
Negotiating Remote Borderland Access: Small-Scale Trade on the Vietnam–China Border

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the cross-border trading networks and practices of highland residents in north-west Vietnam. It reveals how such individuals, of highland minority and majority Kinh ethnicities, negotiate the political reality of an international border in highly pragmatic ways as they augment their livelihoods by trading commodities with inhabitants in south-west China. We follow four particular commodities, traded across different political tiers of border crossing (each with specific rules, regulations and negotiations), by a diverse range of traders. In doing so we argue that border access is mediated by a complex and multifaceted set of social and structural components including not only state policy, but ethnically-embedded social relations and specific geographic variables that, in turn, are engendering disparate economic opportunities.

INTRODUCTION: NEGOTIATING BORDERS

The globalizing world economy is characterized by increasing trans-border activity leading some authors to argue that state borders now function as porous membranes facilitating cross-border economic and social interactions (Dicken, 2000; Evans et al., 2000; Herzog, 1992). Yet at the same time contemporary borders are important symbols of state control over territories and population movements. Indeed, processes of globalization, market liberalization and the associated opening of borders to trade are frequently accompanied by a reassertion of government control at physical border sites (Andreas, 2000; Kusakabe, 2004; Papademetriou and Waller Meyers, 2001; Walker, 1999). States often retain a strong determining influence over cross-border flows of people and commodities, disputing the claim that we live in a borderless world (Held et al., 2000; Hirst and Thompson, 1995; Ohmae, 1990). State borders delimit the territory over which a state maintains sovereignty, acting as ‘screening agents’ that control what can legally flow between political jurisdictions and under what conditions (Clement, 2004). In such a context, we argue that a greater attention to borders and borderlands generates new and important understandings of a range of contemporary issues that include international political relations, transboundary regions,

state power, cultural landscapes, and the informal economy (see among others Donnan and Wilson, 1994, 1999; Herzog, 1990; Pavlakovich-Kochi et al., 2004; Newman, 2006; Staudt, 1998; Tonkin, 1994).

In fact, Ratzel (1897, cited in Donnan and Wilson, 1994: 8) suggests that ‘the fringe on each side of the borderline is the reality of borders, while the line itself is the abstraction’. This points to the tensions between abstract lines drawn on a map and the on-the-ground realities of borderlands where boundaries are rarely so neatly delineated. Building on these ideas, Donnan and Wilson (1999: 15) suggest that borders actually incorporate three elements: firstly, ‘the jurisdictional borderline which simultaneously separates and joins states’; secondly, the agents and institutions of the state ‘who demarcate and sustain the border, and who are found most often in border areas but who also often penetrate deeply into the territory of the state’; and thirdly, frontiers, namely the ‘territorial zones of varying width which stretch across and away from state borders, within which people negotiate a variety of behaviours and meanings associated with membership in their nations and states’ (c.f. Anderson, 1996; Herzog, 1990; Morehouse, 2004).

Along with Morehouse (2004), it is our contention that jurisdictional borderlines rarely represent the reality of borderlands, those frontier territorial zones and cultural landscapes on either side. The identity of borderlands is instead shaped by inhabitants’ interactions with the boundary, their transactions across it and with each other (ibid.). Moreover, border residents often devise highly pragmatic ways of negotiating borderlines and state policies, such that state efforts to establish the political and economic parameters for cross-border interactions are often unable to fully control everyday practices of ‘making do’ (Morehouse et al., 2004a). As Donnan and Wilson (1994) suggest, and as we will show in the Southeast Asian context, people and institutions at the local level of the borderlands are often part of extremely complex, interwoven relationships with other ethnic groups and nations, both within and outside their own state.

In mainland Southeast Asia, the majority of modern political borders are located in mountainous terrain. These are sites of territorial ordering and political containment where local populations undertake diverse strategies and tactics in response to border solidification. The Sino-Vietnamese border of 2,363 km is no exception (Gu and Womack, 2000). As one of six Vietnam provinces that border China, Lao Cai province, the site for this study, shares 203 km with its neighbouring Chinese province, Yunnan (see Figure 1). Located in the north-west of Vietnam, Lao Cai is officially labelled a ‘sparsely populated area’, yet the province is home to a diverse range of national minorities (*các dân tộc thiểu số*), a number of whom weave cross-border trade into their livelihood strategies. Historically arriving in waves of migration from southern China, these highlanders have maintained or developed economic practices, political approaches and cosmologies that

Figure 1. Lào Cai in the Viet Nam Context



Source: adapted from Michaud (2007).

reflect their distinctiveness from Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) (Michaud et al., 2002). Concurrently, while swidden-based subsistence agriculture has been the dominant livelihood means for highlanders, they have always been in regular contact with inhabitants of neighbouring valleys — including valleys across modern state borders — to exchange goods such as forest products and opium, for salt and metals and opium (Michaud and Turner, 2000; Rambo, 1997).

The process of creating modern political borders divided the historical homelands of many local groups in north-west Vietnam and south-west China, officially separating kin and long time neighbours between different political territories (Michaud, 2006). While the Vietnamese state has since undergone profound transformations through decolonization, the First and Second Indochina Wars, and socialist rule, the 1986 post-socialist policies of *Đổi Mới* (economic renovation) further transformed the role of the state in the highlands (and elsewhere). More locally, the 1979 invasion by Chinese forces into Vietnam’s northern highland border provinces and the subsequent official closing of the border impacted local population movements and trade for nearly a decade (Chau, 2000; Womack, 1994). It was only in 1988 that the Vietnamese state officially re-opened the border to cross-border

trading, followed shortly thereafter by the normalization of Sino–Vietnamese relations in 1991.

Nowadays, cross-border trade constitutes an important component of many local highland livelihoods, and this article examines how such residents in Northern Vietnam negotiate the political realities of an international border. Investigating these cross-border trade activities between the border provinces of Lao Cai, Northern Vietnam, and Yunnan, China, we ask: what are the implications of this political border for highland cross-border trade? How do state policy, social relations, and the specificities of the commodities traded combine to shape these traders' livelihoods? To answer these questions, we proceed as follows. First, we outline the conceptual grounding for the study, building upon debates around access as related to livelihoods and borderlands. We then introduce the highland border residents at the heart of our study, before analysing the contemporary border controls that they negotiate and the strategies by which they do so. We conclude by concentrating upon the complex factors that structure and shape cross-border trade in highland Northern Vietnam. Although a key part of many highland livelihoods in Northern Vietnam, and indeed elsewhere in Southeast Asia, border trade, the controls placed over it, and the means for highland residents to use different border crossings to their best advantage are little researched.¹ We claim that, in this case, access — mediated not only by the state, but by both the closely ethnic-based social relations of individuals, and structural mechanisms including geographic features — is critical to understanding the ability of border residents to cross between countries, reach local marketplaces, and trade specific goods. Such factors in turn have crucial implications for the livelihoods of individual cross-border traders.²

ACCESSING CROSS-BORDER LIVELIHOODS

This article extends previous work on access to examine the effective ability of individuals and households to benefit from cross-border trade networks (Long and Villareal, 1998; McSweeney, 2004; Ribot, 1998; Ribot

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1. Notable exceptions include contributors in Evans et al. (2000), a volume on social and cultural interactions between China and countries in mainland Southeast Asia; Li and Li (1998), studying live wildlife trade across the Sino–Vietnamese border; Bush (2004), researching small-scale fisheries on the Cambodian–Lao–Thai borders; Kusakabe (2004), focusing on the gendered divisions of trade on the Thai–Lao border; Sturgeon (2004, 2005) on small-scale border politics on the Burma–Thai–China border; and Walker (1999), concentrating on traders and transport on the Lao–China–Burma–Thai borders.
 2. Fieldwork data informing this study have been collected in Lao Cai province since 1998. Our research draws upon a pool of interviewees that includes over 100 Kinh, Chinese and ethnic minority (Hmong, Yao, Nung, Tay, Giay) cross-border traders, as well as nine border officials and army officers, and four representatives of People's Committees at district and commune levels. All names are pseudonyms, while border officials are identified by the code 'BO'.

and Peluso, 2003). Access analysis, by focusing on the *ability* to benefit, rather than the *right* to benefit from a good or activity, helps to identify the circumstances — such as institutions, social and political–economic relations and discursive strategies — by which certain people benefit from particular resources or activities while others do not (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Access is thus conceived of as ‘bundles of power’, while power is defined as the ‘capacity of some actors to affect the practices and ideas of others’ (Ribot and Peluso, 2003: 155; also Ribot, 1998). If we think in terms of an international border crossing, for example, it is clear that local representatives of state authorities are nodes of direct and indirect forms of access control.

