limit the benefit sharing and participation of other local producers. Here, the boundaries between 'the authentic' and 'the inauthentic' are complicated and contradicted by the fact that upland communities in the area have always made a similar type of rice alcohol. These groups are now resigned to the fact that their products are considered 'inferior reproductions'. However, rumours circulate that producers have found ways to subvert

these constraints and find room for manoeuvring within them. For instance, some producers who supply Kinh alcohol traders in the local marketplace and at shops claim to be San Lùng residents when in fact they actually come from elsewhere.

Alternately, some small-scale Kinh traders have used the new system of regulation to help them gain an edge in this market. Some make strategic use of San Lùng's sign value, actively blurring distinctions between 'the authentic' and 'the fake.' Traders take advantage of the fact that 'the authentic' in this case is very difficult to identify - as the average Kinh consumer is said to be "unable to tell the difference" - and market their goods as the 'real thing' regardless of its place of origin. Other traders appear to accommodate the system of regulation, playing on the distinction of San Lùng, and professing the importance of selling a 'top quality product.' These traders claim to only purchase rice alcohol from the LCTC because the brand is a guarantee of product quality and instils consumer confidence (Sa Pa alcohol wholesaler, 26/02/09). While all of the above noted competing claims owe directly to the state's marketing and promotion of San Lùng hamlet, they bear little reflection on Yao customary valuations and uses of their own local varieties.

As the above mentioned unofficial activities are conducted by a mass of producers and traders at a relatively minor scale, they are allowed to exist for the most part, and escape regulation. However, vigilance has stepped up on larger-scale enterprises with the police departments and market management boards throughout the north called upon to combat counterfeiters and intellectual property right violators. Larger-scale production and trading of alcohol using the 'San Lùng' name is also taking place in upland villages, and even lowland factories in the capital Hà Nội and southern Ho Chi Minh City (Department of Science and Technology 2010: Online). To give one example, in Hoà Lạc hamlet (in Bảo Thắng district, Lào Cai), households are supplying alcohol at an amount of 2,000 litres per day, which is then passed off by traders as "San Lùng rice alcohol". These 'counterfeits' are sold in upland tourist shops and restaurants, as well as in lowland towns and cities. Other news reports claim that there are large volumes of "simulated San Lùng" being sold on the market – which is either low grade alcohol made from cassava, or

tampered-with versions composed of a small percentage of authentic San Lùng watered down with cheaper alcohols (Vietnam Net Online: 2006).<sup>164</sup>

For those groups with a stake in the trademarked commodity – the LCTC and San Lùng cooperative members - the marketing and sale of San Lùng outside of formal networks is a serious concern. Strategic efforts to delegitimize the unofficial San Lùng alcohols are made by contesting its authenticity, quality and safety. For instance, news reports discuss the problematic trade in “trafficked rice alcohol”, and the negative livelihood impacts this is having on the “poor Yao producers from San Lùng”. A Vietnam News report quotes the distaste of the San Lùng alcohol cooperative’s leader for the imitation alcohols. The leader noted “we cannot [produce alcohol like the unofficial producers]. San Lùng villagers would rather suffer poorness than produce that cheap version. We have to protect the prestige of our traditional product” (Vietnam Net Online: 2006). The state and popular media also create consumer anxiety by warning against possible negative health hazards associated with consuming counterfeit alcohol (LC Government Online: 2010b).<sup>165</sup>

It is interesting to compare the branding of San Lùng rice spirits with Moran’s (1993) study of French wine trade marks. Here, in a similar manner to the LCTC, wine-makers drew upon claims to their situated, local knowledge and the physical characteristics of the locality which resulted in a unique product that could not be replicated elsewhere. State regulations were used by local wine-makers as a means to embed a specific place of origin into product identity. In so doing, local knowledge was transformed into property, and became an exclusive right.

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<sup>164</sup> One company called into question for trademark violations had also previously bought alcohol from San Lùng hamlet is the Văn Hóa enterprise. This company was marketing alcohol from the hamlet under the slightly different name, “Shan Lung,” but was forced to cease its activities in 2006 for infringement of intellectual property rights.

<sup>165</sup> However, conclusions from studies of the associated health risks are still rather unclear. One study conducted on the quality of alcohol being sold in markets and street shops in Hà Nội, found that while there were a few concerns over product quality, production hygiene and labelling, there were no compounds found that might lead to acute toxic effects (Lachenmeier et al. 2009). At the same time, the small sample size used for the research certainly limits the generalisability of overall findings. However, Đam Viet Cuong and Vu Minh Hanh (2009) warn that significant amounts of toxic substances may be present in home-distilled alcohols.

However, this case study at hand illustrates rather differently how place-based branding can also work to create unequally endowed spaces and places. As Cook and Crang (1996: 132) point out, brands are entangled in “geographical knowledges - based in the cultural meanings of places and spaces...deployed in order to ‘re-enchant’...commodities, and to differentiate them from the devalued functionality and homogeneity of standardised products and places.”

Although the identity of the product in question resembles the spirits that have long been produced by Yao and other ethnic minorities elsewhere throughout the territory, the deepening of this commodity’s association with one specific place and community, has constrained the participation of producers who may also wish share in the benefits of this emerging lowland consumer market. When I asked a Kinh state representative of the local People’s Committee for his opinion on the ramifications for other localities, he responded:

Well, yes it’s true that San Lùng village is now a little bit richer than other communes because of the state’s investment. But I don’t think that this should be creating any resentment or jealousy. Each village needs to find its own specialty and discover their own skills in order to develop their own local economy. Therefore, for San Lùng, this is a very happy thing.

In order to participate in the trade, other hamlets must consider either acquiring their own trademarks, accept lower prices for their inferior quality alcohol, or else choose to work ‘underground’ and pass-off their alcohol as ‘San Lùng.’ On the flip side, Yao producers from San Lùng who share ‘ownership’ of this commodity with the LCTC are locked into a system where they are largely dependent upon the dictates of a single buyer. As such, the hamlet has a vested interest in preventing San Lùng from being marketed and sold through other channels. This begs the question of whether the trademark has afforded San Lùng producers with local ownership over their resources, or much choice as to how to employ those resources? As Ribot and Peluso (2003) contend in their refined conceptualisation of access, here the *ability* to benefit from an activity or resource is of far greater relevance than the *right* to benefit from it. If branding is in fact meant to be used as a socio-economic development tool for upland communities, in this instance,

perhaps a collective brand that encompassed a broader territory of similar upland rice alcohol producers would be a more appropriate initiative.

The state's involvement in San Lùng has clearly worked to alter the social and trade dynamics of what were once very local and culturally rooted trade networks. The state's ability to enhance demand for this good has led to the introduction of competing claims, as well as new actors vying for their right to produce as well as brand and sell San Lùng alcohol. Yet San Lùng is not the only commune to see livelihoods modified, names appropriated and values altered by the trade in upland spirits. I now move on to explore another example of shifting upland alcohol trade networks due to outside interests – that of maize alcohol produced in Bản Phố hamlet of Bắc Hà district.

#### **7.8 Bản Phố Commune Case Study - Claims and Counterclaims in the Commoditisation of Upland Maize Alcohol**

The maize alcohol producing commune of Bản Phố, located in Bắc Hà District, is at the heart of our second case study of the recent transformations in these trade networks owing to exogenous interest groups. As noted in Section 7.5, here, the production of maize spirits by Hmong and other ethnic minority groups is popular – and found extensively for sale by small traders within all upland markets of Bắc Hà, Si Ma Cai and Mường Khương districts. Yet, owing again to the recent development of tourism in Lào Cai, one particular area of Bắc Hà district, Bản Phố, has also commanded widespread recognition since the late 1990s for producing the region's top quality maize alcohol.

Bản Phố is a commune of 550 households - of which ninety per cent are Hmong - located approximately four kilometres from Bắc Hà town. According to local Hmong residents and Kinh wholesalers from Bắc Hà town, almost every household from Bản Phố distils alcohol. Nevertheless, not all of households are involved in trading, with some preferring to make spirits for personal consumption alone.



**FIGURE 7.5: BAN PHO HAMLET AND BAC HA TOWN, LÀO CAI PROVINCE**

An important factor that distinguishes this case study from San Lùng, is that there is no state monopoly or overall large-scale investment to create a brand in maize alcohol from Bản Phố. Rather, the trade consists of numerous Hmong small-scale household producers linked to Kinh wholesalers who act as the key distributors in the commodity chain. Since 2007/2008 however, a private company from Hải Phòng in the lowlands has been active in Bắc Hà town. This company markets its product as “Rượu Bắc Hà”, and has a contract with Hmong suppliers in nearby hamlets. The company differs from the other small-scale traders and wholesalers through its creation of a more up-market label design and packaging. Nevertheless, given that the stated interests of the current Lào Cai master plan for the province’s development are to develop brand names for spirits from upland localities like Bắc Hà (Section 7.6.1), it is very probable that a large-scale venture to invest in Bản Phố alcohol will occur in the near future.<sup>166</sup>

<sup>166</sup> For one, a representative from the Lào Cai Tourism company stated that there were future plans to invest in other regional specialty-type alcohols from Bản Phố commune in Bắc Hà district and Thanh Kim commune in Sa Pa district (LCTC representative 12/10/07). Currently, Thanh Kim rice alcohol (produced by Yao households) is currently going through the registration process to acquire a trademark, but its quality must first be “improved” before this will occur (LCIPT 2008).

If the state does become involved in a maize alcohol venture in Bản Phố, it will be competing or mingling with a number of well established commodity chains, of which there are currently four. Spatially, these encompass localised and locally-oriented commodity chains, as well as the more recently developed, extended regional commodity flows that also reach the lowlands. First, producers sell directly within Bản Phố to other Hmong households from there or neighbouring hamlets. Second, marketplace trade expands the scope of this product, with Hmong distillers from Bản Phố and other hamlets taking their trade to the central market of Bắc Hà town – selling there to local customers, tourists, or long distance wholesalers. The third network involves Kinh or Tày alcohol wholesalers who purchase maize alcohol directly from producers, either within the hamlets, or else have producers bring it to their shops in Bắc Hà town. Finally, a fourth trade network involves long-distance wholesalers who either have the alcohol sent to them by their Bắc Hà wholesalers contacts, or if they are not based too far away, may travel to Bắc Hà in order to purchase it themselves.

In terms of the total volume of alcohol being sold and income generated from this trade, the amount of intra-hamlet sales remains fairly small, meeting the local requirements for weddings, ceremonies and celebrations, and personal consumption. In comparison, Kinh wholesalers currently dominate these commodity chains as a whole, economically – dealing in much larger quantities, capturing more surplus value than smaller scale Hmong producer-traders, and extending the spatial reach of these commodity chains. In tracking the commodity chains in Bản Phố maize alcohol during the next sections, I reveal the social relations and trade strategies that underpin these trade networks, as well as how commodity values are claimed and contested by different groups of social actors.

### **7.8.1 Marketplace Trade in Bản Phố Upland Maize Alcohol**

Depending on the season, between ten to fifteen Hmong from Bản Phố, and other nearby hamlets, trade maize alcohol each day at the Bắc Hà town market, (trader counts conducted in 2007, 2008 and 2009). While this seems a small number, their presence is noteworthy given that this is the sole product that Hmong are trading at this market on a daily basis. Before the Hmong New Year, when alcohol is in high demand, the number of



traders active each day in the marketplace approximately doubles. Trade is even greater Sunday's main market, when the total can expand significantly to between thirty and forty traders. These daily spirit traders in Bắc Hà market are all Hmong women, with most at middle-age or elderly.<sup>167</sup> Pi (27/05/07), a Hmong woman who trades alcohol everyday in Bắc Hà market has nine children, which provides her household with sufficient labour for alcohol making in addition to agricultural production. This frees Pi up to trade in the market, while her husband remains at home to assist with farm work and distilling.

The main customers of these marketplace traders are local Hmong residents from neighbouring hamlets, who purchase maize spirits for everyday consumption purposes, or in larger quantities for celebrations. Sundays of course bring a far greater number of customers. For local men of all ethnicities in upland areas, alcohol consumption at the weekly main market is a typical, socially expected part of the day's event, important for relaxation, bonding and socialising with other men.

A second group of maize spirit customers in the Bắc Hà market are Vietnamese and foreign tourists, who are interested in sampling the local specialties. Nevertheless, this comprises a limited consumer group – thus far, Bắc Hà remains a less popular upland destination for Vietnamese lowlanders relative to Sa Pa and Đà Lạt.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, most Kinh tourists who wish to purchase Bản Phố upland maize alcohol will buy it from traders in either Sa Pa town or Lào Cai city (Sa Pa Kinh alcohol wholesaler 26/02/09). Sa Pa town and Lào Cai city act as pooling centres where all of the speciality upland alcohols of the province (and some from neighbouring provinces) are being marketed.

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<sup>167</sup> This is interesting because it differs from the periodic market trade I observed in other markets such as Si Ma Cai, where both genders are fairly equally represented in weekly alcohol trading.

<sup>168</sup> There continue to be relatively more foreign tourists visiting Bắc Hà for the Sunday market than Vietnamese, and many of these do so on package day or overnight trips, based from travel agencies and hotels located in Sa Pa town. The tours include a stop-over in Bản Phố itself, where a visit to the house of a 'Flower Hmong family' takes place. Often, the hosts are an alcohol-distilling household, and a requisite sampling of maize alcohol will be included (Field observations from May 2006). Local tourist enterprises have therefore added another, perhaps rather unexpected, consumer base to this commodity chain.

A third group of marketplace customers are alcohol traders or wholesalers - usually ethnic Kinh or Tày - from towns at lower altitudes along the major roadways. Often, these individuals run hotels or restaurants along highways and at rest-stops for buses ferrying Kinh tourists from Sa Pa to the lowlands. Here, they can capture tourists interested in purchasing upland specialties on their return journey. These hotel and restaurant operators travel to Bắc Hà marketplace to purchase maize spirits directly from Hmong traders (Hmong female alcohol trader Bắc Hà 09/06/07). Nevertheless, as face-to-face dealings are irregular, Hmong traders in the Bắc Hà marketplace do not tend to have regular trade relationships with these non-local buyers. This contrasts with Hmong producers who have established trade connections with Kinh wholesalers from Bắc Hà town, as I will move on to explore in the next section.

### **7.8.2 Kinh Wholesalers of Bản Phố Upland Maize Alcohol**

Non-local alcohol traders tend to source from Kinh wholesalers in Bắc Hà town rather than from Hmong producers in the hamlets. This is because contacts with Bắc Hà wholesalers are often made through industry connections. Moreover, wholesalers are typically more contactable by telephone, and they can more easily arrange to have the goods transported. From personal counts in July 2009, there were approximately twenty Kinh alcohol wholesalers in Bắc Hà town, with three operating at a noticeably larger scale than the others. These wholesalers were selling only maize alcohol, and did not trade rice alcohol from other areas of the province, unlike wholesalers in Sa Pa and Lào Cai city which sell all of the upland special varieties.



**FIGURE 7.6: HMONG TRADER AND KINH WHOLESALER OF MAIZE ALCOHOL, BAC HA TOWN (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Of the six Kinh alcohol wholesalers I interviewed in Bắc Hà town, the newest entrant started his business in 2000, while the longest running opened her shop around 1987. May (12/05/07), a woman in her late 60s, is one of the largest wholesalers in town. When she first started trading alcohol in 1992, there were only a few other wholesalers, who she described as being ‘old traditional Vietnamese women’. This early group of wholesalers moved to Bắc Hà town during the 1950s and 1960s as part of the state-sponsored migration schemes (see Chapter 3). Almost all of these original wholesalers are now deceased, and their children have since taken over their enterprises. Since 1997, May has noticed more Kinh arriving in Bắc Hà from lowland provinces or other upland areas – with many entering the wholesaling industry in spirits. Because of this, the competition has been heating up amongst alcohol traders in Bắc Hà.

### **7.8.3 Trade Relations: Kinh Wholesalers and Hmong Bản Phố Maize Alcohol Suppliers**

Establishing interethnic social networks between village-based producers and town-based wholesalers is crucial to the alcohol trade. Kinh wholesalers may either visit Hmong producers directly in the hamlets, or else producers will bring their product to wholesaler shops in Bắc Hà town, especially on market Sundays. These wholesalers described the importance of long-term ties and ways these were first established – elements also noted by Abrami (2002) regarding network building between Kinh and Nùng in the medicinal trade. My wholesaler informants similarly described the importance of gathering information about the trustworthiness of potential trading partners. This was accomplished by visiting them in their homes, and forming an informal contract that was often cemented through gift exchange.

Tien, a Kinh man in his 40s, began to sell maize alcohol in 2000. His wife is a teacher in the nearby Hmong commune of Tả Van Chu, and through her position she was able to build relationships with many residents there. Tien drew on his wife's social networks and her reputation as a “kind person” in order to access producer households and establish trade connections with Hmong. As he put it “she helped me to gain a kinship with the people in that village. They trusted me because of her, and this is even more so now that I have known them for a long time” (Tien 17/12/07). Tien has a “verbal contract” with the Hmong households he purchases from, and he buys a small amount – between twenty to thirty litres - from them on a weekly basis, or more when the demand is greater. Maintaining regular purchases with his contacts, even when he does not actually require more alcohol, is also important for keeping good trade relations, as Tien's suppliers feel assured that they can depend on him.

Another strategy for strengthening trade relationships involves wholesalers buying from only one or a few Hmong families. May, the Kinh wholesaler whom I introduced above, purchases alcohol from just three households –which are all members of the same extended family in Bản Phố hamlet. May (17/12/07) worked to develop “friendships with the Hmong people living there”. She discovered who the spirit makers in the hamlet

were, and which households were regarded as the most skilled. At first, she brought gifts of maize, rice, and honey to the Hmong families she visited to demonstrate respect, courtesy and to help ensure that she would be welcomed. May, has two main reasons why she trades with a single Hmong family. First, this ensures that the quality of her spirits remain consistent, as she trusts the reliability of the Hmong family's product. Second, buying from a single family prevents jealousy or competition between households, which could eventually lead to difficulties in her supplier relationships (May 17/12/07). While trust is an important element for both parties, for Kinh wholesalers it seems to be so for guaranteeing product quality, while for Hmong producers it assures fair dealings and an ongoing trade relationship.<sup>169</sup>

#### **7.8.4 Value Contestations between Social Actors along the Bản Phố Maize Alcohol Commodity Chain**

While I have shown how trust-based relations are vitally important in alcohol trade networks, negative perceptions and distrust by Kinh wholesalers of Hmong producers also permeate this spirit trade. This is, once again, because wholesalers are sceptical about alcohol quality. Indeed, some wholesalers in Bắc Hà town expressed misgivings about the practices of Hmong alcohol suppliers. Paralleling San Lùng, at the heart of these cynicisms are contestations over the 'authenticity' of Bản Phố alcohol. Also, here again, a number of strategies are adopted as ways for different actors to gain or maintain access to this trade.

Wholesalers and state officials allege that some Hmong traders use deception in order to take advantage of Bản Phố's reputation amongst Kinh consumers. For example, Kinh wholesaler May states that some of the Hmong selling spirits in the Bắc Hà market pretend to be Bản Phố residents but who are not really from there. Some wholesalers

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<sup>169</sup> Wishing to also diversify their trade, some wholesalers also buy additional commodities produced by the Hmong households that they procure alcohol from. For instance, May and Tien also purchase forest honey from their Hmong alcohol suppliers. Another Kinh wholesaler, Thu, sources plums from hers which she sells during the season for that fruit (June-July). Once an ongoing trade relationship built on trust is established, this social capital is often extended into other trading arrangements.

believe that the alcohol these traders sell is tampered with – a mixture of ‘low-grade’ maize alcohol - and therefore its quality cannot be trusted. In May’s (17/12/07) words:

There are some Hmong who are not good people. In the marketplace there are so many types of alcohol, and traders are all claiming that theirs is made in Bản Phố. This is impossible because Bản Phố is such a small place. These traders will mix alcohol from different villages together and sell it as Bản Phố. You can usually tell because they often sell their alcohol for a cheaper price. Real Bản Phố alcohol will be more expensive. At the same time, others contend that it is certain Bản Phố Hmong residents themselves who are the doing the misleading. These individuals are said to buy spirits from other hamlets and then market it as their own product. As one Market Management Board representative (03/09/06) from Bắc Hà town explained:

Bản Phố residents buy maize alcohol from minorities in other villages and then trade it as if it’s their own. They say “I’m a Bản Phố resident, so therefore trust me on the quality of my alcohol!” These untrustworthy people are now able to make a profit because of their village name.

A third opinion, shared by both Kinh wholesalers as well as Hmong producers from outside of Bản Phố, is that this maize spirit has been overrated by tourism and the media. These wholesalers buy alcohol from other Hmong hamlets which they believe make a far superior product. Nevertheless, in order to be able to market their alcohol to customers, wholesalers say that they have to pretend it comes from Bản Phố - as was also the case for San Lùng. For instance, wholesaler Tien (17/12/07) stated:

I don’t believe that the quality of Bản Phố alcohol is all that excellent. Sure, it has developed a reputation for quality, but what producers are making today is not as good as it was in the past. I buy my alcohol from other Hmong villages, but I can’t sell it unless I label it as coming from Bản Phố.

Hmong producer-traders from hamlets neighbouring Bản Phố also shared similar concerns. Phu, a male Hmong alcohol maker from a hamlet next to Bản Phố declared “you can’t just trust what the journalists say. I know that we make an even better quality maize alcohol, but Bản Phố is getting all of the recognition because of the newspapers and tourism, and people are only ever hearing that name” (27/05/07).

In spite of these conflicts and reservations, there is no dominant authority overall which determines Bản Phố’s authenticity – such as with the LCTC’s trademark of San Lùng. As such, the social actors here appear to have more leeway to successfully challenge the

circulating claims, to support and further their own pursuits. Wholesalers develop close trade relations with Hmong producers whom they know offer a high quality product, whether from Bản Phố or nearby hamlets – despite having to market it to outsiders with the ‘right name’. Hmong producers from outside of Bản Phố are aggravated that the locality has received such goodwill from the media, yet they are still able to trade their alcohol to Kinh wholesalers and minorities in local markets. Finally, while Bản Phố residents benefit from their status as producers, they too often resort to buying alcohol from outside their own hamlet as they cannot produce enough to sell.

#### **7.8.5 Long Distance Trade Networks of Bản Phố Maize Alcohol**

As with San Lùng, due to its growing esteem, Bản Phố maize spirits are now reaching customers far beyond the northern uplands via extended commodity chains. Beyond Bắc Hà town it is sold to traders, wholesalers, restaurants and hotels in upland towns and cities through the region which have a number of upland specialty alcohols on offer. It is also sold to Vietnamese tourists in restaurants and shops in the small towns located along the main roads to Lào Cai city, and then at spots en route to Hà Nội. Additionally, it is available in wholesale shops in Lào Cai city, to be then distributed throughout urban areas of the northern lowlands.<sup>170</sup>

Wholesalers from Bắc Hà town must also work to cultivate ongoing trade relations with these customers. Like many other Kinh traders working in upland marketplaces, these networks are based upon bonding social capital – often constituted through relationships with kin or acquaintances from their former hometowns or places of residence (see Chapters 3 and 5). Such long-distance connections are a key resource enabling wholesalers to make trade partnerships with other Kinh trader-wholesalers of local spirits in more distant places such as Yên Bái, Lào Cai city, Sa Pa, Hà Giang, and as far away as Hà Nội. Many of these trade networks are conducted remotely, facilitated by connective

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<sup>170</sup>The amount these outside buyers typically purchase from Bắc Hà wholesalers varies by season, and as with San Lùng rice alcohol, the peak demand is before the Vietnamese New Year (in late January or early February). Another high point coincides with the Vietnamese holiday season from June-July. Smaller-scale wholesalers tend to sell between 100-200 litres at a time, while larger ones can trade between 300-700 litres (Tien 17/12/07; May 17/12/07; Bắc Hà MMB official 03/09/06).



technologies – telephone and public bus for transportation - with parties rarely ever meeting face-to-face.

