

Navigating fieldwork politics, practicalities and ethics in the upland borderlands of northern Vietnam

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Abstract: *In this article, I detail and evaluate the negotiations I had to broker to conduct ethnographic research on marketplace vendors and trade in the upland borderlands of northern Vietnam. Working with the analogy of the numerous 'lines' I was constrained by, had to manoeuvre around, and at times crossed over, I begin with a discussion of the 'official lines' or state regulations imposed upon my research and how I worked with, or negotiated these limitations. I then reveal the important 'border guards' or gatekeepers, such as local state actors and also field assistants, who enabled or constrained access to informants in numerous different ways. I also highlight the logistical and practical lines that I had to accept and indeed, often draw, to accomplish my study. I conclude with a consideration of how friendships in the field drew me beyond the lines I had originally drawn around my research. These relationships furthered my anxiety over the possibilities for conducting research that ultimately contributes towards social justice in a constrained political setting such as that which presently characterises Vietnam.*

Keywords: *borderlands, ethics, ethnic minorities, fieldwork, research assistants, Vietnam*

Introduction

The process of undertaking qualitative research in the social sciences, involving a long period of engagement in 'the field', comes with a whole host of practical, logistical, ethical and personal implications, based upon the specific historical, sociocultural and political context of the chosen setting(s). In the case of socialist Vietnam, it is difficult to provide any uniform or consistent description or characterisation of the general 'research environment' that researchers can expect to find. In part, this is because the formal conditions governing the conduct of qualitative research are constantly transforming, and the precise ways that these rules are actually operationalised on the ground are often unpredictable. The research environment also obviously depends to a large degree on the particularities of one's topic, the locations of the research, and the groups of people selected to be the subjects of study. Yet Vietnam shares a degree of similarity with its neighbours – the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the People's Republic of

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 attempts to exert direct control over researchers' activities through a variety of means (see Cornet; Daviau; Gros, this issue).

In this article I contribute an in-depth evaluation of fieldwork trials and tribulations in the upland borderlands of northern Vietnam, emphasising the need for flexibility and adaptability, and providing potential solutions and coping mechanisms for novice researchers approaching similar field locales. I chart the different fieldwork 'lines' I found myself having to understand, follow, 'read between' and cross while carrying out ethnographic fieldwork. This fieldwork is the basis for my doctoral dissertation in human geography on rural marketplaces, commodity networks and trade livelihoods of Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities. The study is situated in Lào Cai, a northern upland province of Vietnam bordering China, where I conducted

fieldwork over a total period of 15 months between 2005 and 2009 (see Fig. 1, number 4, in Turner's introduction article, this issue). In this article I pay particular attention to issues that arose in connection with the specificities of state and institutional regulatory cultures, the important role of language assistants in the process of fieldwork, logistical and methodological concerns connected with a research project characterised by transience, and some of the ethical dilemmas that can emerge when research relationships and friends are formed in the field. I conclude the article with a consideration of the possibilities for how researchers might work towards a more politically engaged research in a context where such actions remain highly constrained by the state.

Upland ethnic minorities in Vietnam and the state

Vietnam has a large and diverse ethnic minority population comprising 54 state-classified ethnic groups (Kampe, 1997; Khong Dien, 2002). Ethnic Vietnamese or *Kinh*, meaning 'people of the capital' (Rambo, 2003: 139), make up 86% of the population, while ethnic minorities, officially referred to as the 'National Minorities' *các dân tộc thiểu số*, account for the remaining 14% and number around 11 million people (Michaud, 2006). If one focuses specifically on upland ethnic minority groups, the population is around 8.5 million (Michaud, 2006). Thirty-one of the 53 ethnic minority groups reside in the northern highlands; hence, ethnic heterogeneity is even more spatially concentrated (Koh, 2002). This rich sociocultural diversity in the uplands is largely due to the various waves of migration of different ethnic groups into the region over the centuries, predominantly from southwest China (Michaud *et al.*, 2002).