We argue that access not only conditions the use or acquisition of various forms of capital, it also shapes the potential exploitation of livelihood opportunities, in this case opportunities related to markets, border crossings, trade networks and tradable goods.³ This access is determined by the social positioning of an individual, as well as structural components that affect an individual’s ability to exploit livelihood opportunities. For example, an individual’s social identity (defined in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, place of birth, status) and social relations (defined according to family, kinship, friendship, historical ties among individuals and groups, occupation), may afford one specific access (Ribot, 1998; Ribot and Peluso, 2003). An individual may also be better positioned to exploit opportunities by strengthening his or her belonging to a certain interest group (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005; Wood and Salway, 2000). Alternatively, failed access and social exclusion can result from groups trying to monopolize specific opportunities for their own advantage while legitimizing limiting opportunities for others through the use of characteristics such as gender, language, ethnicity, origin or religion. This points to the fact that ‘livelihood activities are not neutral but engender processes of inclusion and exclusion’ (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005: 34). Structural components, often geographic such as distance to border crossing points and markets, as well as seasonality and the household life cycle also impact on access and associated livelihood opportunities, as will be shown in this article.⁴

3. Following Chambers and Conway (1991) and Ellis (2000), we identify livelihoods as integrating assets and vulnerabilities (the presence or absence of forms of capital — human, physical, natural, financial, and social), strategies (how people deploy or exploit existing assets), and access or barriers to resources (discussed in this section). See also Turner (2007).

4. In this particular context, researching with individuals living in the borderlands of north-west Vietnam and south-west China, we have found that ethnicity is a salient category to help understand some of the behaviours of individuals in the borderlands. Our intent is not to employ the label of ‘ethnicity’ uncritically as we realize that there is considerable differentiation among individuals within an ethnic group, and in no way do we wish to inadvertently homogenize or essentialize ethnicity. Indeed, we are attempting here to account for the dynamic nature of highland groups, intra-locale specificity, and individuals’ innovative undertakings (see Sowerwine, 2004 for similar discussions re ethnicity among the Yao, a neighbouring highland minority group).

Undertaking an in-depth analysis of the livelihoods of cross-border traders in Northern Vietnam we draw together literature on access, borders and borderlands to focus on the importance of the place-based knowledge of border residents, recognizing that the local wisdom and experiences of such residents often reflect very down-to-earth ways of negotiating borders and state policies. These state policies, often made by high level state officials in spatially removed national capitals without consultation with local border communities, result in a complexity of strategies and coping mechanisms among border residents (Morehouse et al., 2004a, 2004b; Papademetriou and Waller Meyers, 2001). Local level studies such as this one are therefore needed to illustrate just how such individuals — whom we introduce below — negotiate cross-border livelihoods.

HIGHLAND BORDER RESIDENTS IN VIETNAM

Prior to European colonization and the associated principle of national territories bounded by a demarcated, fixed physical border under state control, the peoples of Peninsula Southeast Asia's highland fringes were rarely subject to the direct interest of lowland rulers (Duncan, 2004; Michaud, 2006). Instead, these highland fringes acted as political and economic buffer zones with inhabitants kept in a position of obedience through feudal tributary relationships which were considered a more cost-effective strategy than conquering and occupying these zones. The formation of permanent modern borders has been 'a fundamental factor in fragmenting and segregating highland ethnic groups, turning them into "national minorities"' (Michaud, 2006: 45). From this perspective, modern borders validate the dominance of major ethnic identities such as Kinh (Vietnamese lowlanders) in Vietnam and Han (the majority Chinese) in China, 'by enclosing their customary domain and creating a national political entity centred on their definition of the nation. In addition, borders aggregate to these core nations a number of different ethnicities relegated to the role of minority' (ibid.).

Interestingly, although now minorities in the Socialist State of Vietnam, highlanders outnumber Kinh lowlanders in the province of Lao Cai where this study is located. The population of Lao Cai province was close to 600,000 in 2004, of which ethnic minority groups formed 64 per cent, incorporating approximately 21 per cent Hmong, 16 per cent Tay, 14 per cent Yao, 5 per cent Giay and 4 per cent Nung, in addition to other smaller groups (People's Committee of Lao Cai Province, 2004). At the same time however, local political control and economic wealth remain firmly in the hands of the Kinh.⁵

5. Across the border, the population of Yunnan stood at 42.9 million in 2000, with 14.3 million or 33.4 per cent of the province's population being classified as national minorities (Michaud, 2006).

One of these highland minority groups, the Hmong, are found along the remote Vietnam–China border and, as noted above, form the largest ethnic minority group in Lao Cai province (Casson, 1998).⁶ Like many highland groups in Southeast Asia, the Hmong have an acephalous (lacking political leaders or hierarchies), stateless, kinship-based social organization, being related to each other ‘primarily through blood ties and alliance, not through geographic proximity or political affinities’ (Michaud and Culas, 2000: 114). As part of this organization, families in the same lineage rely on each other for mutual assistance, while remaining independent economic units (Pham, 1995). With few Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) located in the hill areas where Hmong live, there is now a small degree of participation of Hmong in the local and regional State administration (Culas and Michaud, 2004). Yet within villages ‘strict customary laws provide for the rights and duties of members of the kinship group’ (Corlin, 2004: 304).

In Lao Cai province, despite their relative geographic isolation, Hmong residents are very much interconnected through marketplace trade, which constitutes an important economic and social activity. This was the case long before Europeans arrived on the scene, with Hmong trading cypress (for coffin wood) with Chinese caravan traders in return for salt, silver and manufactured goods. Later they also traded opium with the French for similar products. More recently, several factors have led to new trade opportunities for Hmong residents. Growing prospects for cross-border trade since 1988 have created new economic opportunities, while a handicraft trade in Sa Pa, a small but rapidly growing highland tourist town in Lao Cai province, has emerged since the removal of restrictions on travel for foreign tourists in 1993 (Turner and Michaud, 2006).

For its part, the Vietnamese State has long been concerned with minority ethnic groups within its boundaries, due to domestic conflicts and the large populations of these groups in neighbouring countries (Jackson, 1969; McElwee, 2004). The First Indochina War contributed to the tendency of lowland Vietnamese to view ethnic minorities with suspicion because, despite the success of the Viet Minh in drawing support from the highlanders, a number of highlanders in Northern Vietnam aligned with the French, particularly Thai, Hmong and Yao west of the Red River (for more details see Jackson, 1969; McAlister, 1967; McElwee, 2004; Michaud, 2000). In response to such perceived security threats Vietnam, like many other Southeast Asian states, has attempted to consolidate its territory by encouraging lowlander peasants to ‘colonize’ frontier areas and borderlands, often at the expense of the area’s original inhabitants (de Koninck, 1996). Indeed, since the 1954 Geneva Conference and the official decolonization of North

6. The Chinese state classifies the Hmong as part of the larger Miao group (8.9 million in 2000). The largest Miao population in China is in the Guizhou highlands, although as a result of waves of south-western migration, Yunnan province is currently their second most important location (Michaud, 2006).

Vietnam, state-directed agricultural expansion has fulfilled a broad spectrum of mandates including the settlement of border areas for international security purposes. A wave of Kinh migration to the highlands was thus released with the socialist state's New Economic Zone (NEZ) programme, active in the northern highlands in the 1960s. This programme was intended to bring the remote highlands under greater state control through the influx of Kinh migrants (see Dao, 1980; Evans, 1992; Hardy, 2003; Porter, 1993). These migrants often developed tolerant relationships with the highlander majority, pursuing livelihoods as agriculturalists, traders and labourers, in spite of often deeming their highland neighbours to be 'backward' (Sowerwine, 2004; van de Walle and Gunewardena, 2001). The most recent wave of Kinh migration to the northern highlands has been in the shape of spontaneous migration facilitated by the 1986 economic renovation policies of *Đổi Mới* and new business opportunities associated with tourism (Michaud and Turner, 2006; see also Casson, 1998; Wandel, 1997).