May, one of the largest Kinh wholesalers in Bắc Hà town, whom we met earlier, developed many connections in Yên Bái over the period of 10 years that she worked there as a state accountant, before retiring and starting up her business in Bắc Hà . Building upon these relationships, she has maintained several regular contacts with other trader-wholesalers in Yên Bái, where there is a good market for Bản Phố maize alcohol. When these traders need more stock, they telephone her and she sends it to them by public bus – a common way for many commodities to be transported and circulated by small traders through the region, as well as to the lowlands (see Chapter 5).<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, some of May's former contacts from Yên Bái have since moved elsewhere, enabling her to spread her trade networks further to new places. For example in 2004, a former workmate from Yên Bái moved to Hà Nội. This colleague of May's wished to set up her own business in ethnic minority-made spirits from different upland areas. She reconnected with May, who invited her to visit Bắc Hà and learn about Bản Phố alcohol production and quality. The two established a trade contract, and now the Hà Nội wholesaler simply telephones May whenever she needs more alcohol, and May has it delivered to her by bus.

In addition to the importance of social network resources, wholesalers also have a number of strategies for initially attracting customers. Some rely on word of mouth and customer recommendations. Others, such as Tien (17/12/07), explained how a trader's personal characteristics are important. When buyers come to his shop he invites them to sample his alcohol and “charms” them, by being friendly and sharing information with them about upland alcohols. Being outgoing and knowledgeable were skills that Tien feels allowed him to initiate business connections with many hotels and tourist companies

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<sup>171</sup> Although it might seem risky, due to the potential for theft, May's use of public transport for private trade is quite a common practice in long-distance trade in Vietnam, though it mostly occurs in the context of regular, well-established business relationships. Indeed, the majority of long distance trade of alcohol from Bắc Hà town is transported to other areas on public buses. Transportation costs are always understood to be the responsibility of the receiver, not the sender. This moreover, mitigates the chances of loss through transportation, as payment upon receipt is an incentive for the bus staff to ensure the goods are not tampered with.



in different places. Through these networks, good news about his business spreads, fostering new connections.

Noted earlier, as more people enter the alcohol trade industry in Bắc Hà town competition is rising. Wholesalers must therefore innovate ways to maintain or improve their sales. Some invest in shopfront signs that clearly advertise the name of their store, their individual 'label,' and their telephone number so that they can be more easily spotted by non local prospective customers. Kinh wholesaler Lien (17/12/07) has created her own brand label, *Quang Thom* (Fragrance) in order distinguish her business from other wholesalers. Bắc Hà wholesalers will also travel to Lào Cai city and nearby towns to meet other alcohol traders, or visit hotels and restaurants in order to advertise their goods. Once, alcohol wholesaling was the traditional domain of older Kinh women, however now many wholesalers are much younger women or men, in their twenties and thirties. According to May (17/12/07), "these younger traders have more energy and therefore they are more active and make more friendships with government officials and companies so they can sell a lot around here, much more than me". As competition heats up, the face of Bản Phố trade is changing.

#### **7.8.6 Earnings along the Bản Phố Maize Alcohol Commodity Chain**

Thus far, I have explored the Bản Phố alcohol commodity chain in terms of the trade networks that structure it, and the social dynamics that underpin these networks. Let me now turn to consider the question of who is reaping the financial profits along these commodity chains. In 2009, Hmong suppliers were being paid around 10,000-12,000 VND/per litre from Bắc Hà wholesalers. These wholesalers in turn were selling to intermediaries and outside wholesalers for an average of 18,000 VND/per litre. In Lào Cai city, wholesalers were selling Bản Phố maize alcohol for 20,000-25,000 VND/per litre, rising to 30,000 VND/per litre in Sa Pa town. One Bắc Hà wholesaler, May speculated that based on her information, in Yên Bái her maize alcohol was being sold for 25,000 VND/per litre. A big leap from these prices is commanded by the alcohol distributed by the Hải Phòng-based company, Phong Ling, which has a distribution office in Hà Nội. Phong Ling markets its alcohol in basic plastic jugs for 45,000 VND/per litre,

while more upmarket packaged glass bottles are sold for 130,000 VND/per litre. Hence in sum, local wholesalers see a profit of around 6,000VND/per litre, while outside traders and wholesalers go on to reap a profit up to double that (up to 12,000 VND). Far more dramatically, in the case of the company Phong Ling which sources directly from Hmong producers, this is around 33,000-118,000 VND/per litre in profits.

As with the case for San Lùng producers, while Hmong involved in these maize alcohol commodity chains invest the most time and physical labour as producers, the earnings they capture at their segment of the chain remain the smallest. Their power to increase prices in relation to the commoditisation of alcohol for external markets is limited due to the fact that this product is also widely sold in upland markets for use by Hmong. Kinh buyers from Bắc Hà aware of local prices will not accept paying much more than the going local rate. Moreover, Hmong producers are restricted in their ability to access traders and wholesalers beyond their locality, while Kinh wholesalers in town benefit from their geographically expansive social networks. When taken from an overall view of the commodity chain, it appears that Hmong are losing out from the economic possibilities of these new, wider markets in upland alcohols. Kinh entrepreneurs are better positioned to reap the majority of the financial rewards from these commodity transformations.

## **7.9 Conclusion**

The commoditisation of upland alcohols for emerging lowland consumer markets has fashioned new cash-earning opportunities for Hmong and Yao household producers in certain localities, while the option of supplying local-use markets, following very different consumer logics and spatial patterns, continues more broadly as an important activity. As such, local-scale commodity chains now coexist alongside extended regional and upland-lowland chains with numerous actors involved at every node. Regarding the latter, ethnic minority producers are inserted into these new commodity chains where value judgements and taste discernments regarding alcohol are externally determined and at times, at odds with local perspectives. For Hmong and Yao consumers, upland spirits remain associated with local cultural practices, socialising, and a preference for their own

alcohol varieties, while for Kinh consumers, possessing these items relates to emerging tastes for particular ‘authentic’ upland products. While in some instances, certain groups of Hmong and Yao producers and traders are able to make strategic use of these opportunities, at other times they appear increasingly cut-out.

State and lowland interests in promoting and marketing particular upland spirits to Kinh consumers has led to the entry of new interest groups competing for their share. These actors attempt to control the way that upland alcohols are evaluated, who has a right to participate in this trade, and to develop novel trade and marketing strategies to gain or maintain a foothold. Moreover, ethnic minority producer-traders participating in external markets find themselves enrolled in a process of making claims and counterclaims as to their ‘right’ to trade these commodities as authentic alcohol producers.

Yet, for Hmong and Yao, their traditional alcohols remain at the heart of a number of important cultural rituals and customs. The bride wealth remains an important step in wedding practices to this day, and alcohol is a key element at this big event. Yao and Hmong New Year celebrations, held in the middle of winter, are also an important time of alcohol supported socialising. Not everyone produces alcohol however, and decisions over whether to add this task to a household’s livelihood equation include factors such as the size of available landholdings, labour availability, pig rearing, and the role of hybrid seeds in boosting staple crop yields. Also playing into these decisions is the broader recognition of Hmong and Yao local customary knowledge, with certain households known as ‘good producers’, and distillation techniques handed down from one generation to the next.

The examples I have presented here also address one of my initial research questions concerning the interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Here, the commoditisation and commercialisation of upland spirits has developed with the influence of the state’s promotion of hybrid seeds and as well as the emergence of new lowland consumer demands. Such an initiative has been documented in other areas of Southeast Asia with similar state policies of “one product, one village” – such as the

Philippines and Thailand - in order to promote local tourism and urban sales of such specialty products.

Upland spirit production by ethnic minorities, for both local and lowland consumer markets, can be an important income-generating strategy. My first case study made it clear that the creation of brands and trademarks for particular ‘special’ upland alcohols and other ‘traditional cultural commodities’ in the name of highland development proceeds apace, under the direction of provincial governments like Lào Cai. By examining the socio-spatial history of an alcohol brand, and the role of the state as ‘brand architect,’ I have demonstrated some of the very real symbolic and material effects that this process is having on the livelihoods and prosperity of people and places (c.f. Pike 2011). The uneven geographies relating to the spatial associations of brands for upland commodities, such as San Lùng, further uneven development in the highlands by reinforcing but also orchestrating socio-economic inequalities.

Turning to my second case study, based on my analysis of Bán Phở, in the absence of extra-local sanction mechanisms, Hmong producers and Kinh wholesalers of maize spirits seem to have more room to define and contest commodity forms, such as the ‘authenticity’ of their product. Finally, when viewed from an actor-oriented livelihoods approach, Hmong and Yao producer-traders appear to capture the least economic value through their involvement in alcohol production and trade for external markets, compared to other actors along these commodity chains. They are limited through their lack of access to more spatially extensive trade networks, and levels of physical capital, relative to Kinh traders and wholesalers. It is important to stress however, that when viewed from a micro, household-level perspective, involvement in alcohol trade for both local and wider markets is nevertheless a vital cash-earning activity. Particularly as local markets for spirits continue to flourish, alcohol trading continues as a significant way to support the activity that lies at the heart of Hmong and Yao livelihoods – namely subsistence rice production - while facilitating asset building and further livelihood diversification through the dual livelihood strategy of pig rearing.

## CHAPTER 8

### UPLAND AND CROSS-BORDER TRADE NETWORKS IN OLD AND NEW HMONG TEXTILES

#### **8.1. Introduction**

Among the many diverse ethnic minorities, Hmong clothing and textiles – most notably women’s attire - are often among the most striking impressions made upon visitors to Vietnam’s northern uplands. The use of customary dress colours by Vietnamese ethnologists as a key marker to designate Hmong subgroups would seem to imply that it is of a static and timeless nature. However, the vast multiplicity of designs and patterns, and the dynamics of shifting styles, fashions, and materials used, renders a much more complicated reality. In this chapter, I examine the changing significance of Hmong dress as a cultural and economic phenomenon, and the active roles that Hmong traders play within new trade networks associated with this transformation. I focus on the influence of tourism and cross-border trade opportunities in the commoditisation of textiles, the formation of new notions of symbolic and economic value, and innovations in textile production and new consumption patterns. The chapter is divided into two case studies which investigate the mix of production and trade networks in textiles used by Hmong that are materialising in Lào Cai province. The first case study concerns an externally-oriented market – Hmong textiles for consumers of ethnic handicrafts. The second case study looks at the market in new, manufactured dress and textile commodities oriented to Hmong consumers that are entering Vietnam from China.

Commencing in Section 8.2, with a discussion of the enduring importance of customary clothing for Hmong upland residents, I next focus on the highly gendered nature of clothing production (Section 8.2.2), highlighting why the tourist-oriented textile trade undertaken by Hmong is a female-dominated activity. In Section 8.3, I present my first case study examining tourist-oriented production and trade networks in Hmong textiles, based out of Sa Pa district in Lào Cai. Although the trade of textiles for handicrafts is not a new phenomenon for Hmong in the area, the different types of trade that I describe

correspond to distinct trade opportunities that have opened since the mid-1990s, with the re-introduction of international tourism to the region. Originating from the tourist town of Sa Pa, ancillary commodity flows and trade networks have subsequently developed, drawing in a number of upland hamlets both within Lào Cai and across other northern upland provinces, in response to producer innovation and customer demands. Beyond these local and regional-level trade movements, the commodity flows of Hmong textiles for tourists and other consumers of ethnic handicrafts embrace national and even global scales. I explore how these expanding commodity networks have drawn together new configurations of producers, traders and intermediaries, including Hmong from beyond Sa Pa, as well as Kinh and Tày from Sa Pa and a number of lowland cities.

In the second case study, analysed in Section 8.4, I explore the thriving trade within Lào Cai province in Hmong ready-to-wear manufactured clothing, synthetic cloth and decorative materials and accessories coming from across the border in Yunnan, China. Driven largely by a populous base of Hmong consumers in China, participants in these trade flows in upland Vietnam include both Lào Cai resident Hmong traders, and cross-border Han and Hmong traders who come from Yunnan. Commencing in China, I follow these commodity movements across the border into Vietnam. In so doing, I examine how each group of actors within this trade network are positioned in relation to one another, analysing the various factors affecting access as well as the different forms of social capital that traders make use of to gain an advantage within their segment. As I will demonstrate in Section 8.4.5, Hmong long-distance traders from border districts in Lào Cai assume a key position in transmitting and disseminating these new commodities – influencing Hmong consumption patterns and demand throughout Lào Cai and other upland provinces.

Within both cases, I draw on the literature on social networks and livelihoods, as discussed in my conceptual framework (Chapter 2), to reveal how access to these new trade opportunities and networks are mediated by factors such as language, place of residence, and knowledge and understanding of consumer preferences. Moreover, I also illustrate how what appear to at first be two quite separate systems of provision are in fact intertwined in complex ways. Only through in-depth but comprehensive analysis of the

diversity of trade activities that structure these commodity chains do such interconnectivities come to light. This overlap in turn, is a reflection of common horizontal factors that cut across the chains, namely gender, ethnicity and place, and play an important role in influencing the composition of commodity chains. This finding lends further weight to recent arguments calling for the inclusion of both vertical as well as horizontal perspectives as both of these may wield a significant influence on commodity chains (Fine and Leopold 1993; Leslie and Reimer 1999; Bush 2004; Turner 2007).

A now extensive body of literature explores the production and trade of Southeast Asian textiles - both island and mainland – focussing on subjects such as commoditisation, globalisation, identity, and gender and ethnic dynamics (see for instance, Milgram and Van Esterik 1994; Milgram 2001; Purananda 2007). An initial expansion of this scholarship has taken place especially since the 1970s, with the opening of roads to remote areas, and the growth of ethnic tourism. This early scholarship, however, was largely descriptive, involving the categorisation of textile types, designs and technology – as well as some material on the role of textiles in ritual and religious celebration (Milgram and Van Esterik 1994). There was little discussion of the role of cloth in economy and trade, as studies tended to reproduce and document primarily ‘traditional’ practices. As upland northern Vietnam was not open to visiting scholars during this time (until after 1993), limited research on socio-economy of textiles was pursued. This case study thus covers not only the historical continuity of Hmong textile production and trade, but also provides a unique lens through which to analyse transformations and new developments in tourism, trade and economic practice.

## **8.2. Hmong Textile Meanings and Household Production**

Hmong customary clothing and textiles play a vital part in the preservation and transmission of history, maintaining ethno-cultural identities, and in the reproduction of gender roles and ideologies. As various Hmong written scripts were developed only recently in the 1950s, and are used by few Hmong worldwide, oral histories and textiles have been the key means of keeping and communicating historical information, stories and folklore, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices (Feng 2007). For instance, the



geometric motifs and designs used in textile embroidery and clothing often relate historical events, mythologies and spiritual practices, or represent objects, animals and plants that are significant to Hmong lifeworlds and livelihoods (Mai Thanh Son 1999; Tapp 2001; Feng 2007; discussions with Sa Pa Hmong women from 2005-2009). Even the pleating, characteristic of many Hmong women's skirts, is reported to symbolise the hills and valleys associated with Hmong creation myths (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007).

Clothing has been used as a complex endogenous and exogenous marker of Hmong local ethnic identity for centuries. Women's traditional dress is the most elaborate of all Hmong garments, and is also perceived as the key cultural dress icon (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007). Noted earlier, in Vietnam, ethnologists (both French colonial and state-commissioned) have often used clothing styles, colours, and designs – usually of women – as a way of distinguishing and designating different Hmong cultural subgroups (Geddes 1976; Tapp 2002b; Culas 2010).<sup>172</sup> However commentators point out how the practice of basing subgroup names on such aspects – what are assumed to be fixed or authentic 'cultural features' – is problematic as dress styles have transformed over time through interactions with other (majority and minority) groups and with access to new materials and technologies of production (Tapp 2002b; Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007). Moreover, official subgroup names in Vietnam that have been derived in this way frequently do not correspond to the subdivisions that Hmong use to identify themselves (Tapp 2002b). For example, while Hmong individuals may refer to themselves to outsiders according to the (dress-based) state classified sub-groupings, they do not always use these labels with each other (Field notes from Lào Cai and Hà Giang province May-June 2010). The inadequacies of state ethnological projects to 'scientifically' determine ethnic classification are also evidenced through the many inconsistencies in subgroup labels used in China and Vietnam (Tapp 2002b), with few links to the classifications actually used in practice by Hmong in these nations.

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<sup>172</sup> Indeed, Litzinger (2000) has argued that in the case of ethnic minority groups in China this was one of the ways that ethnic subjectivities became inscribed onto the gendered (female) body.

### 8.2.1 Hmong Textiles and Identity in Lào Cai Province

In upland northern Vietnam, customary clothing remains an important element of Hmong cultural practice and gender identity. Hmong textiles, especially hemp fabric, have retained their significance during life cycle events (such as marriage, childbirth, and upon death), as well for healing and shamanistic rituals, throughout the important lunar New Year festivities, and at social gatherings such as market day.<sup>173</sup> This highlights the central role of Hmong clothing for expressing, maintaining, and transmitting socio-cultural identity. Although Hmong in some areas of Vietnam have begun to wear factory-made Hmong clothing imported from China on a regular basis (explored in Section 8.4), hand-made textiles continue to be essential in Vietnam as well as Yunnan, China during many rituals, most particularly as funeral clothing (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007, Field notes from Yunnan, China 2010). Moreover the production of hemp cloth remains a common practice for Hmong in many areas of upland northern Vietnam (Tapp 2006; Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007; Personal observations).

The role of Hmong dress and textiles as identity markers is signified by their use at many points in the life cycle. In Lào Cai, when a Hmong woman gets married, her mother usually presents her with precious heirlooms consisting of hemp textiles and jewellery (Laj, Sa Pa Hmong woman 10/09/10). Her in-laws consider this inheritance as a reflection of her wealth and social status –and these objects are rated by their quality and quantity (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007). In Vietnam, during Hmong weddings women wear an elaborate dress set which is frequently made from hemp. Many women then try to reserve this wedding skirt to be clothed in when they die (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007). According to Hmong spiritual beliefs, this burial skirt is how a woman's ancestors will be able to identify her in the afterlife (Laj, Sa Pa Hmong woman 10/09/10). Moreover, both women and men are buried with squares of hemp cloth that are specially decorated with embroidery and batik, as well as hemp-lined cloth shoes made by kinswomen. These items are also needed so that the deceased will be recognised and have a successful

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<sup>173</sup> For the Hmong of Yunnan, China and Lào Cai, Lai Châu and Yên Bái provinces of Northern Upland Vietnam, hemp has historically been an important fiber for producing cloth, and is required for various spiritual and socio-cultural practices.

journey to the land of the ancestors (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007). Special hemp skirts are also often worn by women during childbirth. While this obviously serves a practical purpose, Mai Thanh Son (1999: 24) suggests that the birthing skirt may also function as an identity marker, helping to remind a newborn of his or her ancestral origins. Additionally, special textiles for infants such as baby carriers and hats contain motifs to protect the child's spirit and keep him/her safe from harm (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007; La Sa Pa Hmong woman 10/09/10).

Dress is also an important and conspicuous way to convey ethnic belonging in a multi-ethnic space, such as upland Vietnam. A number of Hmong informants explained how clothing helps to identify someone as Hmong, as well as to distinguish what specific locality another Hmong person comes from – as elements of clothing styles, colours and patterns differ between localities, in addition to subgroups (Mai Thanh Son 1999; Tapp 2006). For example, Ly, a young Hmong woman from Sa Pa whom I have known for several years, had just returned after having spent eight months in China, when I caught up with her again in 2009. In talking to me about her experiences there, she stated that when approaching a stranger, “I knew that she was Hmong because of the skirt she was wearing. Without the skirt I would never have known.” She went on to say, “I think there are many Hmong people living in China, but I couldn't tell if they were Hmong or not because they were dressed like the Chinese” (Ly 07/07/09). After observing the diversity of Hmong clothing in different areas of Lào Cai for several months, I was able to finally see the distinctions between local clothing styles from different parts of the province, not just between but also within the same ‘subgroup’. Some of these variations were quite distinct, while others were fairly subtle and required a trained eye to identify (see Figure 8.1)



**FIGURE 8.1: DIFFERENT STYLES OF HMONG CLOTHING IN LÀO CAI PROVINCE (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Clothing is also used by Hmong in Vietnam as a way of identifying as Hmong, in relation to and distinct from, the majority Kinh as well as from the numerous other minority groups residing in the northern uplands. As Tsu (14/06/05), a young Hmong mother from Sa Pa expressed: “If you are a Hmong person you should wear Hmong clothes. We are not Vietnamese, and we should do something right for our people by wearing our own clothes.” Whereas in China, Thailand and Laos, Hmong are increasingly beginning to wear the ‘modern’ clothing styles associated with the majority populations, my observations in northern upland Vietnam over the period 2006-2010 are that Hmong there tend to continue to prefer wearing their customary clothing, whether hand or factory-made, on a daily basis. A similar enduring practice by indigenous societies of continuing to adopt customary dress in the midst of centripetal pressures of market integration and capitalist globalisation has been noted in a few studies, particularly in Latin America (see for instance, Hendrickson 1995; Blenda 2005; Little 2004).

In Lào Cai province certainly, customary Hmong clothing has retained its importance despite the advance of tourism there. For foreign and domestic visitors alike, witnessing ethnic minorities in ‘traditional dress’ is part of the draw to upland markets and tourist towns like Sa Pa. This contrasts with other research on the impacts of tourism on Hmong and other upland ethnic minority groups elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where traditional clothing is no longer worn on an everyday basis and cultural authenticity is often ‘staged’

for guests (Cohen 2004; although see Section 8.4.2). According to Aiv (14/06/05), a Sa Pa Hmong trekking guide:

If you are a minority person, like Sa Pa Hmong, then it is important to keep your traditional way of dress throughout your whole life. When tourists come to Sa Pa they come here to see you, so you don't have to change. We may have the same face as Kinh people, but we have a different language and different clothes and that's what people want to see when they come here.

In Sa Pa town, a small number of young Hmong women - the majority of whom are single - earn cash income from employment as tour guides and are beginning to wear western/Kinh clothing in town during their time off. However, some of these women explained that in their home hamlets they revert to wearing Hmong clothes, not wishing to attract disapproval from other community members, such as Hmong elders. Duong Bich Hanh (2008), who undertook research on these young, working Hmong women in Sa Pa, contends that many of them are embarking on a process of self-reconstruction. Two separate identities are being developed: one as the "dutiful daughter" accountable to family and cultural obligations; and another as a "modern girl whose experiences and lifestyle are tied to a physical urban space, and more significantly, a symbolic cosmopolitan space that extends far beyond the urban space of Sa Pa itself" (Duong 2008: 232). While I agree with her that a small segment of these young working women may fit this description, I have also observed many others of this same category, who do not appear to be interested in switching their style of dress, and continue to feel that it is important to wear Hmong clothes at all times.

The importance of clothing as a way for Hmong to mark themselves from other ethnic and social groups is echoed in Patricia Symonds' (2004: 48) study of Hmong in Thailand, in which she explains that the production of clothes is important for "exchange and heirloom conservation [which] helps groups to reproduce themselves and to achieve autonomy or advantage in interactions with others". Duong Bich Hanh (2008) offers a counter-take on this, concerning tour-guiding Hmong from Sa Pa. She proposes that here, young women's desire to take on the trappings of a lifestyle that defines them as 'modern women' through new consumption practices (like western clothes) is in part an effort to contest "the stereotype imposed on them by Vietnamese society at large as marginalised

yet romanticised Others” (Duong 2008: 232). I suggest that both interpretations of women’s strategic behaviour may be equally valid. Hmong women may at times engage in one or the other of these practices depending on the particular context and circumstances. My observations of female Hmong friends visiting the capital Hà Nội as tourists presents yet another insight into clothing and identity. These women wanted to go shopping for western clothes immediately after arriving in the city so as to not ‘stand out’ in traditional dress, explaining that they wished to blend in so they would not be stared at. These examples reflect a host of possible responses by Hmong women in terms of their use of dress as a self-conscious and strategic choice, highlighting shifting identifications and how clothing practice is situational. Indeed, my observations mirror those of Hansen (2004: 372), who argues that that the two-sided nature of dress, worn touching the physical body yet facing outward towards other, “invites us to explore both the individual and collective identities that the dressed body enables. The subjective and social experiences of dress are not always mutually supportive but may contradict one another or collide.”

### **8.2.2 The Gendered Nature of Hmong Textile Production**

Throughout many parts of Southeast Asia, textile production and knowledge has customarily been a gendered (female) activity (Schneider 1987; Van Esterik and Milgram 1994; Maxwell 2003). In the case of Hmong in Southeast Asia and China, the production of textiles, embroideries and clothing is undertaken almost solely by women, and are activities that remain important to women throughout their lives. Within northern upland Vietnam, while extremely time and labour consuming, women are responsible for the entire process of clothes-making: from the growing of hemp to make cloth and the indigo used to dye it; to the cutting and processing of the hemp stalks and the production of thread; to its weaving into cloth, the sewing of garments, and the embroidered pieces which are applied to it (Mai Thanh Son 1999; personal observations).<sup>174</sup> The production of Hmong clothing and decorative techniques are highly valued and well-practiced skills. According to Hmong gender ideologies, a woman’s sexual desirability and status as - or

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<sup>174</sup> Hemp production for clothes is practiced by Hmong in many parts of northern Vietnam, although manufactured cotton has become a substitute material in some places.



potential to be - a good mother are intimately tied to how accomplished she is at these activities (Symonds 2004).

