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## Making a Living the Hmong Way: An Actor-Oriented Livelihoods Approach to Everyday Politics and Resistance in Upland Vietnam

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# Making a Living the Hmong Way: An Actor-Oriented Livelihoods Approach to Everyday Politics and Resistance in Upland Vietnam

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Ethnic minority households in upland northern Vietnam are shaping culturally appropriate rural livelihoods in highly pragmatic ways, as they negotiate the everyday realities of economic liberalization, intertwined with centralized and authoritarian socialist political structures. Notions of “social interface” from actor-oriented analyses, everyday politics, and covert forms of everyday resistance provide a heuristic device to understand the nuanced decision-making processes underlying such livelihoods. Ethnographic data reveal how Hmong ethnic minority individuals and households augment agricultural livelihoods by navigating new economic opportunities, while also resisting unwanted reliance on the market. Based in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province, the research in this article identifies three particular diversification strategies—cardamom cultivation, textile trade, and tourism trekking—that currently form the foremost cash component of Hmong livelihoods that are otherwise largely subsistence based. Livelihood decision-making processes among these upland rural dwellers are mediated by a complex and multifaceted social interface involving state policy, the actions of local officials, and ethnically embedded social relations, negotiations, and struggles that, in turn, are shaped by everyday politics. The case points to the value of incorporating such findings into alternative discourses of upland development to support the design of more appropriate livelihood and development policies. *Key Words:* actor-oriented approach, everyday politics and resistance, livelihoods, Hmong, Vietnam.

越南北部高地的少数民族家庭正以高度务实的方式，在他们协商日常现实的，与集中和专制的社会主义政治体制交织在一起的，经济自由化的过程中，塑造文化上适当的农村生计。由面向角色的分析，日常政治，和日常性的隐蔽形式而产生的“社会接口”的概念，给了解此种生计底层细致入微的决策过程提供了一种启发式的设备。人种学的数据显示了苗族少数民族个人和家庭如何通过浏览新的经济机会增加农业生计，同时也抵制对市场不必要的依赖。本文的研究确定总部设在老街省萨坝地区的三个特定的多元化战略—豆蔻种植，纺织品贸易，和徒步旅游，是目前苗族生计，否则在很大程度上只能维持生存的，最重要的现金组成。在这些高地的农村居民之间的民生决策进程是由一个复杂的多方面的社会接口所介导的，它涉及国家政策，地方官员的行动，以及种族嵌入式的社会关系，谈判，和斗争等因素，反过来这些因素也被日常政治所影响。本例指出了把这一发现纳入高地发展的替代性话语的价值，以支持设计更合适的生活和发展的政策。关键词：面向角色的方法，日常的政治和阻力，生计，苗族，越南。

Las familias de minorías étnicas en las montañas del norte de Vietnam están formando modos de vida rural culturalmente apropiados de manera muy pragmática, al gestionar las realidades cotidianas de la liberalización económica, interrelacionadas con estructuras políticas socialistas centralizadas y autoritarias. Las nociones de “interfaz social” de análisis centrados en el actor, políticas cotidianas y formas encubiertas de resistencia cotidiana, proporcionan una herramienta heurística para entender el matizado proceso de toma de decisiones bajo tales medios de vida. Datos etnográficos revelan cómo las personas y los hogares de la minoría étnica Hmong aumentan los medios de sustento agrícola navegando por nuevas oportunidades económicas, mientras que también resisten la no deseada dependencia en el mercado. Basada en el distrito Sa Pa, provincia de L'ao Cai, la investigación en este artículo identifica tres particulares estrategias de diversificación—el cultivo de cardamomo, el comercio de textiles y el turismo de caminatas—que actualmente conforman el principal componente en efectivo del sustento de Hmong que por lo demás se basan largamente en la subsistencia. Los procesos de toma de decisiones sobre los medios de subsistencia entre estos habitantes de las zonas rurales de montaña son mediados por un complejo y multifacético interfaz social que involucra a la política estatal, las acciones de los funcionarios locales, y sus étnicamente integradas relaciones sociales, las negociaciones, y luchas que, a su vez, están determinadas por la política cotidiana. El caso apunta al valor de incorporar estos hallazgos en discursos alternativos de desarrollo de

zonas altas para apoyar el diseño de más apropiados medios de sustento y políticas de desarrollo. *Palabras claves:* enfoque centrado en el actor, política cotidiana y resistencia, medios de subsistencia, Hmong, Vietnam.

In the uplands of the Southeast Asian peninsula, more than 200 million people, more than half of whom are ethnic minorities, construct livelihoods based predominantly on rural agriculture. Yet, only recently has the vast cultural diversity of this region begun to be recognized and researched by outside social scientists again, in part, due to relaxation over access by the socialist governments of Vietnam, China, and Laos (Evans 1999; Hansen 2006; Michaud 2009). Concurrently, state and nongovernment investment programs and development schemes have arrived in the uplands, supporting initiatives (such as hydropower dams and roads) that are being implemented rapidly as economic liberalization and market integration are interwoven with centralized, socialist political structures. In turn, ethnic minorities are having to choose whether and how to diversify their livelihoods in response to new economic opportunities emerging around them. These processes are creating new sites and forms of compliance, contestation, debate, and struggle (Edelman 2001; Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Kerkvliet 2009).