CONTEMPORARY BORDER CONTROLS AND STRATEGIES

In current day Vietnam there are three official categories of border crossing, namely open entrances, national crossings, and international crossings.⁷ Open entrances are small, local crossings for residents of the districts on either side of the border adjacent to the crossing point. National crossings⁸ are sites where any citizen of Vietnam or China may cross the border, and international crossings are larger crossings where third country nationals can also cross, with the appropriate documents. In Lao Cai province, as will be shown below, these differ considerably with regards to the scale of cross-border activity, border regulations, the number of traders crossing and their ethnicity.

Following the normalization of relations between Vietnam and China in 1991, the Vietnam state has repeatedly emphasized the role of cross-border trade in developing the border region and creating new livelihood opportunities (Chan, 2005; Chen, 2005). During our interviews, border officials stressed the positive role of crossing points for the economic benefit of the local ethnic minority population, with statements such as:

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7. In China, government policy and local administration in the border regions have actively responded to new opportunities provided by cross-border trade. In Yunnan, the provincial government has simplified visa and customs procedures for those who want to make visits across the border, permitting multiple re-entries on a daily basis (Kuah, 2000).
 8. Our analysis does not focus on national level crossings because, in comparison to the others, they were little used by Vietnamese citizens; they are used far more frequently by Han Chinese, who do not form the focus of this investigation (for more details see Schoenberger, 2006).

The border opened to serve the ethnic minorities living here and make it easy for them to cross to buy, sell and do business... Because the ethnic minorities live near the border, trading with China allows them to buy with a cheaper price because the transport costs are lower than if they had to bring goods from the lowlands to this area. (BO7, 2 July 2005)

However, as we will soon see, Vietnamese state policies often effectively promote large-scale trade at the expense of small-scale activities conducted by local residents, as Gu and Womack (2000: 1057) point out:

Some entrepreneurs and government officials in both countries pay attention to large-scale and small-volume trade, but look down on small-scale border market trade because it does not generate significant profits or revenues. This oversight is a serious problem for the poor border areas in particular because such small-scale trade is all they have and it needs to be encouraged.

Taking Advantage of Local Links: Highlander Traders

Residents of districts adjoining the border have access to the small crossing points called 'open entrances' where there are often few taxes on imports as the quantities moved by individual traders are considered minimal (BO2, 13 June 2005; BO8, 8 July 2005). One senior border official working at such an entrance explained that there is an open entrance at every point along the border where there is an 'Office of Border Defence', making a total of eleven such open entrances in Lao Cai province (BO9, 8 July 2005). Indeed, open entrances are typically characterized by a sizeable army outpost — the Office of Border Defence — located about 5 to 10 km from the border, and a smaller outpost called the 'Border Control Station', often just a small hut, located at the physical border. Here, members of the Office of Border Defence work to inspect permits and collect crossing fees.⁹

The permits used by border residents at such open entrances function as an advantageous alternative to a Vietnamese passport, being fairly easily obtainable at local Security Offices in communes near the border (BO1, 8 June 2005; BO3, 14 June 2005).¹⁰ Only people classified as border residents

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9. Fees must be paid to both Chinese and Vietnamese border authorities for each crossing made, although variations were reported by traders and border officials, suggesting non-standardized payments. All interviewees confirmed that the fee paid to Vietnamese authorities was 3,000 Vietnamese dong (VND) (US\$ 0.19), but some traders reported paying it only on their return trip while others paid it twice (these differences occurred among Hmong and Kinh traders alike). The fee paid to the Chinese authorities for those travelling from Vietnam was VND 10,000 (US\$ 0.60), but interviews suggest that this too was enforced unevenly (BO3, 1 July 2005).
 10. These permits are issued by both Vietnam and China. To apply for a permit in Vietnam a border resident over the age of eighteen must bring a photo and their border ID card to a local Security Office (all residents of Vietnam are issued an ID card by the state and currently, border residents are distinguished by a diagonal yellow line across the card). Each permit indicates where the holder is permitted to cross, a new permit being required for each crossing point (BO3, 1 July 2005). Acquiring a passport, by contrast, requires a mountain of paperwork and multiple visits to the provincial capital.

can cross at an open entrance with a permit; no other Vietnamese citizens — even if they hold a passport — are permitted to use these crossings.¹¹ Border residents thus enjoy the most favourable conditions for accessing the border with China in terms of the limited bureaucracy involved and the most numerous crossing points. These advantages notwithstanding, those who access open entrances do face restrictions as to how deep they can travel into the neighbouring country's territory, typically only being permitted as far as the nearest marketplaces (BO3, 1 July 2005).

What types of commodities are being traded by those who take advantage of these open entrances? Among the multitude of small-scale trade movements, two commodities in great demand locally, and consistently transported using these crossing points, are manufactured ribbons and highlander-style skirts. Colourful braid ribbons are for sale in nearly every market in Lao Cai province. They are used to decorate jackets produced and worn by Hmong women (mostly in the districts of Bac Ha and Si Ma Cai, shown on Figure 2a), as well as being sewn on the jackets of Yao women. They are also refashioned into a variety of goods by both Kinh and highlanders such as hats, bags and bracelets, for sale to foreign and domestic tourists. Manufactured pleated and patterned synthetic fabric skirts provide Hmong consumers with an alternative form of every-day clothing that is cheaper to buy, lighter and cooler to wear, and easier to wash than the traditional, home produced, hand-embroidered hemp skirts, which the manufacturers imitate. Working by hand on skirts with four to six metres of embroidery places significant demands on the time of the women producers. It is worth stressing that these homemade skirts are not losing their popularity — they retain their traditional and ritual importance.¹² In part,

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11. Despite the importance of the category 'border resident' as a legal mechanism of access, the state definition was rather hard to pinpoint from interviews with officials. Some stated that border residents were members of *communes* adjacent to the border, but suggested that in practice this was quite flexible as all residents of Lao Cai *city* could cross the border as border residents, even if they were residents of wards (urban administrative units, roughly equivalent to rural communes) not adjacent to the border (BO1, 8 June 2005). Another official stated that border residents are all those who live in *districts* adjacent to the border, so that the whole district may use an open entrance (BO2, 13 June 2005). In practice, the clearest exception to either of these interpretations was a group of Kinh traders from Sa Pa town, in a district not adjoining the border, who managed to cross the border at an international crossing with only a permit. These traders had negotiated border access on more favourable terms than the majority and were the exception amongst interviewees. To negotiate such access these Kinh cross-border traders from Sa Pa might have overpaid for permits as a number reported that they cost VND 20,000 as opposed to the VND 5,000 or 10,000 reported by border officials. Interviews in 2007 with cross-border traders in Lang Son province, north of Ha Noi, also confirmed the 'greyness' regarding how access can be financially negotiated.
 12. Most Hmong women own at least one full pleated traditional Hmong skirt made from hemp, with sections batiked and embroidered. These are worn for marriages, births and on other special occasions. Most importantly, a woman is dressed in the skirt when she dies, in order to meet her ancestors (Mai, 1999).

the growing interest in manufactured skirts stems from the fact that they *reproduce* traditional dress, and hence do not represent an abandonment of tradition in favour of ‘lowlander clothing’. These manufactured skirts are seen as distinctly Hmong, regardless of whether Hmong produce them or not, and are only ever worn by them. The different trade flows of ribbons and skirts are shown in Figures 2a, 2b and 2c.¹³

A key crossing point for these goods is the Pha Long open entrance border crossing (Figure 2a, point D). Here, Hmong from Vietnam, specifically Muong Khuong district that adjoins the border, cross the border to buy ribbons in Lao Kha, a predominantly Hmong border market in China (point C). This border market sits close to ribbon manufacturing sites in Van Son, China (point A) where it is possible for China-based traders to purchase ribbons directly from manufacturers (Long, Han Chinese trader, 11 June 2005). The Hmong border residents of Muong Khuong return to Vietnam from the Chinese market and travel onto markets elsewhere in Lao Cai province such as Sa Pa (point F) to sell the ribbons wholesale to Kinh, Hmong and Yao traders.