Every year, Hmong women produce clothing sets for themselves, their husbands, their children, as well for their parents-in-law (Mai Thanh Son 1999; Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007). According to Symonds (2004), part of being a ‘good mother’ involves properly instructing one’s daughters in the art of needlework and clothes-making through a lengthy apprenticeship (Symonds 2004). In Lào Cai, Hmong girls are usually taught to embroider around the age of eight, and begin making their own clothes by around age thirteen (Mai Thanh Son 1999). During the Hmong New Year celebrations, girls who have reached puberty don the clothing they have made for the first time, displaying their abilities to the community and to possible future marriage partners (Symonds 2004; Feng 2007; personal observations). Indeed, the finest sets of clothing are reserved by all Hmong to wear during the New Year festivities.<sup>175</sup>

The production of handicrafts is also important in social bonding. As discussed in Chapter 3, after marriage, Hmong women most typically leave their family to move in with their husband’s household, which is often in a different locality. This can be a stressful time, as women are adapting to a new environment, group of people, and are often expected to prove themselves as hard workers while acting with respect and modesty towards in-laws (Feng 2007). Shared textile production and embroidery often helps women to build relationships with other women, and can help to ease the entry into a new family and community (personal observations).

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<sup>175</sup> In the tourist town of Sa Pa, some Hmong traders expressed concerns that the girls who are coming into town to sell handicrafts at a young age are not learning to embroider as well as they should. For instance Mi (26/06/06), a 16 year old handicraft trader explained that Sa Pa Hmong have around eight different kinds of embroidery designs, while she herself has still only learned how to do five. She reflected that: “Because a lot of girls sell in the streets of Sa Pa town, they do not learn to embroider and make clothes properly, so it will be very hard for them later on. It may be a problem for them in terms of finding a good husband because if a woman cannot make her husband’s clothes, and his clothes are old, people will talk and say “oh, his clothes are so bad, she does not take care of him well.”



Chu (18/06/06) a young Hmong mother from Sa Pa described the difficulties she experienced during her transition to live with her husband's family:

When I got married I was very upset and cried because I had to make all of the clothes for the family: my parents-in-law, my brother and his younger siblings. I said to myself, "oh no, I can never make all of that!" I had to make so many pieces of embroidery. So my husband said to me, "why don't you just ask your mother-in-law to help?" I was afraid to because I was newly living there and felt very shy. But she did end up helping me. And that way, we ended up getting along together ok.

The gendering of Hmong textile knowledge and production has positioned women as the main drivers behind the trade of handicrafts to tourists. The handicraft trade as 'women's domain' is very significant, as Hmong women's access to trade and income earning has customarily been limited in this region in comparison to men – earlier important cash-earning activities for Hmong, such as the opium trade were undertaken largely by men (Turner 2007). It is to this increasing involvement of Hmong women in the tourism trade that I turn to next.

### **8.3 Case Study 1: The Commodity Chain in Hmong Textiles for Consumers of Ethnic Handicrafts**

The commoditisation of textiles and sale of Hmong handicrafts for the tourist market in Lào Cai is symptomatic of a much geographically broader phenomenon. Indeed, transformations of Hmong textiles into 'cultural commodities' for the ethnic handicraft market have taken place in Vietnam (Michaud and Turner 2000; Turner 2007), Thailand (Cohen 2000; Symonds 2004), Laos (Cohen 2000; Miao Yun 2010), and China (Chinese textile trader, Ma Guan Yunnan, 15/06/10; Oakes 1993; Miao Yun 2010). Moreover, in Vietnam, the Hmong handicraft trade has a fairly long history. Visitors to the French colonial hill station of Sa Pa were purchasing such items as early as the 1920s (Michaud and Turner 2000; Turner 2007).<sup>176</sup>

Nevertheless, the handicraft trade during the French colonial period remained at a minor scale compared to what it is today. Furthermore, Hmong who were then involved in the

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<sup>176</sup> According to Michaud and Turner (2000), building on oral histories and archival documents, the handicraft trade during this period occurred primarily via two paths. Firstly, local Hmong would sell their textiles, jewellery and old clothing directly to French guests. Secondly, the small numbers of Kinh in Sa Pa at that time would act as trade intermediaries between the French consumers and Hmong producers.

handicraft trade were only ever doing so on rare occasion as a very minor supplemental activity. Consequently, it never amounted to having any significant livelihood impact (Michaud and Turner 2000). With the onset of the war between the Viet Minh and French colonial forces in 1946, these activities completely disappeared, only to resume again after 1993 – the first time since the colonial period that non national guests were free to visit Sa Pa without requiring special state permits (Lloyd 2003).

### **8.3.1 Sa Pa Hmong Handicraft Producers and Traders**

Since 1993, a major market in ethnic minority handicrafts has burgeoned, based in particular on Hmong and Yao textiles. This has been initiated by the swift and substantial growth of international and domestic tourism to Sa Pa district. The subsequent trade in handicrafts undertaken by ethnic minorities has expanded to encompass a number of different producer links, trader types, and commodity networks. First, in this section, I outline the different locations from which Sa Pa resident Hmong women sell their textiles – be it from a fixed stall in the market, mobile on the town’s streets, or in their home hamlet.

A number of Hmong and Yao women of all ages from communes around Sa Pa town sell handicrafts on a daily basis in town.<sup>177</sup> Nowadays, a number of these Hmong and Yao traders have obtained more or less permanent stalls within the handicraft section of the town’s central marketplace. Opened in 1996/97, this section was designated by the Lào Cai People’s Committee as a ‘cultural market’ (*chợ văn hoá*) (explained in Chapter 3; Sa Pa MMB official 08/08/07). Those with such fixed stalls have either been trading the longest, are relatives of such women, or have developed social networks with them in order to enter into part-time sharing or stall borrowing arrangements (Field notes 08/08/07). Although I have also noted Yao traders as also being importantly involved in this trade, I limit the rest of the discussion to the role of Hmong in these networks as they

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<sup>177</sup> Hmong and Yao handicraft traders are present on a daily basis in Sa Pa town. However, not all of these women trade full-time, some coming into town only on weekends or when they have free time and goods to sell. They also tend to take time out from trading during planting and harvest periods for rice and maize, although it is becoming more common for traders to hire labour to assist them at this time.

play a larger role in the regional handicraft trade and cross-border trade that I explore next.

While the district state would like to contain ethnic minority vendors within this clearly demarcated area for handicraft trading, demand for market stalls currently far exceeds availability as only a fixed number of spaces exist, for which traders pay daily fees to the Market Management Board. Between 2007 and 2010, these stall numbers remained stable at fifty. Social networks with stall-renting market traders are thus crucial for gaining access to such coveted spaces (Sa Pa Town People's Committee 03/08/06). Kin frequently share their stalls with each other, taking turns on different days.

However, the majority of handicraft traders are unable to obtain a prime spot in the central market, and either put up temporary, informal stalls at locations around town that move over time due to periodic crack downs by officials, or trade from areas designated by the People's Committee, yet which also seem to keep changing. Others still are ambulant vendors, on the look-out for tourists to sell to. Some of these street traders may team up with relatives or friends who are fixed market traders. As the former group are mobile, they encounter a greater number of tourists who may be potential buyers, but tend to have a less diverse range of handicrafts to sell at any given time as they are limited by what they can carry around. Some street traders may therefore sell items on behalf of their relatives in the market, or will procure an item that a tourist has expressed interest in from their contact in the market in return for a small commission.

Nevertheless street traders have frequently become a target for local authorities, especially when an event is held in Sa Pa town and the state wishes to have 'clean streets'. Dawn (14/06/07), a young Hmong mother who works as an ambulant vendor and trekking guide discussed this process:

I have been harassed by the police and they confiscated my goods. Afterwards, I was unable to get them back. They said to me, "Why do you do nothing all day? You just talk to tourists and follow them around!" They see me as lazy and tell me to go to the new market.<sup>178</sup> But the new market is no good for selling...it's not like the central market where

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<sup>178</sup> In 2005 a new trade site opened temporarily to hold events in association with a conference and cultural fair. The site remained opened, and Hmong and Yao traders were permitted to open self-made stalls in this

all the tourists go. I told the police “We Hmong vendors have very little money. We make only enough to live through the little work we can do in our small fields, so we come here to try and sell a little bit, so why do you bother us?”

Finally, some Hmong participate in the handicraft trade within their home hamlets that are the destination of most tourist treks that originate from Sa Pa town.<sup>179</sup> These trade transactions occur after a tour group has hiked with a Hmong guide to visit a local household (often her own family’s house) and consumed a meal there. Other Hmong traders try to join up with these trekking groups in Sa Pa town in order to befriend tourists through conversation on the trek down to the hamlets, a technique which aims to conclude the encounter with a sale. This has become an increasingly popular strategy since the mid-2000s, as possible trade spots in Sa Pa town have ‘dried up’ due to the authority’s actions or become saturated with traders.

Moving from a focus on who these actors are, at the start of these commodity chains, to the goods that they trade, the textiles and handicrafts being sold have been changing significantly over time. During the 1990s, minority handicraft traders more commonly sold their old clothes, embroidery, as well as jewellery, directly to tourists. Yet since that time, the range of items being produced has expanded considerably. Hmong producers are continually experimenting in innovating new goods refashioned out of old textiles. Pre-worn Hmong skirts, embroidered collar pieces, belts, and baby carriers, no longer of value for personal use, are being reclaimed and transformed into a variety of tourist-oriented items. This creation of new, marketable commodities often involves Hmong carefully cutting-up used clothing so as to separate the valuable bits, particularly the batik or embroidered sections, in order to remake them into a wide and ever growing

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area for a period of about three years. In 2008, this site was transformed into a ‘night market,’ primarily for Kinh and Tày cooked food vendors, and the Hmong and Yao traders have since had to relocate elsewhere.

<sup>179</sup>Developing initially from the interactions between female Hmong handicraft traders and tourists, a secondary industry in trekking to nearby villages has also been stimulated, whereby many of the tour guides hired by hotels and tour companies are young Hmong women who first began encountering tourists while working in their free time as handicraft vendors. These girls and women learned to speak English (and for some, even a number of other foreign languages), and have used these skills to their advantage, branching out from initially taking tourists they had befriended to visit their families in the villages in order to sell handicrafts to them on an informal basis, to a more formal arrangement of working at a fixed wage as a trekking guide for hotels and tour companies (Chau 21/6/06). Yet, while guides in 2009 earned anywhere from 80,000-150,000 per day, depending on the hotel they worked for, tours charged at least double that amount to tourists.

assortment of commodities such as blankets, bags, purses, hats, wall hangings, pillowcases, stuffed animals, and various types of clothing (Figure 8.2).



**FIGURE 8.2: REFASHIONED HMONG TEXTILES AS TOURIST COMMODITIES (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Ma (14/06/05), an elderly Hmong woman selling textiles in Sa Pa town since 1993, describes her observations of how handicrafts have changed over this time:

Before I sold handicrafts that were quite different from what people are selling right now. We used to sell a whole dress, or a set of all our clothes. I didn't make pillowcases, hats or blankets like I do now. I would sell belts, but these were just the old belts that we had already worn, we didn't make any new belts for tourists. In 1998, I started to make blankets out of old skirts. At first, I didn't have many blankets like I do today, only a few. Before, if we didn't want to wear our clothes anymore, after three or four years, we'd just throw them away. But now we use them to make new handicrafts.

Clothing and embroidered pieces - formerly perceived by Hmong as old and useless, having already fulfilled their cultural and practical purposes - are now assessed for their economic potential and recycled to into tradable commodities. Some women have also started to make less time-consuming handicrafts that are only meant to be sold on the tourist market. For example, Hmong and Yao have begun to produce small patches of embroidery which can be completed within a relatively short time-span, for use in decorating a number of different products. Handicraft producers also often use synthetic materials such as industrially-made cloth, yarn, thread and ribbons from China, rather than natural materials, in their production for the market.

Nevertheless, as the demand for tourist items has increased over time, it has not been only Sa Pa resident Hmong women who have found a new cash supply – Hmong hamlets from other districts in Lào Cai as well as neighbouring upland provinces have become new source markets. This has resulting in the spatial broadening of regional, upland trade networks in old textiles, a process undertaken by Hmong participants which I turn to examine next.

### **8.3.2 Casting the Net Wide – new entrants into the textile trade from outlying areas**

Currently, a constant and growing demand for Hmong textiles to supply the tourist handicraft industry is outpacing the ability of Hmong from communes with good access to these markets to match it. A scarcity of old textiles and clothing from local sources, means that producer-traders must increasingly source these inputs beyond the vicinity of Sa Pa district, to regions outside of the direct reach of tourism (Turner 2007). Distant Hmong ‘supplier areas’ have been drawn into the handicraft market, extending textile commodity chains to the regional scale of the wider northern uplands, and assembling diverse groups of social actors through new trade configurations.

Another factor motivating Sa Pa resident Hmong traders to engage extra-local sources for worn textiles is their place-based distinctiveness, as I introduced earlier. Hmong handicraft traders from Sa Pa spotted the economic potential that could be derived from differences in local textile designs and colours. These style variations have enabled Sa Pa Hmong to diversify their products, offering a broader range of handicrafts to capture the interest of consumers. Moreover, while Sa Pa resident Hmong produce very intricate and colourful embroideries (for collar pieces, belts and arm bands) women wear hemp pants and blouses dyed dark with indigo on an everyday basis. As such, Hmong clothing from Sa Pa might be considered ‘plainer’ relative to the more colourful handmade skirts produced and worn by Hmong elsewhere.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Therefore, spatial variations in traditional Hmong textiles have become important for the handicraft industry, but while these are appreciated and valued by Sa Pa Hmong producers themselves, this knowledge is most of the time lost on outside consumers of these ethnic handicrafts. For instance, when I visited Tsu, a middle aged Hmong woman at her market stall in Sa Pa town, she was making and selling bags comprised of a pastiche of segments of different embroidery styles produced by Hmong from four separate hamlets, covering a wide geographical area. Yet, tourists had no idea as to the diversity of origins



Accordingly, there are two main ways that this long-distance sourcing of used Hmong textiles takes place. The first, which is how this trade is often initiated in any new locale, occurs when Hmong traders from Sa Pa travel to other regions where they know Hmong make the style of skirts or embroidery pieces that they want – usually, those containing large sections of fine embroidery or batik work. Usually, Hmong traders initially make this trip with the additional purpose of visiting kin, who often act as trade contacts. Second, usually only after initial contact is made by a Hmong trader from Sa Pa, textile collectors – who are frequently kin of the Sa Pa contact - from these distant hamlets travel to Sa Pa town to sell used skirts, and some of them rapidly become ‘wholesalers’ in old textiles. In 2009, the key places that these skirts were being sourced from included such distant sites as: Yên Bái province, Điện Biên province, Lai Châu province, as well as from further points in Lào Cai.

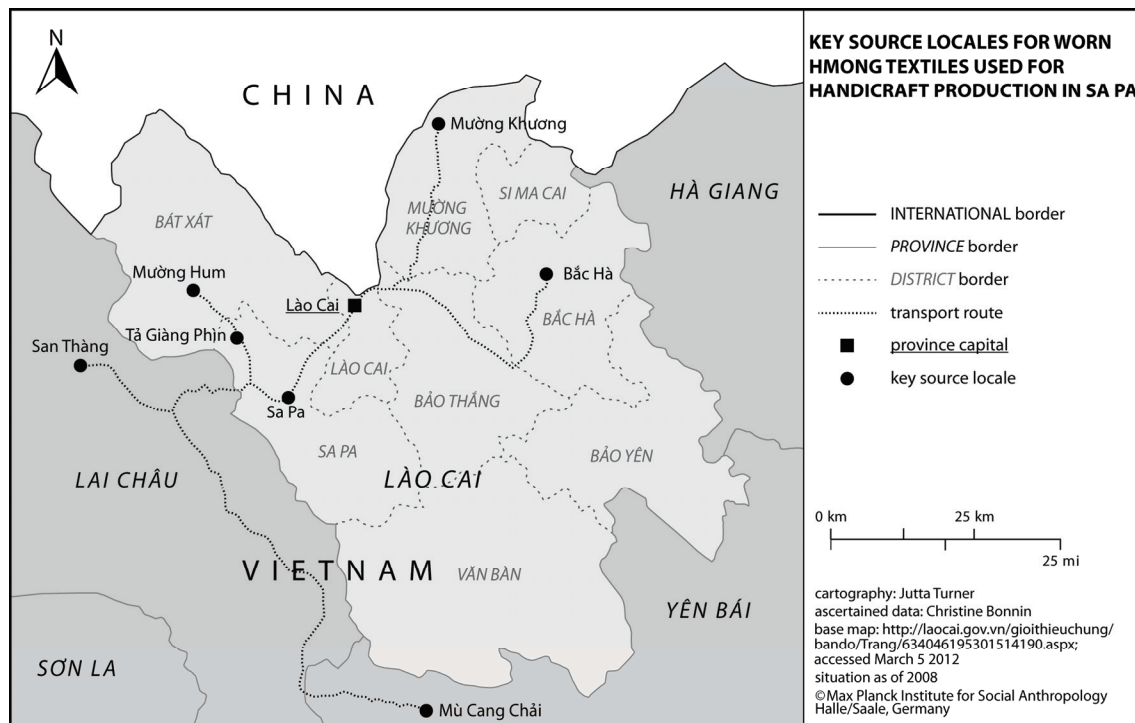
To illustrate this using one specific example, since the late 1990s increasing numbers of Hmong from Mù Cang Chải district in Yên Bái province arrive each weekend with large volumes of used skirts and embroidered collar pieces to sell to Sa Pa Hmong traders in the town square. In 2009, between 25 and 30 Mù Cang Chải Hmong individuals were involved in this trade network.<sup>181</sup> This journey takes over six hours by bus, or four and a half by motorbike, a distance of around 70 km on winding roads. The long investment in travel time to reach Sa Pa suggests that Hmong wholesalers find this venture a worthwhile economic strategy. A similar trade involves Hmong wholesalers who collect skirts and embroideries with highly valued local designs from other far flung locales such as: San Thang commune in Lai Châu province (33 km away); Ta Giang Phin and Mường Hum communes in Lào Cai province (over 30 km away); as well as Bắc Hà (100 km away) and Mường Khương (110 km away) districts of Lào Cai province (Figure 8.3).

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of such pieces, believing that they were buying local and authentic handicrafts made entirely *in situ* (Field notes 24/6/09).

<sup>181</sup> Skirts are particularly sought after as they can be opened up and joined together (two or three across) to form a blanket. In 2009, skirt collectors from Mu Cang Chai would pay around 80,000 VND per skirt. They would then sell them to Sa Pa Hmong traders for around 100,000 or even up to 300,000 VND for one with fine embroidery. Sa Pa Hmong then sew two skirts together and sell them as blankets to tourists for around 400-500,000 VND. During the same time period, Thuy, a Kinh trader was selling blankets in her up-market shop for between 600,000-700,000 VND.





**FIGURE 8.3: KEY SOURCE LOCALES FOR WORN HMONG TEXTILES USED FOR HANDICRAFT PRODUCTION IN SA PA (ADAPTED FROM LÀO CAI GOVERNMENT ONLINE: 2008)**

According to Yi (03/09/07), a Hmong wholesaler from Mù Cang Chải, because of the rising demand for old textiles to serve Sa Pa's handicraft market, traders like her must travel to more difficult to access hamlets in order to obtain a sufficient number of old skirts to supply their trade. She explained "I now have to go to farther areas. It is very difficult because I have to reach many villages on foot because motorbikes cannot go on the paths, and sometimes I leave with nothing." At the same time, Hmong textile wholesalers from the source areas get involved in long-distance trade networks because they have an advantage over Sa Pa Hmong in accessing textiles. These local resident wholesalers have better knowledge of their area and know exactly where the isolated hamlets are located, and moreover, usually possess more extensive social networks there. For some Hmong households in remote areas with limited market opportunities, the expanded reach of this textile network has presented a new avenue to earn some cash through the sale of their old clothing (Yi 03/09/07).

Regarding the transactions involved, Hmong textile collectors circulate through the hamlets of their locality, gathering old skirts from households, and typically pay after they are sold in Sa Pa. Collectors may pay households in cash, but some also barter old textiles in return for new synthetic Hmong skirts from China, cloth, or jewellery such as rings or bracelets.<sup>182</sup> For example, Khu (21/02/09) a Hmong woman from Mù Cang Chải, stated that wholesalers will normally give her two new manufactured skirts for one of her old handmade skirts, or as many as four new skirts for one less worn, very well-embroidered skirt in good condition. She explained that women often prefer to exchange their old skirts for the manufactured ones because in her hamlet there is only one Hmong shop selling these new clothing items.

This barter of old for new skirts presents one example of how the two commodity chain case studies presented in this chapter cross at certain nodal points, thus forming part of a larger commodity network. The presence of such interconnectivities between different commodity chains of a similar good (textiles) but for different end markets, highlights the relevance of incorporating an analysis of the horizontal dimensions of commodity chains at each node - such as the role of local practices, social identity, and place - alongside a vertical analysis, following a commodity from production through to consumption (Fine and Leopold 1993; Leslie and Reimer 1999; Bush 2004; Turner 2007). This examination of Hmong trader's activities within specific commodity chains reveals instances where they assume overlapping roles which link these commodity chains together at specific points. Here, through their wider trade connections, Hmong textile wholesalers are not only engaged in supplying the handicraft market, but also function as suppliers of manufactured Hmong clothing for remote consumer communities. Hmong wholesalers access the new goods from the Sa Pa town market or else from long-distance Hmong traders from the border districts of Lào Cai who sell them in many upland markets (explored in Section 8.4).

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<sup>182</sup> Long distance traders also purchase black cloth sold by Giay traders in the Sa Pa marketplace and bring this back to local hamlets in order to barter the material for old skirts or else to sell to Hmong women in Yên Bái, Lai Châu or Điện Biên provinces (Hmong handicraft trader Sa Pa 06/10/07)

However Hmong textiles from distant locales are also in demand by Kinh handicraft intermediaries – introduced next - who re-fashion Hmong textiles into various tourist-oriented commodities. Nevertheless, trade networks between non-local Hmong textile wholesalers and Kinh intermediaries in Sa Pa are more limited in strength and regularity, due to difficulties in establishing social ties across ethnic and linguistic cleavages – inhibiting these groups’ ability to access resources and information from one another (Meagher 2005; Turner 2007). This owes in part to the large number of visiting wholesalers and irregularity of transactions – only two or three Hmong long-distance traders visit Sa Pa on a consistent basis. According to one Kinh shopkeeper, Thue (30/05/05) “I don’t know who these Hmong traders from Lai Châu are because there are so many different people and I can’t recognise them. I often keep an ample supply of materials which I get from Sa Pa Hmong, so these long distance Hmong sellers often have to try elsewhere.”

Such interethnic social ties are hard to foster given language barriers, long-distance Hmong wholesalers being unfamiliar in dealing with Kinh people, and also historically-rooted apprehensions by many Hmong of Kinh lowlanders (Sa Pa Hmong trader 14/2/09). Vang (26/07/07), a Hmong man from Pha Long who accompanies his wife to Sa Pa to sell the old skirts they collect, explained “I have heard that some Kinh people would like to buy our skirts but I don’t know who they are or how to sell to them because I don’t speak their language”. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I met only one Kinh trader in the Sa Pa town market who spoke Hmong because she was previously stationed to work in a medical clinic within a Hmong hamlet. Indeed, non-local Hmong often prefer to trade with Sa Pa Hmong than with Kinh town dwellers because of concerns over difficulties bargaining, receiving an unfair price, and being cheated (Turner 2007).

However, a few Kinh shopkeepers have managed to develop long-term trading networks with long-distance wholesalers. These are commonly initiated through contacts provided by a Sa Pa resident Hmong who has already has a business relationship with that Kinh trader (Sa Pa Kinh handicraft trader 06/10/07). In this case, as discussed in my conceptual

framework (Chapter 2), bonding forms of social capital between Hmong traders of similar ethnic and social status are extended to bridging forms. The latter takes place between more socially heterogeneous and distant groups – here, of different ethnicity and economic status - linking non-local Hmong with Kinh shopkeepers and facilitating trade. Yet while overall, Kinh handicraft traders are limited in their ability to access this node of the commodity chain, they wield substantial power in transmitting market information, and transforming the handicraft market through their activities which are concentrated in the higher-value segments of the chain.

