Challenges and dilemmas: fieldwork with upland minorities in socialist Vietnam, Laos and southwest China

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Abstract: *The Chinese, Vietnamese and Lao spaces within the upland Southeast Asian massif, sheltering over 80 million people belonging to geographically dispersed and politically fragmented minority populations, have only recently reopened to overseas academic endeavours. Undertaking social sciences research there among ethnic minority groups is underscored by a specific set of challenges, dilemmas, and negotiations. This special issue brings together Western academics and post-fieldwork doctoral students from the realms of social anthropology and human geography, who have conducted in-depth fieldwork among ethnic minorities in upland southwest China, northern Vietnam, and southern Laos. The articles provide insights into the struggles and constraints they faced in the field, set against an understanding of the historical context of field research in these locales. In this unique context that nowadays interweaves economic liberalisation with centralised and authoritarian political structures, the authors explore how they have negotiated and manoeuvred access to ethnic minority voices in complex cultural configurations. The ethical challenges raised and methodological reflections offered will be insightful for others conducting fieldwork in the socialist margins of the Southeast Asian massif and beyond. This specific context is introduced here, followed by a critique of the literature on the core themes that contributors raise.*

Keywords: *China, ethnic minorities, fieldwork, Laos, Southeast Asian massif, Vietnam*

The topics at the heart of this special issue interweave the professional, political and private, bringing together all the messiness, compromises and ethical dilemmas that make up social science fieldwork in the Global South. These are brought into even starker reality because of the specific circumstances surrounding everyday life and practices in China, Vietnam and Laos, especially for ethnic minorities. The human geographers and social anthropologists writing for this special issue are all actively engaged in research with ethnic minorities in socialist Asia, either as graduate students or professors. All of us have spent extended periods of time in our field sites, located in Figure 1, either for continuous periods of fieldwork or during repeat visits, the latter in part reflecting the realities of fieldwork in socialist countries. Each article here brings to the fore the positionalities of the authors in the field, and questions their subjective gazes, as well as debates over representations of 'the other' and

the importance of reflexivity in social science research. In doing so, we do not shy away from deliberating over the mistakes that we have made along the way and the rewards that can be gained from such critical reflection. We hope that this collection can act as a partial road map, providing directions to help ease novice researchers – or those more experienced elsewhere but new to this region – into and through their fieldwork experiences, in turn allowing for richer and more meaningful encounters and interactions in the field.

The principal organising theme of this special issue concerns the dilemmas that arise, the negotiations one must undertake, and the possible solutions that can be followed when undertaking fieldwork among ethnic minorities in socialist China, Vietnam and Laos. While the terms socialist and postsocialist are often used interchangeably in relation to the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of
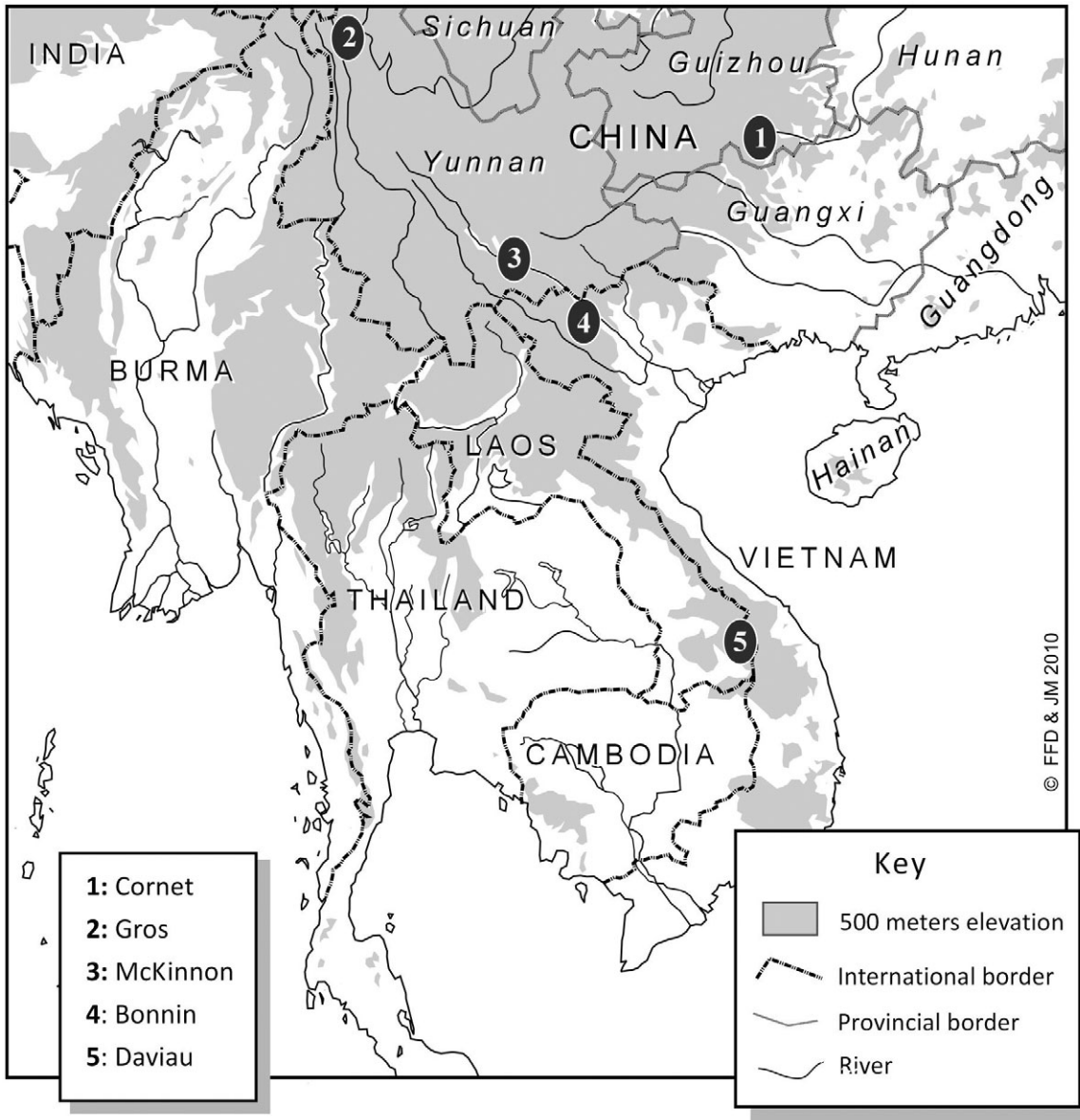
Figure 1. Locations of fieldwork in the Southeast Asian massif discussed in this special issue