The Lao Kha border market in China is also an important distribution site for manufactured Hmong skirts to enter Vietnam (Figure 2a, point C). Like ribbons, Van Son (point A) is a notable production site for these skirts. However, their production also extends to smaller sites in Ma Quan, China (point B) and their production after printing is often undertaken in Hmong households that can assemble more than 100 skirts each week for sale in the nearby Lao Kha market. This spatial flow of goods from producers towards the Vietnam–China border has led to the centrality of the Lao Kha border market and the Pha Long crossing in this trade (point D). Tong, a Hmong woman very active in the skirt trade living in Muong Khuong district, explained how she crosses the border at Pha Long to buy skirts and supplies other traders back in Vietnam:

To get skirts supplies I cross at the local Pha Long entrance to go the Lao Kha market each Tuesday, bringing about the same amount back each week. I supply skirts to my aunt, cousin and some friends living nearby who are traders and help them to buy other goods that they want in China. I don’t sell to my friends and relatives to make a profit but just act as their representative to buy the skirts. I import 300–400 skirts a week to distribute amongst friends and family, and keep 50–60 for myself to trade. In total I supply ten relatives, three sell in Muong Khuong market, another in Phong Hai market in Bao Thang district and another trades in Lai Chau province [west of Lao Cai province]. (Tong, 4 June 2005)

13. These diagrams are based on commodity flow analyses undertaken using a ‘systems of provision’ approach, an approach chosen because it conceptualizes commodity circulations as interconnected flows of knowledges and discourses, not just materials. The approach thereby pays attention to the social embeddedness of economic relations and the cultural meanings attached to commodities (Hughes, 2000; Leslie and Reimer, 1999).

Figure 2a. Routes Taken by Ribbons and Skirts across the Sino-Vietnamese Border in Lào Cai Province

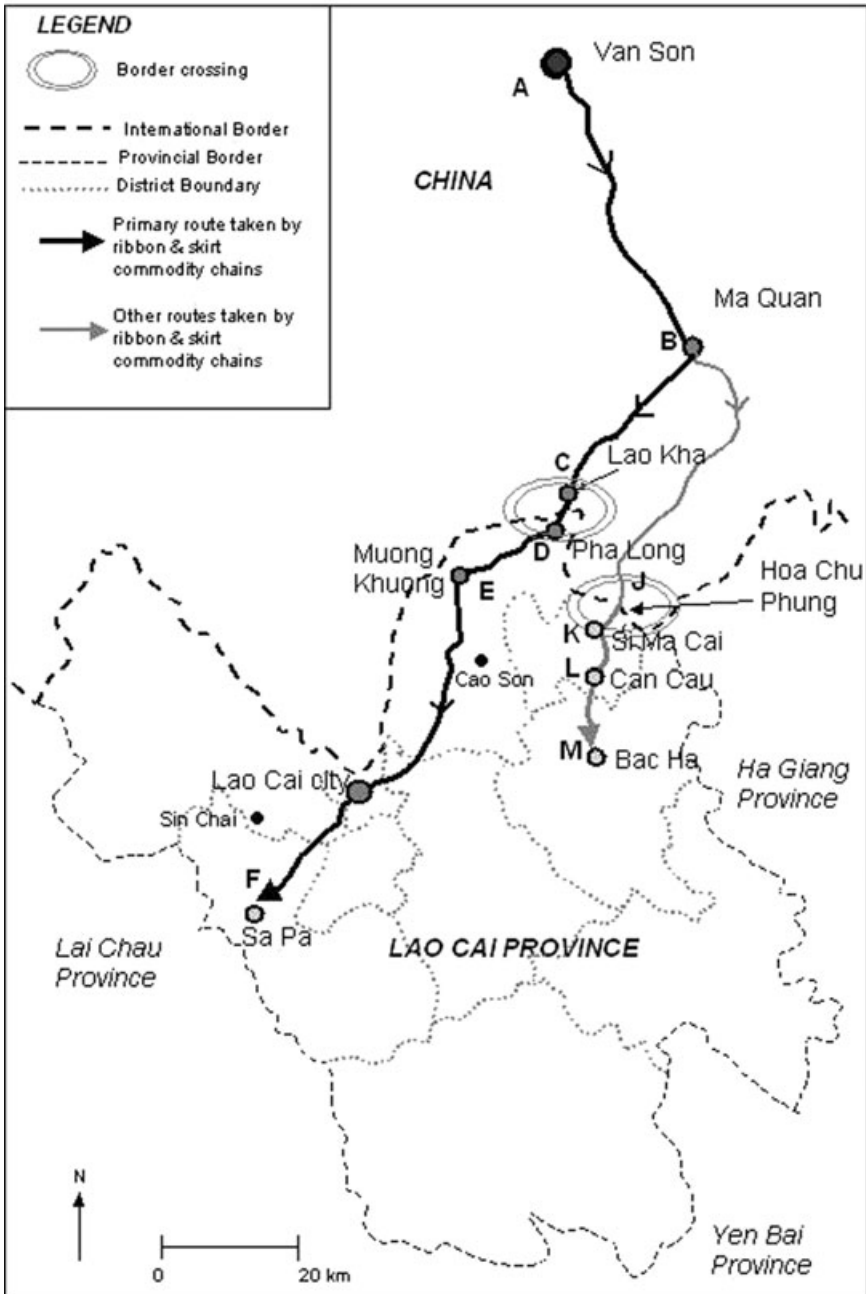
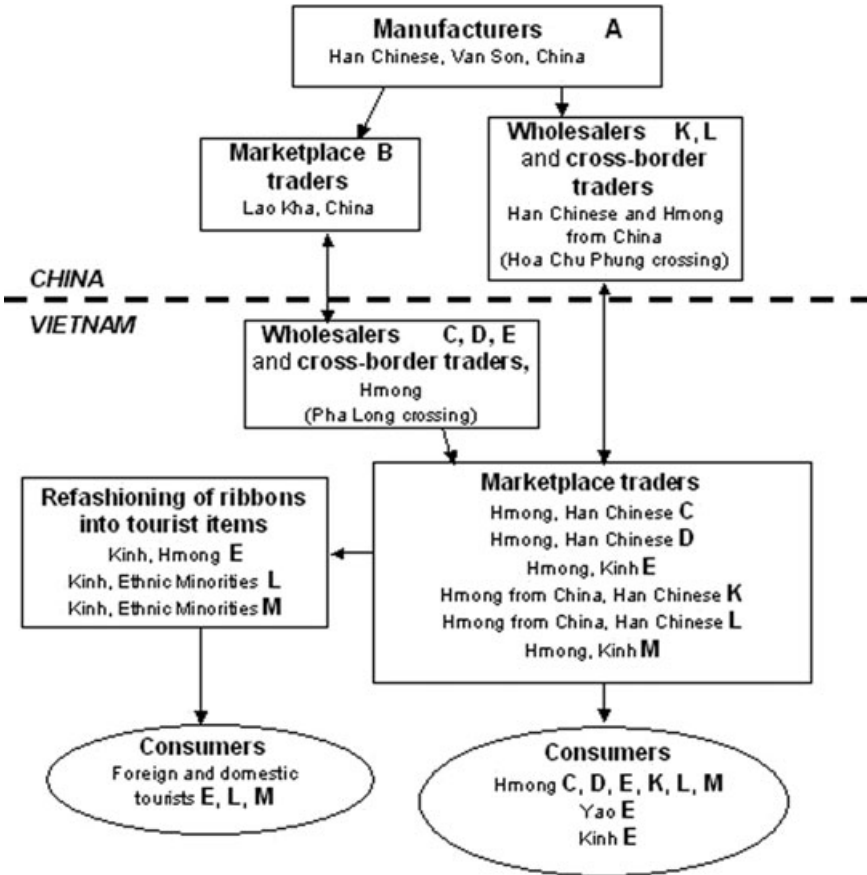