Vietnam's post-colonial policy record towards the ethnic minorities residing within its borders looks impressive in formal terms.¹ However, upon closer inspection, the autonomy of ethnic minority groups appears highly delimited by the state since independence (1954), especially in terms of spatial mobility, freedom to engage in customary sociocultural and livelihood practices, and ability to participate in civil society. Policies regarding the northern uplands and the 'minority question' have

always been premised upon an overarching preoccupation with national unity and assimilation. Thus, state control over these populations has been an integral aspect of the nation-building project (Sowerwine, 2004). Moreover, the perception of ethnic minorities as inferior to the ethnic Vietnamese, as socioculturally and economically 'backwards', has been pervasive. This has formed the underlying rationale for numerous state programmes that have had the effect of marginalising and devaluing ethnic minority lifestyles and ways of making a living. At the same time, and contradictorily, other state discourses espouse the beneficial aspects of ethnic minority culture, a process that has been termed 'selective preservation'² (Evans, 1985: 142; Saleminck, 2000; Michaud, 2009). Within the Vietnamese study of ethnology, the focus has been on the classification of these diverse groups, strongly influenced by Marxist–Leninist–Stalinist historicist and evolutionist notions of sociocultural development. This in turn has been used to legitimise state-building, integration and development agendas (Keyes, 2002; Koh, 2002; Michaud, 2009).

Furthermore, the state has tended to impose a 'one-size-fits-all' and 'top-down' approach in terms of policy design (Rambo, 2003; McElwee, 2004). Policies are devised for the lowland context, or else treat the entire highlands as a homogenous region to which the same standard framework can be applied (Sowerwine, 2004). Yet, in practice, the state has been unable to fully impose its uniform policy blueprint upon the uplands. Given its inappropriateness, ethnic minorities living in the northern highlands have responded to this blueprint in numerous – often covert – ways that better suit their own needs, often compromising the state's agenda in the process. Nevertheless, until very recently, studies on the impact of these agendas in the northern highlands or of ethnic minorities' responses have remained limited, stemming from state prerogatives to maintain stability in this politically sensitive region (Taylor, 2008: 5).

Adding to these dynamics is the overall legitimacy of qualitative social science research in Vietnam. Generally speaking, empirical research on social phenomena has largely occurred within a framework that favours top-down, formal knowledge and positivist, quantitative methods of data collection, which are

viewed as apolitical (Scott *et al.*, 2006: 31). The inclusion of the voices of local actors and their situated, local knowledges obtained via ethnographic methods remains less common. As I will go on to explore further in this article, a divergence in research cultures and traditions in cross-cultural settings can pose additional problems for researchers wanting to accomplish a long period of engagement in the field. Nevertheless, in the period since the State embarked upon *Đổi mới* – economic renovation moving the country towards greater market liberalisation and international openness – a growing number of ethnographic studies have investigated how northern upland minority groups are relating to wider structural transformations. The current situation for undertaking fieldwork in highland and national border areas of Vietnam has become more open than before,³ reflecting a state more receptive to foreign researchers (Scott *et al.*, 2006: 30; Taylor, 2008: 28).

Organising formal research access in Vietnam from the top down

The current steps that foreigners must pass through to be permitted to formally conduct research in Vietnam have been recently described by Scott *et al.* (2006). Yet, although there exists an overall ‘official route’ that should be observed by foreign researchers, one will often find that the actual implementation of regulatory procedures on the ground differs depending upon the host institute, location of field sites, subject matter of study and groups to be involved in the project. Nevertheless, in the main, this process can best be described as moving down an administrative hierarchy, with authorisations required first at the central state level and then, subsequently, at provincial, district and commune levels.⁴

In Vietnam, most foreign researchers are sponsored by a host institute, usually a state research or academic institution. For graduate students, it is difficult to approach sponsors independently, so for many like myself, these linkages occur through institutional collaboration between Vietnamese institutes and one’s home university.⁵ Officials at my host institute at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) assisted me with obtaining the initial research visa and then provided me with an official letter

of permission affixed with a ‘red stamp’, sign and symbol that I had passed through the legitimate route to conduct my study.⁶ VASS also produced special letters of permission for me when necessary to access data from various state bodies (such as the National Archives, and the Department of Ethnic Minorities). In addition, my sponsors provided me with field 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 experience difficulty in receiving official approval because they propose to study a topic that state officials regard as sensitive or problematic. Therefore, the issue of both the timing and the framing of a study are important (Svensson, 2006: 3). Often, when foreign researchers present official proposals for authorisation, these are reworked from what was originally presented to their home universities, with elements that could be perceived as critical ‘toned down’, and aspects likely to be perceived as safe or potentially supportive to state prerogatives emphasised.