Vietnam, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, there are important political differences with postsocialist Eastern Europe and the former USSR where state socialism collapsed in the late 1980s and the shift towards market integration and capitalism occurred rapidly. Economic reforms have been far more gradual in China (beginning in 1978), Vietnam (c. 1986) and Laos (1986), while the socialist governments in all three countries have maintained a firm grip on centralised, political control and all

remain single-party states. Reflecting this political nature and highlighting these differences with postsocialist Europe, in this issue we continue to refer to China, Vietnam and Laos as socialist. A further specificity of our work concerns the everyday realities that upland ethnic minorities in these three countries continue to experience. The participants in our research are not necessarily those in positions of political power nor financial wealth; yet nor are they passive victims of the changing circumstances

that entwine economic liberalisation with centralised and authoritarian political structures. Frequently, they quietly contest 'the rules' of the lowland ruling majorities; these ethnic minorities are well aware of the malleability of culture, history and social relations.

Not surprisingly, socialist rule in these three countries plays a substantial part in shaping the experience of our fieldwork within. Many of the authors in this special issue have also undertaken fieldwork elsewhere, in Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Thailand, the Philippines, Pacific Island States, and further afield. This provides space for the authors to reflect upon how socialist rule impacts upon field relationships, working conditions and perceptions. Of concern are debates over how to establish and maintain positive relationships in the field with ethnic minority informants (who may also become friends), political gatekeepers, and local researchers, as well as how to generate and sustain trust. Working with ethnic minorities often raises a strong desire to help right wrongs and support local customs, perhaps in direct opposition to the majority's wishes. 'Professional detachment' is not really an option nor a goal for any of the authors, although we ponder over and explore the quandaries raised in trying to balance empathy with observation, and scholarship with advocacy.

However, let us start with the pragmatic issues. To be allowed to undertake officially authorised social science fieldwork in the contemporary political climate in China, Vietnam or Laos, one must have the correct 'red stamps'. Beside the political symbolism embedded in this very colour, these stamps must adorn letters and authorisations provided by all levels of the state apparatus in order to confer to the bearer the proper credentials. Such negotiations take time and patience and can be extremely stressful, especially for those on limited research funds. Most frequently, gaining such authorisation entails being linked to either a state research institute or a local university. Those new to the field usually gain access to these institutions via colleagues' suggestions or supervisors' pre-established contacts, although it is possible – though not always successful – to gain access through more direct meetings, such as 'cold calling' an institute in the hope that someone will be willing to help out a new-

comer (see Scoggin, 1994). Often, fortuitous meetings help pave the way, as noted by Cornet and McKinnon (this issue). There are a number of compelling reasons why it is important to have official permission to undertake fieldwork in China, despite the drawbacks also attached (Hansen, 2006). Gros (this issue) notes how he came to this realisation while in the field reflecting upon the problems a lack of authorisation was going to cause not only him, but also those he wanted to interact with.

There is also the possibility of gaining access to field sites via non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in potential field site areas, through both authorisations and logistical support. This raises a different set of concerns and ethical dilemmas (see Daviau, this issue), as NGOs have their own specific research agenda that they expect employees or consultants to follow, or may lay claim to research results after fieldwork and analysis. Participatory learning and action projects, and participatory geographic information systems, involve collaborative research with local researchers and are another potential trajectory for research, moving away from more traditional ethnographic studies. The benefits and downfalls of taking such an approach in socialist states where authorities often remain cautious of those wanting to undertake long-term fieldwork are considered here by McKinnon.