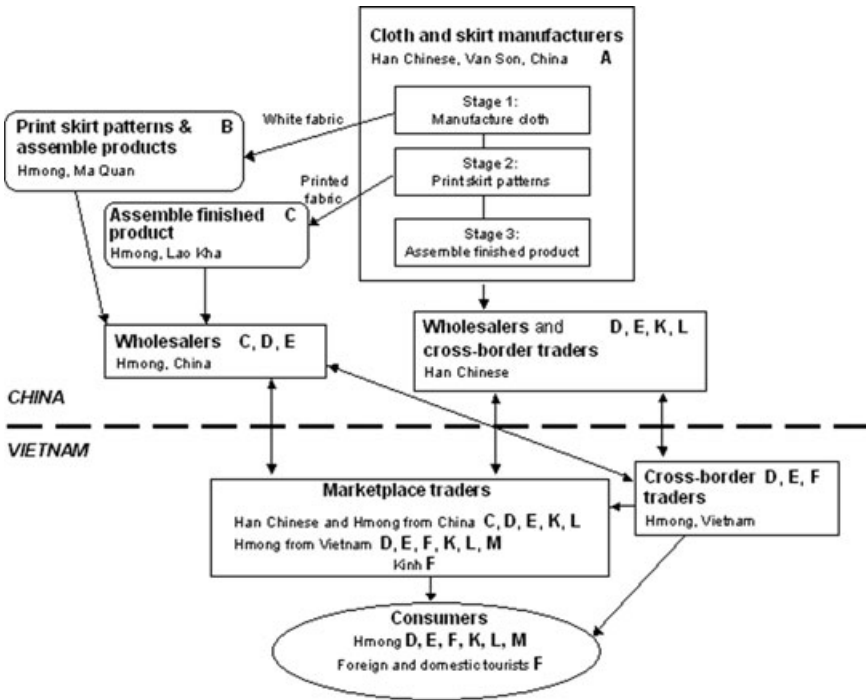
Figure 2b. Commodity Flow Diagram of Ribbons



Indeed, Tong’s weekly schedule revolves around trading these skirts. On Saturday she sells in Pha Long, Sunday in Muong Khuong, Tuesday she goes to China to purchase supplies in Lao Kha, Wednesday she sells in Cao Son and Thursday in Sin Chai (located on Figure 2a). Sometimes she even goes to a market further south in Yen Bai province, Vietnam to sell skirts there as well. Her cross-border trading activities are an important component of her household’s livelihood, with the opportunity cost of lost agricultural labour more than compensated for by her cash income, used for household expenses.

Although the Hoa Chu Phung open entrance (point J) in Si Ma Ci district is also used to import skirt materials, interviews with skirt traders reinforced the importance of the Pha Long crossing. This trade in skirts has become far more central to the livelihoods of a group of women from Muong Khuong district than for those living elsewhere. For example, Tong, whom we met above, explained ‘the Hmong from Pha Long [Muong Khuong district] go

Figure 2c. Commodity Flow Diagram of Manufactured Highlander-style Skirts



to many areas to sell. Often they go to Lai Chau province to sell because the skirts only come from this entrance here. And many others go to other areas' (Tong, 4 June 2005). Indeed, across the markets we studied we consistently found that Hmong women from Muong Khuong district dominated the trade in manufactured skirts. What is important to note here is that since many of these women reside in communes in this district adjacent to the Vietnam–China border they are classified as border residents and therefore have favourable access to the Pha Long open entrance crossing and Lao Kha market. Consequently, *rights* in terms of the formal rules and conventions that mediate access to the border, as well as structural components that affect the *ability* to access the border, such as the geographic conditions associated with border residency and distances to markets and crossing points, have facilitated the beneficial exploitation of specific livelihood opportunities for these local Hmong women.

However, this particular case is even more complex. These Hmong women in Muong Khuong district are uniquely positioned to better access the border for a number of additional historical and cultural reasons. First, many Hmong key informants from Pha Long commune, and Muong Khuong district more generally, described local cross-border exchange relationships that pre-dated

the Sino–Vietnamese conflict as having continued throughout the border closure. The resilience of these trade networks is due in part to the presence of kin on the Chinese side of the border. Several informants initially began crossing prior to 1979, continuing to do so during the border closure in order to see relatives in China and to exchange small quantities of ‘special clothes, food and clothing’ (Ku, 3 June 2005). Beyond maintaining trade networks and contributing to important social networks, these exchanges also provided Hmong women with information about trading opportunities and goods available in China. This affirms the central role of site specific knowledge gained in earlier times that McSweeney (2004) also identifies as an important component of access to rural trade networks in her work in Central America. Second, these Hmong women benefit from cultural capital in the form of language skills developed and maintained during their ongoing cross-border exchanges. Indeed, several Hmong women from Pha Long travelled as children to the Lao Kha market where they learned to speak the local form of Mandarin when socializing in the market while their parents traded. Such skills and networks made these women more comfortable crossing the border when it became legal to do so again after 1979, and hence put them in a better position to seize upon growing trade opportunities.

Additionally, some Hmong women traders in Pha Long commune have benefited from the involvement of a Hmong man in the local People’s Committee who has helped transmit specific information about border trade regulations from government officials to the community. As Ribot and Peluso (2003: 170) argue, state authorities are often ‘nodes of direct and indirect forms of access control’ where multiple mechanisms of access are ‘bundled together in one person or institution’. Several elderly local Hmong women were therefore able to cross the border according to new legal procedures as soon as the border was re-opened (having also crossed illegally during its closure). When asked how they learned the new procedures, Nhia (18 July 2005) revealed that her friend’s husband — the Hmong man mentioned above — worked in the local government and had explained the new procedures required to her and two of her friends, all from Pha Long. Traders’ kin affiliations, language skills and other forms of human and social capital are therefore important determinants of their ability to access trade networks and associated livelihoods (see also McSweeney, 2004).

This analysis of open entrance trade also highlights important differences with regard to access to financial capital and networks due to country of residence. Considerably larger quantities of skirts are imported and traded in Vietnam by Han and Hmong skirt wholesalers from China, than by Hmong traders from Vietnam. Many of the traders from China have direct access to manufacturers in Ma Quan and Van Son, China and, importantly, are able to obtain credit from producers, enabling them to access larger quantities of goods at better prices and without reliance on intermediaries (Long, Chinese trader, 9 July 2005; Yeng, Hmong trader from China, 17 July 2005). As a

result, these actors sell in Lao Cai province marketplaces near the border at prices lower than traders from Vietnam. Hmong marketplace traders in Lao Cai are very aware of the distinction between the buying power of Hmong from Vietnam and Hmong from China. The borderline thus represents an important division in terms of access to financial credit and capital, creating different opportunities for residents on either side. Bound up in this difference are the legal restrictions noted earlier that govern the distances traders from Vietnam can travel into China, hence denying Vietnam-based traders from forming direct links with Chinese manufacturers. Consequently, state-regulated access agreed upon by Vietnam and China to the borderlands for traders from Vietnam, in addition to the smaller amounts of financial capital they are able to lever, result in traders from China capturing a considerably larger market share, out-pricing their Vietnam-based competitors.

Kinh Capturing International Crossing Trade

In contrast to the situation at the open entrances and national crossings, the much larger international crossings are distinct because they allow third country nationals with the necessary documentation to cross the border. In Lao Cai province there is only one such crossing linking Lao Cai city with the Chinese town of Hekou. On the Vietnamese side this crossing is marked by a modern immigration and customs office equipped with x-ray machines and customs and passport control to accommodate large flows of traders and tourists.

The Lao Cai city entrance is distinctive from others in the province due to the sheer volume of trade and people crossing daily. A border official explained that the import–export turnover moving through this site had grown so much that 2004 levels were double those of 2001 (BO1, 8 June 2005; see also Chen, 2005). This high volume of trade is explained by the fact that this crossing allows for the widest variety of permissible modes of transportation, including a railway line. This is the only crossing in the province which allows trucks, although to cross from Vietnam the truck must be registered in Lao Cai province and go no further inland in China than Hekou (BO4, 22 June 2005). Similarly, it is the only place at which tourist buses can cross (BO1, 8 June 2005). Thus, as a result of ground transportation regulations, large-scale trading is encouraged at the Lao Cai city crossing, while cross-border trading at other entrances is limited to far smaller quantities.¹⁴ Associated with this scaling-up of trade, however, is a

14. State-regulations on modes of cross-border transportation allow fewer options at open entrances and national crossings than at international ones. Because trucks are not permitted to cross at national and open entrances, most traders cross the border by foot and import only what they can carry on their backs or, in some cases, on pack horses. It is common to see trucks arriving, being loaded with goods that have been brought across the border by

more intensive regulation regime in the form of duties and import regulations based on the quantities and types of goods imported (BO1, 8 June 2005; see also Chan, 2005).

