

Under the state's gaze: Upland trading-scapes on the Sino-Vietnamese border

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Within the politically-defined Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), the borderlands of southeast Yunnan, China and Lào Cai province, northern Vietnam, have been categorized as being part of the GMS North-South Economic Corridor. I argue that the creation of this subregion and corridor have been an opportunity for the governments in these locales to extend their territorialization and create new state spaces. For centuries, relatively isolated and ignored by lowland rulers, ethnic minority residents in these borderlands maintained their own culturally appropriate livelihoods, trade networks and societies. Nowadays, an increasing state presence in the uplands presents both challenges and opportunities for local populations on either side of the border, be they ethnic minorities, or Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) and Han Chinese. Contemporary border narratives gathered from local traders managing important upland commodities shed light on the means by which these borderland spaces are shaping both attractive prospects as well as restrictive constraints. Local residents fashion new trading-scapes by drawing on kin ties, historical linkages, local indigenous knowledges and transnational societies that reach deep inside each country. As inhabitants carefully avoid or manipulate the state's gaze, I conclude that those living in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands possess the agency to 'do things differently' from hegemonic development approaches supported by GMS sponsors, and can create, maintain, support and refashion culturally appropriate trade livelihoods.

Keywords: Ethnic minorities, Greater Mekong Subregion, Sino-Vietnam borderlands, territorialization, trade, Vietnam

The Greater Mekong Subregion Program arrives in the Yunnan-Vietnam borderlands

In 1992, with the financial support of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), six countries initiated a subregional economic cooperation scheme named the Greater Mekong Subregion Program (GMS Program). The governments of the countries involved – the People's Republic of China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand and Cambodia – aimed to use this initiative to improve economic relations. This was a project born out of a geopolitical moment as instability decreased in the former Indochina states and policies shifted to market-oriented economic growth. This aim was to be facilitated via a focus on nine priority areas: transport and trade facilitation, transport infrastructure, telecommunications, tourism, agriculture, energy, environment, human resource development and investment (ADB, 2011). An economic corridor approach was devised and adopted in 1998 with corridors routed over existing or planned highways (Ishida, 2007). These corridor routes were to become 'cross-border transport links that open up opportunities for various types of investments to the *otherwise remote and inaccessible areas*' (ADB, 2011, emphasis added; for histories of the GMS see Glassman, 2010; Hensengerth, 2010).

These 'otherwise remote and inaccessible areas' through which GMS economic corridors run include the borderlands encompassing parts of Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous prefecture in Yunnan province, China and Lào Cai province in Vietnam.