What one might consider the first hurdle to reaching 'the field' – gaining a research visa and the required official permissions – is then soon followed by a range of other anxieties and coping strategies. Of the three countries under scrutiny, fieldwork procedures and practices for foreign researchers in China are the best documented to date (see, for example, Thurston and Pasternak, 1983; Curran and Cook, 1993; Rofel, 1993; Herrold, 1999; Pieke, 2000; Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006).[1] This relative wealth of reflection regarding China-based fieldwork is not surprising given the country's size and the fact that it 'opened up' again to outside social science researchers before either Vietnam or Laos. Albeit, the initial acceptance of (US) researchers in 1978 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was curtailed in 1981, at the expulsion of a US graduate student, and fieldwork thereafter was significantly restricted for quite some time (see Thurston and Pasternak, 1983; Pieke,

2000; Harrell, 2007). Nevertheless, discussions on fieldwork specifically among ethnic minorities in China are far less common, with Smith (2006) working in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Hansen (2006) working with Naxi and later Han migrants to ethnic minority regions, Yeh (2006) working in Tibet, and Harrell (2007) working among a number of ethnic minorities in southwest China, especially the Yi and Nuosu, being among the few academic authors who explicitly discuss fieldwork procedures and reflect upon their experiences among ethnic minorities in that country.

In comparison, there is very little written on fieldwork practices in Vietnam with *any* ethnic group, beyond Bertrand (1994) and Scott *et al*. (2006) working predominantly with the Kinh majority. Bertrand (1994) explores the conditions of fieldwork in the early 1990s, considering the differences between undertaking fieldwork in the North versus the South, suggesting that while local authorities in the North follow directives from the capital diligently, local leaders in the South 'make their own law'. He then analyses the role of local gatekeepers and the administrative obstacles to undertaking fieldwork with coastal sampan dwellers. Scott *et al*. (2006) profile the conditions that they met when carrying out fieldwork as graduate students in three different locales in Vietnam in the late 1990s, focusing upon the procedures that they were required to follow and the gatekeepers and bureaucratic hurdles that they faced along the way. These three authors, likewise, observe the lack of publications on fieldwork in Vietnam, noting instead that authors tend to make passing reference to research procedures and conditions, such as Marr (1993), Fforde (1996), Kerkvliet (1995) and Forbes (1996). Increasingly however, as the country opens up to Western-based researchers, more doctorate and master's theses are being completed in which students consciously reflect upon their fieldwork experiences with ethnic minorities, such as Sowerwine (2004) and Schoenberger (2006).

Turning to Laos, the cupboard is bare. Outside this special issue, Vandergeest *et al*. (2003) analyse approaches to research, describing a North–South collaboration with the National University of Laos, yet with a focus on institutional capacity building and no mention of fieldwork per se. Indeed, Enfield (2010)

stresses the need for far more sustained field research residence in Laos, although a small number of graduate students have recently accomplished this. Still to be published are nuanced reflections upon such fieldwork, a void that Daviau helps to fill in this issue.

One might think that turning to works on postsocialist Eastern Europe and the former USSR and the growing body of literature on the trials and tribulations of undertaking fieldwork in such locales, as discussed by Hörschelmann and Stenning (2008), the contributors to the edited collection by De Soto and Dudwick (2000), and Hann *et al*. (2002), among others, could be insightful.[2] Although important and interesting in their own right, I did not find these of direct use for researchers about to step into the socialist Asia realm because of very marked dissimilarities in political-economic and social context and institutional settings, as noted earlier.

To further understand the specific contexts in which the researchers of this special edition are engaged, next I briefly introduce the ethnic minorities or 'subjects' of our research. Then I turn to define and review the core elements considered in this special issue – beyond the 'nuts and bolts' of physically getting to a field site – including positionality and reflexivity, power relations and the role of gatekeepers, and ethical dilemmas. Here I focus upon what has been written previously on these elements, albeit limited, in relation to fieldwork in China, Vietnam and Laos. A conscious decision was made to focus this special issue upon the experiences of Western researchers. This is because the experiences reflected upon here are so very different from those encountered either by local researchers undertaking fieldwork in their own country, or those travelling from these socialist countries to the Global North (as highlighted in Bamo Ayi *et al*., 2007). We hope that companion works that go beyond our approach will be available soon, and my article in this issue, focusing upon the voices of Chinese and Vietnamese research assistants, is perhaps a bridge between these.

Meeting our informants

According to the latest censuses available in the three countries studied here, there live over 110

million people belonging to ethnic minority groups in the whole of China, Vietnam and Laos. Our fieldwork has concentrated in the southwestern uplands of China, the northern uplands of Vietnam, and upland Laos, located within what has been called the Southeast Asian massif. This area incorporates the uplands over roughly 500 metres elevation (shown in grey in Fig. 1), encompassing 'the high ranges extending southeast from the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau, and all the monsoon high country drained by the lower Brahmaputra, the Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Mekong and Red Rivers and their tributaries' (Michaud, 2009: 27).[3] In the part of the massif shared by China, Vietnam and Laos, there live approximately 70–80 million ethnic minority individuals.