No statistics are kept on the ethnic identity of individuals crossing at the Lao Cai city site but border officials suggested, and observations confirmed, that very few ethnic minorities cross at this point. One border official maintained that no Hmong cross in Lao Cai, very few Yao, and some Giay, while it was mostly Kinh who use this crossing (BO1, 8 June 2005). When asked why he thought Giay crossed here and not other groups from nearby, his response reflected an ethnic-based, spatial variation in residence and crossing choice:

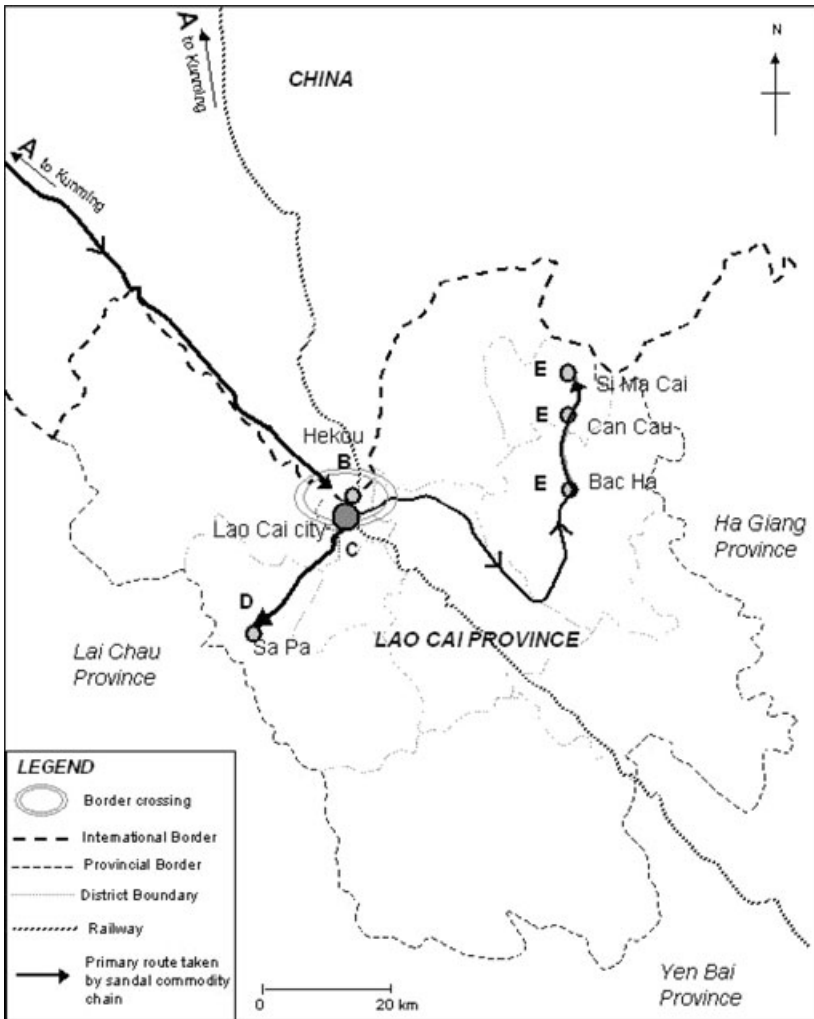
The Giay people live in lower areas than the Hmong and the Yao and so it takes less time for them to come to the border [here]. The Giay have a lot of relatives living in China so they go often to visit. Also, the Giay live in lowland areas and near the Kinh people so they have learned the procedures to cross the border from the Kinh. (BO1, 8 June 2005)

This observation is supported by census data that demonstrate that in the relatively lower lying areas around Lao Cai city, located on the Red River, there are far fewer Hmong and Yao than in upland areas, a point we will return to below (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 1999; see also Michaud et al., 2002).

Given that, in comparison to other crossing points in the province, Lao Cai is unique with regards to the sheer numbers of Kinh traders who cross here, let us look at some commodities which are moving across at this point, namely brown plastic sandals and cardamom. Brown plastic sandals are ubiquitous in the highlands and are worn by tens of thousands of ethnic minorities. The sandals are strongly associated with the minorities by Kinh and highlanders alike and are seldom worn by Kinh. We concentrate on this commodity due to its prevalence across markets in the province, its observably wide usage by many ethnic minorities, and the central involvement of Kinh traders in these networks. We also examine flows of *thảo quả* or medicinal cardamom (*Amomum villosum*) which grows in the highlands of Southeast Asia and is known for its medicinal properties (rather than the variety used for cooking) (see Kvitvik, 2001). Cardamom grows wild in many of mainland Southeast Asia's highland forests and has been collected for centuries, traded as an ingredient in Chinese pharmaceutical products. Unlike the three other goods studied here, cardamom is not manufactured and is exported to rather than

hand, and then turning back. Motorbikes — by far the most common form of transportation in Vietnam — are forbidden at all levels of crossings in Lao Cai province. It is possible to cross the Red River and Nam Thi by boat to enter China, although border officials gave contradictory statements regarding the legality of this mode of transportation. In practice, border residents living near the rivers can cross the border with a rowing boat in a few minutes (Chan, 2005).

Figure 3a. Routes Taken by Sandals across the Sino-Vietnamese Border in Lào Cai Province

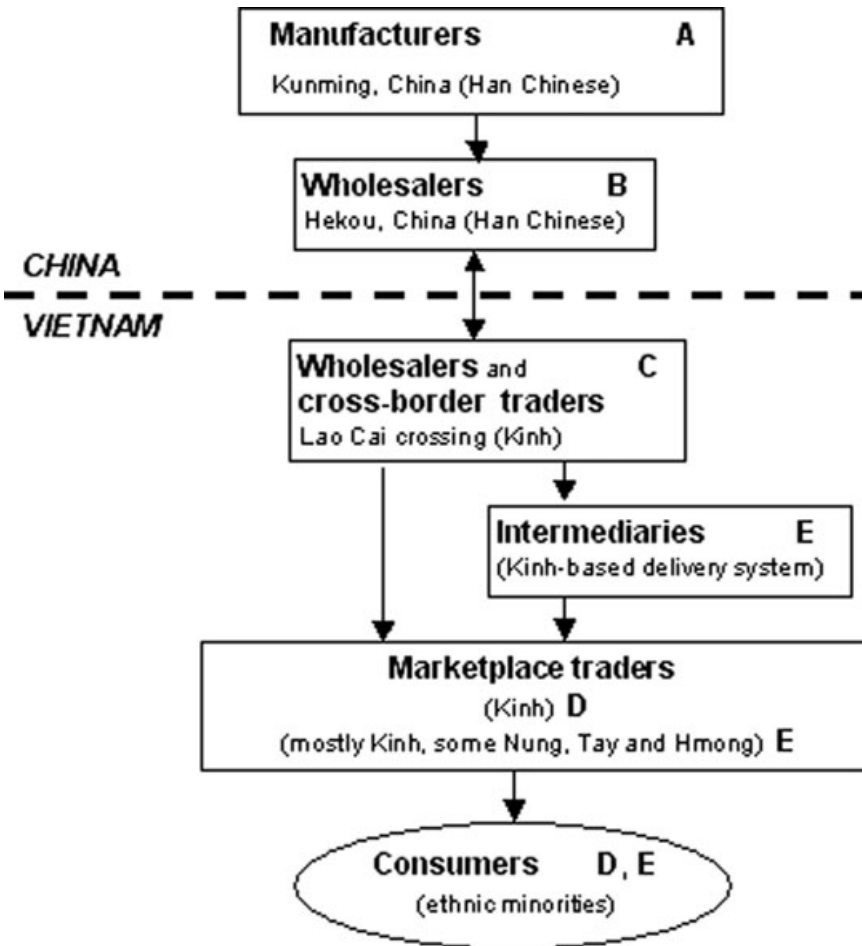


imported from China. The different trade flows of sandals and cardamom are shown in Figures 3a and 3b, and Figures 4a and 4b, respectively.