### **8.3.3 Kinh and Tày Intermediate Producers and Traders of Ethnic Minority Handicrafts**

Kinh and Tày traders have played a key role in the commoditisation of Hmong material culture in Sa Pa, and the diversification of handicrafts based on ethnic minority designs and textiles. This group is expanding its operation in Sa Pa town, both in the market and in small shops as well as more up-market boutiques, acting as producers, traders and intermediaries. Sewing and refashioning ‘Hmong-looking’ goods such as pillowcases, wall hangings and clothes, they use textile pieces which are then reconstituted on industrial sewing machines.

It is predominantly these traders who extend Hmong handicraft commodity networks out of the uplands, to Hà Nội and beyond. At this node in the commodity chain, a number of trade networks exist between this group of Kinh and Tày producers and Hmong producers. In the first, traders purchase small pieces of embroidery from Hmong women, often on weekends, when the latter are going to and from the Sa Pa town marketplace. Second, traders may have established more regular supply arrangements with particular Hmong producers, with some shopkeepers providing the input materials to make these embroideries. Kinh and Tày shopkeepers then affix these small patches onto larger items, a step in the commodity chain that adds considerable value, resulting in a final product that will fetch a higher price. Finally, trade networks may then circulate back to ethnic minorities, with shopkeepers either selling back or else ‘lending out’ the finished products on a commission basis to Hmong or Yao street vendors who lack physical

capital such as sewing machines to make these items themselves (Turner 2007; Kinh traders Sa Pa 27/05/05; 27/07/07). Some Kinh traders even base their trade upon these circular exchanges with Sa Pa Hmong and Yao vendors rather than selling to tourists. This is the case for Kinh trader Thu (27/07/07) who explained “I may get a smaller profit each time I sell to Hmong, but this gives me a faster turnover because they buy from me far more often than the tourists do.”

Many of these final products are sold in Sa Pa, but increasingly, since the early 2000s, a growing trade network has witnessed large volumes of these goods transported to Hà Nội. Many such items are found throughout Hà Nội’s Ancient Quarter (*Phố Cổ*), and at other tourist sites in the capital. Indeed the handicraft shops in Sa Pa town also act as collection centres to wholesale these commodities onwards to lowland tourist markets.

As discussed below in Section 8.3.3 this group of Kinh traders tends to capture the largest share of the total earnings from the handicraft industry, owing to their higher levels of financial capital, vast social networks which connect their upland businesses with lowland opportunities, and connections with the state (Michaud and Turner 2000).

#### **8.3.4 Extending the Tourist Textile Commodity Chains beyond the Uplands**

Despite their upland, rural origins, the commodity chains for Hmong textiles reach far from Sa Pa and the surrounding hamlets and towns, and are global in reach. While I wish to keep my main focus on the trade linkages in the uplands, I detail these extensive networks, and the supply and demand dynamics of the long distance trade flows that shape these chains, briefly here.

For these textiles to move beyond the uplands, most commonly, Hà Nội-based wholesalers or traders selling these pieces in tourist shops will initially travel to Sa Pa and establish a relationship with Kinh traders based in Sa Pa town, or far less commonly, with Hmong traders. Indeed, these larger, long distance arrangements often bypass Hmong producer-traders entirely. While the initial stages of production and distribution in the commodity chain within Sa Pa and the uplands are performed largely by Hmong,

the later marketing and distribution beyond the uplands in Vietnam is mainly in the hands of Kinh. After the initial establishment of trade agreements, goods are usually transported by train or bus from Sa Pa to Hà Nội, and lowland traders put in further requests with their upland contacts by phone. In addition, these handicraft wholesale relationships often operate in both directions. Hà Nội-based Kinh traders also frequently act as wholesalers for lowland tourist souvenirs for their Sa Pa trading partners (such as wooden carvings and silk scarves).<sup>183</sup>

It is common for traders in Hà Nội to also be adding value to items from Sa Pa, sometimes buying unfinished cloth items in bulk, to then refashion into more up-market tourist items in their own shops. Indeed, Hà Nội traders may have a number of people sewing for them in Hà Nội or in surrounding towns and communes. Once the final commodities are made, these are sold to wholesalers and traders in a number of Hà Nội tourist sites and also in tourist ‘hot spots’ throughout the country, such as Hội An, Huế, and Hồ Chí Minh City. Again, as with other upland-lowland commodity flows, such long distant trade is usually via buses or train, with transactions facilitated and carried out by cell phone, or in this case sometimes by email, after initial contacts are made (Chapter 5, Anderson 2010).

From Hà Nội as well as these other lowland locales, commodity chains in tourist items based on Hmong textiles attain a global reach, as they are then exported to a number of cities around the world and have been sited by myself or colleagues in Montreal, Halifax, New York, Ithaca, Paris, Sydney, London, Bangkok and Hong Kong. NGOs and fair trade or alternative trade establishments (such as Craftlink, 10,000 Villages and Oxfam Hong Kong) attempting to develop new markets for Hmong textiles, also have a role in bringing these goods into the global commodity chains, albeit on a fairly small scale.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> A similar but smaller scale trade network operates between Kinh tourist traders in Bắc Hà market and their Kinh Hà Nội or other lowland area souvenir trade contacts. I discussed this group in Chapter 5.

<sup>184</sup> While some poverty alleviation and livelihood development initiatives such as those undertaken by Craftlink and Oxfam have worked with the local government in an attempt to promote fairer production and trade networks, to date only a very limited number of Hmong and Yao in Sa Pa district have been able to actually participate and benefit from these projects (Fieldnotes 2005, 2008; Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007).

It is clear that these handicraft trade networks are set to receive an added level of complexity, as the attention on Hmong textiles is now moving beyond the private sector. The Lào Cai government has stated its official interest in promoting this ‘cultural industry’ for tourist and export markets as part of the province’s socio-economic development plan (2008-2020). Specifically, it plans to invest in “developing traditional brocade textile, garment and embroidery in the trade villages of Sa Pa, Bắc Hà, and Văn Bàn.” However, it is unclear specifically how this will be implemented or what role Hmong or other ethnic minorities will play in these projects (SRV Decision No. 46/2008/Qđ-TTg *ibid*). As with upland alcohols, this new focus is clearly on promoting marketable ‘traditional village specialties’. Yet, such growth in this textile industry and the new actors increasingly involved brings new tensions and concerns as well – debates which I will examine in detail within the discussion chapter (Chapter 9) of this thesis.

In sum, in this case study I have demonstrated how the expansion of consumer markets in Hmong handicrafts since the late 1990s has led to the creation of new economic values and meanings for items formerly considered for their use and cultural values alone. Hmong women traders from Sa Pa - long exposed to outside visitors who have taken an interest in their handicrafts - have been the ultimate leaders in this transformation, finding novel ways to exact profits from worn textiles that have exhausted their function and would otherwise be worthless. These women are thus active participants in the commoditisation of Hmong material culture, through their innovation of new products and judgements of how to market their own textiles to appeal to external consumers. Hmong are also the main actors extending this process into more distant areas of the uplands through their building of networks, advanced by social ties and shared language, spatially encompassing a number of source locations and drawing in a range of new participants.

Kinh handicraft traders must work closely with Sa Pa Hmong in order to access authentic textile pieces and links to non-local textile supplies, while this relationship is often highly unequal and not without conflict and resentment (see also Chapter 9). As pointed out by Sa Pa Hmong trader, Bee (11/07/06), “Vietnamese are unable to make our textiles. We



help them out a lot by making these things and trading with them. Without us, their shops would not even be possible.” Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated how Kinh are often well placed to monopolise many forms of upland trade and market activities. However, my second comparative case study of new Hmong textiles from China, which I turn to now, is all the more intriguing because this economically and politically powerful group has remained almost totally absent and excluded from this vibrant upland cross-border commodity network.

#### **8.4 Case Study 2: Transnational Trade Networks in Manufactured Textiles for Hmong-oriented Use**

In this section, I investigate the operation of a functionally separate upland commodity chain in Hmong textiles within Lào Cai province – that of factory-made garments and materials based on traditional designs which are imported from China by transnational petty traders. Here, new cultural commodities produced from industrially manufactured materials are oriented entirely towards a Hmong consumer market. As I shall demonstrate, although the two commodity chains of this chapter’s case studies have different orientations, by considering the trade networks that underpin them, it becomes clear that both are in fact nested within larger commodity webs. This highlights the important influence of horizontal factors such as ethnicity, language, upland border residency, and gender in creating and expanding these trade networks and markets.

These trades in new minority textiles have been facilitated by the official reopening of the Vietnam/China border in 1988, after almost ten years of closure following the Sino-Vietnamese war (Chapter 3, Schoenberger and Turner 2008). Since the 2000s, a cross-border trade in Hmong textiles has flourished, with the emergence of several new trade opportunities for differently situated groups of actors, particularly for Hmong residents of both Vietnam and China as well as Han Chinese traders.

##### **8.4.1. The Introduction of Manufactured Hmong Clothing and Materials**

As discussed earlier, Hmong customary clothing has often been interpreted based on what are regarded as static and consistent elements. Yet, as much for Hmong dress as for

other ethnic groups globally, ‘traditional’ clothing and costume reflect processual practices and constituents. These transform over time and space via the “selective incorporation of influences that have continually redefined individual and local identities” (Hansen 2004: 373). The expansion of cross-border market trade into Vietnam’s upland areas, combined with better connective infrastructure and increasing levels of wealth amongst Hmong households, are all basic factors that have led to a growth in the market for Hmong manufactured clothing and synthetic materials.

Since the late 1990s, within Vietnam, imported factory-made Hmong textiles from China have influenced significant modifications in customary dress based on new production technologies. These textiles include: industrially-made synthetic or blended cloth upon which are printed Hmong batik and embroidery designs; other synthetic materials used for making Hmong clothes such as yarn, thread, ribbons, and beads; as well as a range of ready-made apparel that imitate Hmong styles and patterns, such as synthetic skirts and shirts for everyday wear, as well as more ornate Hmong wedding dress sets, shown in Figure 8.4.



**FIGURE 8.4: NEW HMONG FASHIONS (TOP L.: SYNTHETIC RIBBONS; TOP R.: RIBBONS SEWN TOGETHER TO FORM A BLOUSE; BOTTOM R.: SYNTHETIC SKIRTS WITH EMBROIDERY PRINTS; BOTTOM L.: FANCY READY-TO-WEAR HMONG DRESS SETS. SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

I examine the importance of place within these transformations, as the most dramatic and rapid changes have occurred in the contiguous borderlands themselves (Tran Thi Thu Thuy 2007; personal observations). In areas more distant from the China-Vietnam border, these alterations in dress have been more subtle and gradual. Furthermore, I will also demonstrate (in Section 8.4.5), how Hmong borderland residents play an instrumental role within these trade networks and in stimulating consumer demand, as they transmit the new materials and styles throughout the wider northern uplands of Vietnam.

Informants note that different items of factory-made Hmong clothing and materials from Yunnan began to appear in upland markets of Lào Cai province at various times. However, the introduction of these commodities occurred well after the resumption of normalised relations between Vietnam and China in 1991. For instance, Hmong traders

state that the manufactured ribbons first appeared in Lào Cai's upland markets around 1996-1997 (Pha Long Hmong female trader 14/06/05). Synthetic, pleated Hmong skirts began to turn up in border markets such as Mường Khương and Pha Long around 2002/2003, reaching Sa Pa market by about 2003/2004.

However, commercially produced minority clothing and input materials were being made in China much earlier than this. One reason for the initial development of synthetic Hmong fabrics is likely to be linked to the prohibition on hemp cultivation imposed by the Chinese state in parts of Yunnan (Clarke 1999; Miao Yun 2010). Given the large population of Hmong in China (well over one million in Yunnan province alone, compared to only 146,147 in Lào Cai province), this ban would clearly have a dramatic impact on Hmong cloth practices in that area, stimulating a demand for replacement materials (Miao Yun 2010; GSO 2009). According to a representative from the Cultural Bureau in Ma Guan, Yunnan (18/06/10), during the 1970s, Hmong in the border area still grew a significant amount of hemp for clothes-making. This began to decline during the 1980s, and even further still in the 1990s, following the proscription on growing hemp. Despite this suppression, it appears that in practice, households there are still permitted to plant small amounts of hemp for personal use, and in 2010, I observed a minute quantity of hemp cloth and skirts (two traders selling just a few items) being sold in some Ma Guan border markets. Elder Hmong in Ma Guan also indicated that for women of their generation it is still important to have hemp cloth skirts for burial dress (Field notes, 18/06/10).

Other commentators have suggested that the opening of this industry in Hmong dress may have been stimulated through the investment of members of the Hmong diaspora in the United States, who purchase traditional clothes for use at festivals and ceremonies from enterprises in China (Miao Yun 2010). Indeed, Schien (2004: 282) observes that:

The sale of costumes...is one of the few means by which Miao in China are making money from the renewal of transnational ethnic ties. As the longing for the homeland becomes displayed on the migrants' body, those at home simultaneously find a means by which to commodify their culture for commercial gain.

Nevertheless, at present, a similar industry in factory-made Hmong dress is not taking place in Vietnam. Thus, China acts as the overall supplier for Hmong consumer markets of these commodities throughout the wider mainland Southeast Asian massif, including Vietnam, Thailand and Laos.

#### **8.4.2 Cultivating Consumer Preferences**

Many Hmong residents of Lào Cai, particularly young women, prefer these new synthetic clothes/materials for daily wear, albeit for a variety of reasons. These are perceived as being cheaper and far less labour-intensive to produce - compared to the customary practice of hemp cloth-making, embroidery and batik – which allows women more time for other activities.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, Miao Yun (2010) suggests that the cost of Chinese manufactured Hmong skirts has decreased by over eighty per cent since 2005. A skirt that in 2005 cost \$60 USD, was selling five years later for around \$8 USD. Such factors also make it far more feasible for women to own a larger number of dress sets – as opposed to only one or two handmade ones (Laj, Hmong woman Sa Pa 25/05/05). Additionally, many of the materials, such as those used for the ready-made skirts, are made of lightweight fabrics compared to hemp. This makes them less cumbersome to wear while working in the fields, and more comfortable during the hot summer months. Female informants also state that the new materials are easier to wash and maintain than their handmade clothes.

Another perspective expressed by some Hmong women is that the synthetic garments and cloth are “more beautiful” (Mường Khương Hmong trader 25/05/06). This relates to the greater range of available designs, and because the industrial dyes produce more vibrant and different colours as opposed to the traditional, plant-based ones. Indeed, Vietnam resident Hmong consumers of these new clothes and materials reflect a “diversification of tastes being pushed in numerous directions...turning local consumers into arbiters of stylistic innovations” (Hansen 2004: 373). Such findings link to studies in other regions addressing similar transformations of ‘ethnic clothing’, and the emergence of new

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<sup>185</sup> For example, a traditionally-made pleated hemp skirt made by a Hmong woman in Lào Cai would take roughly two weeks or more to complete (Mai Thanh Son 1999, personal observations).

aesthetics with the creation of hybrid designs - as well as how this shifting of fashions is linked to gender and ethnic identity politics (Niessen, Jones and Leshkovich 2003; Allman 2004; Bhachu 2004).

Clothes-making out of these synthetic decorations –cloth, ribbons, thread and yarn- is also facilitating the development of new Hmong fashions, allowing women to express their creativity and innovation, as fresh styles and designs can be more quickly and easily achieved than by customary production methods. Yi (9/08/07), a middle-aged Hmong clothing trader in Mường Khương market shared her thoughts on these changes in customary dress:

In the past, Hmong people were a lot poorer, so a woman might have only one skirt that she would wear for two years! Now that Hmong have more money and there are more types of skirts, and the skirts look more beautiful, Hmong have more selection and care more about fashion. They can buy whatever style they want.

Changing consumer tastes are also manifesting in terms of generational differences, with older and younger age groups of Hmong women providing different reasons for why they appreciate these new synthetic clothes. For example, Hmong traders explained how younger women are at a stage in their life where they tend to be more preoccupied by their physical appearance and are more fashion-conscious – therefore, interested in the latest trends and newest materials. Middle aged and elder Hmong women in turn, tended to say that they were concerned with the practicality and ease of wear of the new clothing. Laj (28/07/07), a Hmong textile trader in Si Ma Cai market, summed up these preferences:

Older people like these Hmong shirts I am selling from China. This is an older style that the old people like because it is made of a softer fabric. But the young people prefer newer Hmong fashions. They are interested in blouses that work to complement the skirt. They are more concerned with fashion and looking good than with feeling comfortable.

While some Hmong in Lào Cai province are purchasing the skirts and tops from China as ready-to-wear items, others adapt the synthetic materials into their own particular clothing designs. In many parts of Lào Cai, Hmong women use the imported materials to make lower cost, less time consuming versions of dress, while these still resemble their own local styles. Place-based elements of clothing design are therefore retained –while



adapted with the new input materials. Likewise, some Hmong traders, such as Paj from the start of this thesis, have arranged to have Vietnam-based Hmong designs printed onto these synthetic fabrics. Through her market contacts in the Yunnan border area, Paj was able to get synthetic prints made that imitate the local Mù Cang Chải embroidery style (Yên Bái province), which were transformed into ‘copies’ of the traditional skirts. She now trades these synthetic skirts adorned with localised designs to Hmong at the Mù Cang Chải market. These cases serve to illustrate how the manufactured materials and clothes are not entirely replacing or eroding older, customary styles. Rather, ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ elements are actively and creatively combined by Hmong women to suit their desires and practical needs.

Indeed, there exists a vast spectrum of Hmong factory-made clothing and synthetic materials being imported into Vietnam from China. This ranges from ready-to-wear items of different types and qualities, to clothing that is either entirely or partly made from the industrial cloth, yarn and ribbons –the latter of which is produced by Hmong on either side of the border (Section 8.4.5). In terms of quality, in addition to Hmong women’s evaluations of everyday clothing described above are the highly valued and very costly dress sets (typically including a skirt, blouse, apron and hat) from Yunnan. These are extremely ornate and used by only a few women in Vietnam during festivities such as New Year, market day and weddings.

#### **8.4.3. Unravelling the Commodity Chains in Hmong Manufactured Textiles: China’s Side**

In Vietnam, most of the manufactured Hmong-wear coming from China gets sold within upland periodic markets. However, before continuing on to examine the composition of these trade networks on the Vietnam side, I first trace the basic initial nodes in the commodity chain within China to illustrate how it eventually links up with the Hmong textile trade unfolding in Vietnam. Across the border in Yunnan province, manufactured Hmong clothing is popularly sold in smaller town markets, as well as at specialised shops in larger towns such as Ma Guan, Wenshan and Pingpian (Kou Yang 2005, personal observations). For example, in the town of Ma Guan, located approximately 20 km



directly away from the Vietnamese border (roughly 50 km from the international border gate at Lào Cai/Hekou), I noted at least ten such shops dedicated entirely to Hmong dress, cloth, materials, and accessories. These shops sell ready-to-wear skirts, shirts, aprons and leggings, and as well as wholesale synthetic fabric, ribbons, yarn and beads, as shown in Figure 8.4. I spoke to one such shopkeeper in Ma Guan, Yu (15/06/10), a Han Chinese woman who explained how she grew up in an ethnically-mixed rural community where she learned to speak Hmong. Around 1985, she moved to Ma Guan town and started up her business.



**FIGURE 8.5: A HAN CHINESE-OWNED HMONG APPAREL AND MATERIALS SHOP, MA GUAN CITY, YUNNAN (SOURCE: AUTHOR)**

Yu and her employees produce all of the Hmong ready-to-wear garments sold in her shop. She stated that sometimes, Hmong traders from Vietnam visit her there, coming mainly to purchase skirts. According to Yu, the amount these traders purchase from her depends on the current ‘popularity’ of the style in Vietnam. She says that traders prefer to ‘experiment’ – buying only a few garments at first to test the market in Vietnam before they go on to buy greater quantities. For example, Yu described how if a particular skirt design is a big seller in Vietnam, then traders will often buy as many as 100 to 200 at a time, while for a less popular or new style, they will only want perhaps 40 or so skirts. However, her observations are that overall, Hmong from Vietnam prefer cheaper quality

skirts which cost less, and that they are generally “poorer” than Hmong who live in China.

Departing for a moment from my exploration of the commodity chain in new Hmong textiles, I wish to point out how at this node in the commodity chain, we find yet another interlinkage with the geographically expansive commodity network in Hmong textiles for handicrafts. To illustrate this, Yu had a number of worn hemp skirts in her shop when I visited, which she said were purchased from Hmong residents from Vietnam. She explained that she sold these old skirts to collectors from the nearby town of Wenshan. These skirts (some of which were transformed into handicrafts), would then be taken by Yunnan based Han and Hmong wholesalers to sell in distant markets and shops located in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan. Some of the skirts gathered in Wenshan were also being traded across the border to eventually end up at points in Thailand and Laos – such as Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Luang Phrabang and Vientianne – to be reworked into a number of different tourist handicraft items (Miao Yun 2010).<sup>186</sup> Yu related that in the past, handicraft intermediaries used to buy the hemp skirts produced by local Hmong in the Ma Guan area. However, since a much smaller volume of hemp is now being grown, the availability of locally sourced old skirts has declined, and Vietnam has thus become a new important supply source. The spatially extensive flow of old Hmong textiles from Vietnam was also researched by Miao Yun (2010), who estimated that 80 per cent of used Hmong clothing passing through China and onwards to Thailand actually originates from China, while 20 per cent comes from Vietnam. The large demand for used Hmong pieces in Thailand owes to the vast tourist markets located there, combined with the fact that Hmong in Thailand and Laos are no longer wearing traditional clothes on a daily

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<sup>186</sup> Miao Yun (2010) investigated trade flows in used Hmong clothing from China to supply the tourist handicraft markets of Thailand and Laos. From the point where I left off at the collection point in Wenshan city, she found that the trade flows continue on to a second collection centre in Mohan (Yunnan), after which there are two main directions: 1) The old Hmong clothes cross the border into points in Laos to finally reach handicraft traders in Luang Phrabang and Vientianne; 2) A greater volume of old Hmong clothes moves through Laos and across the Thai border into Kod Yao, before ending up with handicraft traders in the major markets of Chiang Mai or Bangkok in Thailand. After this, as with the Hmong tourist handicrafts made in Vietnam, these commodities go on to reach global markets. Within this trade network, China based Hmong and Han are the major actors, wholesaling skirts directly to Thai and Lao based Hmong.

basis and have smaller populations than Hmong in China (Miao Yun 2010, personal observations).

Here, once again it becomes clear that both Hmong handicraft and factory-made textile commodity chains are being mutually influenced by a number of important factors. The dynamics of these two textile chains are largely shaped by gender, ethnicity, and place. These horizontal aspects feature in the politics of trade and consumption within these very different Hmong textile systems of provision – one for externally-oriented tourist markets and the other for Hmong consumers directly (c.f. Leslie and Reimer 1999). Such dynamics and connections are more fully revealed when specific trade networks and activities are investigated in their entirety, and would likely be missed if only the vertical locations within specific commodity chains were considered.

Returning to my discussion of the commodity chain in manufactured clothes for Hmong consumers, Han and Hmong traders in Yunnan explained that the synthetic cloth – with printed Hmong embroidery and batik designs used to make skirts - comes from Zhejiang, an eastern coastal province, over 1,000 km away (Yu 15/06/10; Hmong Chinese trader 17/06/10). One of this province's major manufacturing industries is textiles, much of which consists of small-scale enterprises (Feng 2004). Inhabitants of Zhejiang are said to have a reputation for entrepreneurial spirit and for being “good at making copies,” hence the rationale by Yunnan residents as to why that particular province would be involved in manufacturing Hmong textiles (Xui Li, research assistant in China 17/06/10). Yu, the Ma Guan shopkeeper I introduced above, places orders for particular Hmong prints with manufacturers in Zhejiang, oftentimes requesting prints that traders inform her are selling well in Vietnam. She also claimed to produce new embroidery prints herself by computer which she sends by post to her contact as a template. The patterns are printed onto bolts of cloth which are then sent to her through the postal service.