Since 1981, China has officially recognised 55 groups of 'minority nationalities' (shaoshu minzu). Twenty-nine of these are indigenous to the southwestern area of China that lies within the Southeast Asian massif, with a population there of over 59 million. In Vietnam, there are 53 (since 1979) groups of 'national minorities' (các dân tộc thiểu số), and those living in the uplands number over 8.5 million (MacKerras, 2003; Michaud, 2006). In Laos, of the 49 ethnic groups (sonphao) now recognised by the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), 47 are minorities totalling 2.5 million people (Ovesen, 2004; National Statistics Centre, 2005).

It has been suggested by Goudineau (2000) that the shared state ideologies regarding ethnic minorities of China and Vietnam, are also reflected in Lao political strategies.[4] In China, after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power, national minorities (shaoshu minzu) had their cultures recognised again. Official ethnic minorities are now awarded certain 'affirmative action' measures, such as exemption from the one-child policy, fewer taxes and preferential university admission (Gladney, 2004; Michaud, 2009). Nevertheless, at the same time, while primary education may be available in local ethnic minority languages, one must be fluent in Mandarin to access higher education as well as numerous off-farm employment opportunities. As Michaud (2009: 34) notes 'such necessities act as powerful incentives for cultural integration of the younger generations into Han

society. Indeed, official recognition only partly masks a national policy of slow but steady cultural integration'.

In Vietnam, *Đổi mới*, the Economic Renovation decreed in 1986 at the Sixth National Congress, and implemented over the following years, has generally reduced the level of state authoritarianism. A policy of 'selective cultural preservation' appears to best describe the state's approach to ethnic minorities, with cultural performances, material culture and tourist items being seen as worthy of preservation (especially on VTV5, the state-run television channel especially directed at ethnic minority viewers). Concurrently, 'unsavoury' practices such as slash and burn/swidden agriculture and certain ritual and shaman expenditures are strongly discouraged. Yet as a whole, upland ethnic minorities continue to be little understood by lowland Kinh, often characterised as being 'backwards' or 'lazy' (van de Walle and Gunewardena, 2001; Koh, 2002; Sowerwine, 2004).

In Laos, a relocation policy for ethnic minorities (discussed further by Daviau, this issue) is at the heart of the government's plans for upland non-Lao settlements. Such policies 'result in the implicit confirmation of ethnic Lao political and cultural superiority' (Ovesen, 2004: 214). Ovesen (2004: 222) continues to note that 'the official view tends to be that non-Lao traditions are archaic and not conducive to improving the socio-economic conditions of the group in question' (see also Stuart-Fox, 1991). Given that these are the contexts in which our fieldwork is carried out, the themes reviewed next and then expanded upon in our articles are not entirely surprising.

Pre-field preparation: Reflecting upon positionality, power relations and ethical dilemmas

Positionality and reflexivity

Debates over positionality and reflexivity have been growing in critical discussions of the politics and ethics of fieldwork among social anthropologists and postcolonial and feminist geographers since the 1980s.[5] Positionality involves the recognition that 'all knowledge is produced in specific contexts or circumstances and that these situated knowledges are

marked by their origins' (Valentine, 2002: 116). Hopkins (2007: 391) proposes that such positionality is inclusive of one's race, class, gender, age, sexuality, disability as well as life experiences. Yet I suggest positionality is more than these characteristics. It can also include philosophical perspectives and ways of viewing the world, political leanings, and specific combinations of these, such as having the same gender and sense of humour as the informants, but being very different in terms of ethnicity and social class. In turn, England (1994: 82) defines reflexivity as 'self-critical sympathetic introspection' coupled with 'the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as a researcher'.

While such concerns with establishing self-conscious positionality via reflexivity in social science research are echoed by many, including McDowell (1992), Katz (1994), Radcliffe (1994), Moss (1995) and Rose (1997), it is still relatively uncommon for field researchers to document the practice of these considerations *in their published work*. This is certainly the case with regard to socialist China, Vietnam and Laos where, until this special issue's contributions, reflexivity regarding the positionality of researchers engaging with ethnic minorities was rare. The benefit of such a reflexive approach to research, England (1994: 89) argues, is that it 'allows the researcher to be more open to challenges to their theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises'.