The Lao Cai city international crossing (Figure 3a, point C) is the only crossing point used for sandal trade in the province, partly because of its relative proximity to sandal manufacturers in Kunming, China (point A).¹⁵ At the Lao Cai city crossing, predominantly Kinh traders from Vietnam cross the border to buy sandals from Han Chinese households in Hekou

15. The distance from Hekou to Kunming is 468 km or approximately eighteen hours by bus.

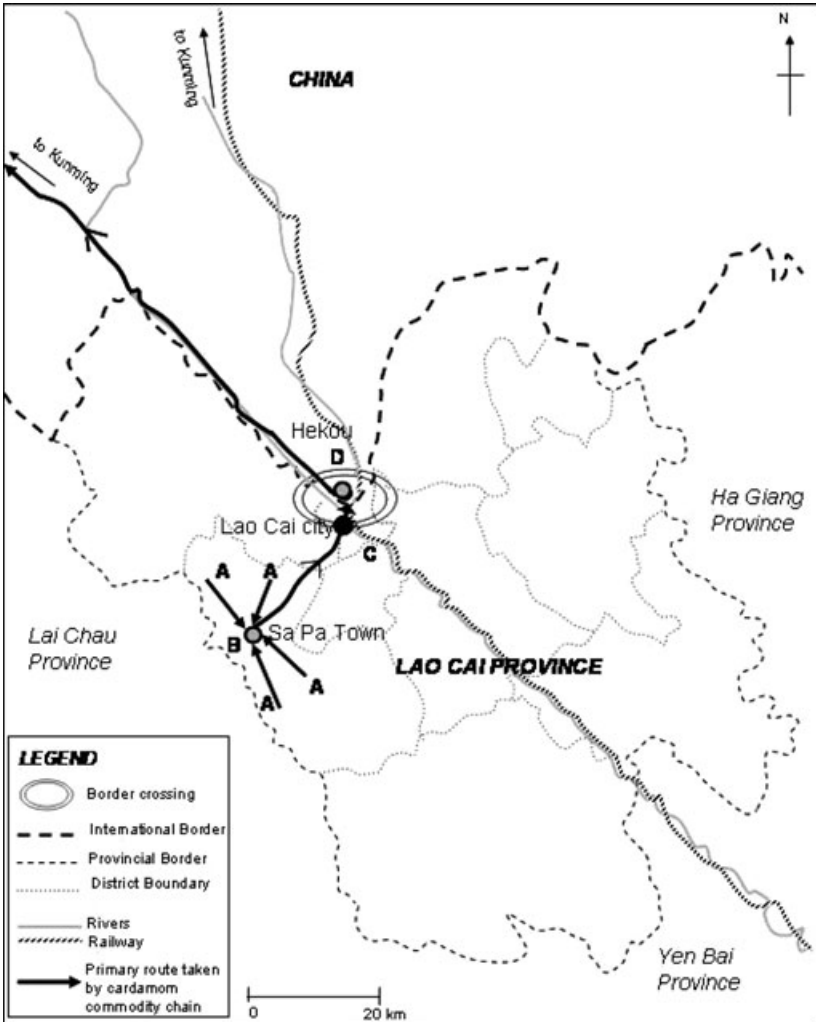
Figure 3b. Commodity Flow Diagram of Sandals



(point B), who wholesale them from their homes (Hanh, 22 June 2005). The dominance of Kinh sandal traders at the border crossing is repeated at later stages of the trade, as they continue to control sandal wholesaling throughout the province. Kinh marketplace traders are the exclusive suppliers of sandals to highlanders, securing all the local marketing opportunities with regard to this popular commodity (such as marketplaces, points D and E).

Likewise, cardamom moves predominantly across the Lao Cai international crossing (Figures 4a and 4b). Flowing from Vietnam to China rather than vice versa, cardamom is grown in Lao Cai and neighbouring provinces principally by Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities (points A), forming an important component of many local livelihoods. Unlike the trade of ribbons and skirts which involves highlander traders at many steps, the role of highlanders in the cardamom trade typically ends with its cultivation, after which

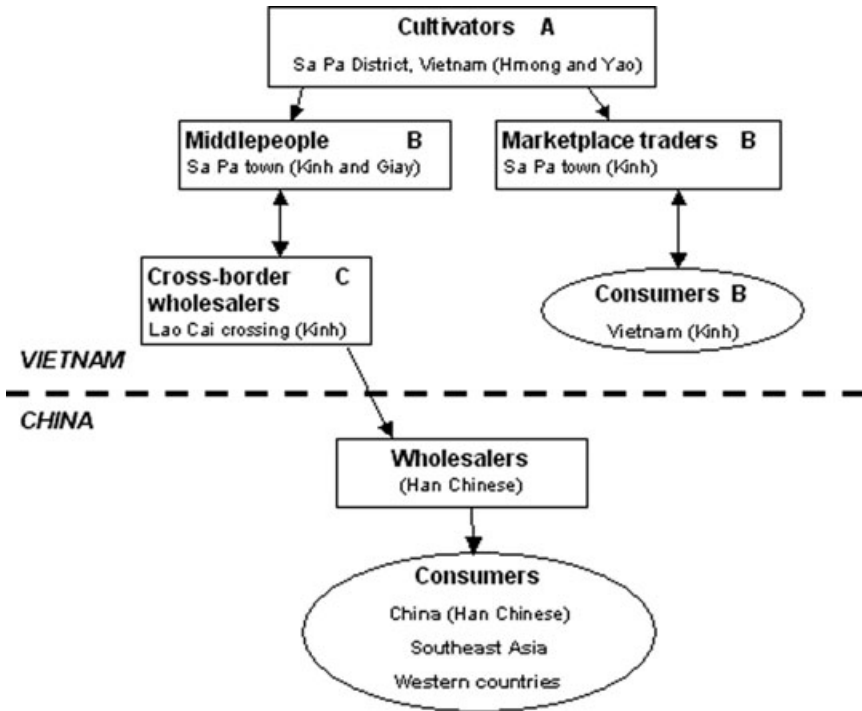
Figure 4a. Routes Taken by Cardamom across the Sino-Vietnamese Border in Lào Cai Province



Kinh or Giay middle-people (point B) dominate the transportation and sale of this high-priced commodity to local markets and wholesalers. These middle-people bring large quantities to Kinh cross-border wholesalers in Lao Cai city (point C). From Lao Cai city these wholesalers export to China, whose inhabitants nation-wide form the most important regional market (Hoa, 14 July 2005; see also Sowerwine, 2004).

Why is it Kinh who overwhelmingly dominate at this international crossing? There are several important components of access influencing this ethnic

Figure 4b. Commodity Flow Diagram of Cardamom



differentiation, including physical geography and place of residence, social relations, various forms of capital, and specialized knowledge. Turning to residence, locally based Kinh traders clearly have preferential legal access to the Lao Cai crossing since they can access it with only a permit rather than a passport. As detailed above, access to border crossings by the permit system is principally determined by traders' location of residence. Since ethnic minorities tend to live on higher ground further from Lao Cai city, they cannot access this crossing on such favourable terms as Kinh city traders. In this instance we see the important distinction between the *right* versus the *ability* to cross the border. Since all citizens have the right to cross here with a passport, ethnic minorities residing elsewhere could theoretically cross here if they have a passport. But there are important variations in the ability to acquire a passport and to negotiate the border system, as discussed below. At the same time, Kinh living elsewhere and wishing to gain favourable cross-border access are far more likely than highlanders to have the social capital necessary to do so — family and friends living near the Lao Cai city border crossing and able to facilitate the passage of commodities. These kinds of contacts and networks also provide important information on cross-border opportunities and help familiarize traders (in this case, Kinh) with commodities available for sale in China and their suppliers.

Access to various forms of capital is certainly facilitating Kinh use of the international crossing and associated large-scale trading opportunities. In terms of the sandal trade, the extensive cross-border trade and wholesaling operations that distribute the sandals province-wide require access to considerable physical capital, in the form of trucks, and financial capital that makes it possible to buy sandals in large quantities, often on credit. It is also likely that the ability of Kinh traders to control the distribution of sandals and to trade at high volumes has formed entry barriers for other traders, especially ethnic minorities, who are less able to mobilize the financial, social and physical capital required to participate in these trade networks.