In terms of trade relations that underpin the movement of these commodities *within China*, a few of the Yunnan based Han and Hmong traders that I spoke to described Hmong from Vietnam as “difficult to trade with” (Yu 15/06/10; China Hmong trader

17/06/10). This was based on their experiences that Vietnam based Hmong traders tend to demand goods on credit, preferring to pay only after they made their sales in Vietnam. Some Yunnan traders of both Han and Hmong ethnicity expressed resentment over this delay in payment, or when Hmong from Vietnam failed to return to cover their debt. In this context, while shared language skills – here, in Hmong and Mandarin dialects - are a crucial asset for forming trade networks, the irregularity of these trade connections and large geographical distances between trade participants at different nodes in the network most likely means that such trade ties are often rather weak, with verbal agreements difficult to enforce. Indeed, perhaps a lack of strong social networks is the reason for why it appears far more common for Hmong residents of Vietnam (at least from Lào Cai and Hà Giang) to access markets much closer to the border with Vietnam for supplies, as will be discussed in Section 8.4.5. Moreover *within Vietnam*, relations between Hmong residents of Lào Cai and cross-border Han/Hmong traders from China seem to be much stronger. I will consider these dynamics further in the next sections as I move the investigation across the border to markets in Vietnam.

#### **8.4.4 Extending Hmong Manufactured Textile Trade Networks into the Vietnam Uplands**

Within the Vietnam-China border areas of Lào Cai and Yunnan provinces, a number of border markets now feature factory-made Hmong materials and dress. For the most part, this trade is operated by Hmong residents of Lào Cai, as well as Hmong or Han traders from Yunnan. Focusing on Lào Cai province, there are three main entry points for these goods: the national-level border gate at Mùòng Khương, and the auxiliary border gates at both Pha Long and Si Ma Cai, described in Chapter 3.<sup>187</sup> Commodities then flow into Lào Cai's upland markets chiefly via two ways: 1) Yunnan border resident Hmong or Han Chinese import these goods to sell in select upland border markets, or; 2) Lào Cai border resident Hmong buy these commodities at markets in Yunnan near border gates or

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<sup>187</sup> A much smaller trade in handmade skirts from China (produced from manufactured cloth and yarn) are being brought into Vietnam via the Pa Nam Cum auxiliary border gate in Lai Châu province, near Phong Thổ. This trade is undertaken by Vietnam resident Hmong from San Thàng village in Lai Châu, who import these skirts from an adjacent hamlet in China. Sa Pa Hmong traders are aware of this trade flow because skirts from San Thàng are highly valued for their use in making handicrafts, and wholesalers from that area bring them into Sa Pa for sale.

else nearby towns, importing them into Vietnam for sale. For Hmong traders from Lào Cai, the key source markets in Yunnan are Lau Kha market (approximately 5 km from Pha Long) and Xiǎo Bàzǐ market (approximately 20 km from Si Ma Cai).<sup>188</sup> I now turn to look more closely at the activities conducted by these different types of traders in the textile commodity network on the Vietnam side.

#### **8.4.5. Vietnam Hmong Actors in the Manufactured Textile Trade**

Given the official limits placed on the mobility of Chinese nationals (who are border residents) while in Vietnam (described in Chapter 3), Hmong traders who are residents of Lào Cai are advantageously positioned to broaden the spatial reach of these textile commodity chains throughout the northern uplands. Historically, Hmong borderlanders have maintained tightly knit networks with kin and friends on either side of the official borderline. These are cemented and sustained through marriages, social visits, and market trips (Schoenberger and Turner 2008). Such interactions continued, though with greater difficulty and caution, during the decade the border was formally sealed in the 1980s (Schoenberger and Turner 2008). While unsanctioned cross-border trade persisted on a very small scale during this period, the open border policies and conditions as of 1988 have provided further stimulus for upland residents' to use their transnational social networks as a practice to facilitate transnational trade. Furthermore, interethnic language fluency is another important resource for Vietnam-based Hmong traders. Many Hmong in the Vietnam border region continue to speak local dialects of Mandarin as they have in the past, which allows them to form market relations with Han Chinese suppliers (Chapter 3).

In Vietnam, the overall market share of textile trade conducted by Lào Cai resident Hmong is generally smaller compared with cross-border traders from China – discussed next. However, far greater actual numbers of individual Hmong traders from Vietnam are participating in the trade. Undeniably, it is becoming an increasingly prominent supplementary livelihood strategy for many Hmong in Lào Cai. As with the Sa Pa

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<sup>188</sup> Few Vietnam resident Hmong cross at the Mường Khương entry which is mostly used by Chinese traders entering Vietnam.

Hmong who are involved in the handicraft trade, many Hmong traders of new textiles stated that their earnings were used mainly to support agricultural production – the purchase of seeds and fertilizers. Also cited were children's school related expenses and rice for consumption. The use of trade profits to purchase much-valued rice is especially important for Hmong living in areas of the province east of the Red River where conditions are drier and less rice can be grown (parts of Mường Khương, Pha Long, Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai districts).

Up to now, Kinh traders have remained outside the scope of this extensive and lively commodity network. In particular, Kinh face a number of access barriers that include the lack of specific language skills (in Hmong), residential status (not tending to be registered to live in remote upland hamlets on the border), social ties, and knowledge of Hmong consumer preferences. As such, Hmong residents of Vietnam have remained the dominant traders and transmitters of these new materials and fashions from China. As will be illustrated below, drawing on their expansive kin-based networks, border resident Hmong from Lào Cai have spread their trade activities throughout the northern upland region.

#### **8.4.5.1. Vietnam Hmong cross-border traders, intermediaries and subcontractors.**

Hmong traders from Lào Cai sell a variety of textile commodities originating from China within Vietnam's upland markets. These include: synthetic skirts, tops, and aprons – in wholesale or retail quantities. Many traders of a smaller scale simply remain in Vietnam and visit Lào Cai's marketplaces to buy clothes, or the materials to make them, directly there from cross-border traders from Yunnan. For the smallest traders, this is cheaper and more convenient, given the costs and time spent travelling to markets across the border. However, growing numbers of Lào Cai resident Hmong (approximately 100 in 2003), cross the border each week at Pha Long, Si Ma Cai, and to a much lesser extent Mường Khương, to purchase their trade supplies from markets in Yunnan (MRDP 2003). These cross-border traders explain that they prefer to go to China themselves so they can buy in



bulk, making their inputs cheaper (Cán Cấu Hmong male trader 01/09/07).<sup>189</sup> According to Tou (22/07/07), a male Hmong trader from Pha Long, “I don’t buy anything from the Chinese traders here [in Vietnam] because I get better prices by going to Lau Kha market [in Yunnan] and buying wholesale.” In addition to purchasing goods in Yunnan for their own trade, some Hmong traders from Lào Cai also import extra quantities which they then redistribute in Vietnam to relatives, friends and other traders who have placed requests. Hence, this group of Hmong cross-border traders act as wholesalers or intermediaries (Vang and Tou 01/09/07; Schoenberger and Turner 2008).

In Lào Cai’s upland markets, Hmong residents typically sell the ready-made synthetic skirts, but also offer an assortment of tops, skirts, and aprons that they make from the industrial input materials. Individual traders frequently have an array of dress styles on display at their market stalls, and price variations reflect the amount of labour as well as the quality of fabrics used. The production of Hmong apparel from manufactured material is still quite time and labour intensive, while not nearly to the same extent as making traditional dress by hand. As was related by Vang (01/09/07), a Hmong man who trades textiles along with his wife:

We sell shirts and aprons. The simpler aprons with less detail cost 26,000 VND, and my wife can sew about six of these per day. But aprons which are more detailed and have more material cost 60,000VND, because my wife can only sew four of these per day. The shirts we make sell for 100,000VND and my wife can usually sew two in a day.

In addition, some larger scale Hmong traders from border districts (Mường Khương and Si Ma Cai) have made arrangements with relatives or friends who are based either in Vietnam or in adjacent border villages of China, and allocate garment production to these contacts (Figure 8.5). These Lào Cai resident Hmong supply their producers with the necessary input materials, and then typically pay them after receiving the finished goods. Ly (30/08/07), a middle aged woman from Mường Khương describes her system as follows:

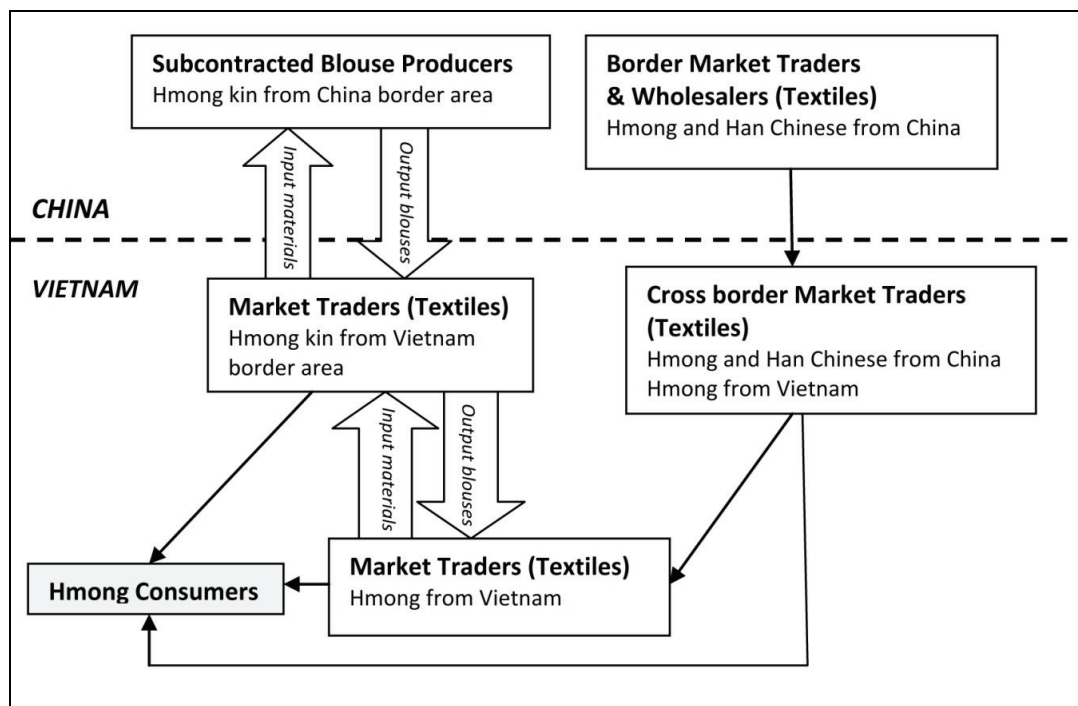
Hmong people in China sew together the blouses I sell. My family has relatives in China and I made this connection through them. But I myself have never met the people who sew my blouses, however I believe in them and their ability. I send the materials through my

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<sup>189</sup> As noted in Chapter 5, other items commonly imported from China by Hmong traders from Vietnam include plant seeds (including hybrid rice seed), medicines, Hmong VCD/DVDs, and rubber boots/shoes.



family and friends. First, I send the material to the people in China and then after I get the finished shirts back, I get yuan currency in order to pay them for their work. Per blouse, I pay almost 300,000 VND. That's why I have to sell a shirt for at least 400,000 VND, but the quality and materials are very good. The aprons are easy for me to make quickly, so I just sew them myself. But the work on the blouses, like the embroidered flowers, is difficult and people must learn how to do it carefully because it is so complicated. Some other Hmong relatives from Pha Long also bring me material and ask to have these blouses sewn for them too. Almost all the traders here hire people from China to sew their blouses like me. While we already know how to make the blouses, it takes a long time to sew so many, and if we ask people in China to do it for us it saves time.



**FIGURE 8.6: EXAMPLES OF CROSS-BORDER PRODUCTION AND EXCHANGE NETWORKS FOR HMONG TEXTILES**

Hmong traders from Lào Cai also discussed how barter transactions with others specialising in a different aspect of the textile trade are sometimes performed. For instance, textile trader Teng (01/09/07) explained how some Hmong will import input materials (cloth, ribbons, yarn) and exchange these goods for an equivalent value of finished clothing made by other Hmong. The former group will then travel to upland markets further from the border to sell the ready-to-wear clothes. Such dynamics reflect a complex and flexible trade system used by Hmong participants in the textile market –

based on transnational kinship networks, involving trade specialisation, and employing a diversity of forms of economic exchange.

#### **8.4.5.2. Vietnam Hmong Market Circuit Textile Traders**

An important category of Hmong textile traders from Lào Cai orient their activities around circuits of periodic markets. As explored in Chapter 5, this has been aided by recent improvements in road connectivity, along with better public transportation and more Hmong owning motorbikes. With the improved access to periodic markets in previously hard to reach communes, the textile trade has spread from the border area into the hinterlands of Lào Cai. Groups of border residents have adopted a niche as traders of these goods in areas where the potential demand for such commodities is high but where access to such supplies has formerly been very limited.

For instance, the upgrading of a tertiary roadway in 2007 between Mường Khương town and Cốc Ly commune has enhanced the travel route between these two places. Although trade was already taking place along this corridor, the new road has encouraged growing numbers of Hmong from border hamlets of Mường Khương to participate in a weekly trade circuit encompassing six periodic markets.<sup>190</sup> However, not all traders visit the entire circuit of markets each week, with some following it for a few days at a time. Many of this group of traders tend to operate as a team of married couples or family members, rather than trading individually. Circuit traders often spend the night with kin living near that particular market. Once again, this highlights how kinship based social networks are frequently drawn upon in order to support trade activities, whether directly or indirectly.

Similarly, another road and bridge improvement - completed in 2010, to promote tourism in the region - between Pha Long commune (Mường Khương district) and Si Ma Cai town has enabled a group of female traders from Pha Long to trade in a three market circuit, consisting of Tả Gia Khâu (Friday), Cán Cấu (Saturday) and Si Ma Cai (Sunday)

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<sup>190</sup> This involves some or all of the following marketplaces: Pha Long (Saturday), Mường Khương (Sunday), Cốc Ly (Tuesday), Cao Sơn (Wednesday), and Lũng Khẩu Nhín (Thursday) (Tou, male Hmong trader 19/08/07).

(Ly, female Hmong trader 28/02/09). Yet a different group of Hmong border residents from Si Ma Cai work another three market circuit, covering Cán Cầu (Saturday), Bắc Hà (Sunday) and Cốc Ly (Tuesday). This illustrates the changing trade flows, market circuits, and livelihood opportunities that have been made possible through enhanced physical access to markets. In addition, it highlights the instrumental role of Hmong traders in creating, developing and spreading these markets in new ‘cultural commodities.’ Furthermore, it suggests that the way Hmong traders are currently using markets for trade does not appear to coincide well with the Vietnam state’s model of a fixed trader in a single market, as I examined in Chapter 5.

#### **8.4.5.3 Vietnam Hmong Long-distance Textile Traders**

The commodity networks for these manufactured textiles are lengthened even further into Vietnam by long-distance Hmong traders who bring new fashions and materials to more distant areas of the northern uplands. For the most part, these traders are residents of border hamlets in Mường Khương district (predominantly Pha Long commune). This group trade at marketplaces throughout Lào Cai and beyond, reaching markets as far away as neighbour provinces of Yên Bái and Lai Châu<sup>191</sup>. Long-distance traders first began selling their within own local markets. However, the increasing competition with other textile traders there prompted them to consider checking out the market potential of these commodities elsewhere (Interviews with groups of Pha Long Hmong traders 15/02/09; 22/02/09). One such trader, Lang (15/02/09), who trades each week in Mường Hum market (Bát Xát district), explained that her knowledge of place-based variations in Hmong dress helped her to gauge consumer preferences, and to assess which particular goods would sell best in which localities:

I visited many markets first before discovering that Mường Hum was the best one for trading. At first, I went to over ten different markets, including Bình Lư (in Lai Châu province) and Sa Pa. But Mường Hum market was the one I found I could sell very well in because the local people here need the goods I sell the most, unlike in other places. [For example], the Hmong here use a lot of manufactured ribbons and yarn to make their clothes, and do not want to wear the ready-made skirts [from China] which are popular in other places like Mường Khương, Bắc Hà, and Si Ma Cai districts.

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<sup>191</sup> For example, between 2007 and 2009, I observed ten of these Pha Long traders in the marketplaces of Sa Pa town, and eleven in Mường Hum (Bát Xát district), while thirteen travelled to Mù Cang Chải district (Yên Bái province).

Some long-distance traders, such as Paj and her husband Chue from Chapter 1, who are in their 60s, trade in Mù Cang Chải (Yên Bái province) and sometimes in Sa Pa, spending up to ten days away from their home at a time. When in Mù Cang Chải, Paj and Chue sleep in their market stall, which actually belongs to her uncle, another instance of how kin-based social capital is drawn upon to further trading endeavours. An important characteristic of long-distance traders is that many of them tend to be older. These traders are usually middle-aged or elderly Hmong, with children who are already married, and/or are from households with sufficient labour for agricultural production.

Alternatively, some elderly Hmong have turned to trading as they are no longer able to perform physically demanding agricultural tasks. As such, the textile trade is an important supplementary household activity that can be undertaken by border resident Hmong if agricultural tasks are already being met, as well as presenting a way for older household members to continue contributing to their household's overall asset base.

#### **8.4.6 Cross-border Chinese Traders**

Each week, groups of cross-border traders from Yunnan of different ethnicities (including Han, Hmong and other national minorities such as Zhuang), make the journey into Vietnam via one of the three aforementioned local crossings. Traders crossing to sell at either Mù Cang Chải or Pha Long remain for only the peak market day before returning to China. Differently, China nationals entering through the Si Ma Cai border gate operate in a two market trade circuit. This consists of Cán Cầu market (on Saturday), followed by Si Ma Cai market (on Sunday). To travel between Si Ma Cai and Cán Cầu (a distance of approximately 9 km on well maintained road), Chinese traders use a public minibus – aside from livestock traders, as discussed in Chapter 6. Based on trader counts between 2006-2009, the greatest number of cross-border traders from China were found in Mù Cang Chải market (approximately 30), followed by Si Ma Cai (approximately 25), and Pha Long (approximately 10). The number of cross-border traders coming to these markets depends on the season – fewer come during the planting and harvesting periods, while more are present in the months leading up to Hmong New Year. Within these border markets, Chinese traders are grouped into a separate, designated trade area by the Market Management Board for which they pay a daily trade fee (around 5,000 VND in 2009).

Cross-border traders from Yunnan commonly sell a wide host of lightweight, easy to transport goods. This includes specialty Hmong-oriented goods such as manufactured clothing of various styles and qualities, synthetic material inputs, lengths of bead to adorn clothing, hats, and musical instruments. In addition, they often sell rubber boots and shoes, umbrellas, blankets, plant seeds, pesticides, medicines, non-perishable foods (such as noodles and packaged biscuits), and trinkets. These commodities are then sold in retail and bulk to the different types of Vietnam resident Hmong traders explored above.

While many of these cross-border traders are ethnic Han, a significant number of them also speak Hmong, stating – like Yu from earlier who runs the textile shop in Ma Guan city - that they learned it while growing up in multi-ethnic communities. Yet interestingly, hardly any of the Chinese traders that I spoke with in upland markets have learned Vietnamese. This observation implies that Kinh customers are not the key market that Chinese traders are aiming for in these areas. In contrast, at the international border crossing in Hekou city, many Han traders speak Vietnamese – where a far larger scale cross-border trade in very different commodities is occurring. However, in Lào Cai’s upland border markets, speaking Hmong is an important form of bridging social capital for Han traders, which helps them to form essential trade networks, but also social networks with Hmong customers. For example, in Mường Khương, some traders from Yunnan who enter Vietnam on Saturday spend the night before market day in various host houses owned by Hmong or other ethnic minorities. They also store their surplus goods with these households during the week for a fee. For example, Feng (24/08/08), a Han cross-border trader explained that he stays with Hmong households because, “the Vietnamese don’t like us (Chinese traders) and don’t want us to stay with them.” Wei (24/08/08), another male Han trader who sells in Mường Khương marketplace stated that he decided to specialise in selling Hmong products because he “understands them.” He believes he is successful at his trade because he gets along well with Hmong people, and “because I know that I am their guest here. They are good and honest people and they like to do business with me.” At the same time, despite these good trade connections that Han cross-border traders claim to have, I observed that they will not normally go as far as

to offer goods on credit to Hmong from Vietnam because they, “do not know them well enough” (Wei 24/08/08). This suggests that social capital between these two groups is remains in terms of levels of trust, when we compare this with the Vietnam resident Hmong who are able to negotiate complex credit relations with Hmong kin in China for textile production – some of whom they have never even met, as discussed above.

With regards why this specific group of Yunnan based traders have selected to work in Lào Cai’s upland border markets, it appears that several factors are at play. These result in distinctly different trade opportunities on either side of the border. The first factor reflects cross-border polarities in relation to traders’ economic ability and market competition. While border residency and Hmong language skills create good trade prospects for Yunnan traders in Lào Cai, this same group faces a trade disadvantage within their own country. Many Han Chinese trader informants described themselves as ‘poor,’ explaining that business was more competitive in China, and that they lacked the financial capital to conduct a similar enterprise there. Interestingly, a number of Han traders stated that Hmong in China prefer more expensive clothing and materials, whereas cheaper items could be marketed to Hmong in Vietnam. Others reflected on the rising start-up costs for small traders in China. One male trader, Cheng (23/08/08) believed that, “due to inflation in China, it’s difficult for us to make money trading there any longer, while we can still do well by trading in Vietnam.” Others stated that the markets in China were already saturated with similar traders selling Hmong textiles, but there were still relatively few in Vietnam. Nevertheless, despite their claim to being limited by capital, when compared to the Vietnam based Hmong involved in the textile trade, these traders from China typically have greater financial capital.

The second factor behind this choice of trade activity by China border residents is because it fits well within their wider livelihood portfolios. Many cross-border traders from Yunnan are also household farmers, a livelihood that permits them to be more flexible with the time scheduling of their labour – compared to wage labouring. Lu (23/09/08) described how he completed all agricultural work during the week so he could

use the weekend to come to Vietnam to trade. Wei (24/08/08) summed up his thoughts on time flexibility and cross-border economic difference as follows:

If I had a paid job I wouldn't be able to come here since I'd have to work all the time, but I'm a farmer so I can do this trade. The Chinese who trade here are all farmers. It's harder to earn money trading in China, but you can still earn more money here. The place we come from is very underdeveloped, so we are only farmers over there, but here [in Vietnam] we can be traders!

The third factor has to do with specific place-based opportunities due to Chinese trader's better access to supply contacts and markets in Yunnan. China based Han and Hmong cross-border traders have better access to textile suppliers in the border towns of Yunnan such as Ma Guan and Wenshan, and are likely to have stronger social networks with them too (Schoenberger and Turner 2008, personal observations). The majority of Hmong traders from Vietnam do not advance further than the border markets directly on the Yunnan side to access goods, which likely largely reflects that their movement in China is curtailed by their border crossing permits.

The final factor influencing these trade opportunities relates to Yunnan based traders' knowledge of the differences in Hmong consumption preferences on either side of the border. As was noted above, cross-border traders from Yunnan describe that they sell "inferior" and "poorer quality" Hmong textiles which are more affordable to the less affluent Hmong residents of Vietnam (Han trader, Cán Cầu 23/08/08; Han trader, Cán Cầu 23/08/08). Such traders explain that while the cheaper Hmong commodities they sell find a good market base in upland Lào Cai, these same goods are not in high demand in Yunnan. According to Lian (23/08/08), a Han male cross-border trader:

In Vietnam they don't make these [synthetic] Hmong clothes so Vietnamese [Hmong] have to get them from us Chinese. The Hmong in China wear different things, not like the stuff I can sell here. [Hmong] minorities in China don't like this stuff...the clothes and materials they use are more expensive and better quality.

These factors that I have outlined above call attention to how opportunities for traders from China – as well as Hmong traders from Vietnam - are contingent upon fluctuating terms of access, economic conditions, and consumer preferences on either side of the border. This showcases once more, the relevance of considering horizontal factors such as the role of place – the border – and ethnicity when analysing commodity chains from a



livelihoods perspective. While cross-border traders from Yunnan complain that they are marginalised from access to trade within China, within the context of upland Vietnam, this group is able to capture a large share of the market in Hmong textiles. Yet, their ability to maintain this competitive edge is restricted to only those upland border markets in Lào Cai that they are formally permitted access to by the Vietnam state.