For my project, it was fairly easy to ‘pass’ this inspection process as highland marketplaces in ethnic minority areas (*chợ vùng cao*) are often also classified and regarded as ‘cultural markets’ (*chợ văn hoá*). Cultural marketplaces are viewed by the state, and widely depicted in the media, as traditional meeting spaces where ethnic minorities can exhibit selective aesthetic elements of their culture through song, dance, food and drink, clothing, games and romantic flirting practices. They are therefore of interest from a cultural perspective and viewed as politically harmless subjects of study. They are also gaining importance since Vietnam reopened certain highland regions to foreigners in 1993. In Lào Cai province, the highland town of Sa Pa has been reinitiated as a tourist destination. Sa Pa also acts as a base for organised tours to upland periodic marketplaces (*chợ phiên*) in neighbouring districts, and this has served to marginally extend tourism into other areas of the province. Interestingly, while my intent was to explore how Hmong and Yao were engaging within these expanding and changing spaces of trade, the state tends to perceive ethnic minority involvement in trade as insignificant or underdeveloped, thus devaluing its importance vis-à-vis *Kinh* trade. This view prevails despite

commerce having historically played an enduring role within the livelihood portfolios of many ethnic minorities and ignores how these groups are responding to emerging trade opportunities (McElwee, 2008; Turner and Michaud, 2008). At any rate, because of state stereotypes regarding ethnic minorities' engagement with trade, my project was seen as relatively innocuous (see Daviau, this issue).

Nevertheless, additional strategies for monitoring activities of an overseas researcher and controlling their movements may also be implemented. For instance, to obtain my central-level permits I was required to submit a programme of work for approval by my host institute. This consisted of a timetable that indicated precisely where (district, commune, marketplace) I would be conducting research and on what days. This system was not ideal, given that I had hoped to have a more flexible schedule for field visits that would evolve based upon the information I was obtaining. It was furthermore complicated by the fact that I was interviewing and undertaking observations in periodic marketplaces, which only occur once per week.

After obtaining the central-level research permits discussed above, I then had to meet with representatives at the Lào Cai Province People's Committee to have further red stamp permits issued for every district in the province where I wanted to conduct fieldwork (Sa Pa, Bắc Hà, Mường Khương, Si Ma Cai and Bát Xát districts). I then had to meet with contacts at the People's Committee in each of the districts to specify the particular communes outside of the main town that I wished to visit, and also the various state bodies that I wanted to speak with. Sometimes, additional special authorisations were also required to conduct interviews with particular state departments. All of these meetings required some time to arrange and also a number of formal meetings with state representatives.

Shifting rules at different scales

Further hurdles can exist for researchers wanting to conduct fieldwork in highland areas, national border regions and involving ethnic minority populations. The official system of rules regulating research often becomes more ambiguous when actually operationalised in the

field. This is owing in particular to the power vested in local state actors in interpreting the rules and the validity of research authorisations.

My attempts to interview at the provincial level Department of Ethnic Minorities in Lào Cai city illustrates how the right to access state information can be contested on the ground as well as how rules pertaining to foreigners are open to interpretation and subject to unexpected change. At first, when I visited this Department I was told that I would need to get an additional special permit from my Hanoi-based host institution to talk to officials there. After doing so, I was then informed that the permit I had was insufficient and that I also required prior approval from the Provincial People's Committee. Yet, at the Provincial People's Committee, I was told that they could not issue a permit to me at all. When I asked why, a representative explained that a 'new decree' had just gone into effect, and therefore they could no longer issue permits to foreigners wishing to visit 'certain departments'. Officials at my host institute obviously had no idea about this new development, believing they had supplied me with the correct authorisations. According to an official at the Provincial People's Committee, if I still wanted an interview with the Department for Ethnic Minorities, I should just go there and see if they would talk to me, what I had already done at the start and been refused, taking me back to square one. While I had no overt means of recourse, given these shifting parameters of government rules on the ground, I adjusted my initial strategy by posing some of the questions I had meant to ask at this Department to officials at other state bodies that I did manage to interview, such as the various People's Committees and planning departments.

I soon discovered that proceeding along official routes to facilitate and ensure research access could hinder access, even to willing interviewees. At the beginning of my fieldwork I wanted to interview officials from the Economics Department in a district bordering China. My state-appointed field assistant and I 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 Economics

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 I had been asking. The representative spoke to the police for a while and then apologetically told me that the interview was being terminated. He did not offer any explanation. While the validity of my formal authorisations and 'right' to access the field was therefore challenged on many occasions by actors who wielded the local power to contest this, whether this was out of a sense of urgency to protect political imperatives, conceal state information, demonstrate ability to exert control over a foreigner's activities, or some a combination of all of the above, remained opaque.

Other 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. Gatekeepers are described in the social science literature as 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 village 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. 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 to engage informants.