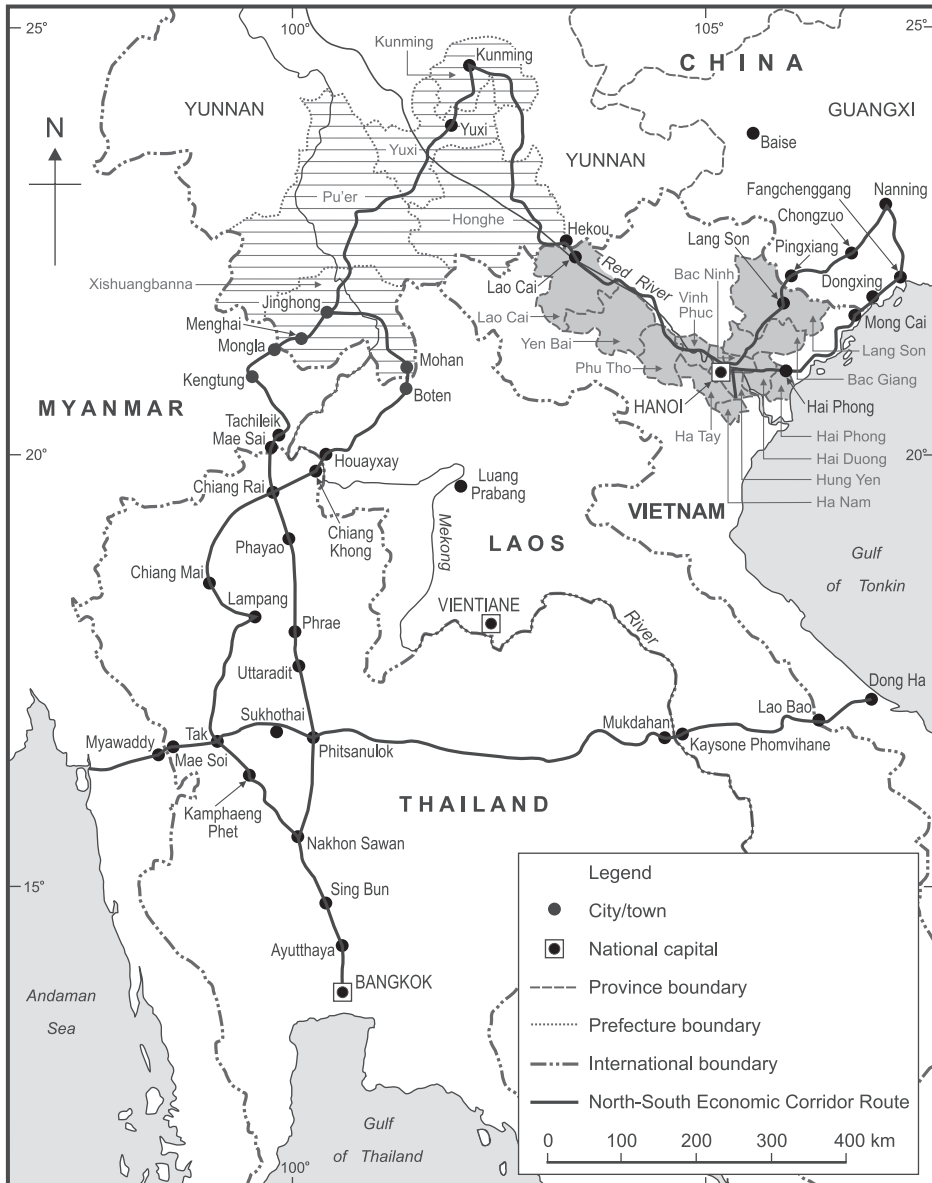


Figure 1. *The Greater Mekong Subregion North-South Economic Corridor.*

Source: Adapted from ADB (2010a: 6).

Shown in Figure 1, the GMS North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC) stretches from Bangkok, north to Kunming (via Myanmar or Laos) and then southeast to Hanoi, Vietnam before heading north again to Guangxi province, China. One branch cuts directly through the upland Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (the Kunming-Hanoi-Hai Phong section, sometimes labelled the 'central sub-corridor'; ADB, 2010a). The purpose of this North-South Economic Corridor is 'to reduce income disparities, increase employment opportunities, generate higher income, and improve the living conditions of people in the corridor and surrounding areas' (ADB, 2010a: 13).

To facilitate this corridor plan, in 2006 a loan agreement was signed between the ADB and the government of Vietnam to create a 244-km highway from Noi Bai (Hanoi's airport in the Red River Delta) to Lào Cai city on the Sino-Vietnamese border. The ADB Project Administration Memorandum noted that the new link would serve two purposes:

At the national level, it will connect the northwest region of the country, *now very poor and isolated*, with the economic centers that have developed around Hanoi and its port, Haiphong. At the regional level, it will link the rapidly-expanding economy of PRC's Yunnan province with Hanoi and Haiphong, *facilitating rapid expansion of cross-border trade and commerce* (ADB, 2006: ii, emphasis added).

Estimated completion dates for this Vietnam segment have shifted from 2008 to 2012 (ADB, 2006; Vietnam Expressway Corporation, 2007), but by late 2012 the highway was still far from complete. It is estimated that nearly 5500 households will be adversely affected due to loss of assets or livelihood sources such as fruit trees (Vietnam Expressway Corporation, 2007). On the Chinese side, new highways and high speed rail links are being constructed rapidly to criss-cross Yunnan and beyond, as part of a 'Yunnan Integrated Road Network Development Project', also driven by the Western Development Strategy (*xibu dakaiifa*) (Lan, 2010). An expressway from Kunming to Hekou was due to be completed in 2008, while a railway line connecting the international border crossing of Hekou with Mengzi, the capital of Honghe Prefecture, was planned for completion in 2012 (Wang *et al.*, 2007; ADB, 2010b). Both were still to be finalized as of late 2012.

A quick assessment of the language used in ADB and related reports on the GMS highlights 'the power of development in legitimising and normalising particular languages and worldviews as well as creating particular places and spaces' (McGregor, 2009: 1690; see also Escobar, 1995). Modernization binaries are created between poor and remote uplands versus rich(er), connected lowlands (see Sturgeon, this issue). Following such logic, a state supported transfer of resources and technologies to these upland regions must take place. There is a presumed need to facilitate the rapid expansion of cross-border trade and commerce, despite the fact that a vibrant cross-border economy *already* exists, whether ignored, tolerated or operating under the radar of the state. Using legally-sanctioned, small local-level crossing points, or crossing using centuries-old winding mountain paths away from official scrutiny, numerous traders – including ethnic minorities, Vietnamese (Kinh) and Han Chinese – buy and sell a multitude of products. While goods like buffalo, alcohol and textiles are rooted in local traditions and customs, others are either a result of new market imperatives (commercially produced textiles, cardamom), or completely new to the region (hybrid rice seeds, plastic goods, chemicals).