## **8.5 Conclusions**

In this chapter I delved into two different case studies of Hmong textiles in order to illustrate the impacts of wider market shifts taking place in the border uplands on items formerly of use value only to Hmong. In tracing the different routes that these new commodities follow, I exposed a complexity of networks, covering a vast spatial range with trade circuits covering local, regional, cross-border and global scales. At first glance, when analysed through a commodity chain approach – moving from stages of production through to consumption - these appear as two very separate systems of provision, oriented towards dramatically different consumer markets. However, by investigating the trade networks and activities that underpin these commodity chains, we find that the two are in fact linked together and nested within a much larger transnational commodity network that extends regionally to encompass China, Vietnam, Thailand and Laos, and then onwards to global markets. These commodity network interchanges underscore the role of place, gender and ethnicity – key horizontal factors that feature throughout the different systems of provision that Hmong textiles are being engaged in.

I have investigated the differential livelihood opportunities that these transformations have presented for diverse groups of participants, revealing the importance of access – particularly via stocks of knowledge, information, and networks - in carving out a trade niche. We have seen how these conditions can shift according to context. I demonstrated how the livelihood opportunities and networks open to traders are not static, but conditional upon where these different groups of actors are geographically, socially and economically situated.

For the factory-made textiles, border residents both Han and Hmong alike, are best placed to take advantage of new markets and trade opportunities. However, China nationals are limited by state regulations over their movement in Vietnam, and as such, Lào Cai border resident Hmong are well positioned to take over the remainder of the trade beyond the border markets. Moreover, while I demonstrated how Kinh Vietnamese appear to hold the economic upper-hand with the Hmong handicraft textile trade, they are excluded from penetrating particular networks and markets. This includes non-local Hmong supply systems for worn textiles, as well as the Hmong factory-made textile trade – due to lack of access to markets in China, poor social networks with Hmong and Chinese, and being short of the necessary language skills. Such place-based access to and limits on certain assets emphasise that the locational specificities of capital as an important dimension and characteristic of upland trade. Furthermore, as Long and Villareal discuss (1998: 748), this highlights how:

Power in one locale or part of a commodity network does not automatically determine or guarantee control over the social relations in another. Rather, one must visualise the processes involved in terms of a set of interlocking social domains that are cross-cut by commodity flow and social networks wherein relations of status and power are produced, sustained, negotiated and resisted.

Within both cases, I revealed the important role of social capital for upland traders and how this is put into effect by different groups. I explored how Hmong traders from Vietnam draw upon their far flung social networks in Vietnam and China to access and build trade contacts, and negotiate trade arrangements. While Han cross-border traders from Yunnan benefit from shared language with Hmong in Vietnam, it appears that their social capital can only go so far, evidenced by the fact that they are unwilling to take risks in market transactions (like offering goods on credit), that help to secure longer term trade relations based on trust.

A final important point is about the role of Hmong traders as leaders and innovators within both commodity chains, as well as being the key group to spread these trades into remote regions, and promote new markets throughout the Vietnam uplands. I have revealed how Hmong handicraft traders are savvy at creating new products to appeal to tourists, and very knowledgeable on finding and engaging new sources of supplies.

Factory-made textile traders from Lào Cai's border areas are skilled at assessing variations in Hmong consumer preferences in different locales, in order to determine the commodities best suited. They are also able to influence fashions by requesting that manufacturers in China make new designs based on the localised patterns that are valued by Hmong in Vietnam. Indeed, Hmong in Vietnam are emerging as an important group of consumers who support the livelihood endeavours of Hmong small-scale textile traders. The development of Hmong manufactured clothing is necessarily dynamic in design and styles, serving the consumer preferences of different groups of women while continuing to support the assertion of regional identities. While demands in China may have initially changed under state pressure for Hmong to curtail hemp production, they now also reflect Hmong women's own changing opinions of what they want to wear on a daily basis.

In summary, the examples of the myriad levels and complexity of Hmong trade dynamics I have presented within this chapter – as well as throughout my other results chapters - serve to counter the perspective of the Vietnam state that ethnic minorities such as Hmong are inefficient at trading and lacking in economic entrepreneurship. Rather, I would argue that the state lacks sufficient knowledge about how Hmong are engaging in trade and market activities, as these pursuits are of a small-scale and remain difficult to capture and assess, as they take place within and across a wide variety of different settings. Moreover, the fact is that many of these commodities – like Hmong textiles and other goods from China – are oriented towards ethnic minority consumer markets, a market that is not viewed of much interest or economic significance in Vietnam. These debates will be fleshed out more fully within my concluding discussion chapter (Chapter 9), which follows next.

## CHAPTER 9

### TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE VIETNAM UPLANDS: STATE PLANS AND LOCAL AGENCY

#### 9.1 Introduction

‘As primary exchange locations, marketplaces of all sorts are both sites of global commercial integration as well as one of the principal vehicles by which it is accomplished’ (Appelbaum 2005: 275).

‘The hills, however, are not simply a space of political resistance but also a zone of cultural refusal’ (Scott 2009: 20).

How do we reconcile these two statements in the Northern Vietnam uplands? On the basis of the preceding chapters detailing the situation in Lào Cai province, this chapter further expands on how upland residents create trade livelihoods that are shaped by their own unique combination of these forces - what some might call centripetal and centrifugal tendencies (Scott 2009). Over the centuries, upland minority traders have learnt to negotiate state and market integrationist forces that impinge on them in numerous shapes and forms: offer and demand, marketplace regulations, transportation timetables, taxation, forced settlement, and border controls. Minority individuals involved in trade have also grappled with negotiating access to trade opportunities, and engaged in struggles and contestations over value and meaning in the commoditisation of upland goods as they attempt to shape these according to their own terms. All the while, upland traders work to create the spaces in which to practice a multiplicity of marketplace trade and exchange suited to their needs, will, and aspirations.

In the four preceding results chapters, the system of marketplaces and market control in the Vietnam northern uplands as well as their organisation and how minority traders move amongst these was investigated and critiqued. Three upland commodities were specifically focussed upon in order to draw attention to the complexity of interactions

that shape upland trade opportunities, constraints, and activities, namely water buffalo livestock (Chapter 6), upland artisanal alcohols (Chapter 7), and ‘old’ and ‘new’ forms of ethnic minority textiles (Chapter 8). While these three goods have retained their historical significance within the livelihoods and lifeworlds of ethnic minorities, this examination of upland commodity networks illuminates processes of accommodation, re-working and resistance as these products undergo commoditisation - accompanied by the entry of external interest groups on the scene. These investigations are directly informed and shaped by a conceptual framework drawing upon an actor-oriented approach to livelihoods that emphasises the key role of social networks and that engages with commodity chain approaches. The daily life situations that were revealed, and the commodity networks by which products are moved, shaped, and re-interpreted through the uplands and beyond, underscore the significance and magnitude of social networks and the role of social capital that extends well beyond the mountains.

Where does this leave us, in regards to understanding how upland livelihoods are constructed, the actors involved, and their complex relationships? In this discussion I consider how using an actor-oriented approach contributes new understandings of what it is to be an upland minority trader, how one negotiates the market and state officials and regulations, how ethnicity can play a core part in grabbing opportunities and circumventing barriers to specific livelihood options, and how traders at times resist being wholly caught up in the different economic avenues open to them.

Reflecting upon the interactions and positionalities revealed in the field, in this chapter I first turn to examine the implications of state involvement on upland trade. I consider the importance of access to infrastructure for upland trade endeavours, how the state has undertaken market construction in these mountainous areas, and the discourses that surround these developments. In so doing, I critically assess the common proposition that these uplands are distant, isolated regions. I then turn, in Section 9.3 to examine the roles of agency, innovations, and resistance for local actors. Here, I explore the gendering of marketplace trade and the role of ethnicity in relation to access to specific social capital and networks. I then reflect upon how commodities are being refashioned through time,

and the diverse resistance measures to the socialist state apparatus and wholesale reliance on the market that become apparent through ethnographic fieldwork. A comprehension of how these factors intersect - their roles, characters and functionalities – goes a long way to fully grasping the realities of upland trade in northern Vietnam and, potentially, across the wider Southeast Asian massif.

## **9.2 State Involvement in the Vietnam Northern Uplands**

In post-colonial Vietnam, the socialist state's vision of the uplands and attitude towards upland citizens is based upon an ideology that bears many resemblances to modernisation theory, in the sense of a unilinear socio-cultural and economic transformation. The underlying imperative is that the uplands relinquish irrational and unproductive practices to 'catch up' with the lowlands and become 'modern' (c.f. Koh 2001; McElwee 2004; Sowerwine 2004; Michaud 2009). Here, in broad strokes, modernity comprises a utopian vision of society's advancement: it "encompasses the belief in...reason, progress, truth; the rational planning of ideal social orders; and the standardisation of knowledge and production" (Rofel 1997: 157). Since economic reform, the ideological underpinnings of Vietnam's 'socialist dream' have shifted from Marxist tenets of social evolution, replaced by a new yet parallel modernisation project centred on the rhetoric of market-based economic growth and development (Michaud 2009).

While intellectuals in contemporary development studies have long since discredited and moved on from modernisation approaches - which critical academics in the social sciences considered irrelevant - throughout Southeast Asia as much as within most large global entities such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, modernisation is still very much the paradigm of the day, in state practice (Evers and Gerke 1997; McGee 2011). Therefore, 'revisiting modernisation' in terms of how this is currently being prescribed and exercised by states in order to understand and articulate the processes at work, remains crucial (Woolcock 2009: 5). This is all the more so in the context of socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos which remain highly constrained political settings where ethnic minorities have very little autonomous official voice, and continue to be highly misunderstood and mistrusted by the state. Here, the persistent

implementation of a multiplicity of ‘normalising’ and integrationist socio-economic policies in the uplands marginalise and devalue the way local residents wish to practice their livelihoods and lifestyles (McElwee 2004; Michaud 2006; World Bank 2009; Michaud 2011).

As such, this study of the social interface of upland marketplace interventions is situated within and contributes to, a wider body of work that critically investigates the dynamics of ‘development project disjunctures’ in the upland Southeast Asian massif. This research covers a diversity of topics including conflicts over access to and use of land and forestry resources, national park and biodiversity conservation initiatives, and in the development of megaprojects such as agro-forestry plantations, roads, and hydropower dams (Li 2007; Barney 2008; Biggs 2008; Rigg 2009). Paying careful attention to the interplay between externally-driven (state and market) development agendas and local contextual realities - in terms of how social actors alternately negotiate, take-on, adapt to, rework or resist these - reveals how hybrid or multiple modernities are being actively created, thereby escaping the trope of development targets as either passive beneficiaries or unwilling victims of ‘progress’ (Arce and Long 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993).

In so doing, upland societies indigenise or vernacularise modernity into locally meaningful and appropriate forms and expressions (Sahlins 2000; Michaud 2011). As Michaud (2011: 222-3) puts it, upland populations on the margins “translate outside demands into locally intelligible arrangements due to the distinctive impetus of their own vision of the world – their culture – and the resulting interpretations may differ significantly from the original intended meaning of the message sent by outside actors, such as state development programmes and development practitioners.” I now turn to highlight how this thesis has revealed such processes at work, through the lens of markets and trade in the uplands by drawing on core themes that have emerged through my research analysis.



### **9.2.1 The State's Recipe for Market Development: Add in a Marketplace and Stir...**

We have seen how the Vietnam state's current socio-economic development agenda for the uplands is often at odds with how development is practiced and envisioned by uplanders themselves. At issue here has been how the state views physical marketplaces and attendant connective infrastructures – or 'distance demolishing technologies' (Scott 2009) - as an essential component of and precursor to socioeconomic development and market integration in the uplands. I have suggested that this is a practical, 'tick-the-box' method that enables the state to tackle development problems in what official agents consider a tangible format, resulting in a measurable and answerable mechanism to add-in what is currently 'missing'.

Here, as in Southwest China with its 'Go West' scheme implemented since 2000, the central Vietnam government's response – via provincial and local state direction - has been to pour investment, with external donor assistance, into the construction or renovation of marketplaces in district townships and within remote upland communes. The 'modernisation of upland markets' proceeds apace through the upgrading of temporary 'inefficient' markets into permanent structures with fixed stalls, the reorganisation of market days, and the formalisation of markets through measures of governance and the surveillance of 'unruly' traders. However, state marketplace formalisation and organisation – its 'rationalisation' - is frequently inconsistent with 'marginalised' upland traders' needs, goals, and priorities as they themselves define these. Moreover, state agendas of market ownership and control within the context of Vietnam's broader liberalisation of the economy for capital accumulation, seems to signal that in the uplands at least, the self-regulating 'invisible hand' of the market needs to be significantly guided and formed.

The urgency with which state marketplace and other infrastructural development plans have been put into effect to meet national and provincial policy targets occurs with local inhabitants and traders given very little time to prepare for the consequences. Local traders, as well as local officials, are frequently kept in the dark, unaware or confused about future projects, with such developments often seeming to be shrouded in mystery.

Through case study examples, we have seen how state market projects, including relocations, renovations, and inefficiently-placed marketplaces have often furthered and even fostered livelihood insecurity and vulnerability – rather than enhanced small-scale trade endeavours. Elsewhere, improved market infrastructure has not proven successful, resulting in new markets that are disused or even abandoned. Likewise, in some renovated markets, the number of daily traders has dropped while stall rental fees within ‘modernised’ markets has risen.

Such dynamics can also be observed in the lowlands with the transformation there of traditional markets into modern, more ‘civilised’ commercial retail centres and supermarkets. Yet, within the upland context of Lai Cai province, such disjunctures between development policy and actual practice can be taken a step further. In effect, the state’s current approach prioritises and privileges a lowland model of marketplace trading that does not always appear to be directly applicable to the upland context. This market ideal – exemplified and operationalised through fixed stalls and trading - is underpinned by logic that contains an ethnocentric bias and patronising attitude towards ethnic minority upland residents that implicitly considers other alternative ways as inferior. As few ethnic minorities fit into this market model, the state’s support of such as standard reifies stereotypes that ethnic minorities do not trade or that they lack the cultural predisposition for ‘modern’ entrepreneurship. This narrow definition of trading also acts to devalue the diverse and sophisticated social networks and exchange systems developed by ethnic minorities such as we have seen for Hmong and Yao – those other levels of reciprocity - and which are vital for sustaining household and community.

Where ethnic minorities are viewed as intrinsic to the development of upland marketplaces, it involves imposing a state-informed (in other words, Kinh) idea of a ‘cultural market’. In doing so, the endogenous socio-cultural roles that markets continue to fulfil for uplanders are reassessed in light of an economic value that can be derived for tourist profits – and in terms largely to benefit exogenous economic actors. This is part and parcel of a wider trend in which ethnic minority cultural distinctiveness is interpreted as something that should be preserved and developed, in large part for the economic

possibilities that this may bring (Koh 2004). While the commoditisation of upland culture is well advanced across the border in Yunnan, China, similar processes are at a more nascent stage in upland northern Vietnam (Michaud 2009; Tapp 2010). Nevertheless, in Lào Cai province the commoditisation of ethnic minority traditional products and areas for cultural tourism is a key part of the new upland development approach, and most likely to continue to grow and extend to other northern upland areas (SRV No. 46/2008/QĐ-TTg). This encompasses not only cultural markets, but also cultural or handicraft villages, alongside the state promotion of ‘cultural days’ and local ethnic festivals – all in an aesthetic, sanitised format. While this growing popularity of ethnic minorities and their material culture may go some way towards disrupting negative stereotypes and developing a more positive representation, simultaneously “it may also add mystique to the category, reproducing an orientalist vision of the highlands as separate and Other” (Sowerwine 2004: 495).

Scott (2009: 5) has described such state attempts to integrate upland peoples into markets as part and parcel of the ‘last great enclosure’ whereby “the objective has been less to make them productive than to ensure that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable, or failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were.” As throughout the wider Southeast Asian massif, in upland northern Vietnam this agenda has been reflected through a variety of state-making and territorialisation projects geared at the socio-cultural and economic integration of highland ethnic minority societies (McElwee 2004). These efforts include: banning rotational shifting agriculture and imposing sedentarisation; replacing open common-property rights with individual household use-rights or restricting access in the name of conservation; promoting monocropping and upland cash crops; and pushing capital-dependent hybrid rice and maize seeds, with impacts on food security and sovereignty (Bonnin and Turner 2011b). In addition to all of the above, the state’s concerted efforts to ‘bring the markets to the people’ – by encouraging markets of a sanctioned form and format, alongside the construction of attendant connective physical infrastructure - is yet another mechanism for drawing upland residents more directly under the gaze of the state.

#### 9.2.4 Disconnected Marketplaces and Uplands?

The portrayal of the uplands as disconnected, marginal and remote places, and the development of an upland-lowland conceptual binary manifests as a “byproduct of national struggles for cultural identity, economic development and territorial control, all of which are implicated in the Vietnamese modernisation project” (Sowerwine 2004: 54). The distinction is not novel to Vietnam, applying to ‘margins’ and ‘centres’ throughout wider Southeast Asia – and reflects a polarising convention employed within state discourse and policy, mainstream thinking, and applied development, while it also remains entrenched in the academic literature (Li 2001; Scott 2001; Vandergeest 2003; Sowerwine 2004; Formoso 2010, for examples and critiques). According to this model, flows of resources and benefits are assumed to move primarily from lowland centres, to ‘poor’ remote uplands (Sowerwine 2004). By devoting specific attention to the historical and contemporary workings of local, upland-lowland and transnational exchange, we come away with a rather different picture which highlights the dynamics of flows, inter-connections and active spaces – challenging the dominant model of upland stagnancy and disconnect.

An important contribution to the upland-lowland binary debate has been added by Scott (2009: 2) who asserts in his book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, that “this relationship is particularly salient in mainland Southeast Asia, where it demarcates the greatest social cleavage that shapes much of the region’s history: that between hill peoples and valley peoples or between upstream and downstream peoples.” Scott (2009) reinforces this binary by arguing that the various regional empires of what he refers to by the concept metaphor of ‘Zomia’ extended only marginal power into the uplands prior to the 1950s. Up until this point, uplanders’ cultural practices and livelihoods were strategically geared at maintaining autonomy and keeping the state at a distance to avoid becoming its subjects.<sup>192</sup> A critical turning point occurs in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century with the building of modern nation states and the extension

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<sup>192</sup> Zomia, a name coined by van Schendel (2002), has been used by Scott (2009) to refer to the same geographical region as the Southeast Asian massif (Forsyth and Michaud 2011: 3). This area encompasses the uplands of all nations sharing the southeastern segment of the Asian land mass south and east of the Tibetan plateau (part of China, Bangladesh, India, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam).

of ‘distance-demolishing’ technologies of power into the uplands (Chapter 5; Scott 2009: xii). At the same time, Scott explicitly recognises that prior to this time, upland groups were already firmly linked to supra-local economies and played a crucial role in trade with the lowlands and global markets. Giersch (2010) suggests that the relevance of these dynamics should not be underestimated. With specific reference to upland trading he argues that:

Processes of acculturation and adaptation were complex and multi-directional, but they reveal that Zomia was not just a place shaped by cultural refusal or avoidance of external institutions of power, whether state or commercial. Local peoples had to reckon with states and commercial networks, and such reckoning meant acquiring new practices...the incentives for such change included the desire to access, rather than avoid, networks of power and wealth (Giersch 2010: 219-220).

Indeed, for the case of Lào Cai we have seen how complex supra-local economic connections in this area involving interchanges amongst a wide mix of actors extends back at least over a century and a half to the mid 1800s – with some dating back much earlier. Even at that time, Vietnam’s northern uplands were a critical source of precious commodities destined for lowland, Chinese and global markets. We saw how upland ethnic minorities were significantly entangled in these trade flows and had to be entertained by the various political and economic powers of the day in order to ensure a continued access to the supply of these goods.

Notwithstanding the recognition of these historical interconnectivities, in line with Scott’s (2009) argument, the concrete examples presented in this study reveal how Lào Cai’s upland trade-scapes have become more intertwined with the lowlands than ever before through the accelerated growth of connective infrastructure. Improved terms of structural access via new modes of travel and upgraded transportation corridors are enabling rapid flows of goods, people, resources and information through the uplands and beyond. We have seen how trade routes are swiftly expanding nowadays, as numerous commodity chains start from and pass through these uplands.

In Lào Cai province, small-scale traders assume a fundamental role in creating, strengthening, sustaining, expanding and modifying these connections. Through the

specific actions of these networked actors, local economies are directly linked to wider regional, national, and transnational economic spheres (c.f. Milgram 1996). As Benediktsson argues (2001: 5) “local agency performed by individuals in their social environment, has the capacity to radically reshape the outcomes of a seemingly universal, global process. Of great importance here are the creation and maintenance of networks, which tie localities into a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.” We have seen how upland traders are actively engaged in taking up new economic avenues, using their fluid, intertwined, and spatially diverse networks to facilitate trade – innovating commodities and influencing the creation of new, consumer markets at a distance. In taking on these emerging local opportunities, upland traders are not only being integrated into wider markets, but also work to shape them.

At the same time, these supra-local connections are not necessarily stable or equitable, and may be characterised by determining factors affecting access, such as physical linkages including roads, transportation, communications, but also socio-cultural configurations such as ethnicity, language, gender and social networks. Moreover, some connections are better valued, recognised, and understood by the Vietnam state and majority Kinh society than others, such as those based on official networks and formal modes of regulation. Consequently, connections used by ethnic minorities - built largely upon kinship, ethnicity, language and other modes of affinity - tend to be rendered invisible or unimportant, perpetuating the misconception of upland people as remote and disconnected.

### **9.3 Unravelling the Terms of Upland Access to Marketplace Trade**

As upland actors meet to exchange commodities in village homes and shops, on buses and in marketplaces, connections are made, social networks formed, and social capital created and drawn upon. Through time it has been possible that some of these connections have shifted from face-to-face meetings to far flung, sometimes ‘virtual’, ties at a distance via mobile phones and the internet. All the time, both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ bonds of connectivity are made, reworked, retained, and extended. Some connections are more diverse than others, some small in scale, others large and complex, some stable and

others fragile. The core argument in this section is that while current livelihood frameworks include ‘access’, these do not sufficiently articulate the importance of specific relational elements of access, as well as the conceptualisation of access in general, and yet this is a critical element within how upland livelihoods are being pursued (c.f. de Haan and Zoomers 2005; Ribot 1998; Ribot and Peluso 2003).

Often, such relational constituents appear as a black box in the literature, described simply as the policies and institutions ‘mediating access’ to resources and livelihood opportunities. As such, a clearer, more nuanced approach to understanding how societies regulate access to resources is essential to comprehending these processes the context of upland Vietnam. A more appropriate conceptualisation is to recognise how a social actor or group’s ability to benefit from resources is mediated by complex bundles and webs of power (Ribot and Peluso 2003). By unravelling these networks of power relations, we uncover the particular mechanisms through which social actors are empowered to acquire, control, and maintain their capacity to use these resources. The terms of access are constantly in flux over time and space, at different historical moments and within changing political regimes and economic policies. As such, while in one context, a particular actor or group may be in a powerful position relative to others (such as a male Hmong elder), within yet another they may be in a relatively weaker position. Within the different trading systems and networks explored for water buffalo, artisanal alcohols and textiles, this fluidity and flux is exemplified when the terms of access to trade resources and types of trade are explored.

A number of conclusions emerge as particularly relevant to our understanding of the dynamics of access to market and trade opportunities in the uplands. Firstly, greater attentiveness should be given to the social sites that traders occupy, and the ways that social difference figures into access to resources and livelihood opportunities. We have seen how markets can be markers of social difference and here, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status have come to the foreground as important factors that affect access. Secondly, an actor-oriented approach is important for examining power relations governing access, as this allows us to identify points of struggle, conflicts of interest, and



negotiation over resources use and available opportunities. Thirdly, an investigation into ‘cultural configurations’ such as identity, traditions, beliefs, and worldviews is vital to a more refined, less mechanistic, understanding of the ways that ethnicity and cultural practice can facilitate upland societies’ access to resources, and ability to realise effective livelihood strategies (Forsyth and Michaud 2011). Finally, a consideration of the historical experiences that shape the particular livelihood opportunities and strategies used by different groups of people over time should be integrated into livelihoods research. Such legacies are important for interpreting current barriers and opportunities in relation to markets and trade.

Having highlighted these important conceptual factors, I now wish to consider in greater detail the central relational elements and mechanisms that I consider play a meaningful role in shaping the access of different groups of social actors to upland trade opportunities - namely gender, ethnicity and social networks.