Let me take an example. The market management boards⁷ in highland marketplaces are state bodies tasked with overseeing local market operations. While often perceived as 'chaotic', marketplaces have complex, highly effective systems of organisation. Formal, state-regulated

mechanisms (such as the locational assignment of stalls, collection of fees and assigning of market days) have overlaid informal approaches created by different groups of traders themselves and which are devised to respond to the realities and requirements of everyday trading. I found that these two modes were at times in conflict with one another, such as when state development planning required the relocation or renovation of marketplaces, or when fees changed, circumstances that traders were usually very unhappy about. Market officials were vital for me to gather statistical, historical, policy and planning data, and during my visits to some markets, staff members wanted to personally show me around. In one town marketplace in a newly created district directly bordering China, the manager, Mr Tien,⁸ was a 35-year-old single, originally from Hanoi who enjoyed spending time socialising with my field assistant and me. He insisted that we always pay him a visit before commencing trader interviews. When first assigned his post in 2006 it was to replace the former market manager who was 'too lax'. The market had been considered unruly, with traders selling wherever they pleased and fees not being collected properly. While I personally enjoyed talking with Mr Tien, I began to observe that traders did not hold him in high regard, often waving him away during collection rounds. His position as a more 'hard line' market manager combined with his different class status caused him to be a resented figure in the marketplace, a university educated man from the capital, unfairly taking money from poor and hardworking small-scale vendors. I noticed that some traders previously willing to converse with me would cut our discussions short or suddenly refuse to talk after spotting Mr Tien, my assistant and me together in the market. My association with the market manager shifted my positionality in the eyes of certain traders, such that I was being perceived as to some extent 'on his side'. I ended up trying to avoid meeting up with Mr Tien until after I had finished interviewing on market days to prevent losing informants' trust any further.

In another instance, I found that contacts I had established with the head of the Women's Union in one hamlet, while allowing me to gain official statistical information (as well as her opinion) on ethnic Yao women's participation in

handicraft production and trade, did not work to my advantage as I had expected for enabling me to talk to other women in the village. During interviews with women whom she had introduced me to, I had a nagging sense that something was amiss, a perception that the responses I was getting were 'the official line' and that informants seemed to be steering away from providing their own views. Later, during a conversation back in the district town with another Yao woman who lived in the same village, I discovered that the union leader was not universally liked. Although she was also an ethnic minority (Yao), I had incorrectly presumed she would automatically facilitate access to informants, mediating potential power asymmetries given a shared social location (gender and ethnicity). Instead, I found out that her position as head was not fully supported by all members of the hamlet. Additionally, there was some negative sentiment in the community surrounding her involvement with a development initiative due to allegations that she was unfairly gaining greater access to financial and other resources. I had not realised that internal class differences existed in this community, which, to me, had at first appeared fairly equal along socio-economic lines. These ambiguities point to the importance for researchers to be open to diverse ways of accessing insider knowledge, and not assuming at the outset who the most appropriate gatekeepers will be.

Bringing to light the role of field assistants

Another important category of gatekeepers encompasses fieldwork assistants, particularly those who serve as language assistants (Heller *et al.*, 2010). Rather limited attention has been paid to the role of language assistants in cross-cultural social science research, which, given the wider urgency to incorporate greater reflexivity in the writing-up of research, is rather unusual (Temple and Edwards, 2002; although see Turner, this issue). As language assistants are able to follow both sides of the conversation, they assume a unique position within an interview dialogue and wield control over the flow of information and production of knowledge.

In ethnically diverse highland northern Vietnam, many national minorities do not speak Vietnamese fluently. Indeed the choice (or

necessity if assigned field assistants by one's host institute, as I was) to use Vietnamese-speaking field assistants to converse with ethnic minorities should be seen as potentially fraught with difficulties. In my study, I regarded trade sites as important arenas of interaction in which different groups of social actors (traders of various ethnicities, state/market officials, development practitioners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), tourists, journalists, researchers and so on) encountered one another face-to-face in pursuit of their (sometimes divergent) goals. Therefore, to try to access these different voices, over the course of my fieldwork I worked with 11 different language assistants. These were native speakers of Vietnamese, Hmong and Yao, as well as a Chinese translator who helped me conduct interviews with Han Chinese cross-border traders.

At the beginning of my research, I worked closely with three Vietnamese language assistants assigned to me by VASS, my state host institute in Hanoi. Designating these state employees to assist me was, in part, another method of monitoring my research. I was aware that they 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. These assistants were all young *Kinh* women from lowland areas and all had limited professional or personal experience in highland areas and with ethnic minorities.⁹

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 highlands or with ethnic minorities. Indeed, as Scott *et al.* (2006: 37) notes, highland and rural contexts are not generally viewed as attractive working environments by urbanites (see also Turner on research assistants, this issue).