In this paper I examine the current-day trading-scapes and negotiations of small-scale traders operating in the northern Vietnam-Yunnan borderlands adjoining the GMS 'central subcorridor'.¹ Building upon an actor-oriented livelihoods framework and drawing from the conceptual ideas of everyday politics and resistance, I examine the contemporary border narratives of local traders managing a range of commodities. I attempt to shed light on the complexities of border livelihoods in this region, while critiquing this trading-scape in regard to inhabitants' avoidance or manipulation of the state's gaze. Concurrently, I utilize Appadurai's '-scape' approach to deconstruct the underlying disjunctures among economy, culture and politics. Trading-scapes of local borderland residents are culturally situated, fluid and irregular; aligned neither with

state directives nor border control (Appadurai, 1996). How grand development plans for the region and the state's expanding power affect these local trading-scapes – or will do so in the near future – is investigated to gain an understanding of local trader resourcefulness.

This paper builds upon ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Lào Cai province, Vietnam from 1999 to 2012, and in Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, and Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan province China in 2009 and 2010, as well as archival research. Conversational interviews have been completed with over 150 upland traders, at least 50 of whom cross the border to purchase supplies or sell goods. Cross-border trader interviewees have been Hmong, Nùng, Yao, Tày and Han. I completed most interviews in Vietnam with the help of local Hmong and Yao interpreters, Kinh non-state employed research assistants or by myself, and in China with state or non-state employed Han interpreters and research assistants (see Turner, 2013, for more on the politics and ethics of completing fieldwork in this region).

Borderline citizens in the southwest China-northwest Vietnam borderlands include sizeable minority nationality/ethnic minority groups. For instance, the Hmong number over 2.5 million in China (categorized within the broader Miao language sub-branch of the Miao-Yao language family) and approximately 1.06 million in Vietnam. Also resident in these mountainous uplands are members of the Yao/Dao group, numbering approximately 2.6 million in China and 751 000 in Vietnam. The Tày are grouped under the broader label of Zhuang in China (over 16 million), while Tày are the most numerous ethnic minority in Vietnam (1.6 million) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2010). The Nùng are likewise classified under the broader label of Zhuang in China. With complex histories of migration, trade, peace and hostilities, this mountainous segment of the GMS, like many other areas in the Southeast Asian Massif or Zomia, creates an ethnic kaleidoscope.

In China, the standard Han approach considers centre/borderland relations to be '*de haut en bas* [top down], with the borderlands being inferior, benighted places, their darkness lit by the distant rays of the brilliant centre' (Lary, 2007: 6). People living in China's borderlands are not only numerical minorities, but are considered different, strange and exotic. Some consider these residents less culturally evolved than Han (Mackerras, 2003; Lary, 2007). Across the border, since the country's reunification in 1975, the Vietnamese state has worked relentlessly to integrate upland ethnic minority communities into the national economy, while labelling their cultures and practices as 'backward' and individuals as 'poor' and often 'lazy' (Duncan, 2004; McElwee, 2004; Scott, 2009; Salemink, 2011). Livelihood, cultural and historical differences between upland ethnic minorities and lowland Kinh are essentialized by the state, an approach reflected in current-day development policies (Michaud, 2009).

Grand development schemes, everyday politics and actor-oriented livelihoods

In 2009 James C. Scott argued that before the Second World War, the Southeast Asian uplands (a region he labels Zomia following van Schendel, 2002) were a 'zone of refuge' for ethnic minorities wanting to remain outside state political control. Since then, he suggests, grand development schemes and 'the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies has changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing hill peoples and nation-states' (Scott, 2009: xii). Ethnic minorities are no longer able to seek refuge in these upland locales to withdraw from the state, following the 'last great enclosure movement in Southeast Asia'. This project to 'bring non-state

spaces and people to heel' has been 'culturally styled as development, economic progress, literacy and social integration' (Scott, 2009: 4–5).

Is the GMS initiative yet another instrument by which regional governments work to encompass ethnic minority groups within the state's reach and bring these people to heel? As noted in the other papers in this special section, we see clear evidence across the region of state-endorsed corporate upland enclosures, opium substitution concessions, the eradication of upland shifting cultivation practices, and resettlement of ethnic minority populations to sites within the state's panoptic gaze. Regional governments and the ADB frequently cite the eradication of poverty and the improvement of local economies as driving factors behind these programmes (Duncan, 2004; McKinnon, 2008). Whether local communities experience the perceived positive outcomes is another matter. As Ferguson wrote in 1994 regarding 'development' in Lesotho, an argument can be made that foreign-led (and I would add state-led) development projects seldom manage to alleviate poverty, but have a number of unplanned outcomes. Drawing from Foucault, Ferguson argues that 'what is expanded is not the magnitude of the capabilities of "the state", but the extent and reach of a particular kind of exercise of power' (Ferguson, 1994: 274).