### **9.3.1 Gender Dynamics in Upland Marketplaces and Trade**

Although the gender dynamics of upland markets and trade is a theme that weaves itself throughout this study, I take the opportunity here to bring together and articulate key points that have become apparent. We have seen how Lào Cai’s upland markets are distinctly gendered places. The majority of small-scale traders in these local marketplaces are women, a pattern evidenced throughout Vietnam and much of the Southeast Asian region, as well as several other parts of the Global South (Alexander and Alexander 2001; Milgram 2001; Nguyen 2001; Seligmann 2001; Leshkovich 2003; Bonnin 2004, 2006). In the context of Vietnam, Nguyen (2001) in her study of Kinh traders in Huế, states that the marketplace as women’s domain owes to gender ideologies that position women in charge of the domestic sphere as well as the household budget. According to Confucian ethics, women are expected to make up for any shortfall of funds through being thrifty or else by earning supplemental income through market trade.<sup>193</sup> As such

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<sup>193</sup> Confucianism concentrates on a hierarchical nested model of society based on the correct and acceptable relations between different social groupings such as between father and son, husband and wife, village and nation. Within this dominant/subordinate model, the welfare of the greater group takes precedence over individual aspirations and needs. In particular, women are often considered to be inferior to men and

“working in the market became a ‘natural’ extension of the home” (Nguyen 2001: 140). At the same time, the economic power that market women derive through their activities is marginalised by cultural attitudes that view such trade as both immoral and insignificant. Female traders are often stigmatised as poor, ill educated, vulgar, and lacking in moral virtue (Leshkovich 2000; Nguyen 2001). As Leshkovich (2000: 5) writes, “Vietnamese women are said to trade because no respectable Vietnamese man would sully himself by pursuing such an activity”. These sorts of attitudes were clearly evidenced in this study through the relationships between some market officials and female traders. Here, market women were often perceived by state agents as unruly and overly emotional, and in need of paternal guidance and authority to ensure the proper functioning of markets.<sup>194</sup>

The gendering of migrant social networks also shapes access to market opportunities in the uplands. Kinh migrants to Lào Cai province draw heavily upon kin and social networks back in their lowland hometowns as a critical resource to facilitate their trade. Vietnamese women’s traditional responsibility for the maintenance of kinship ties means that women market traders are “strategically positioned to transform these networks into powerful economic tools” (Leshkovich 2000: 6).

While other researchers on Vietnam have demonstrated petty trade as a female-oriented activity, I found that Kinh men appeared more discernibly involved in market trading in Lào Cai – and particularly so when they are recent migrants to the uplands. We have seen how many newer trader migrants to Lào Cai as of the 1990s are less well-off than earlier

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subjugated to male authority, and their proper behaviour involves being submissive, supportive and compliant towards their fathers, and later, husbands (Jamieson 1993; Sowerwine 2004). Moreover, within this heritage, scholarly and administrative occupations are considered mentally and materially superior to those based in commerce and petty trade, which are frequently stigmatised (Taylor 2004). Despite these influences in constructing women’s trade as inferior, Nguyen (2001) reminds us that for lowland Kinh, contemporary gender ideologies have been influenced by a mix of feudal, Confucian, colonial, and socialist legacies, in addition to local and regional variations.

<sup>194</sup> Moreover, Taylor (2004) explains a further gendered distinction relating to markets in Vietnam: the abstract ‘modern’ market (*thị trường*) such as urban corporate business, managed according to rational and scientific principles and gendered as male spaces; in contrast to the ‘traditional’, transitory local marketplaces (*chợ*) and ubiquitous street trades seen as lacking in order and discipline and which are female dominated spaces. While private enterprises (*kinh doanh tư nhân*) are viewed as a marker of the success of *đổi mới* reforms, this category excludes women’s market trade, which is downgraded as ‘petty trade’ (*buôn bán nhỏ*) or else relegated to the informal economy (Taylor 2004).

migrant marketeers – often lacking residency status and farming land. The strategy of this more recent group of traders tends to involve a husband/wife team where the labour is often divided to take advantage of overlapping periodic market days – so that the couple trades at different markets on the same day. It appears likely that in this context, gender ideologies of market trade are also influenced by socio-economic dynamics in the uplands – the dire necessity of trade as a survival strategy and a lack of other income earning options may take precedence over cultural stigmas of petty trading, prompting men to engage in these activities.

Nevertheless, studies on the gender dynamics of market trade in Vietnam have focused primarily on ethnic Kinh and the lowland context, and I could find very few published materials devoting explicit attention to the gendering of trade conducted by upland ethnic minorities such as Hmong and Yao.<sup>195</sup> The World Bank (2009) reports that ethnic minority men – many of whom are primarily animists, thus not that much influenced by Confucian ethics - have greater access to markets than their female counterparts, and also participate in market trade more than Kinh men. However in fact, within the upland market sites I studied in Lào Cai, ethnic minority women were highly visible as traders.<sup>196</sup>

The involvement of ethnic minorities in small-scale handicraft production and trade in Sa Pa district for the tourist market is undertaken almost entirely by women, particularly Hmong and Yao women. As options for Hmong and Yao to earn cash in these areas remains very limited, and as the livelihoods of these two groups continue to be based largely on semi-subsistence agriculture, the gender specificity of this emergent trade has meant that women participants now often earn more cash than male household members

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<sup>195</sup> Two exceptions are Sowerwine's (2004) Ph.D. thesis, which devotes a section to Yao women's involvement in the cardamom trade, and Duong's (2006) Ph.D. thesis which deals in part with young Hmong women's involvement in the tourist trade in Sa Pa, but is predominantly focussed on their role in tourist trekking.

<sup>196</sup> The report suggests that ethnic minority men are more prominent in the market because they tend to be more fluent in Vietnamese than women, and therefore have the necessary language skills to deal with Kinh traders (World Bank 2009). Whereas, I found that Hmong and Yao women were well represented as traders within the upland markets of Lào Cai, particularly in regards to the trade in tourist handicrafts, manufactured textiles, and upland alcohols. Moreover, a significant amount of these trades involves Hmong and Yao trading with each other, and as such, it is not necessary for them to speak Vietnamese.

(Turner and Bonnin in press). While the majority of households do not rely entirely on women's earnings as the sole livelihood component, the cash that trading provides is often vital to the continuity of subsistence agricultural production. Since the introduction of hybrid staple food seeds in the late 1990s, access to cash has become far more necessary, as the seeds must be purchased annually – and cannot be selected and saved as is the case for local seeds (Turner and Bonnin 2012). Additional chemical inputs, such as fertilisers and pesticides must also be bought for hybrids to grow well, but at considerable expense for upland households. Moreover, handicraft trading permits labourers to be hired to expedite the planting of their rice fields, as hybrid rice seeds have a brief window period for optimal sowing (Bonnin and Turner 2011a; Turner and Bonnin in press).

For handicraft sellers, market trading can mean significant periods of time away spent from the home, with growing numbers of women even opting to stay away overnight in guesthouses.<sup>197</sup> Hmong and Yao women express that their time in the market brings them more than economic benefits, and is also a personally gratifying experience. Trading provides women with an opportunity to travel, socialise and learn through their relations in the market with other women, friends, as well as domestic and foreign tourists - the latter of whom tend to show curiosity, benevolence and are sympathetic to these women's ordeals, which is in general a sharp contrast with their own husbands and father, as well as most Kinh tourists.

Not surprisingly therefore, Sa Pa district Hmong and Yao women's participation in the handicraft industry is playing a role in reconfiguring gender relations. This is reflected through a number of different attitudes and reactions women traders received from their husbands, fathers, and in-laws towards their trading. Interestingly, differing perspectives on these gendered shifts appear to have some connection with age. It seems that women's cash earning is often accepted and appreciated by the younger generation of husbands –

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<sup>197</sup> Often only widowed, very elderly, or unmarried women do this, however, and married women of childbearing age tend to return to the hamlets in the evenings. Indeed, with respect to trade it appears that there are age-related differences in Hmong women's autonomy. There is a pattern of widowed and elderly Hmong women travelling as a group to trade in distance markets, which may point towards their greater level of power and freedom at that period of the life cycle. This may also reflect the fact that older women's physical labour for farm work is less essential after households have been established and more able-bodied members are available to perform these tasks.

who have grown up in the context of tourism – after some initial negotiations and jealousies. Interestingly, quite a few young Hmong women explained that for them, a ‘good husband’ is one that does not get upset or jealous but is happy when their wives can earn money by selling. In some cases, these new labour dynamics are prompting shifts in customary household gender divisions of labour. Indeed, we found that it was not uncommon for these young married men to take over customary female domestic chores, such as child minding and cooking, while their wives were in the market or trekking (also see Duong 2006).

However older generations, such as the fathers of unmarried young women and girls, seem to often have a more difficulty adjusting to their daughters’ new found ‘wealth’ and independence. Some men downplay these market activities, stating that women are actually in town socialising or “gossiping” rather than working (Laj, Hmong trader Sa Pa 12/08/06). Others resent the time women put into trading, emphasising how other more important chores and farm work that need to be done at home are being overlooked (Shu, Hmong trader Sa Pa 21/05/09).

Women’s market trading may sometimes also be viewed as a threat to family honour with female independence linked to a lack of control over women’s sexuality. A number of young, recently married Hmong women expressed how their mothers-in-law begrudge them from leaving to work in town. Doing so is inappropriate behaviour for a married woman as “a good wife stays home” (Ly, Hmong trader Sa Pa 08/20/10). Some Hmong women also explained that their husbands suspect them having extramarital affairs if they spend too much time away from home. As the marketplace has long symbolised a place to meet potential marriage partners, some Hmong individuals feel that women should not be at the market independently, such as Vang (27/10/07), a Hmong man from Bac Ha, who states, “when you are married, it’s proper that a man and a woman should always go to the market together. The woman should never go alone.”

The long term implications of these gendered cash earning opportunities on household and marital dynamics are yet to be seen, as these are very recent transformations, but I

envision that such shifts are likely to become even more evident as the costs of hybrid seeds and their essential inputs continue to climb each year. Nonetheless, it is important to clarify that these gender shifts are largely reflective of the specific case in Sa Pa district, and possibly also in regards to female Hmong textile traders from Mường Khương, district – a fruitful area for further research.

### **9.3.1 The Role of Ethnicity and Social Support Relations in Upland Trade**

Recently, commentators have argued that the relationships between livelihoods and ethnicity, identity and cultural practices needs to be better accounted for through research and conceptualisation (Ellis 2000; de Haan and Zoomers 2005; Forsyth and Michaud 2011). This is of particular relevance for livelihoods research among upland ethnic minority groups in the borderlands of socialist Vietnam, China and Laos. While encompassing a wide diversity of peoples and places, these upland border areas share common features that influence how local livelihoods are pursued. These factors include: specific relations with a socialist state based on a communist-influenced, paternalistic ideology towards minorities; a fairly recent reopening to markets; ongoing tensions between upland minorities and the lowland majority; and the presence of numerous transnational upland societies which depend upon socio-culturally based networks as an important element in their livelihoods (Michaud 2009; Michaud and Forsyth 2011). Over time, these factors have led to particular implications for how upland people envision and shape their livelihoods, and adapt to changing circumstances.

I have explored how state development agendas for upland marketplaces implicitly work to favour lowland styles of trading, and approaches that are familiar mainly to Kinh. Associations between ethnicity and livelihoods have also been examined in this research through the intra- and inter-ethnic dynamics within specific forms of trade, the ethnic-specificity of exchange systems, the way cultural elements are used as a resource for trading. I also looked into the issue how ethnic difference can enable or constrain entry to certain types of trades or trading networks. Ethnic differentiation in market and trade activities can relate to ‘natural’ place-based features as well as socially constructed factors, which are generally interrelated. Long standing production and ethnic trade

niches in Lào Cai such as for water buffalo, non-timber forest products, and alcohol can initially come about due in part to opportunistic differences in agro-ecological environments. Ethnic segmentation of certain trades can also reflect social distance, allowing for greater freedom to operate beyond the pressures and limitations of local moral economies. Discrepancies in upland trading activities also relate to socio-economic disparities between, and within, different ethnic groups. We have seen how in many instances, upland ethnic minorities such as Hmong and Yao enter into market relations with Kinh on profoundly unequal terms –owing to differences in market knowledge, financial capital, and connections. As this study and a number of others have shown, these factors often place ethnic minorities at a weaker position in their trade relations with ethnic Kinh (Turner 2007; McElwee 2008; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009; World Bank 2009).

Alternately, there are also multi-ethnic trading networks in which Kinh participants have found long-term trade relations with minority partners is vital – based on respect, loyalty, and efforts at cultural understanding and brokerage (Chapter 7). Similarly, some Kinh handicraft traders depend upon durable networks with local Hmong vendors to gain access to new supply networks with non-local Hmong – lacking the social capital and language skills to do business directly (Chapter 8).

Although the bulk of the economic trade rewards in the uplands are dominated by and channelled to ethnic Kinh overall, they should nevertheless not be taken as a homogenous group. We have seen how this category is internally fragmented within Lào Cai's upland markets (Chapter 5). Kinh market traders in upland markets do not have equal economic status and access to power. Different histories of migration have led to contested claims over market space by those that see themselves as the 'more legitimate' traders. Earlier migrants have fixed residency and often a status as former holders of state positions. Many newer migrants try to establish themselves under precarious circumstances without formal residency or land. These recent migrants are frequently stigmatised by older



residents as being ‘like the Chinese’ and overly concerned with profit-making, even if this is seen as industrious.<sup>198</sup>

The notion of uniform economic dominance among members of ethnic majority groups in the uplands is also countered by the example of Han Chinese traders of minority-oriented commodities in border markets. These traders did not present themselves as economically powerful, but ‘poor’ – lacking the financial capital to be ‘real traders’ in their own local markets (Chapter 8). Indeed, many of these Han cross-border traders explained that they could not sell their ‘inferior’ goods to the wealthier Hmong in China. Han traders also noted better social capital with ethnic minorities (compared to Kinh), when in working in Vietnam’s rural border uplands – contacts which they relied upon for resources like accommodation and storage space.

Kinship and language also come out clearly as instrumental elements within the three case studies of ethnic minority ‘cultural trades’. The use of spatially extensive kin-based ties has become even more advantageous for trade activities within the context of Vietnam’s ‘liberal market’ economy. We have seen how clan and kinship ties are adapted by Hmong in a number of instances to gain a foothold in markets. Long-distance traders draw on such relational networks to access coveted trading spots in markets outside of their home commune. Transnational networks for production of Hmong clothing is also frequently based on family connections. The cross-border trade in water buffalo and ethnic minority textiles respectively are similarly rooted in transnational networks based on affinities of kinship, ethnicity, and language – trade-scapes in which the more economically dominant ethnic Kinh also remain absent. Indeed, as Turner (2010: 286) writes “...it is frequently more efficient for local residents of the borderlands to trade with each other across the borderline than to negotiate with traders from other parts of their respective countries.” The language skills of Vietnam-based Hmong in local dialects of Chinese, and conversely, Han Chinese traders’ capacity to speak Hmong, enable these two groups to build cross-border trading alliances.

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<sup>198</sup> While I did not establish this in my research, it may also be that for newer Kinh traders, their more recent arrival and often temporary status, means that they are to some degree less constrained by local moral economies in upland markets than Kinh traders who have been there for the longer term.

Local cultural values, practices, and knowledges also shape and support ethnic minority economic activities and trade endeavours. Within the diverse upland trading systems for water buffalo used by Hmong, local level exchange systems are underpinned by shared understandings of fairness and mutual gain, based on social networks with kin and community. For Hmong and Yao, artisanal alcohol production is a highly valued skill that is strongly bound up in notions of local cultural identity, cultural capital, and economic standing. Hmong actors also draw upon socio-cultural resources such as their in-depth knowledge of variations in local textile designs and kin contacts. These assets are used to extend the source locales for tourist handicraft textiles into remote areas of the northern uplands and for innovating new tourist-oriented products. Likewise, traders' expert knowledge and social networks are used to influence and expand the market for manufactured Hmong textiles, resulting in new trade linkages and product designs.

### **9.3.3 Refashioning Commodities in the Uplands**

A number of traditional upland objects are becoming commoditised and integrated into new, wider markets – with these commodity chains lengthening to encompass upland-lowland, cross-border, and even globalised flows. Following the journeys of a number of these goods, we find that the social actors involved in their production and circulation represent more than simply “cogs in an economic machine”, by their active engagement in “[shaping] the conditions under which commodities are made, traded and consumed (Nevins and Peluso: 225). By adopting a more hybrid treatment of commodity chains - as opposed to a linear, economistic analysis of commodity stages - a complex picture emerges in which commodities are in fact being “indigenized”, “hybridized” or otherwise appropriated in concept, representation, and form during their commodity lives” (Nevins and Peluso: 228).

Drawing from my case studies of upland markets and the livestock, alcohol, and textile trades, three key interlinked points emerge. The first point is that local socio-cultural dynamics and meanings continue to coexist and wield significance, sometimes strengthening while other times altered, alongside market integration and

commoditisation. The second point is that processes of commoditisation create new opportunities while also engendering new contexts for emerging conflicts over symbolic meaning, economic value, and knowledge production. The third point is that, in contrast to upland markets as ‘traditional’ and changeless elements of peasant societies, these places are also sites in which shifting consumption patterns, evolving tastes and ideas of modernity are being expressed and can be observed. I continue now to flesh out these main ideas in greater detail.

We have observed how processes of commoditisation and market integration are not necessarily leading to the disappearance and erasure of local socio-cultural meanings nor the homogenisation of upland objects’ value (c.f. Kopytoff 1986). Rather, for Hmong and Yao, there are numerous instances and contexts where these objects continue to wield important use, symbolic, and exchange values which remain distinct from their commercial values - alternate values which continue to exist within a system of commodity exchange. Despite the growing market value for water buffalo in both Vietnam and China, the multiple systems used by Hmong in Lào Cai to exchange water buffalo, reveal how these systems embedded in kinship and local social relations continue as important alongside commodity exchange systems. Such ‘customary’ approaches facilitate access to these animals and are vital to ensuring household productive security, particularly in times of dire crisis. Similarly, although upland artisanal alcohols are entering lowland markets, the practices of Hmong and Yao consumers and the local markets for these valued items continue to be of more significance to local producers. Likewise, the manufactured textiles for ethnic minorities lately introduced to Vietnam, are creating new spaces and ways for Hmong women to express their identity, as I will explore further below.

While the commoditisation of upland goods for wider markets opens up new opportunities for a wide range of local, tourism, and state stakeholders, this process is also affecting tensions amongst different interest groups, particularly in terms of struggles over authenticity, claims to knowledge, and economic value. Thus, as well as their physical movement, commodities are expropriated by others, refashioned and attain new

personalities and ‘social lives’ as they move amongst different actors and locales (c.f. Appadurai 1986). This was a central theme explored in-depth with the brandmaking of upland artisanal alcohols, and as well as for handicraft textiles, especially with the circulation of different perspectives on the ‘rightful’ possessors of the knowledge and skills to produce these goods.

Similar conflicts are also clearly illustrated when we consider the opinions of Hmong traders about the forceful presence of Kinh in the upland ethnic handicraft trade. Several Hmong traders described this as appropriation. A few Hmong also argued that they should be receiving a fairer share of the economic benefits from a trade based entirely on their skill and knowledge. As May (11/07/05), a Hmong trader from Sa Pa expressed:

I don’t really like the new big Vietnamese shops selling ethnic minority handicrafts. I feel like the minorities have helped out the Vietnamese to make their business, but I don’t think they really do the same for us. For example, we are the ones skilled in making very beautiful embroideries, and it is very difficult for us to make them. The Vietnamese cannot make these things. But then, when a minority person sells their embroidery to a Vietnamese shop they are paid only very little, say 5,000 VND, but then the Vietnamese sells this same thing for 40,000 VND in their fancy shop. I think this is very bad. I am worried about the future and think that because more Vietnamese keep on building shops the minorities are going to become the losers. Minority people are losing out with our own handicrafts.

May’s interpretations of Hmong identity include possessing a valuable, complex skill as experts of embroidery – one which cannot be acquired by ethnic Kinh. Many Hmong handicraft traders’ similarly referred to their unique mastery of textile artistry as a means to contest the unequal terms of their economic relations with Kinh.

Also of interest here are Hmong handicraft traders’ views on the state’s role in supporting their endeavours. Some traders employed state rhetoric of cultural preservation to argue that minority textiles are an important asset to Vietnam’s national heritage. From this angle, it is inherently the state’s responsibility to protect and assist them. One such trader, Van (11/07/05) felt that the government was ‘using’ ethnic minority handicrafts in international forums to showcase Vietnam’s cultural diversity, yet with real actual sponsorship for the producers of these objects. In her opinion:

I think that the local government should be helping out the minorities to sell their handicrafts. It shouldn't be the central government, but the local government who sticks up for us. They should not allow more Vietnamese shops selling minority goods. Instead, they should help the minorities to do these things themselves. The government needs to help those who are poor, not those who are already rich. Some people from the central government came here and took pictures of our handicrafts and clothes. They put these on a website on the internet, and took some samples of our handicrafts to give to the leaders of other countries...like a sample, for free. They tell the world "these are the handicrafts of our country", and put them up on the webpage with a little picture. But if that is true, why do they do nothing for us?

Van finds this use of minority material culture by the state to portray itself globally as ethnically diverse and embracing cultural distinctiveness, hypocritical. Similar opinions were voiced by Hmong handicraft traders to critique the state and its lack of support to them – additional arenas of conflict in the commoditiation of upland textiles.

'Peripheral' marketplaces in the uplands are also sites where shifting tastes and consumption practices amongst upland households can be observed. According to Pickering (2003: 206):

Households...provide a private place within which varying ideologies, priorities and identities may be expressed...by determining which things will or must be purchased on the market, and by constructing social relations that work to avoid market consumption, households can play a significant role in shaping the economic potential and impact of markets within their local areas.

To a large extent, upland consumption practices are reflective of local cultural histories and environments, yet increasingly these are also being shaped by external influences, both lowland and global. Such practices are "produced, reproduced and changed through the interlocking of global commodity markets, state power and local agency" (Benediktsson 2002: 83). Whereas upland marketplaces continue to be most important for supplying basic essentials, it is clear that conspicuous consumption demands are also being fulfilled within these sites. Conspicuous consumption has been alternately conceptualised as a status-building strategy linked to class (Veblen 1970, Bourdieu 1984), as part of the creation of individual and social identities (Giddens 1991), and as a socio-cultural process that uses signs and symbols as a means of communication (Douglas and Isherwood 1978). However here, my purpose for drawing attention to new

forms of upland consumption is to highlight how traders in Lào Cai's upland markets have taken up a key position in brokering and facilitating these transformations.

The range of goods available in upland marketplaces has enlarged dramatically since the mid to late 1990s, with - thanks in large part to the end of the American embargo - more commodities from the lowlands as well as from China to be found. This has expanded peoples' choices, desires and given way to new types of consumption behaviours.

Upland preferences and demand for lowland commodities are illustrated through the activities of traders working to supply the latest in urban fashions to many of the most remote upland marketplaces. Some Kinh clothing traders have found a niche in responding to the changing tastes of upland youth – keeping abreast of the latest styles via information flows through television, the internet, and lowland social networks (Chapter 5). Likewise, although produce being sold in upland markets still reflect local seasonal patterns, improved connectivity means that customers can now also avail of spoilable fresh foods with origins as far away as Southern Vietnam. In particular, Kinh migrants who have resettled in the uplands now have access to foods that they were used to consuming and enjoying in the lowlands.

The consumption practices of ethnic minority Hmong in Lào Cai – youth and women most notably - are also transforming with the development of new factory-made textiles from China.<sup>199</sup> Here again, upland traders are the primary actors enabling this process. In particular, Lào Cai border resident Hmong occupy the role of circulating these 'cultural commodities' through the northern upland region, and act as catalysts of consumer desire for new fashions and materials.

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<sup>199</sup> Also arriving in the uplands are commercially-made music videos and films that blend modern and traditional stories, dance and fashions, oriented towards Hmong and other ethnic minorities, and produced in China, Thailand, and the US. These popular media goods flow into Yunnan province and are transported by Hmong cross-border traders into Lào Cai's upland markets. For Hmong in particular, such new media serve as more than just a form of popular entertainment, but also as a means for members of this transnational society to assert, define, and redefine their cultural identities, discussed more below.