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 fieldwork duration (at least one year). 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 foreign 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.

At the start of this section, I alluded to the importance of the relationship between field research assistants and research participants. The research assistant’s presence is often more important than the researcher’s because the former typically becomes the main medium for dialogue and interaction (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). Like researchers, assistants too must modify their identity based upon whom they are conversing with. 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. My state institute-assigned assistants were very capable of developing rapport with officials because they were used to engaging in the style of formality that was required with this group. My Vietnamese assistants, whether state or not, were also good at developing relations with *Kinh* migrant market traders, particularly if they shared the same lowland home town. However, some of my state-assigned assistants were not helpful connecting with Hmong and Yao I wished to speak with. Part of this could be due to the fact that informants would have preferred to speak in their native language, or felt discomfort in speaking with *Kinh* due to historical ethnic tensions between these two groups. Yet more often, I felt that the demeanour of my assistants was off-putting or disrespectful to informants due to a lack of cultural sensitivity, such as cutting informants off while talking, making facial expressions that signalled a lack of interest, speaking sharply, fondling informants’ garments or trade wares, or showing discomfort at the setting (we would often squat on the floor in market stalls during interviews). These instances were disconcerting because I did not wish to place informants in a position that caused them to feel uncomfortable or disempowered. I also had to seek careful ways of addressing these issues with my assistant to avoid creating a strained working relationship between us.

On two different occasions, I worked with male assistants. I did so in an attempt to develop a better rapport with *Kinh* alcohol/medicinal

wholesalers and buffalo traders which are trade activities that tend to be dominated by men. I had struggled to have fruitful interviews with such informants when working with female language assistants because we felt that we were not being taken seriously. While I found that male assistants were indeed better at bonding and conversing with these informants overall, I also perceived them to be extremely authoritative. For example, during interviews my assistants would at times supply their own answers 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.

The most positive research episodes for me overall occurred when I worked with Hmong and Yao assistants.¹⁰ They opened many doors for me to speak with Hmong and Yao traders and villagers. Conversations were less tense and more free-flowing, and I was not as hesitant to ask about state activities or for historical information, questions that I knew were sensitive and that I tended to avoid with *Kinh* assistants. When my Hmong assistants and I would travel from Sa Pa district, where they lived, to other areas of the province, or neighbouring provinces, they were skilful at gaining rapport with other Hmong, who were eager to find out more about Hmong from another area. During conversations about trade, informants frequently directed questions towards my assistants to compare things in their locality with where my assistants lived. 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.

Considering the researcher/field assistant relationship as simply an employer/employee dynamic does not fully capture the many ways the balance of power continually shifts within the relationship. This may be of particular relevance in the case of cross-cultural research, where the field assistant also has a better under-

standing of the sociocultural milieu and often takes on an expanded role as key informant, research analyst and cultural broker for the researcher (Temple and Young, 2004).

Upsides and downsides of multi-sited research in tourist and 'transient' settings

Traditionally, ethnographic research was based upon long-term fieldwork within a single locality, what was considered a bounded space that encapsulated a culture. This has since been replaced with the concept of the field as socially constructed by researchers themselves, as well as by studies of phenomena that necessitate multi-sited methodologies, such as transnational processes (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). A number of methodological and logistical issues are unique to multi-sited research, which may become even more complicated for projects that occur within transient places or with mobile groups, requiring creative coping and improvisation strategies (Lozanski and Beres, 2007). As my study examined highland marketplace systems and the trade networks of commodities of historical significance to ethnic minorities (livestock, textiles and rice/corn alcohol), this involved research in various markets. I undertook recurring field visits to 14 different marketplaces spread throughout the province. While six were central town marketplaces, operating on a daily basis, eight were periodic marketplaces, taking place only once a week. Many periodic market days overlapped, so that in choosing to attend one market, I was missing others that were taking place simultaneously. Moreover, periodic markets tend to operate from 7 AM to noon, and it took us between two and a half to three hours to reach each, 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 soon made this impractical. Before long I switched to hiring private jeeps or motorcycles, or joining tourist buses to reach my destinations in a timely manner. Recurrent landslides or floods blocking roads and poor weather during the rainy season meant that market visits often had to be cancelled, sometimes 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 divided 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.