I argue here that despite such grand development schemes, ethnic minorities in the mountainous regions of Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan and Lào Cai province in Vietnam, while certainly more directly under the state's rule than ever before, are still able, in carefully negotiated and ingenious ways, to contest the state's latest modernization plans. I draw on Ben Kerkvliet's work on everyday politics (1990; 1995; 2005; 2009) and James Scott's on everyday resistance (1985; 2009), while attempting to understand the complexities of local trade livelihoods. Kerkvliet (2009: 232) provides important conceptual tools for understanding how upland minorities go about their daily lives. He suggests that everyday politics involves '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 and acts that are rarely organized or direct'. Everyday politics entails scant organization, consisting of low-profile and private forms of behaviour undertaken by individuals unlikely to consider their actions political. Kerkvliet (2009: 233) advocates that everyday politics be divided into four categories, namely 'support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance'. While it is important to recognize that the livelihoods of Sino-Vietnamese borderland inhabitants often integrate state initiatives and priorities, they also reveal differing degrees of resistance and reworking of state goals, as part of their everyday politics.

These everyday politics and resistance tactics form an integral part of borderland residents' livelihoods. To study these livelihoods in a holistic manner offers an important critique of earlier overly structural explanations of unequal 'development', and requires a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and complex nature of how individual actors endeavour to create and sustain a meaningful living (Scoones, 2009). Conceptually, livelihood frameworks are diverse, but they focus attention on assets and vulnerabilities (the degree to which one has financial, physical, natural, social and human capital); the factors facilitating or restricting access to activate these resources; and the activities or strategies undertaken at the individual, household and community levels (Chambers & Conway, 1991; de Haan & Zoomers, 2005). As I have jointly argued elsewhere (Bonnin & Turner, 2012), recognition of the wider structural context in which these livelihoods are embedded is critical, as access to resources and decisions regarding activities and strategies are fashioned and mediated by economic

opportunities, as well as social-institutional processes. The latter include social relations, ideologies, customary rules and state-based policies and development programmes, as introduced next (Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 2009; Turner, 2012).

State control over the Yunnan-Vietnam borderlands

In pre-colonial times, upland frontier regions across mainland Southeast Asia were often buffer zones without precise territorial limits (Winichakul, 1994; Bruneau, 2004). These ethnic minority homelands became politically divided as modern state borders developed. The border between southwest China and northwest Vietnam was officially recognized in 1887 by Chinese and French authorities, resulting in kin and neighbouring households becoming separated into different and at times hostile states (McKinnon, 1997; Michaud, 2000; 2006; Giersch, 2006; Schoenberger & Turner, 2008). Both countries underwent profound transformations as they deflected European colonial advances, experienced revolutionary wars and socialist rule, and implemented economic liberalization policies (Womack, 1994; Li, 1998; Chau, 2000; Turner, 2010). Most recently, the 1979 border war officially closed the Sino-Vietnamese border, affecting *formal* cross-border movement of individuals and trade for nearly a decade. The border was not officially reopened until 1988.

As the GMS started to take shape in the early 1990s, new border trade policies were adopted. In Vietnam these policies strengthened border trade regulations and included management plans for borderland marketplaces (Gu & Womack, 2000). China responded with policies aimed at increasing cross-border trade, and by 1992 had permitted 56 border towns to facilitate cross-border movements from Yunnan and Guangxi provinces (Kuah, 2000). A permit system was introduced for residents on both sides of the Yunnan-Lào Cai border. This allowed for an important legal cross-border trade to re-emerge among upland ethnic minority populations after the border war, using small border crossing points. Kinh and Han traders tended not to impinge on this trade, preferring to use the larger Lào Cai city-Hekou border crossing on the Red River where trade was growing rapidly.

In these formative years of the GMS, border trade as a whole was encouraged. In Vietnam, preferential policies were established in certain border areas to reduce land-use taxes, relax regulations for foreigners and reserve 50 per cent of revenue for reinvestment in local areas. This policy was extended to Lào Cai province in 1998 (Gu & Womack, 2000; Roper, 2000). In 1996 Chinese officials agreed that provincial, district and country level governments could decide upon their own border policies, many of which included preferential policies to help develop borderland trade (China State Council, 1996). Two years later, the economic corridor approach of the GMS was announced.

Chinese documents name four contemporary border crossing categories: (1) foreign economic and technical cooperation in the border region; (2) border crossings as part of tours/tourism; (3) small-scale border trade; and (4) crossings undertaken by border residents. This last category relates directly to local residents crossing the border for small-scale trade, permitting 'trade by those living within twenty kilometres of the border, in government-approved border crossings or designated bazaars, not to exceed officially regulated values and quantities' (UNDP, 2007). Such small-scale traders require a permit issued for six months to cross into Vietnam for local market days.