Turning to specific features of the positionality of Western researchers in Vietnam, Scott *et al.* (2006) noted that being female facilitated easy rapport with female respondents; yet resulted in far less socialising with males. However, at the same time, their 'foreignness' did still grant them some invitations to male circles, placing them in a somewhat ambiguous gender role. Smith (2006) researching with Uyghur in China also reflects upon how she negotiated her positionality depending on who she was interacting with, as best summarised in this quote:

> Keen to avoid being channelled into activities considered suitable for women, I re-negotiated my role afresh depending on the gender, educational and religious (nominal or observant) background of companions. With rural men and most women, I was the epitome of female modesty. With educated men, I played up my Western image and academic status. This

enabled me to assume a neutral role vis-à-vis men, and to observe from the men's side of the room at Uyghur weddings, where guests are conventionally segregated. I was thus included in the 'male fraternity' closed to the society's female members. I gained perhaps greater access than a male researcher, who would have had access to male domains but only limited access to female domains (Smith, 2006: 143).

Our positionality is commonly influenced by those to whom we have access in the field. For instance, Svensson (2006) researching cultural heritage in China quickly realised that she was not going to have fruitful interviews with local residents if she had been observed initially talking and walking around a village or neighbourhood with party secretaries and local officials. She was indeed being positioned by future interviewees. Likewise, Cornet (this issue) quickly realised that just having a government-sanctioned research permit made local villagers suspicious of her motives, associating her with those they were in conflict with. Moreover, as Cornet and Gros show, we cannot jump to the conclusion that a clear binary exists between the lowland, ethnic majority and ethnic minorities and how they will position outside researchers; state employees are often ethnic minorities in remote villages, adding extra complex layers of positionalities and power relations.

Power relations and gatekeepers

Feminist geographer Kim England suggests that relationships between researchers and the researched can lie anywhere along a spectrum from 'reciprocal' to 'potentially exploitive' while, at the same time, continuing to be 'inherently hierarchical' (England, 1994: 82, 86). Relationships in the field are a result of specific power structures which are highly contingent on one's own positionality, along with that of one's research collaborators and interviewees, as well as the time available and context. Certainly, specific circumstances can render the researcher 'quite helpless' (Wolf, 1996: 22), such as when attempting to gain permission from authorities to undertake interviews (see Bonnin; Cornet; Daviau; and Gros), when interviewing powerful actors (Bonnin; Cornet), or when observing what one believes to be inappropriate behaviour or social injustice (see Bonnin this issue). Yet then

again, a researcher from the Global North is frequently in a position of relative power with regards to ethnic minority interviewees. Researchers commonly have more educational qualifications, an ability to access research funds beyond local norms, the freedom to leave the field as they wish, and a capability to decide how research results will be portrayed and disseminated (see Svensson, 2006).

Such power relations are closely intertwined with the role of gatekeepers, defined by human geographer Hay (2000: 114) as a person who controls 'opportunities to interact with others in the chosen research site'. This is a fairly narrow definition however, albeit one that does reflect some of the situations we have found ourselves in, having to negotiate with authority figures and try to manoeuvre around a host of obstacles to access field sites and interviewees. Yet, more recently, a broader definition of gatekeepers has been suggested, including 'those who provide – directly or indirectly – access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional or informational' (Campbell *et al.*, 2006, 98), reflecting the positive aspect that gatekeepers can also bring to one's fieldwork experiences (see also Heller *et al.*, 2010).

Hansen (2006), describing fieldwork with ethnic minorities in southwest China, notes that classical participant observation is frequently just not possible because of local gatekeeper decisions. She remarks:

> Ethnographic fieldworkers in China are faced with a number of challenges which may not be specific for China only, but which certainly are distinctively different from fieldwork in many other parts of the world. Practical circumstances such as the political restrictions on research topics, limited access to data, closed areas, and control of researchers' movements, have forced anthropological fieldworkers to develop other ways of studying social life and culture than the 'traditional' fieldwork method which Malinowski so tellingly called 'participant observation' (Hansen, 2006: 81; see also Michaud, this issue).

As noted by Cornet and Gros (this issue), protocols are such that a research proposal is usually presented to Chinese university officials – often one's initial gatekeepers – who then liaise with the local government and facilitate field access, as well as providing an official research assistant – for a fee. Gatekeepers at all stages of this process may or may not agree to the research being proposed and the processes one then wants to follow in the field. This can result in research proposals needing to be made 'more palatable' for local authorities, as also noted by Daviau in Laos and Bonnin in Vietnam (this issue). Some of these negotiations, told from 'both sides of the coin' – the Western academic and his Chinese counterparts – are also explored thoughtfully by Bamo Ayi, Harrell and Ma Lunzy (2007) in their collaborative book on fieldwork experiences in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan.

Herrold (1999), in a field note on research in Guizhou, southwestern China, details further how the Western researcher can be at the mercy of local gatekeepers and protocol. After three months, she was finally allowed to stay overnight in local hamlets around Caohai Nature Reserve without a 'minder', resulting in far more rewarding dinner conversations than formal interviews. She also notes the role of her delegated driver as an additional (perhaps non-intentional) gatekeeper, as a typical day of interviews was governed by his need to detour, sleep, eat, and so on. She provides an entertaining example of a typical 'day in the field' that highlights the frustrations faced when operating with local gatekeepers and 'minders'. Similarly, Gros (this issue) explains how, over time, local officials came to be less wary of him (see also Mueggler, 2001). This was likewise found to be the case for Bonnin in Vietnam (this issue), who was finally able to undertake research with self-selected research assistants, rather than those appointed by the state. Interestingly, it does seem that wishing to do fieldwork in 'remote' areas with ethnic minorities can aid one's ability to work (after a while) without state appointed research assistants; Gros' assistants did not want to get snowed in over winter in the Dulong Valley, and Bonnin's state-assigned assistants were often too homesick, bored or concerned about being in an area ruled by malevolent ghosts to stay that long. This also depends, of course, on official views of what areas are politically sensitive.

