

Editorial: migration, markets and social change in the highlands of Vietnam

Andrew Hardy and Sarah Turner

The highlands of Vietnam have undergone major changes over the last half century. The wars caused great disruption in these areas; for the northern highlands in 1946–1954, and the Central Highlands in 1960–1975. Yet the end of war heralded the beginning of new and even more sweeping processes of change. The articles in this issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* describe and interpret many of these transformations. In particular, the Central Highlands have, during this period, become an agricultural frontier for people from all parts of the country, with wide ranging consequences for the whole population. The interpretation of this process involves an analysis of some of the major themes in the post-1975 history of Vietnam.

The migration of rural people is a key dynamic in the formation of the frontier. Migrants to the Central Highlands include ethnic Kinh from the densely populated plains, and highlanders (montagnards) from the north, whose own land was subject to agricultural expansion in the mid-century and is currently in a state of environmental and social crisis. More than a million people arrived to live in the Central Highlands over the last two decades, mobilised on state settlement programmes or moving independently of the state with their own resources. Trade and agriculture were their main activities and they contributed to the emergence of a new economy in the region – an economy of commodity agriculture for export to the plains and abroad. This development has had a huge impact on the social and physical environment. Highlanders have found themselves in increasing contact with outsiders, facing choices about their lifestyles and challenges to their livelihoods. In many cases they have opted to withdraw further into the forest, itself under strain, due to the demand for land for coffee and other crops.

Analyses of the causes of this situation take two key factors into account. The first is the role of the state, for which this transformation is a symptom of successful policies. After 1975, the Central Highlands were earmarked for massive in-migration and agricultural transformation. At the time, this was a

Authors: Sarah Turner, Department of Geography, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin, New Zealand. E-mail: s.turner@hyperperth.otago.ac.nz Andrew Hardy, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Cres, National University of Singapore. E-mail: seaadh@nus.edu.sg

region of ethnic insurgency bordering Cambodia, and the settlement of lowland Kinh people there must be understood in terms of national security – internal and external – as well as economic development.

However, in the mid-1980s, there emerged a further powerful agent for change. Economic liberalisation, known as *Doi Moi*, had two effects. De-collectivisation released the rights to use of the land from state ownership, allowing people to sell (and therefore *leave*), and buy (and therefore *arrive*). In the northern highlands, where cooperatives were set in place from the late 1950s, the ethnic heterogeneity of the population impacted on the politics of de-collectivisation. In the late 1980s, the province of Bac Thai, in particular, underwent a process whereby ethnic Tay people reclaimed their ancestral land, displacing Kinh settlers from the 1960s, who were obliged to move into trade or move to live elsewhere. The consequences of land de-collectivisation thus went beyond local relations of agricultural activity, affecting people and economic practice throughout the country.

Doi Moi is also associated with market liberalisation, and this likewise had a huge impact on the highlands. The opening up of market relations in Vietnam in the 1980s made commodity agriculture both possible and profitable. Small upland town markets, with an established presence and defined roles within local communities, were incorporated into larger networks of trade and cultural exchange within the regional economy. These market relations extended further than the plains, into the global economy, as the uplands and their inhabitants became commodities themselves, for consumption by tourists from within Vietnam and abroad. The product from work on the land was now used less for subsistence and more as a commodity with commercial value. Linkages with distant markets were thus created, and in turn affected and encouraged agricultural development in the uplands. Pioneer farmers started making fortunes in what became widely known as a ‘promised land’. They set up networks of information and resources, ensuring a momentum to the transformation process challenging the control of the state and presenting a major threat to the environment.

These processes of change are common to Vietnam as a whole, but impacted particularly strongly on Vietnam’s upland areas, the northern and Central Highlands. The former has recently been described as a place where ‘too many people [are] trying to wrestle a living from fragile environments with limited agricultural potential’ (Jamieson, Le Trong Cuc and Rambo, 1998: 9). A frontier here, exploited in the 1950s and 1960s, has effectively closed. Many of the area’s inhabitants, indeed, are selling up and moving out. Most head for the Central Highlands, where opportunities for agricultural expansion remain legion. Areas of forest await clearance whilst crisis and closure remain some distance off. The nature of these opportunities and the time during which they will be available represent a dynamic for unique social and environmental change. By contrast with the northern highlands, where land is limited and the process of its exploitation from the 1950s was collectivised and local, the Central Highlands is a vast region of rich agricultural potential linked to the world economy.

The research papers presented here, based on recent fieldwork and primary data analyses, offer insights into changes in the cultures and livelihoods of the indigenous populations and arriving settlers in the highlands. The role of the state in this process of agricultural expansion and environmental transformation is also examined. The articles offer multiple perspectives on the emergence in the uplands of a frontier culture and economy, at a time of rapid social and environmental change.