Vietnam currently has a three-tier border crossing classification for the Sino-Vietnamese border (Do, 1999; Minister of Defense, 2005; Turner 2010). First are

international crossings, with one located directly in the ‘central subcorridor’ (Kunming-Hanoi-Hai Phong) of the GMS, the Lào Cai city-Hekou crossing. Vietnamese and Chinese residents cross here with a passport or permit, while third-country nationals cross with a passport and visa. This crossing is seldom used by upland ethnic minorities, as few reside and work in the neighbouring cities. Second are national-level or ‘principal’ crossings, such as Mường Khương, in Lào Cai province. Chinese and Vietnamese citizens cross here with a passport or a permit. At third-tier or ‘auxiliary’ border crossings (*cửa khẩu phụ*), located in remote sections of the border, only borderland residents can cross with a permit.² The fee required to cross at these latter points was about USD 0.50 in 2012 according to local traders, but there is significant flexibility regarding border regulations and enforcement. Enforcement ebbs and flows depending on which officials are on duty, whether it is a local market day and the broader political climate (cf. Schoenberger & Turner, 2008).

On the far end of the state-control continuum are the unofficial crossing strategies, or counter-strategies. These range from smuggling goods across official border posts, to being ferried in a small boat across the Nanxihe/ Nậm Thi River that forms part of the border, to simply walking across the border in a mountainous area far from a check-point. Smuggling takes place by complete avoidance of or in collusion with border guards, who can receive kickbacks and bribes to turn a blind eye (see Diana, this issue). Local residents in China talked of 偷渡 ‘*toudu*’, or illegal immigration, with most having crossed the border at some point to visit friends and relatives or just ‘to see what local markets are like on the other side’. As Donnan and Wilson (1999: 8–9) have noted, ‘although the structures of the state at international borders are often static, the negotiations of political and economic actions and values . . . among the agents and organs of the state, wayfarers, and those who live at the border are continuous and dynamic’.

Small-scale cross-border livelihoods in the Greater Mekong Subregion’s Eastern Corridor

On the periphery of state development schemes in the uplands, is it possible for alternative, indigenous notions of prosperity to exist and thrive (cf. Lummis, 1992)? This paper does not seek to ‘empower’ alternative voices by ‘doing alternative development’, so much as to suggest that alternative ways of making upland, cross-border livelihoods already exist, and have done so for decades, obscured from mainstream views. My goal here is to stress that local people possess the agency to ‘do things differently’ from hegemonic development approaches, and in doing so create, maintain, support and refashion culturally appropriate trade livelihoods. While state-encouraged, large-scale, long-haul trade between China and Vietnam dwarfs local, small-scale, remote cross-border trade, the latter remains of central importance to the livelihoods of tens of thousands of local residents. These residents trade in lively periodic marketplaces which have played an important role in maintaining socio-economic exchange among these populations throughout history (cf. Skinner, 1964; 1965a; 1965b).

One example of culturally-rooted trade that highlights the opportunities associated with living near third-tier/‘auxiliary’ official crossings – as well as unofficial borderline paths and crossing points – is that of livestock. Buffalo, for instance, are fundamental to Hmong and Yao livelihoods. They are vital farming ‘tools’ for ploughing terraced fields for rice preparation and also fulfil important ceremonial roles. Buffalo are sacrificed by

Hmong families upon the death of an elder or during New Year celebrations. They are also important financial capital, sold reluctantly if a large sum of money is needed suddenly due to a family illness or wedding. A regular trade in buffalo spans the China-Vietnam border, taking place via legal and illegal routes. Following legal paths, buffalo are inspected at border checkpoints for disease, while other traders use 'secret routes' to smuggle buffalo without permits. In China there are a number of large periodic livestock markets in the borderlands (e.g. Jia Han Qing market, Wenshan prefecture), while in Vietnam buffalo markets are usually part of periodic markets selling a range of products (e.g. Bắc Hà and Cán Cầu markets, Lào Cai province; Đồng Văn market, Hà Giang province).

As I have elaborated upon elsewhere (Turner, 2010), differences in micro-climatic conditions and local understandings of the strength and durability of buffalo from specific locales have resulted in a simultaneous cross-border demand for these beasts of burden. In 2009 and 2010 Hmong and Han interviewees in China noted that local demand for Vietnamese buffalo was high because they were considered stronger and healthier than those raised in Yunnan. In the other direction, minority traders from Vietnam, including Hmong, Nùng, Tày and Yi minorities, visit border markets in China and return with buffalo to Vietnam. In 2009 this demand was caused by the harsh 2008 winter when a large number of buffalo perished in the Vietnam uplands. From 2010–12, this shortage appeared to have continued.

It is difficult to undertake a regional comparison of buffalo prices due to the numerous factors involved, including age, gender, skin and eye condition, and strength of tail (important for a farmer to hold on to when ploughing or harrowing). Nevertheless, it does seem that this cross-border trade occurs regardless of relatively similar absolute prices. This trade is entrenched in culturally-defined, everyday understandings of commodity values that play a central role in livelihood decision making among upland residents. Local traders strategically use remote routes that best fit their needs to trade with willing customers across the border.