In border markets, towns and hamlets, I was often required by police and authorities to show my research permits. The frontier zone, which is the (approximately) 20-km belt of Vietnamese territory before the actual borderline with China, is an extremely politically sensitive region given the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979–1980, which resulted in the formal closure of the border until 1988. Sometimes during market visits my field assistant or I would become aware that we were being watched by an 'official looking' person, who would stand close by and listen in to our conversations. This was very disconcerting and would have the effect of steering the discussions away from anything that I thought might be perceived as politically sensitive or controversial. Yet, over the four years I have returned to this area, I have witnessed an increasing openness, reflecting the wider changing economic and political environment in Vietnam. As highland marketplaces in Lào Cai are increasingly being promoted as a tourist attraction, some areas that at the start of my study in 2005 were completely restricted to foreign tourists became more accessible, as tour agencies could obtain permits for visitors to reach certain border markets. With the rising numbers of foreigners visiting these markets, my presence became less noticeable. This allowed me to spend greater periods of time sitting quite easily with traders without drawing much attention to myself.

Although I made my status and intent as a student researcher clear to all informants, gatekeepers and others whom I engaged with directly, clearly it was not practical to make my personal identity known to all participants in a marketplace. Increasing tourism therefore afforded me a certain degree of anonymity within these broader settings. This raises questions regarding how a researcher wishes his or her identity to be perceived by a community, and how this perception may be influenced by that community's historical memory of, and current experience with, outsiders. As a researcher in spaces often frequented by tourists, while at times I was appreciative of the benefits I derived from my perceived identity as a tourist, at other times I wished to be clearly distinguished from this group and instead be recognised for what I saw myself as, a longer-term researcher and sojourner in the area. In the highland tourist town of Sa Pa, which receives guests year round, residents are used to transient visitors, and relationships with outsiders are developed with this fleetingness in mind. Similarly, people's prior experiences with other outsiders such as journalists and development practitioners sometimes led to misunderstandings of my role or abilities, resulting in certain expectations. Despite my efforts to be as transparent as possible with informants about my role as a student researcher, there were still instances where this was not fully understood. For instance, sometimes traders thought that I could directly influence the state in advancing the granting of small business loans. Once, a Hmong alcohol producer/trader believed that I might have some sway with media representations of highland alcohols from his village since he heard that journalists had visited neighbouring areas and done this.

Furthermore, as a Canadian woman of 'mixed' ethnicity (Filipino/white), the ambiguity of my ethnic appearance meant that I was often ascribed different labels. For instance, at the outset I was often presumed to be Vietnamese or *Việt Kiều*.¹¹ I tended to welcome this 'assessment' when it came from *Kinh*, because their curiosity about my identity provided a way to initiate conversation. Yet, when speaking with ethnic minorities, I found myself making direct efforts at the outset to emphasise I was 'Canadian' to avoid the

assumption that I was *Kinh*, because of my concern that minorities' suspicions of Vietnamese might negatively affect our engagement. These issues highlight how informants' perceptions of a researcher's positionality, including identity, goals and power, can shape the research encounter.

The transient nature of periodic marketplaces also meant that the people engaged in trading at them were a mobile and therefore variable group. This 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 corn 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 villages and my transportation was hired for a set period of time or distance. I mitigated some of these difficulties by reinterviewing 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 I 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, one elderly Hmong woman who was a long-distance trader covered 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 happened to meet her in a market she was keen for us to spend time socialising with her.

On friendships in the field

Within Western academic studies in the social sciences, students learn about ethics through research methods courses and during the design of their project proposals, which they must submit to an institutional ethics review board for approval before commencing fieldwork. Ethics approval requires that researchers consider the steps they will take to protect research participants and avoid causing them undue harm. Yet, while procedural guidelines developed by university ethics boards are essential for protecting research subjects during the interview setting and in the subsequent write-up, they are inadequate for assisting student researchers in grappling with all 'ethically important moments' in the field (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 262). They do not provide a satisfactory base of reference from which to navigate the messy and often contradictory ethical dilemmas that arise out of everyday interactions in the field.