These ever shifting fashions challenge the notion of minority dress as unchanging, as well as the reverse, that shifts in dress practices are necessarily eroding ‘tradition.’ The continuity of customer preferences for these items highlights that dominant cultural forms are not passively received and accepted in the uplands. Still based on customary designs, the new materials and clothing proliferate incessantly – making these goods responsive to Hmong women’s desire for fresh styles and more comfort. ‘Traditional’ and ‘modern’ are reinvented and intermixed through these commodities – based on distinctly Hmong interpretations of modernity. Hybrid fashions also embody expressions of Hmong femininity and sexuality in flux – evidenced for example, by the growing popularity of more risqué strapless or spaghetti strap Hmong blouses and lace leggings.<sup>200</sup> Although these commodities originate in China and flow into Vietnam, we have seen how long distance Hmong textile traders act as their primary brokers - relaying information about local clothing preferences to producers in China. The development of new styles, altered to better suit local tastes as a result, demonstrate the diverse flows of market information carried out through small-scale trader channels. This careful attention to upland trade networks and flows reveals the problem with characterising these mechanisms simply as capitalist market penetration, as these processes are engaging with and enabling the spread of specific local and ethnic cultural practices.

#### **9.3.4 The Everyday Politics of Making a Living in Upland Trading**

A final key limitation of conventional livelihoods approaches is that they tend to centre on the material and economic dimensions of livelihoods while overlooking the everyday micro-political realities of how rural residents strive to build viable and meaningful livelihoods. Hence, bringing an actor-oriented approach into my conceptual and interpretive framework has allowed me to overcome this weakness through placing a specific focus on how cultural, historical, gender, spatial and power dynamics are expressed in relation to upland trade livelihoods (c.f. Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington 2000; Long 2001). In so doing, I have reflected upon the interplay of diverse actors, structures, and institutions by way of an attention to the fluid and shifting nature of

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<sup>200</sup> However, while these sleeveless blouse styles are widely available in Yunnan, China they have not gained ground in Vietnam, where more conservative styles still appear to be preferable. Lace leggings though, are highly sought out by young Hmong women in Lào Cai.



power. This relational understanding of power recognises that even the most marginalised upland actors have some scope of agency to contest, challenge, negotiate, and control how it is exercised (Long 2001).

Dovetailing this approach, the literature on everyday forms of resistance introduced by Scott (1985), and taken up in a similar vein as everyday politics by Kerkvliet (2005; 2009), offers a valuable conceptualisation of the micro-struggles that occur between competing interest groups striving to maintain or expand their livelihood interests. While rural resistance has traditionally, and most commonly, referred to organised social movements and forms of overt protest, the everyday resistance and infrapolitics literature broadens the scope of what resistance entails to encompass the everyday behaviours and micro-struggles at the margins, characterised as:

People embracing, complying with, adjusting to, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions...Key to everyday politics' difference from official and advocacy politics is it involves little or no organisation, is usually low profile and private behaviour, and is done by people who probably do not regard their actions as political (Kerkvliet 2009: 232).

At the same time, Bebbington (2000: 498) has argued that within the resistance literature on development there has been a tendency to “essentialise peasant motivation and to invoke voluntaristic interpretations of cultural politics”. He goes on to suggest re-embedding resistance interpretations within an analysis of livelihoods practices, to “[make] clearer how very situated are such practices and politics, [as] then we might anticipate forms of political behaviour and responses to development that are neither necessarily resistant nor antipathetic to the logics of markets and modernity” (Bebbington 2000: 498). Integrating actor-oriented and infrapolitics approaches into a livelihoods framework thus entails identifying the totality of social responses to externally imposed changes as they are locally experienced - encompassing accommodation, adaptation, reworking and negotiation, as well as resistance.

#### **9.3.4.1 On-the-Ground Responses to State Market Development Agendas and Market Integration**

Small-scale market traders display a diversity of responses as they grapple with and work to negotiate the outcomes and everyday realities of state upland market agendas. Some such reactions towards the state relied strategies that could be called forms of ‘rightful resistance’. In these clear instances, popular contention by traders focussed on pointing out the discrepancies between the goals and outcomes of state development policy. Traders joined together, formally challenging the local state via legal channels and appeals to the public media. Traders have also taken matters directly into their own hands, refusing to settle for the temporary market infrastructure from the state – building their own sturdier trade stalls, waste disposal facilities, electrical connections and sleeping in the market to protect their wares. Frustrated traders have also taken overt actions by relocating their stalls to other very areas in good visibility of state buildings in protest of poor market conditions. However, as already noted, these expressions of overt resistance and protest in challenging the state remain quite rare in socialist Vietnam.

More common, everyday responses by traders involve covert or quiet means of undermining, evading, or negotiating state authority. We have observed how some traders adopt a ‘foot dragging’ approach, using their lack of information regarding state market plans by the state as rationale to stay put rather than relocate. Traders also evade regulation and control by a number of means, including tapering stall sizes when fee collectors approach, remaining lightweight and ambulant to quickly dodge ‘crack-downs’ on street vending, as well as using unmonitored routes to move commodities across the border. Likewise, traders may exercise strategic representation through claims to being poor, and manipulation, like teasing market officials, and underreporting or lying about sales.

#### **9.3.4.2 Diversity and Self-sufficiency as Resistance**

Scott (2009) maintains that since the 1950s, the possibility for geographical, economic, socio-cultural, as well as psychological withdrawal from the state is no longer a viable option for upland societies. Yet at the same time, with regards to upland economies, it

can be argued that the Vietnam government's lack of interest in and understanding of the particular types of exchange and trade undertaken by ethnic minorities is precisely what enables these activities to continue and flourish outside of official regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, from an in-depth focus on the production and trade of particular goods that feature as salient markers of local cultural identity for Hmong and Yao residents in Lào Cai, it becomes possible to suggest specific instances where diversity and self-sufficiency might be interpreted as expressions of ethnic minority groups' resistance to cultural (Kinh/lowland) and market integration.

A commonly made argument is that indigenous societies work to maintain a level of autonomy and self-determination through social and economic closure - such as by continuing to value and rely upon subsistence as opposed to the cash economy (Keesing 1992; Pickering 2003; Karatzogianni and Robinson 2010; Michaud 2008, in press). This proposition might also be applied to ethnic minorities such as most Hmong and Yao living in Lào Cai, who place a high socio-cultural and material priority on rice self-sufficiency – orienting other livelihood activities around this core pursuit. The three trade activities explored in this thesis reveal that upland trade is almost never the key household livelihood activity many of these residents, but is nonetheless very important through its role in underwriting and subsidising the valued livelihood mainstay.

However, in looking at the ways that these three important goods are traded, there are a number of examples to support the idea that Hmong and Yao in Lào Cai have kept open a number of locally recognised or culturally-based exchange forms and networks. In the process, important spaces of exchange are retained that are either autonomous, or else face minimal outside intervention. This occurs even as these products and trade networks are simultaneously being integrated into wider markets. In other words, retaining a diversity of approaches and remaining self-sufficient in the exchange of key cultural products can be a subtle way for upland minorities to resist the wholesale commoditisation and transformation of these items for external markets – as well as the wholesale domination of their trade and circulation by more economically powerful groups.

A related point on diversity and self-sufficiency as resistance reflects how market integration is not only opening trade opportunities, but also new contexts wherein minority cultural identity can be articulated, constructed and reproduced. As Formoso (2010: 316) argues, the very distance-demolishing technologies used to bring non-state spaces and societies to heel, are also used to “modify the representations that they have of themselves and of their relationship with the state.” In this sense, the expansion of these trade activities alongside the market integration of minority ‘cultural commodities’ is providing new spaces for minorities to retain and/or reframe specific elements of cultural identity and practice. For instance, the diversity of water buffalo trade networks, arrangements, and means of access in times of hardship used by Hmong, demonstrates that these exchange systems are made as flexible and diverse as possible as a way of coping and maintaining abundance. Having a multiplicity of market and non-market options available for accessing buffalo becomes an important livelihood resource in and of itself. Likewise, Hmong and Yao have taken on a similar approach towards Vietnam state programmes to promote hybrid rice seeds (Bonnin and Turner 2011a). Here, farmers in parts of Lào Cai resist becoming wholly reliant on state programmes in favour of retaining a range of old and new options for meeting their rice-production needs. In both of these cases, uplanders are striving to protect livelihoods and reduce insecurity, but also to maintain a degree of autonomy over the economic, social, and cultural reproduction of their household units (c.f. Schneider and Niederle 2010).

The adoption of a diversity of exchange approaches is also apparent in the trade of used textiles for the tourist market by Hmong collectors. Here, a mix of cash-based and barter arrangements are utilised. Resistance to becoming locked into one particular way of doing things as an approach to the market is also evidenced in terms of the flexibility that Hmong and Yao handicraft producers prefer to maintain with their buyers, as opposed to achieving pre-given targets of set quantities by a certain time. The tendency to adopt a more ‘elastic’ supply arrangement is often much to the consternation of Kinh traders and fair trade NGOs which hold certain performance expectations when they ‘hire’ these women out to embroider for them.

We have also seen that Hmong and Yao in Lào Cai maintain a preference for their own, localised flavours of rice and maize spirits. A fondness for local verions remains despite the recent commoditisation of specialty alcohols from specific hamlets. In turn, self-sufficiency in alcohol production for community consumption sustains local systems of trade and exchange for this essential product, ensuring that the distribution of economic benefits from alcohol production and trade remain diffuse. While the state and external stakeholders seek to reshape, circumscribe, and cash-in on the upland alcohol trade, community-oriented systems based on local preferences, demands, and trading systems continue to flourish, despite alterations caused by land shortages and new agricultural technologies.

Lastly, new synthetic Hmong clothing and dress materials reflects a culturally significant, cross-border trade from which economically dominant Kinh are excluded, due to barriers of language, kinship, ethnicity and residency – also highlighting a sphere of autonomy in the market. Far more than a localised trading system, we have seen how extensive this trade is in terms of geographical scope, intersecting at nodal points with the global trade in used Hmong textiles for handicrafts. We have seen that for many Hmong in Lào Cai province as well as the wider northern uplands, traditional dress symbolises resistance to Kinh cultural hegemony, and a connection to a Hmong identity and past. According to Levi (1998: 300):

Just as material culture is a vehicle for the communication of social identity, so too is it a medium for the expression of resistance to structures of domination...the innocuous display of such culturally coded objects are an attractive means for subordinated people to signify resistance to the dominant political economy by enacting strategies of self-sufficiency.

Moreover, the growth of the industry in manufactured Hmong clothing and materials from China has also been accompanied by the emergence of other cultural commodities and new outlet mediums of expression such as Hmong music VCD/DVDs, music videos readily accessible on YouTube, and online chatting. Taken together, these phenomena enable forms of cultural persistence and the development and reworking of a Hmong identity that is transnational in scope - even amongst upland Hmong from Vietnam who are perceived to be isolated and disconnected from global trends.

## 9.4 Conclusion

At the broadest level, the conceptual relevance of this study is to highlight and investigate the juxtaposition of state directives in the uplands versus local realities and cultural, economic, and social needs, in relation to processes of market integration. This analysis of markets has moved beyond former paradigms of a linear evolutionary sense, to put a human face on market processes by bringing to life the dynamic micro-geographies of upland trader livelihoods – accomplished by way of a historically informed analysis of contemporary market trade. An in-depth focus on the actual workings of socially-embedded, place-based markets offers us a beneficial entry point and unique vantage point from which to observe and analyse market creation processes in the Vietnam uplands.

In recognising and highlighting the importance of access to infrastructure of numerous forms, as well as the central role played by ethnicity and how power and resistance are notably expressed within upland markets, trade, and commodity processes I have taken the livelihood approach forward in its conceptual promises. Moreover, by bringing on board an actor-oriented approach to upland market trading, not only did this help to shed further light on ethnicity, power and resistance, but also to unravel shifts in the symbolic meanings that many traded and exchanged goods hold, providing a further nuanced understanding of upland livelihoods. Concurrently, this also allowed me to reveal how and why resistance comes into the picture in different, often subtle, forms. In concluding, I return to my key research findings and conceptual contributions as directly linked to the study's three research questions, and to my overall aim to: **contribute a more nuanced understanding of local market formation and integration in the Lào Cai uplands, through the lens of the actual processes by which markets are being created and (re)shaped at the confluence of local innovation and initiatives, state actions, and wider market forces.** .

Reflecting upon Research Question1, namely: *What roles do centripetal and centrifugal forces, particularly linked to the Vietnam state and market integration, play within the*

*contemporary restructuring of marketplaces, commodity networks, and trade dynamics in Lào Cai's uplands?*, we have seen how upland trade-scapes in Lào Cai are shaped through the interplay of these competing centralising and segmentary influences. These forces have been defined as encompassing, on the one hand, state and market integration pressures (centripetal), and on the other, responses that foster cultural and economic diversity, resilience, and resistance (centrifugal). By way of case studies and clear-cut examples, I have examined the combined influences of past and present as well as local and extra-local, in terms of how these tensions are playing out on-the-ground within upland markets and trade in the northern Vietnam borderlands of Lào Cai province.

We have seen that upland ethnic minorities are actively engaging with a number of new market opportunities. Yet, this often takes place according to terms that are not fully understood, endorsed, or recognised by the state. While few Hmong and Yao in Lào Cai province work as traders full-time, year-round, many are nonetheless involved in a diversity of trade. Upland trader activities include innovating commodities, developing new trade networks, and making use of recent connective technologies to expand the scope of formerly localised trading practices and access more distant markets. In order to support their venture, and again, extend their trading journeys, traders also draw on a variety of cultural resources - such as kinship, language, and cross-border networks. In turn, these upland economic endeavours and approaches reveal the myriad levels and complexity of Hmong and Yao trade and exchange dynamics which, in turn, negates the state's uninformed notion of upland inefficiency and lack of economic entrepreneurship.

Although upland ethnic minorities such as Hmong and Yao have long had some degree of attachment to external markets, at present income earning has become a far more important concern than ever before. In large part, this is due to the shrinking available agricultural land needed for subsistence, in tandem with the state's introduction of hybrid rice and maize seeds which demand access to cash. Thus, petty trade is growing in significance within the livelihood portfolios of many upland semi-subsistence households. However, while the state has certainly taken great steps towards manipulating upland markets according to its vision of development - and integrating



upland ethnic minorities into that market ideal - it is clear that Hmong and Yao are responding to emerging market opportunities in ways that are culturally amenable and mesh with their livelihood needs - ways that state often fails to notice or misreads as 'backwards' or 'insignificant'. Upland market interventions thus reflect social interface areas where differing ideologies and multiple meanings of markets, improvement, and progress exist for different groups, and must be negotiated. Markets may be variously construed, for example, as: a medium for promoting market integration and cultural tourism on the part of the state; a way for Kinh migrants to 'get ahead' in the uplands through capital accumulation and drawing on urban and lowland links; or for ethnic minority Hmong and Yao, as a place to build social networks and engage in forms of trade that reproduce the cultural and material basis of upland households and localities.

Moving to Research Question 2, *How do upland social markers of difference, such as culture and ethnicity, economic status, and gender influence trading and the way actors shape their exchange activities?*, throughout my results chapters I analysed the significance of key markers of social difference – socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender – for trade and market exchange activities in the uplands. In doing so, I revealed how specific elements of upland social difference are often intertwined, resulting in distinct patterns which reflect how differentially-positioned actors are able to access and participate in markets. In the economic reform era (post 1986), social inequalities in Vietnam have emerged as the main development challenge overall. Social disparities have been the most pronounced between the northern uplands and the lowlands, as well as within these highland provinces themselves. Relative to the national majority Kinh, the much lower socio-economic status of upland ethnic minorities has been evaluated according to factors such as physical remoteness, lower incomes, more limited access to formal institutions and resources, higher levels of poverty, and lower levels of formal education and official healthcare. At the same time, these sorts of measurements are not always sufficient to comprehending well-being in the uplands. This is particularly so for ethnic minorities who support their households and communities and resist socio-economic differentiation via non-monetarised relations, and by maintaining a prowess at

subsistence agriculture - and what is more, may ascribe to different local conceptualisations of well-being, prestige, and status.

The materialisation of new markets, development projects, roads, and improved transportation options in Lào Cai province, and the wider uplands, have enabled ethnic Kinh migrants to become the major players in market trade there - notwithstanding this groups' own internal socio-economic differentiation. The overrunning of what were traditionally ethnic minority areas by Kinh migrants has altered the nature of what it means to 'do well' in the uplands through the introduction of money, connections, and Vietnamese language and literacy as necessary 'capitals'. Moreover, as I have shown, well-intended development policies aimed at fostering market integration and poverty alleviation, often end up favouring Kinh in getting ahead instead, leaving the development 'targets' to get by, and cope with the unforeseen impacts of market projects into which these 'beneficiaries' have had scarce say.

For ethnic minorities such as Hmong and Yao, we have observed how cultural variables such as local moral economies and a reliance on kinship networks can pose certain constraints and limits on trading - such as with cultural sanctions against unfair profiteering. Yet, at the same time, these distinctive cultural elements, competencies, and institutions also act as important resources, as well as the preconditions for upland ethnic minorities' trade activities, and the very reason they are able to thrive.

Gender is also an important social marker within upland markets and trade, as is the case throughout Vietnam, with women predominating as small-scale market and street traders, and men taking on larger wholesaling and long-distance trades. Yet we also saw how traditional Kinh gender ideologies that construct petty trade as 'women's work' may be challenged in the uplands, particularly by less economically secure in-migrants, and many men also seek a livelihood as a market trader. The association of gender and ethnicity in upland trade was also important with regards to minority Hmong and Yao handicraft traders in upland tourist towns. The gendering of cloth and embroidery production has propelled women (mostly in Sa Pa district) into a position whereby they

have been able to gain an almost female-exclusive avenue into this new market. This situation is resulting in some clear reversals of household economic power as women are becoming the main cash-earners, posing new challenges to gender relations, masculinities, and a diversity of responses.

My Research Question 3 was: *What strategies are used by different groups of upland social actors, particularly Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities, to engage with opportunities and negotiate constraints in trade and marketplace activities in order to construct and enhance their livelihoods?* Focussing on the production and circulation of items of durable cultural and material significance to Hmong and Yao adds a new dimension to other studies that have looked at the role of minorities in market trade for products destined solely (or largely) for external markets. Comprehensive exploration of the various market pathways and trade networks for water buffalo, artisanal alcohol, and textiles, has enabled comparisons of the context for both local market orientations and for that of external markets, as well as of the interlinkages between the two.

Following the various commodity chains and trade networks for these three goods illuminates how alternative trading methods based on cultural elements such as barter, reciprocity, and kinship networks have accompanied the market integration of upland commodities, and have been adapted into market approaches, rather than eroded and entirely subsumed by them. Hmong and Yao traders benefit in numerous ways from their frontier location, and as transnational societies, in their trade pursuits. In some segments of upland commodity chains - as for the cross-border water buffalo and textile trades – these groups have the upper hand over ethnic Kinh who control these trades elsewhere. As many upland minorities in this region are multi-lingual, they are able to trade with diverse groups in the borderlands, and take advantage of their strong transnational kinship connections.

Having reviewed the key findings of this study, what might happen next in these market arenas and what might this all mean for individual upland traders? Moreover, with the conclusions raised here, what potential steps might state or development agents take in

order that they might better support upland trade endeavours, instead of inadvertently undermining them? What follows here is extrapolation from my experience in the field, and is not based on evidence to date. However, in the near future there are some important elements that I believe will be of most concern for ethnic minority residents, and traders in particular. As it stands, it appears that upland livelihood vulnerabilities are very likely to increase. One of the key causal factors will be the resultant affects of climate change – which is already bringing less regularity of seasonal temperatures, and an increase in natural disasters such as floods. This will affect upland livelihoods by directly impacting staple crop production, forest products, livestock, as well as derivative activities such as alcohol making.

More specifically relating to markets, uplanders will probably see increased state control over markets, trade, and traffic across the border, as well as the dramatic inflow of far greater numbers of new economic agents on the scene due to a boost in tourism to more areas of the uplands and the completion (to be completed in 2012) of a massive transportation/economic corridor between Hà Nội and Kunming, Yunnan.<sup>201</sup> As these elements may introduce more opportunities while likely also influencing greater instability for uplander livelihoods, I suggest that kinship support systems, particularly cross-border networks, are going to become even more important, and that these resources will continue to be drawn upon and adapted for economic purposes by ethnic minorities such as Hmong.

While the Vietnam state's market improvement agenda in the uplands aims primarily to support upland local socio-economic development, the 'development failures' that we have seen ensue as a consequence suggests a vital need for planners to pay greater attention to the ways marketplaces are actually being used. A more informed approach to market development should certainly take better care to involve local voices in the planning process. Local residents should be involved at all stages, particularly in determining whether a new market is desired or needed in a given place, and if and in

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<sup>201</sup> This Hanoi-Kunming corridor will reduce the travel time between these two cities from 3 days to nine hours. Road traffic along this route is expected to increase from three million (2011) to 5.5 million in 2012 and 17 million vehicles in 2022.

what ways an old market should be improved. Traders should be provided with accurate information as to how long market projects will take, be given adequate temporary market infrastructure in the meantime, and be informed of whether they will still be able to have a spot in the new marketplace when completed.

Rather than assuming that ethnic minorities are unskilled at trade or ‘resist the market’, better attention should also be paid to how ethnic minorities are specifically engaged in trade and use marketplaces, to ensure that upland development and market integration policies match better with the actual livelihood goals and priorities of these groups. A need to acknowledge and support alternatives from the state’s market model - such as more flexible, seasonal, or spatially elastic approaches to trade - would enable markets to be better reshaped in favour of ethnic minorities, and likewise, facilitate the ways that they are being shaped by them (of likely benefit for ‘cultural tourism’ too).

With regards to the specific upland trades explored here, for water buffalo traders, I surmise that weather extremes due to climate change and heightened border controls to curb the spread of livestock disease will become increasingly important aspects, especially for cross-border traders. As buffalo vulnerability is likely to increase, it is critical that the already-existent exchange mechanisms which support local systems of access to these animals are protected. These systems should not be undermined by pushing more ‘modern’ approaches to livestock production and trade, so as to take advantage of the ‘comparative advantage’ of the northern uplands for buffalo rearing. This is particularly true as the majority of buffalo in these uplands are raised by small-holder households which depend on these livestock for production and financial security. Moreover, vaccination services should be more readily available in hamlets and marketplaces and at an affordable or subsidised cost, as these are often expensive, and thus vaccination rates are low.

Based on the case studies of Hmong and Yao spirits producers and traders, it appears that supporting a craft-village approach may not be so suitable for upland minority areas, if residents in neighbouring villages or the wider area are engaged in making a very similar

product. This can lead to differentially valuing similar products based on place of production and competing local village interests when some producers benefit from these new demands while others are excluded. Rather than adopting a one-village-one-product strategy or trademarking hamlet-specific products, it might make more sense to designate a wider geographical area as ‘specialty producers’ so that more participants can be included and share in the benefits. Moreover, with increased competition in the upland alcohol trade, if few producers feel they have secure businesses then there is less likely to be any trickle-down effect from more successful producer/traders to less successful producer/traders. Thus, government efforts that do not consider the on-the-ground realities of production and trade defeat their well-intentioned policies from the beginning. A situation continues where we see that the producer earns the least, as middlepeople typically benefit most.

Overall, mechanisms to protect ethnic minority trade endeavors must recognise that there are intrinsic power-based and institutional obstacles to their participation in economic activities. State interests in ethnic minority ‘specialty products’ need to consider how the geography and social control of accumulation may be shifted more towards minorities. As economic benefits are largely concentrated in the hands of ethnic Kinh, steps should be taken to ensure a more equitable distribution - especially for trades that have recently become commercial such as handicrafts and artisanal alcohols, but also the commercial trade in water buffalo.

In sum, this thesis has made an important contribution by shedding fresh light on the livelihood activities of upland traders - such as Paj, whom we first met at the very start of this journey - located on what is regarded as the geographical, economic, and cultural periphery of Vietnam. Yet through doing so, it has not been my intent to romanticise the capacities of ethnic minority traders, or to gloss over the very real economic and institutional barriers they face on a daily basis while working to build viable and culturally appropriate livelihoods. By highlighting the ‘marginal spaces’ in which upland ethnic minorities actively craft out their trading endeavours I also do not mean to imply that state and development actors should be allowed ‘off the hook’, or that uplanders

would be better off if simply left alone to their own devices. I hope that I have succeeded in showing how state upland development interventions uphold certain market models which, for the most part, work to favour certain groups of locals over others - consolidating the position of those already well-placed. This finding thus serves as a vital counterpoint to the predominant images that prevail in Vietnam of upland ethnic minorities as beyond the market, and in need of being 'shown the way.' Rather, we have seen how Paj and other traders just like her in Lào Cai province have come to assume centre stage in shaping the markets and trade networks for important cultural commodities, commodities aimed in many instances at ethnic minority consumers themselves - a vastly understudied group in their own right.



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