Andrew McGregor (2009: 1693), in a review of post-development studies, noted that 'within post-development underdeveloped places are recast as mines of possibilities and alternatives, rather than places defined by what they lack'. However, perhaps in this case it is the *lack* of rigid borderline controls in remote uplands and the *lack* of Kinh and Han traders interested in the cross-border trade of these animals that permits ethnic minority traders an opportunity. Kinh and Han traders seldom wish to get involved in cross-border livestock trade in these arduous mountain terrains, nor do they speak the languages or have the cultural and social capital to make the best of this specific trade prospect. Indeed, Kinh do trade buffalo, but they purchase them on a larger scale for lowland meat consumption, not for cross-border trade of working and ritualized animals. In such a way, local ecological and cultural realities have helped maintain a space for 'alternative' developments.

Another small-scale, cross-border trade dominated by ethnic minority Hmong as well as rural Han living in these borderlands is that of textiles, either hand-made or manufactured in synthetic cloth to replicate styles worn by ethnic minorities. In Vietnam, Hmong women in certain regions plant hemp seeds, harvest the crop and then prepare, spin and weave the fabric before dyeing it with indigo that they also cultivate. This hemp cloth is embroidered with elaborate, stylized designs depicting a person's family history or symbolizing objects important to Hmong daily life (Turner, 2007). In Yunnan, by comparison, little hemp is now grown due to government misconceptions that this is the same plant used for recreational and medicinal drugs. The local

governments of Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures are working to eradicate hemp, especially along major GMS transportation routes (pers. comm., Yunnan academic, 6 June 2009). This was vocally opposed by local Hmong I interviewed in Wenshan (also noted by Gu, 2000).

Evidence thus exists of another two-way trade for a commodity steeped in cultural values – albeit constantly renegotiated – for upland inhabitants. From Vietnam to China are traded pre-worn hemp textiles, often embroidered and pleated Hmong skirts. From China, these goods are resold to traders that pass through Laos to Chiang Mai, where substantial marketplace stalls display these and minority-produced goods made in China for export overseas, especially to the USA and France.³ These cloth commodities ultimately reach overseas alternative trade and craft shops throughout the Global North. In the reverse direction, ‘look-alike’ synthetic Hmong skirts manufactured in China travel to Vietnam. These have been designed and manufactured in part due to the pressure to stop hemp production in Yunnan and increasing demand for lighter skirts for everyday wear. These skirts mimic traditional designs, sometimes to the specific requests of Hmong traders from Vietnam. Manufactured braids and synthetic threads used by Hmong, Yao and other ethnic minorities for their embroidery are also imported into Vietnam from China. Hmong residents from China and Vietnam as well as Han living close to the border (who often speak Hmong due to their rural neighbours) are most centrally involved in these trades, with far fewer Kinh being interested. Traders crossing the border with large sacks of textiles do not seem to need to smuggle these goods between China and Vietnam. Instead, they utilize the permits allowing local residents to cross at third-tier crossings to access borderland markets, and frequently hop on heavily loaded local buses to reach their destinations. Nevertheless these traders will at times smuggle other smaller goods with them across these routes. They therefore concurrently rely on legal mechanisms for cross-border trade, while also opportunistically deploying alternative approaches.

Vietnam-based Hmong, Yao and Nùng also frequently cross the border to buy hybrid seeds in Chinese border markets such as Xiao Bazi, Lao Ka and Mu Chang. In the Vietnam uplands, the state has introduced hybrid rice and maize seeds, and endlessly promotes and subsidizes their sale in what could be seen as an ongoing attempt to control agricultural production. Hybrid seeds lose their capacity with successive replanting, so farmers must buy new seeds annually (Husain *et al.*, 2001). This agricultural organization is far removed from earlier upland ethnic minority livelihood strategies based upon semi-subsistence production of traditional rice and maize crops, some with important symbolic cultural values (cf. Bonnin & Turner, 2012).

One of the core concerns regarding this development programme for upland Hmong and Yao farmers in Vietnam is that the state provides subsidized seeds to local communities at specific times and in pre-determined quantities. These deliveries are often late by local indigenous understandings of prime planting times, and even by the government’s own timetables, adding to local concerns over yields. The bulk delivery of seeds also hinders labour sharing amongst kin-groups, with everyone needing to plant concurrently. To overcome such trials some uplanders are sourcing their hybrid seeds directly from China, where the seeds are far more readily available for those wanting to plant outside the Vietnamese government’s delivery timetable (interview, Xiao Bazi Han trader, 30 March 2009). Rice and maize seeds are also transported – often smuggled – into Vietnam by China-based Hmong traders who sell them in Vietnam border markets (interview, Si Ma Cai Hmong trader, 22 February 2009).⁴ These goods are traded by upland ethnic minorities in fairly small quantities, carried in baskets or by packhorses,

by traders crossing at second and third level crossings. At times, these traders also specialize in smuggling Chinese-manufactured pesticides to meet demand from upland farmers in Vietnam now growing hybrids.