The activities required to achieve ethnographic studies necessitate personal engagement, attachment and compassion with participants. Furthermore, feminist researchers often highlight the relevance of supplication during fieldwork,¹² as a means of forging connections with participants built on empathy and mutual respect, as well as overcoming (to some degree) power differences, such as those based upon social and economic asymmetries (England, 1994). It is important to critically reflect upon the persisting unequal nature of these relationships and the dangers of friendships or friend-like relationships concealing power imbalances between the researcher and the researched (England, 1994; Svensson, 2006). Debates over the degree to which one can or should form personal attachments in the field focus on engagement versus distance, and on optimally working to 'strike a balance' in between (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003). Likewise, concerns regarding reciprocity, commonly viewed as a means of 'giving back', need to be considered. This often involves attempts to realign social hierarchies or the unequal exchange that is part of the research encounter by claiming friendship, commonality (such as based on shared gender, ethnicity, class or experience), and the exchange of gifts or money (Adams, 1998).¹³

Over the course of my research, I formed numerous long-term friendships with young Hmong women. These friendships were vital to me on a personal level, providing me with emotional support during some very low points, while we also shared many rewarding experiences. Of course, I gained invaluable insights from these friends' perspectives on Hmong culture, society and livelihoods in instances when my 'researcher's hat' was hung up and I was simply 'hanging out'. Friendships and personal relations with research subjects therefore also call into question the boundedness of the field and the ability to truly draw lines around what constitutes 'the research' and go home at the end of the day. Being a friend with these young women often meant a reprioritisation and setting aside of work plans to be available to listen or help out (see Tilmann-Healy, 2003).

These instances also drew my attention to other pressing issues completely outside of my research topic. The most striking examples of this were instances when in helping out friends I became witness to, and was emotionally affected very strongly by, extreme institutional prejudice and injustice. For example, a pregnant and very ill Hmong friend requiring serious medical attention asked me to accompany her to the local hospital because she was scared to go on her own. My observation was that her treatment at two different state hospitals (we went to a second hospital because we both agreed that her check-up at the first one had been ineffective) by *Kinh* doctors and staff was dehumanising and inappropriate.¹⁴ While a deficiency of adequate state health-care infrastructure in ethnic minority areas is a well-acknowledged problem in Vietnam, the lack of cultural sensitivity and language barriers among health-care workers in these regions contributes to misunderstandings and a poor ability to communicate regarding health issues.

In another example, I attempted to connect with formal emergency support a female Hmong friend who had just undergone a traumatic ordeal. We were passed back and forth between a number of different organisations and government agencies (each suggesting that we contact the other, and all tied-up by a number of bureaucratic hierarchies, leaving no clear route to follow) before finally finding her some help. At that stage, her 'real need' of emer-

gency assistance (financial, medical, lodging, personal security and psychological support) was questioned during an assessment interview because the organisation felt she already had the help of foreign friends, did not act in a 'thankful' manner and had a cell phone (which was presumed to indicate that she already had some level of cash on hand). The fact that she had attempted to draw upon her diverse social networks to seek support was not recognised or valued. Rather, because she did not fit with the 'victim' image that they were expecting, her needs were not deemed serious.

Concluding thoughts on the possibilities and role of academic activism in constrained spaces

In this article, I have explored the numerous 'lines' or boundaries and limits that one may find in operation when conducting fieldwork in the northern Vietnam uplands among ethnic minorities. These can be the either formal or informal rules and mechanisms that enable or constrain research, logistical concerns, or the personal and ethical boundaries that researchers must face while in the field. In highland northern Vietnam, I often had to alternately follow, read between, or even cross the 'lines' imposed upon me by state regulations regarding research. Yet other gatekeepers, such as actors on the ground and field assistants, were also important 'border guards' I had to work with, facilitating or hindering my research in different ways. Additionally, as a consequence of my subject and transient field locations and informants, I had to accept and draw a number of other logistical lines to achieve my research objectives (such as restructuring my fieldwork schedule and moving research base to access markets and mobile traders).

Finally, my experiences attempting to help friends in the field drew me outside of the lines I had set around my research and led me to experience anxiety over my role as a researcher, as well as reinforce my desire and commitment to finding ways to contribute to social and economic change promising greater equity and social justice (Tilmann-Healy, 2003; Askins, 2009). This brings me to the question of whether or how it may be possible to conduct activist research in a constrained political setting such

as that which presently characterises socialist Vietnam. At what level might researchers be able to contribute to political and ideological change? While undertaking fieldwork for my master's thesis in the Philippines, I was able to independently establish connections with, and work alongside, a community-based organisation supporting the rights of informal-sector workers. There participatory research with women home-based traders offered direct spaces for collaborative advocacy and action (Bonnin, 2004), which differed drastically from the options I found open to me during my fieldwork in Vietnam.

Scott *et al.* (2006) explain that while in other countries academic activists working with marginalised groups often do so via existing grassroots community-based organisations, in Vietnam this is very difficult to accomplish. Independent civil society groups remain rare and working at the grassroots level often necessitates going through the requisite state apparatus. For instance, research concerned with gender issues and using participatory methods such as focus groups is often channelled through the state-directed Women's Union. Furthermore, international NGOs upholding global models of development to promote civil society through bottom-up approaches are controlled and watched by the state (Thayer, 2008).¹⁵ As such, NGOs do not directly confront or challenge the state, but rather must work in partnership with it. They attempt to promote policy changes to achieve objectives supporting marginalised groups within the framework of existing government programmes and officially approved policy directions (Thayer, 2008).