This collection of articles emerged from two different meetings in 1999. Initially, in June, the idea of bringing the authors together was discussed amongst some attending a workshop entitled 'The Challenge of the Forest in Vietnam' (Phase 2), directed by Rodolphe De Koninck, in Buon Me Thuot, Vietnam, with financial support from the International Development Research Centre of Canada. Then, during 22–24 October 1999, the authors presented papers at the Joint Conference of the North-West Regional Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies and the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. These papers were presented in two related panels on the Vietnamese uplands entitled 'Highlanders of Vietnam: (1) Taming Nature, (2) Negotiating Nature', chaired by Jean Michaud and Rodolphe De Koninck respectively. Now, this edited volume presents revised versions of seven of the papers presented there, bringing together geographers, historians and anthropologists.

The first contributor, Rodolphe De Koninck, with his paper entitled 'The Theory and Practice of Frontier Development: Vietnam's Contribution' interprets the very active frontier scene in Vietnam, through the analysis of several forms of frontier development that have taken place at various times and in various regions of the world. Historical experiences of agricultural expansion are shown to have great relevance to the current situation in Vietnam's Central Highlands, an entire region which is being transformed by land pioneers.

We then move to Andrew Hardy's paper entitled 'Strategies of Migration to Upland Areas in Contemporary Vietnam'. This explores the ways in which state-organised migration programmes, the *Doi Moi* process of market-oriented economic reform, and the decisions of migrating individuals and families have combined to bring about the transformation of Vietnam's Central Highlands. Whilst since the mid-1970s, the state was using migrants as a major resource in fulfilling its programmes of upland settlement, it is interesting to observe, through Hardy's case studies, how migrants in the 1990s have managed to utilise such programmes to serve their own interests.

Turning the focus to agricultural colonisation policies, Steve Déry's paper on 'Agricultural Colonisation in Lam Dong Province, Vietnam' explores the continuous agricultural transformation by ethnic Kinh of mountains and plateaux in the central part of the country since 1975. This pioneering practice, which Déry argues was primarily motivated by the State, has contributed to integrate marginal territories and people (often autonomous and sometimes rebellious) into the nation. Due to intense agricultural colonisation, begun in the colonial period by the French, forests in the Central Highlands have

receded to a point where they only appear in residual areas. This paper looks at one such site where these processes remain in activity, the province of Lam Dong in the Central Highlands.

Focusing on a commodity produced by peasants in another such pioneer front, Stan B-H Tan's paper 'Coffee Frontiers in the Central Highlands of Vietnam: Networks of Connectivity', examines how whilst coffee is a 'global commodity', its cultivation often closely correlates with the expansion of pioneer frontiers. Tan examines how the gap between the 'global' and the 'peripheral' is bridged by series of network linkages that make possible the creation of export agro-commodity pioneer fronts. The networks of connectivity between the spontaneous migrant-peasants on a coffee pioneer front in the province of Dak Lak in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, and the global coffee market are then explored.

Examining the transformation of Vietnam's midlands from a different, yet related process, is Steffanie Scott's paper 'Changing Rules of the Game: Local Responses to Decollectivisation in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam'. Scott examines the processes of decollectivisation and land allocation, begun in the early 1980s, which, since 1993 have allowed households to transfer, exchange, mortgage, lease and inherit their plots. Utilising data gained recently from Thai Nguyen province, the study documents how ethnic composition, settlement history and uneven experiences of collectivisation weaved themselves together to result in new patterns of land ownership, as well as vulnerability.

Moving westwards, Yann Roche and Jean Michaud's research note, entitled 'Mapping Ethnic Groups in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam' highlights the usefulness of ethnic and cultural cartography as a tool to visualise the relationships between humankind and the environment, blending cultural exploration with more tangible factors like topography and climate. The preliminary results presented emphasise the distribution of ethnic groups in Lao Cai province, as well as providing a more detailed picture of two districts, Bac Ha and Sa Pa.

Within Lao Cai province, the town of Sa Pa is the locational focus of Jean Michaud and Sarah Turner's paper on 'The Sa Pa marketplace, Lao Cai Province, Vietnam'. Here, highland produce cultivated or gathered by montagnards dispersed in isolated hamlets is sold to, or exchanged with, other montagnards and to lowlanders for commodities and consumer goods. Yet over the last few years, a fast-growing tourist influx has contributed to modifying the market in a number of diverse ways. The paper shows that despite recent transformations, for most of the montagnards, the market there is still used for the same social purposes as in the past, while for others new opportunities make it a more desirable place to trade.