The list of trade goods criss-crossing the border in the sacks, baskets and horse panniers of ethnic minority traders, local Han and a few Kinh traders through small-scale crossings or smuggling routes is countless. Beyond those noted above, batteries, medicines for humans and animals, flashlights and rubber boots and shoes are some of the most frequently sighted Chinese goods at local marketplaces in Vietnam. In border town marketplaces in China, non-timber forest products such as cardamom and mushrooms, home-brewed alcohol and maize (especially for pig feed) arrive from Vietnam. Constantly reworked supply and demand equations create dynamic trading-scapes in these Sino-Vietnamese border marketplaces, in which culturally-rooted traditional trades rub shoulders with newly introduced commodities.

Concluding thoughts: state directives and flexible borderland trading-scapes

The impacts of state-sponsored development programmes are not experienced equally by borderland residents. On the China side of the border, even in very remote locales, minority nationalities and Han are witnessing important agricultural transformations, some of which they are implementing with varying degrees of willingness and success. Large-scale cash crop schemes for tobacco, pineapples and bananas are growing in importance economically and spatially across Honghe prefecture, while jatropha (for biodiesel and other biofuels) and cassava (for pig feed or ethanol biofuel) are also officially endorsed. While many rural households are taking on these livelihood options, oftentimes they face devastating results when extreme weather events like drought, extreme cold or floods cripple or wipe out crops, or when local government priorities change (pers. obs., 2010). In these borderlands, the positive economic benefits for local farmers converting to large scale cash crop agriculture appear to be more limited to date than those witnessed farther south in Sipsongpanna (now Xishuangbanna), as documented by Janet Sturgeon (2010; this issue).

In Vietnam, preparations for a highway passing through the Red River Valley and the heart of the Kunming-Hanoi-Hai Phong 'central subcorridor' remain relatively removed from the upland hamlets where most ethnic minorities dwell in these borderlands. Yet newly constructed subsidiary roads bring hybrid rice seeds to outlying villages alongside the state officials to oversee distribution and accounting. Freshly built permanent marketplaces have officials collecting taxes and regulating livestock negotiations, while new border crossings are being constructed in regions where routes were more fluid and unobserved in the past. (Relatively) small-scale dam construction on both sides of the border is also escalating, sponsored by Chinese companies and requiring farmers and markets to relocate (e.g. Coc Ly dam, Lào Cai province, Vietnam; Madushan dam, Honghe prefecture, China).

Such development schemes all contribute to these borderlands becoming transformed from remote and largely ungoverned locales to governed spaces with increasingly governable subjects. While perhaps not the specific aim of GMS planners, the Chinese and Vietnam states gain an upland landscape far more tamed, manageable and regulated than ever before. So-called 'benign development' projects to connect regions can be argued to be serving geopolitical purposes of bringing upland populations more directly within the State's line of vision (cf. Ferguson, 1994; Bryant, 2002; McKinnon, 2008).

But here I want to shift focus from the dominant discourses of development, governmentality and economic integration in the region to the agency of those living in these uplands. There are alternative approaches *already* at play in these uplands through which local people create relevant livelihood strategies. I will not push an 'anti-development' agenda regarding the large-scale projects underway in the GMS – these projects will certainly continue with the powerful backing of these two states. But I note that a post-development approach suggests alternative visions of development interventions in the future. In these mountain ranges, ethnic minorities have succeeded for generations in creating sustainable livelihoods based on their own definitions of success. When I ask Hmong and Yao uplanders what it means to be 'successful' or what they want in life, the answer is consistently along the lines of 'a house that's big enough for everyone, enough buffalo for the fields, and enough rice to eat throughout the year'. This is not to romanticize their livelihoods – living in a mountainous terrain while coping with extreme weather events and high mortality would be a utopian ideal for few – but these farmers are perfectly capable of creating their own visions of future hopes and dreams, visions that to date appear to be distant from the economic essentialism we see in numerous development plans for these uplands. Progress can be visualized differently.