Smith (2006), recalling fieldwork procedures in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,

Western China, in 1995–1996 considered local authorities and informants to hold much of the power in the research process, considering herself at their mercy to access sites and data. She nevertheless explains how she bargained where she could and gained remarkable access, considering that she had arrived in an ethno-politically charged environment with research interests in Uyghur-Han relations while a doctoral student. She reports that 'a letter of introduction to a named cadre and a fee of £5000 gained me a research visa (code F) and affiliation to the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, located in north-west Ürümchi' (Smith, 2006: 137). She adds that while the academy 'seemed bent on keeping my research indoors and firmly away from Ürümchi's Uyghurs', she was able to negotiate a trip to the south of the province 'as a tourist'; here, her identity as a young female worked to her advantage, as she assumed she was perceived as non-threatening. As such, at times she saw merit in downplaying her official researcher role, much like Hansen (2006).

Solinger (2006), working in China on local economic, migration and employment questions, mostly with Han Chinese, details interesting strategies regarding how she was able to 'interview up', and hence, obtain information from potential 'information gatekeepers'. Prior to interviewing state officials, she gathered extensive knowledge about the interviewee and their work, including details of accomplishments and experiences. Showing such knowledge and 'stroking egos' whenever possible, she argues, meant that her interviewees opened up easily. Nevertheless, she noted at other times, it paid to appear naive or ignorant. She thus suggests to 'appear at once knowledgeable but ignorant, knowing and not knowing' (Solinger, 2006: 161). The benefits of this chameleon approach are also reflected in the comments made by Chloe and Vi, two research assistants who discuss with me in this issue how they devised careful strategies to address specific interviewees; this also speaks to an array of ethical dilemmas.

Ethical dilemmas

More often than not, as academics undertaking fieldwork, we are required to submit ethics certificate applications that consist of a review of our proposed field methods by an institutional review board. Clearly, however, ethical field-work goes beyond such a routine procedure or 'ethics for ethics' sake' (Boyd *et al.*, 2008: 38; see also Hay, 1998; Guillemin and Gilliam, 2004; Berg, 2007). Ethics in practice appeals to reflexive methods that guide one's morally based decisions and allow the researcher to be sensitive to the ethical dimensions of fieldwork practice. In turn, this helps us to be prepared – as much as possible – to cope with ethical concerns that may arise (Gold, 2002).

As Thurston (1983: 9) rightly contends, the ethical dilemmas of undertaking fieldwork in China (and I would add Vietnam and Laos) 'are weighty'. Maintaining one's access to the field, especially over repeat visits, as an overseas researcher can lead to compromises over the data published and thus debates over the integrity of academic research. If one publishes findings that are offensive to the government concerned, and a senior government official reads it, it is highly likely that access will be denied – for either the researcher, or those associated with that specific researcher or, indeed, for future scholars from the same country, as noted earlier. The problem is often knowing *what* exactly are considered controversial findings, as these can shift on an almost weekly basis, dependent on factors often far removed from the researcher's gaze and comprehension.[6] As Svensson (2006) notes, in China, topics that one might not immediately consider as sensitive, suddenly become so if they relate to difficult political decisions, to economic interests, or if there have been open protests, even if miles away from one's field site. Curran and Cook (1993) furthermore note the risks entailed for Chinese researchers when their overseas collaborators publish critical research internationally.

These dilemmas, in turn, point to concerns over the safety and well-being of interviewees in their research participation.[7] In China, as Hansen (2006) maintains and Cornet and Gros (this issue) expand upon, locals, especially ethnic minorities, are frequently subjected to investigations into their private lives by state researchers and government representatives (also reported by Daviau in the Lao context). Over time, locals have come to realise that such investigations can have serious, negative conse-

quences on their lives and livelihoods, including 'loss of illegally cultivated land, children sent to school, birth control' and so on (Hansen, 2006: 82). Because of such historical state intervention, Hansen contends that any current day researcher 'is walking in the footsteps of the Communist Party' (Hansen, 2006: 81); a phrase repeated by both Cornet and Gros (this issue), reflecting its pertinence. Essentially, Hansen (2006) reminds us to question who we are and how we are positioned when we arrive in the field with a letter of invitation or a research assistant from a powerful institution, and the unforeseen consequences that this and our questions may have.