As can be seen from the timing of the conference from which these papers emerged, this Special Issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* has been compiled within a very short time period, which has regrettably meant that for technical reasons, Vietnamese diacritics have been unable to be incorporated into the texts. Yet, whilst there is always more to be done, we believe that the papers presented here will provide readers with a taste of some interesting and unique,

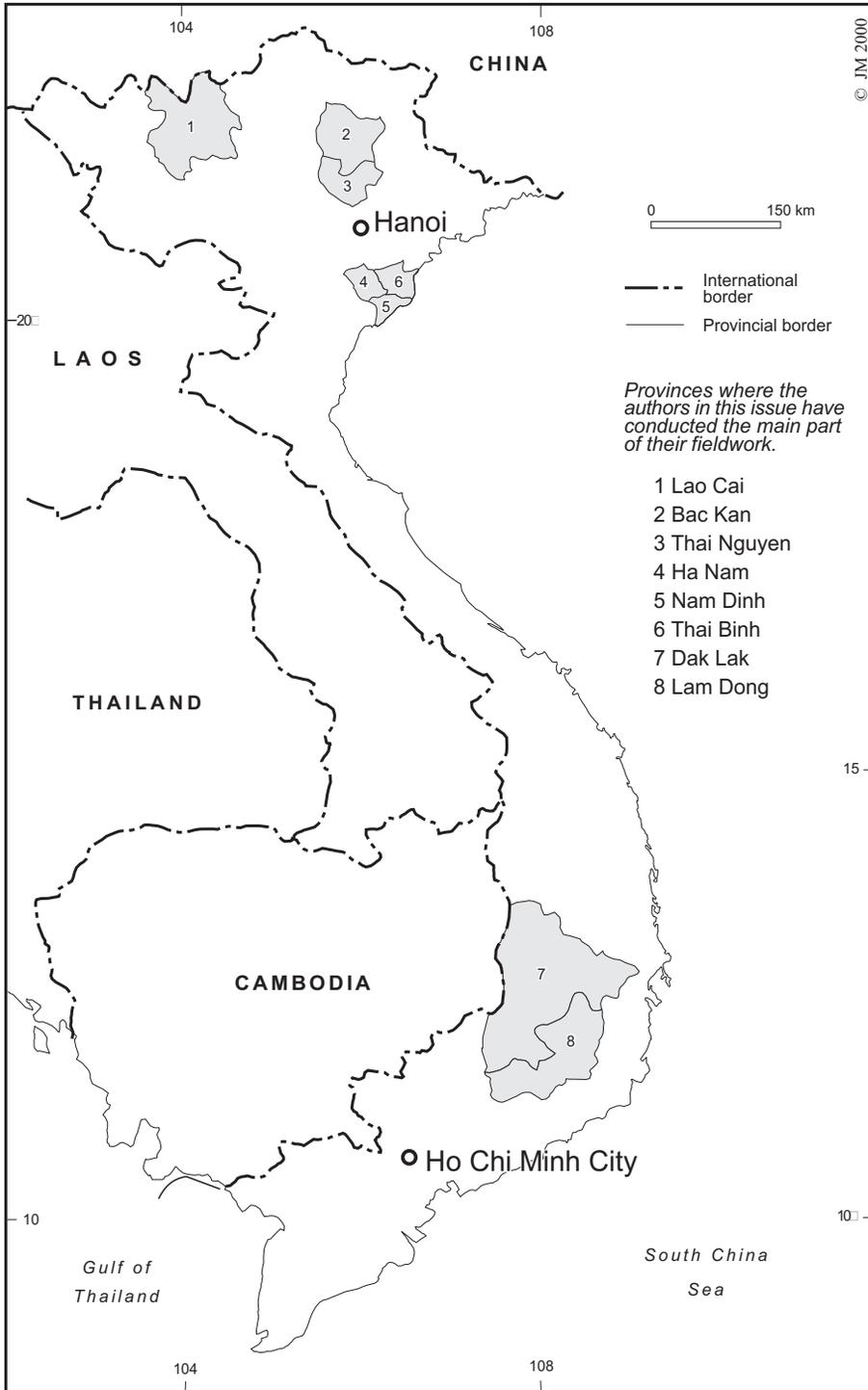


Figure 1. Fieldwork locations of authors

current research work, examining the dynamics and transformations at work in the upland areas of Vietnam. The locations in which the authors conducted the main part of their fieldwork are detailed in Figure 1.

REFERENCE

Jamieson, N. J., Le Trong Cuc and Rambo A. T. (1998) *The Development Crisis in Vietnam's Mountains*, Honolulu, East-West Centre.