If the governments in the region actually want to 'generate higher income, and improve the living conditions of people in the corridor and surrounding areas' (ADB, 2010a: 13), then it would be pertinent to ask ethnic minorities what their takes on 'success' and 'improved living conditions' are. No ethnic minorities in Vietnam with whom I have discussed the Hanoi-Kunming highway or the GMS had a clue what I was talking about, nor were they particularly interested in such schemes. But they do express their lack of trust in local hospitals and clinics, where Kinh 'treat' them disparagingly, every step of a consultation is steeped in paperwork in a language many do not read (if literate), and fees are demanded at every turn (pers. obs., 2008; 2009). Likewise it is considered rather ineffective to send children to schools where the language of instruction is Vietnamese, and where students often walk for kilometres to discover that the Kinh teacher has decided not to come to work that day. This contrasts with the possibility that children can be learning practical life skills, such as minding buffalo or, for young women, embroidery, important for gaining a potential marriage partner. In Yunnan, where Hmong farmers have been more directly affected by GMS infrastructure projects to date, I have been asked why they received so little financial compensation when their land was taken for road construction, and what the point was, anyway, of being given cash which can be spent only once, unlike land for annual production (interviews, 2009).

Not surprisingly, the GMS main sponsor, the ADB, has a vision for the GMS that parallels that of other international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund regarding economic development in the Global South (Oehlers, 2006). Xiong Bin and Wen Shuhui (2009) have compared the influence that a range of actors in China have on the GMS, as well as its impacts on these actors, which include the central government and line ministries, provincial governments, prefectural governments, state owned enterprises, small- and medium-sized enterprises, border communities, the ADB and civil organizations. The impact of GMS integration and initiatives is argued as being highest for border communities, which are ranked as having among the lowest influence to facilitate or impede any initiatives. The authors note that 'little information about the GMS project has successfully reached these [border] communities, which could benefit

from the information, due to limited communication channels' (Xiong & Wen, 2009: 21).

Across the border, such comments mirror earlier findings by Corlin regarding Hmong communities in Vietnam, where 'laws and decrees issued in Hanoi or by the provincial governments seldom consider the problems and needs of these marginal communities, who have little or no voice in the national discourse on land and economic issues' (Corlin, 2004: 314). More recently, authors of the World Bank's 'Vietnam development report: social protection' remarked (in a somewhat surprised tone?):

Anthropological studies have explored differences in behaviors and have found that some ethnic minority responses to policies and programs, though unexpected by officials used to managing service delivery in majority areas, are entirely rational given the context. In other cases, those policies and programs have been found to be conceptually flawed, being based on ill-informed preconceptions (World Bank, 2007: 21).

When GMS projects and development schemes meet with upland livelihoods, the outcomes are unpredictable. Glassman (2010: 61) reports of ADB officials conceding that 'the projects they fund are likely to encourage further sociospatial unevenness, but they state that there is no other viable way they know of to develop the region's basic infrastructure'. Oehlers (2006: 474) adds that the GMS Program has a narrow conception of social norms and practices in the region, and when these are recognized, they are 'posed purely as obstacles to closer market relations and trade amongst partners'. Peripheries are thus produced and reproduced, while large-scale solutions such as establishing regional business councils and associations completely bypass local borderland communities.

There remains a dominant imagery in China and Vietnam among state officials and urban dwellers of 'backward minorities' inhabiting remote rural locales, constrained by ancient traditions. These minorities are continually depicted as unwilling to change and progress, being passive recipients of political logics beyond their comprehension. The language of ADB and government-endorsed GMS documents upholds this dominant discourse, playing directly on it to add legitimacy to their objectives. In contrast, this local-level analysis of cross-border trader and farmer prerogatives, practices and rationales, highlights that borderland citizens are anything but passive recipients incapable of change. Contemporary small-scale cross-border traders are active agents constantly creating flexible approaches that allow them to work via minor crossings, or take illegal routes to bypass official border gates and smuggle goods if necessary to maintain their livelihoods. While these states plough ahead with the GMS Program and specific visions of modernization that will 'open up opportunities for various types of investments to the otherwise remote and inaccessible areas' (ADB, 2011), local inhabitants stealthily continue to create their own upland 'development' alternatives.

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Endnotes

- 1 For an overview of contemporary large-scale, official border trade, see Gainsborough (2007) and Gu and Womack (2000). For more on contemporary Han-Kinh cross-border trade see Chan (2005).
- 2 From interviews and available documents my best numerical estimate of these crossings in Lào Cai province is 11 (Cơ quan của Đảng uỷ và Bộ Tư lệnh Biên phòng, 2009; Vietnam Department of Survey and Mapping, 2009).
- 3 These details were explained by textile trader interviewees in Ma Guan and Wenshan cities, Yunnan; Luang Prabang, Laos; and Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- 4 Seed smuggling also occurs across the Hekou-Lào Cai city international border crossing, with smuggling baskets prepared in Hekou, hoisted onto bicycles and pushed across the border; small boats also cross the Nanxihe/sông Nậm Thi river that forms part of the Yunnan- Lào Cai border to the east of these cities with similar illegal cargo (pers. obs., 2009). Some of this seed smuggling is so blatant that one can only surmise kickbacks are involved, but I have not directly confirmed this yet (although see Chan, 2005: 167).

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