Recent appeals have been made within development geography for the urgent need to integrate “recognition of the cultural, historical and spatial dynamics of rural livelihoods—in addition to the more obvious economic dynamics” (McSweeney 2004, 638). In response, more nuanced understandings are required that attend to the complex assortments of social connections, embedded in local systems of cultures, customs, and regulation that affect and shape economic exchanges and decisions (de Haan and Zoomers 2003, 2005; Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos 2006; Rigg 2006, 2007; Azmi 2007). Only then will any well-meaning support for livelihoods and household survival strategies in the Global South—including those of ethnic minorities in the Southeast Asian massif—be effectively developed. Although a range of livelihood frameworks have been in use for over fifty years (Scoones 2009), there are several common threads that broadly underlie more recent studies and that point to the strengths of utilizing a livelihood approach. These require a comprehension of assets and vulnerabilities (the presence or absence of forms of capital: human, physical, natural, financial, social), strategies (how people deploy or exploit existing assets), and access or barriers to resources (defined by social relations, ideologies, and institutions; see Chambers and Conway 1991; Ellis 2000; Bury 2004; de Haan

and Zoomers 2005).<sup>1</sup> Particularly relevant for the case of ethnic minorities in the Southeast Asian uplands, individual and household livelihoods are shaped by “local and distinct institutions (e.g., local customs regarding access to common property resources, local and national land tenure rules), and by social relations (gender, caste, kinship and so on), as well as by economic opportunities” (Ellis 2000, 6).<sup>2</sup>

Although promising, such frameworks have their critics, among them a number of development geographers. On its own, a livelihood approach can be criticized for its inclination to focus primarily on aspects of material access and ability, often ignoring less evident social and political influences (Kanji, MacGregor, and Tacoli 2005; Scoones 2009). The approach is also prone to facilitate only a cursory examination of the importance of gender with regard to differential access to resources and decision making (Hapke and Ayyankeri 2004). Furthermore, the focus on identifying and analyzing five specific forms of assets or capitals—an approach commonly adopted by development agencies such as the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—has been criticized as producing a “one-size-fits-all” methodology, with the potential to be used uncritically while ignoring local agency (Arce 2003; Hinshelwood 2003; Staples 2007; Scoones 2009; Forsyth and Michaud 2010).

Calls have thus been made for more inclusive, actor-oriented approaches to livelihoods that focus attention on social relations among individuals, embedded within local socioeconomic, political, and cultural systems (Kontinen 2004; Long 2004). By emphasizing the voices and experiences of individual actors and their own knowledge of “development” and modernity, one can concentrate on the local, everyday practicalities of making a living and how people defend these. This approach allows for more nuanced recognition of the contextually rooted cultural, historical, gendered, and spatial dynamics of livelihoods, alongside broader structural forces (Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington 1999, 2000; Long 2000).

Taking up this call, I attempt to advance our understanding of rural livelihoods by drawing on Long’s (2004, 16) notion of “social interface.” I examine how discrepancies in knowledge, power, and cultural interpretation are, as he put it, “mediated and



Figure 1. Lào Cai province and districts. (Color figure available online.)

perpetuated or transformed at critical points of linkage or confrontation” in the Vietnam uplands. These interfaces between actors represent discontinuities in values, interests, and power relations that result in complex negotiations (Long and Villarreal 1993). Moreover, I argue that such mediation can occur through two approaches rarely drawn on to extend our understandings of livelihood decision-making processes, namely, everyday politics (Kerkvliet 2005), and the use of hidden transcripts (Scott 1990). Applying this framework as a heuristic tool, I ask: How are contemporary livelihood decisions made in the northern Vietnam uplands? How are members of an upland ethnic minority group, the

Hmong,<sup>3</sup> diversifying their livelihoods to take new economic opportunities into account? And, in the process, how are Hmong livelihood choices involving negotiations around specific social interfaces? To answer these questions I first outline my conceptual entry point to rural livelihoods. Then I introduce the people and places that lie at the heart of this study. What follows is an in-depth analysis of the core livelihood diversification strategies that ethnic minority Hmong in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province (Figure 1), have embarked on in recent years as the uplands open up to foreign investment, tourism, and cross-border flows of commodities and people between Vietnam and China. Drawing on a decade

of qualitative fieldwork data, I investigate how everyday politics influence the involvement of Hmong individuals and households in the opportunities present, with subtle, everyday forms of resistance to full market economy integration often at play.