Svensson (2006), writing on urban redevelopment and cultural-built heritage in Han Chinese cities, comments upon relationships with interviewees who may build up expectations, based in part on the empathy shown by the researcher. As she notes, 'it is natural during interviews to be sympathetic and attentive to the interviewees' concerns. But it can feel very unsatisfying to leave an interviewee/field site after a long and sympathetic interview without offering any help' (Svensson, 2006: 269). She continues to question the degree to which genuine friendships, and all the expectations that these can bring with them, can be formed in the field, raising concerns mirrored in this issue by Bonnin in Vietnam.

Ethical concerns can also arise over what is appropriate or adequate compensation for interviewee's time (see Head, 2009). This can easily also become a juggling act with the hospitality that interviewees wish to show. Frequently, when interviewing with ethnic minorities, Western researchers are treated to food and drink, which can consume sizable amounts of locals' incomes. Such offering often include large amounts of alcohol, again using up considerable family supplies (see Svensson, 2006; Fiskesjö, 2010). Hence, interview schedules can take on careful timetabling dimensions to avoid meal times, something Christine Bonnin and I have frequently negotiated while interviewing in northern Vietnam. When arriving with food as recompense for a family whom we wished to interview, we always hoped that it would remain with them for a later meal, rather than being immediately prepared to be consumed by us; a delicate negotiation that we sometimes managed to accomplish, sometimes not. Gros (this issue) also discusses concerns over consumption, this time in relation to the Drung customary New Year festival and deliberations over whether, after state pressure had all but extinguished it, it should be reinstated, with all the 'counter-productive' consumption that it entails.

Svensson (2006) admits to feeling uncomfortable with the wealth differential she encountered with interviewees in both urban and rural China (see Smith, 2006). As with our contributors here, she was often asked questions about her salary, or the price of an item of her clothing. She concludes that there are a host of challenges and problematic situations researchers can find themselves in, which always require negotiations over one's positionality and level of involvement versus neutrality or detachment. Only the most insensitive of us, she holds, will not be impacted by our time in the field and will not question the success of our fieldwork. Careful reflexivity is, therefore, essential in deciding how one is going to deal with and find solutions to such ethical concerns. Some such solutions are proposed in the articles that contribute to this issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*.

Entering the field

The contributors to this issue, three women and four men, bring with them diverse positionalities. We span three nationalities (Canadian, French and New Zealand), and range in age, experience and seniority in academic positions from post-fieldwork doctoral students, to newly hired permanent researchers, to mid-career and retired professors. Among us, we speak English, French, Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, Lao, Tarieng, Drung, Thai, and a few other Asian and European languages not associated with this issue. We have been trained as cultural anthropologists and human geographers in a wide range of university settings, with a diversity of theoretical backgrounds. Such positionalities enrich the following articles. They let us explore the breadth of fieldwork experiences on the ground with ethnic minorities in socialist China, Vietnam and Laos, and how we have learnt to negotiate different environments and circumstances, trying to find workable solutions for all those involved.

We start the special issue with Candice Cornet's work in the remote Guizhou province, southwest China, in a village where ethnic minority Dong are coming to terms with the potential uneven returns from cultural tourism (see Fig. 1, number 1). She introduces us to the hierarchic maze of the Chinese administration that she traversed to gain field site access, and reflects on working with different state research assistants. She analyses the impacts of her positionality, first as a young female, and later as a mother bringing her small daughter to the field. Further to China's southwest, Stéphane Gros, researching with the Drung in northwestern Yunnan province on the Burmese border (Fig. 1, number 2), then leads us through an account of a 'blunder' in his research as he inadvertently involves locals in a debate over whether the local New Year's celebrations, banned for almost 20 years, should be held again or not. He reflects on the degree to which researchers can meddle, from a methodological point of view, in interlocutors' lives in such circumstances and the extent to which we influence our fieldwork surroundings. John McKinnon, also in Yunnan, but this time to the southeast on the Vietnamese border (Fig. 1, number 3), takes us from ethnographic-style research to a participatory research exercise regarding mapping land use change and environmental challenges in two adjacent villages of Hani ethnicity. In describing the complexities encountered in implementing a participatory framework and the ambiguities of the outcomes engendered, he suggests that privileging local coherence and celebrating such participatory approaches should not be done at the expense of ignoring the intricacies of on-going behaviours that may be contradictory in a rapidly changing context. For all the goodwill we may bring with us, we must acknowledge and accept the local agency of those with whom we work, and concede that all may not go as planned.

With this in mind, we then cross the border into Lao Cai province, northern Vietnam where Christine Bonnin illustrates a range of 'messy fieldwork' concerns that came to light during her research among ethnic minority marketplace traders, including Hmong and Yao (Dao) (Fig. 1, number 4). Like Cornet and Gros, Bonnin traces the official procedures needed for her to gain entry to the field, all the way from the national level Vietnam Academy of Social Science to the local hamlet, detailing how these official lines can blur over time. She documents the gatekeepers whom she met and how she worked to appease them while continuing to advance her work. She concludes by highlighting the personal and ethical dilemmas that one must face when friendships are made in the field and expectations raised.