In terms of negotiating the complex border interface at this large and developed crossing point, the Kinh are also at an advantage *vis-à-vis* highlanders in terms of various forms of cultural capital such as knowledge, skills and education (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result of their ethnicity and social relations, Kinh have better access to knowledge about the international border crossing procedures. Ethnic minorities often speak Vietnamese as a second language (if at all) while the ability of Kinh to speak the language of the State and of its employees inevitably eases their interactions with border authorities. Additionally, Kinh literacy helps them to negotiate the border's legal infrastructure, in terms of acquiring papers, and even to manipulate this infrastructure by, for example, dodging import taxes and acquiring residency permits for districts other than their own. Cultural capital in the form of understanding the etiquette required for formal interactions with state officials undoubtedly make Kinh more comfortable with this border interface. All these factors combine to enhance the *ability* of Kinh traders to gain preferential access to the largest and most active border crossing in the province.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF DIFFERENTIAL ACCESS

Cross-border trade in highland Northern Vietnam is dependent upon numerous complex factors that comprise explicit (and implicit) state policies towards the border, the social positioning of local actors, and structural components including the specificities of traded commodities. These factors intersect to form a dynamic mosaic of flows and nodes as traders with differential access travel across particular crossing points to operate within spatially dispersed highland trade networks.

State Defined Opportunities

Andreas (2000) suggests that we conceive of borders as a stage upon which the state performs. He argues that the state is engaged in a double performance, having to assure some of the audience that a border is open to

legal flows whilst assuring others that it is sufficiently closed to undesirable flows. The simultaneous processes of opening and closing can certainly be used to describe the Vietnam–China border in Lao Cai province — temporally, spatially and ethnically. As the Vietnamese state has been able to exert control to varying degrees over the frontier, different spaces of engagement have been opened and closed. For example, since the normalization of Sino–Vietnamese relations many spaces have been formally closed — such as cross-border footpaths through the mountains — while other, officially sanctioned spaces incorporated into the three-tier border-post system have been opened.

These policies have encouraged small-scale cross-border trading activities by highlander border residents to operate through open entrances in the uplands, with procedures that are both relatively simple and inexpensive. Border traders are thus persuaded to act within legal parameters, thereby bringing cross-border trade under further state control. This intensification of state rule has been in part due to an army whose resources are no longer diverted by conflicts elsewhere. Yet, at the same time the degree of enforcement of state policy at border crossings is spatially uneven. ‘Core areas’ such as Lao Cai city retain high levels of enforcement with high volumes of cross-border trade. In comparison, ‘remote areas’ see more mixed degrees of enforcement with formalized policies imposed during market days and significantly loosened when cross-border activity is low. By the very nature of these differences, reinforced by the social and structural elements we have illustrated earlier, highland minorities tend to remain involved with smaller scale trade in more remote areas — trade that does not afford them noteworthy profits.

Spatial and Ethnic Access

Settlement patterns of different ethnic groups in northern Vietnam including Lao Cai province have been historically shaped by cultural and political relations as well as topography. To a large degree these reflect where land was still available as different highland minorities initially arrived in Vietnam from Southern China, where the land is most suited to their agricultural practices, and inter-ethnic power relations (Michaud et al., 2002). Intermingled with current-day border policies, this means that access to specific crossings is often highly ethnically distinct. At the large Lao Cai international crossing, in a relatively low-lying area, the evolution of specific state policy and investment in infrastructure has increased trading opportunities and encouraged the development of large-scale trade. As noted above, very few ethnic minorities live in Lao Cai city or have social networks reaching there, and those we interviewed did not wish to travel frequently to such an urban locale; this leaves the lowland Kinh who dominate the city’s population as the traders best placed to access this crossing point.

If we place ethnicity at the centre of attention with regard to specific goods traded, we see further spatial distinctions. Focusing on the trade in manufactured highlander-style skirts, the importance of the small Pha Long open entrance (due to its proximity to markets and manufacturers in China), means that Hmong women from Muong Khuong district are favourably positioned to access this trade. Here, and in the case of ribbon traders, the intersection of state policy regarding border residency with structural components of spatial location and distances to markets, has created a unique prospect for these women, with their place of residence giving them favourable access in terms of permits, fees, and trading and marketing opportunities. These Hmong women also benefit from social relations with kin on the Chinese side of the border maintained before, during and after the 1979 border closure, that serve to support their trading opportunities. Yet, comparatively speaking, their trade remains limited.

In the case of sandals, Hekou, China, directly across the border from Lao Cai city in Vietnam, is an important gateway for these commodities to enter Vietnam. Here, Kinh traders who use the Lao Cai crossing are best positioned to form trading relationships with Han Chinese wholesalers in Hekou. Kinh are also more likely to have family and friends living near this crossing, and such social relations provide important border access as well as information regarding trade opportunities, commodities and suppliers. Consequently, non-legal mechanisms of access, such as ethnicity, local knowledge and spatiality, have created a situation where Kinh dominate this trade and the associated distribution opportunities.

In the same way, trade networks used to move cardamom across the border are characterized by Kinh exporting via the Lao Cai city crossing. Despite the involvement of ethnic minorities in earlier stages of cardamom cultivation, Kinh middle-people dominate marketing and distribution and capture high-volume exporting opportunities (Hoa, Kinh trader, 14 July 2005; Tugault-Lafleur, 2007). Here again, the intersection of state policy with non-legal mechanisms of access — ease of cross-border access at Lao Cai, networking connections with wholesalers in Lao Cai and China, and access to suitable transportation — has resulted in Kinh traders capturing the livelihood prospects associated with this lucrative, large-scale trade. In sum, these trading opportunities demonstrate that in the context of Lao Cai province there is a broad range of important — although not always immediately obvious — mechanisms that control access to border livelihoods and the economic benefits that these can bring.

CONCLUSIONS: CONTESTING BORDER SPACES

Drawing from the border studies literature, Staudt (1998: 9) takes a cautionary approach to state control over borders, reminding us of the critical impacts on people's livelihoods. She notes: 'Relatively open borders provide

opportunities for people to work, enhance their earnings and reduce poverty. The petty regulations that serve hegemonic interests may render such activity “illegal”, but those regulations are often made and enforced without political accountability to those affected and without reasoned judgement’. In current day Vietnam, border regulations do not prohibit highland inhabitants from using cross-border trade to build their livelihoods, and yet we wonder as to the ‘political accountability to those affected’ (ibid.). We suggest that there is a delicate balance between the interests of large-scale and small-scale trade in Lao Cai province and that this is mediated by spatial variation in access to the border and by ethnicity. The ‘remoteness’ of the open entrance border crossings used predominantly by highland minorities may be what best protects and preserves their livelihood opportunities, preventing large-scale infrastructure developments and inflows of Kinh traders who would act as serious competitors, engaged in intensive trading practices with access to larger quantities of physical and financial capital, and important social and human capital. Thus, maintaining comparatively small volumes of trade across open entrances could be the best option for sustaining this element of highland minority livelihoods.

Focusing on borderland spaces with specific attention to the localized, often ethnically rooted dimensions of access has enabled us to tease out the distribution of opportunities at this important interface. Indeed, border policies often indirectly have strong ethnic components that can reinforce inequities or act to redistribute opportunities. In this case, highlighting such factors emphasizes the disjuncture between State rhetoric that supports the promotion of cross-border trading opportunities to supplement highlander livelihoods, and the reality of large-scale trade development across an international border that does not directly benefit these individuals. There are clearly a range of policy and non-policy mechanisms at play here, affecting a multitude of livelihood opportunities, with diverse consequences for well-being and justice (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

In sum, while mapping access along a remote portion of the Vietnam–China border to appreciate the ability of border residents to build livelihoods involving cross-border trade, this research has allowed us to critically examine how a range of traders negotiate these spaces of engagement. This analysis supports Ribot’s (1998: 344) contention that ‘policies tell only part of the story: the other part is told within the space between policy (or law) and outcomes, the space in which a whole array of non-policy mechanisms shape the dynamics of production and exchange. . . operating in parallel to and interacting with policy mechanisms’. By highlighting the fundamental importance of a range of dynamic mechanisms occurring in this space for the lives of those who depend on cross-border trade in the northern highlands of Vietnam — factors not necessarily brought to the forefront in previous studies — this article strengthens and advances borderland trade studies. Elements such as cultural capital (embracing education, literacy, familiarity with border regulations, and language skills), financial capital (including

access to cross-border credit), social capital (encapsulating knowledge of and contacts for trading networks), and physical capital (incorporating specific transportation means), combine with spatiality and ethnicity, interwoven with legal mechanisms of access, to allow certain actors to negotiate and seize upon specific trading opportunities while restraining the inclusion of others. Only when such a multitude of elements are taken into careful consideration and analysed in their complexity can we gain a nuanced understanding of how border livelihoods are made and maintained, who wins and who loses, and the vital role that shifting legal frameworks and policies play.

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