In the locations that comprised my field sites, informal, local-level cooperative efforts initiated by highlanders and small-scale traders tend to comprise alliances based on social networks and kinship. Moreover, identifying arenas of political action in this context requires a less conventional and more all-encompassing understanding of what that means in highland Vietnam among highlanders. In this setting, political acts tend to take on forms that are less easy to identify and which often go unnoticed. Kerkvliet (2009: 232) describes this 'everyday politics' as

people embracing, complying with, adjusting, 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.

Given the qualitatively distinct environment that characterises the opportunity for political action in Vietnam, research that pays careful, sensitive attention to understanding and presenting the concerns that are important to local actors can be one entry point for moving towards a more engaged research. This might include research on how ethnic minorities are striving to pursue their livelihoods, constructing and giving meaning to their lives and worlds, asserting their identities, forming alliances, and interacting with other groups. If based on respectful, in-depth grounded studies that privilege ethnic minorities' knowledge and own accounts, such research can be a vital means of offering an alternate view and building a platform of critique that challenges current state-centric, top-down, ways of knowing that tend to dominate mainstream understandings and have led to significant misunderstandings and, subsequently, inappropriate policy designs.

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Notes

- 1 Since 1946, the state's constitution has afforded all minorities with equal rights on paper, including full

citizenship, voting rights, political representation at provincial, district and commune levels, and primary education in their own language (Jackson, 1969; Corlin, 2004).

- 2 Aspects of minority culture and socio-economic organisation seen by the state to be in conflict with national socio-economic development under socialism have been discouraged. Social organisation and ties based upon kinship and ethnicity – rather than on socialism and loyalty to the Communist Party and the nation – were frowned upon. Spiritual practices deemed ‘wasteful’ such as ritual feasts or sacrifices; livelihood practices viewed as ‘destructive’ or ‘unproductive’ including shifting agriculture; and beliefs regarded as ‘superstitious’ were seen as outdated and in need of being phased out (Salemin, 2000; McElwee, 2004). Elements worthy of preservation were those seen as aesthetic and detached from their cultural context (dance, dress, folklore and music). These were taught in schools and treated as a part of Vietnam’s multi-ethnic yet national cultural heritage (Sowerwine, 2004).
- 3 From the 1950s up until the latter half of the 1980s when *Đôi mõi* was initiated, highland and national border regions were almost entirely off-limits as field sites to both domestic and foreign researchers (Scott *et al.*, 2006; Taylor, 2008).
- 4 The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is made up of hierarchical administrative units: provinces, districts, communes, and villages. All of these units have their own People’s Committee that functions as the major administrative body for that unit (Jamieson, 1993).
- 5 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.
- 6 The letter of permission included my name; institutional affiliation; my home university; the districts where I would conduct research; the dates of the study; what my study was about; and the name of my host-appointed field assistant.
- 7 Market management boards fall under the Ministry of Trade in Vietnam.
- 8 All names are pseudonyms.
- 9 These assistants were assigned to me, with my opinion only being asked regarding gender. 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 (but see Turner’s piece on research assistants, this issue).
- 10 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 highland 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 tour-

ists who ask repetitive questions meant that they were also extremely well suited as field assistants.

- 11 The name given to Vietnamese diaspora.
- 12 Supplication involves a researcher’s acceptance that participants hold superior knowledge about the subject of study, and his or her reliance and dependence on subjects. It also involves the researcher sharing personal information, placing themselves in a position of greater vulnerability and openness in relation to informants (England, 1994).
- 13 Adams (1998) describes some of the dangers of reciprocity, such as cultural misunderstandings, causing offence, creating dependency, generating a further sense of obligation to reciprocate on the part of participants and exacerbating power inequalities. However, the emotional dimension of reciprocity tends to remain absent, particularly when these actions are undertaken as part and parcel of friendship.
- 14 These actions included keeping her at arms length during the consultation; failing to examine her aside from taking her temperature and checking her heart-beat; providing her with diagnoses and medicine for two very different illnesses; and speaking to her in an extremely harsh manner.
- 15 This surveillance occurs via the People’s Aid Coordinating Committee under the Vietnam Union of Friendship Associations (Thayer, 2008).

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