We then head further south again to the Sekong and Attapeu provinces in Laos across the border from central Vietnam. Here, Steeve Daviau reflects on fieldwork with the ethnic minority Tarieng living in the Annam Range (Fig. 1, number 5). He compares the research practices and field access procedures that he followed as a consultant working for different NGOs in the region, to those he negotiated when he returned to the field as a graduate student with all the required official permissions. Working with an ethnic minority group demeaned for decades by the socialist state, he stresses the need to create a discursive space that allows for Tarieng voices to be heard and their agency recognised.

In an attempt to give agency to others involved in the research process, I then report on interviews with two local research assistants who were part of the fieldwork being reflected upon here; Chloe, working with Candice Cornet in China, and Vi, working with Christine Bonnin in Vietnam. I interviewed both assistants after their extended fieldwork periods and invited each to contemplate the process from their own points of view. They reflect upon how they managed unusual and often difficult situations in the field and how their positionalities played into specific coping strategies. They then provide us with pertinent suggestions regarding how Western researchers should prepare for working alongside local assistants, as well as helpful advice for future assistants working with overseas researchers in these locales.

In a final research note, Jean Michaud reflects upon his journey from graduate student living in Northern Thailand studying the impacts of trekking tourism in a Hmong village, to anthropology professor and supervisor researching ethnic minorities in Laos, Vietnam and China. He notes the on-the-ground differences between undertaking fieldwork in democratic Thailand versus

socialist China, Vietnam and Laos. He also points out how trust is so important to maintaining positive research relations in the latter three countries. This notion of trust, implicit or explicit in all the articles here, reveals itself in numerous ways. It weaves together interviewees, government officials, student researchers and professors to create the confidence needed to embark upon safe and viable fieldwork.

In sum, the authors in this special edition highlight the approaches that can be taken to acquire the necessary permits and red stamps to work in what are often sensitive locales and the numerous gatekeepers that one may meet and need to negotiate with to access minority voices. Furthermore, we call attention to the ethics involved in completing fieldwork with people who are often misunderstood by members of the dominant ethnic group in their country of residence. Being an ethnic minority here plays a decisive role in one's everyday life, impacting directly on social relationships, cultural practices and political power. Throughout, the authors emphasise the reflexive stance we all need to take while considering the social, economic and political positions our interviewees are placed in, and the multiple positionalities that we find ourselves taking on while in the field. As such, it is the hope that this special issue can prepare and inform those who wish to undertake research with ethnic minorities in the uplands of China, Vietnam and Laos. While some of the concerns, dilemmas and solutions raised here will resonate with those who have undertaken fieldwork elsewhere in the Global South, there are unique elements of fieldwork with minorities in these socialist locales. The authors are optimistic that those readers who venture to research in these areas will find it as rewarding – despite or perhaps because of the challenges – as we do.

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Notes

1   Bin Liang and Lu (2006) also provide an interesting overview of the dilemmas faced when undertaking contemporary ethnographic fieldwork regarding criminology in China, approached from the US academic perspective.

2   Other interesting postsocialist edited collections, albeit those that reflect even less on fieldwork conditions, include Burawoy and Verdery (1999), Berdahl *et al.* (2000), Kuehnast (2000), Bönker *et al.* (2002), and Hann (2002), as well as articles or chapters by Kürti (1999, 2000), Wolfe (2000), Humphrey and Mandel (2002), Muršič (2002), Caldwell (2005), Hann (2005) and Chari and Verdery (2009). Articles regarding Cuba that do reflect upon fieldwork concerns include Reid-Henry (2003) and Michalowski (2006).

3   See van Schendel (2002), Scott (2009) and Michaud (2010) for recent debates over the terminology of this region, also termed by van Schendel and Scott as 'Zomia', albeit a name they use to describe different land areas and populations within.

4   For a review of the historical development of policies regarding ethnic minorities in each of the three countries, see Michaud (2009). For China, also see Gladney (2004); for Vietnam, see McElwee (2004); and for Laos, see Ovesen (2004).

5   Early writers in this field include, among others, Mohanty (1988), Harding (1991), Keith (1992), Duncan and Sharp (1993), Probyn (1993), England (1994), Kobayashi (1994), Madge (1994), Nast (1994), Haraway (1996), and Wolf (1996). Since the early 1990s, the number of relevant articles has continued to grow and I do not list all who have followed here.

6   For example, I was once stopped, held for 2 hours in a backroom, and my belongings thoroughly searched upon entering Vietnam for no reason I could comprehend. Later, I heard that there had been recent US missionary activity in the Vietnam Central Highlands that the government frowned upon. I can only surmise that perhaps the airport immigration officials were told to look out for repeat visitors from certain countries.

7   Skidmore (2006) working in Burma, raises a number of similar ethical concerns including the safety of her informants after she left the country with her research data. Her interviewees were especially anxious as to how she might then write up her results. She noted that several recorded their conversations *themselves*, as well as her doing so, as a safety measure.

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