This article shows how an actor-oriented livelihood approach, coupled with debates over everyday politics and resistance, and rooted in in-depth ethnographic work, can reveal critical junctures at which individuals accept, abide, negotiate, and contest norms; in this case, norms that have been overlaid by a majority ethnic group on an ethnic minority population via dominant social, economic, and political discourses. Only with a comprehensive understanding of how these elements are intertwined can more appropriate strategies for designing livelihood and development policies be found.

## Conceptualizing Upland Development Alternatives

I draw on four concepts here—sustainable livelihoods, actor-oriented approaches (specifically the notion of social interface), everyday politics, and resistance—to suggest a framework to facilitate more comprehensive understandings of how rural inhabitants in the Vietnam uplands negotiate, resist, and appropriate specific facets of modernity, market integration, and nation-state building as they go about creating their everyday lifeworlds.

### Sustainable Livelihoods

It is obvious to anyone undertaking in-depth rural fieldwork in developing countries that factors involved in the composition of livelihoods are rarely static. Individual and household livelihoods are constantly reworked in an ongoing process as opportunities and assets change from season to season and year to year (Hapke and Ayyankiril 2004, 232). Dealing with such uncertainty requires that people respond and adapt their ways of making a living to changes in the conditions around them. Supporters of the “sustainable livelihoods” approach argue that the concept recognizes this necessity. Defined by Chambers and Conway (1991, 6), a sustainable livelihood is one that can “cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long-term.” This focus on long-term flexibility necessitates that analyses con-

sider the impact of livelihoods on resources, as well as relationships with security, equity, well-being, capability, and poverty (cf. Chambers and Conway 1991; Scoones 1998; Conway et al. 2002; de Haan and Zoomers 2005).

Diversification is often at the core of attempts by individuals and households to form sustainable livelihoods (Moser 1998; Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos 2006). In a rural context, livelihood diversification is “the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in their struggle for survival and in order to improve their standards of living” (Ellis 1998, 4). Diversification occurs for many reasons: It can be based on basic survival needs to overcome barriers and withstand shocks and stresses, what Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg (2004, 613) called *distress diversification*; it can be undertaken as opportunities arise, what I have elsewhere called *selective diversification* (Turner 2007), or it can be a strategy for enhanced economic growth and expansion, namely, *progressive diversification* (Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg 2004, 614).<sup>4</sup> A diversification approach might include engaging in new income opportunities, experimenting with different crops, or combining agricultural, livestock, and off-farm activities (Chambers and Conway 1991; Rigg 2006). Indeed, market integration and globalization processes are producing unprecedented challenges for rural families in the Global South, resulting in ever-changing diversification approaches (de Haan and Zoomers 2003; Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos 2006). Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg (2004, 615) have argued that in this context the fluidity of livelihoods has been largely overlooked, and with broader economic contexts in a state of flux, the degree to which livelihoods are continuously refashioned and negotiated is underestimated. Such critiques have led to the appeal of taking on board an actor-oriented analysis.

### Actor-Oriented Analyses and Social Interface

To accurately understand the socioeconomic processes and cultural perceptions at work in the Vietnam uplands one must recognize local actors’ agency and knowledge regarding development and modernity. Although at times overlooked or reduced to background elements in livelihood studies, ethnicity, representation, meaning, language, identity, and difference can play pivotal roles in how individuals and households determine what constitutes an appropriate livelihood strategy, taking into consideration culturally embedded understandings of right and wrong, success and

failure, and benefit and loss. With their own specific agency and value positions, individuals and households strive to make a living and meet consumption and economic needs while simultaneously considering new opportunities and coping with uncertainties (Long 1997, 11).

Anchored in the development sociology tradition, the actor-oriented perspective is part of a broader collection of approaches whose adherents reacted against earlier modernization, (neo)Marxist and structuralist approaches, criticized for their inability to explain locationally specific differences in development, while overemphasizing economic determination (Korovkin 1997, 90; Hebinck, den Ouden, and Verschoor 2001, 3). Arguing instead for the possibilities of individual agency and endogenous growth, proponents of the actor-oriented framework contend that in development and policy interventions we often observe the emergence of a range of “negotiated orders, accommodations, oppositions, separations and contradictions” (Long 2004, 15).

Long’s notion of “social interface” is useful here. Long (2004, 16) argued that to fully comprehend the everyday processes by which “images, identities and social practices are shared, contested, negotiated, and sometimes rejected by the various actors involved,” we must analyze the extent to which the lifeworlds of specific actors, including their social practices and cultural perceptions, are autonomous or at times “colonized” by more extensive frames of ideology, institutions, and power. For Long, it is these junctures or interplays of everyday life and wider structural forces that comprise social interfaces. Rather than being some ethereal notion, interface encounters can be face-to-face between individuals, often representing different interests, or can include absent actors who still influence local outcomes. Long advocates that such interfaces be documented via careful ethnographic investigations.

Critics of Long’s (1989) earlier work on social interface have posited that Long fails to successfully combine these approaches (Drinkwater 1992, 371). Yet in his critique, Drinkwater avoids throwing the baby out with the bath water, building on Long’s approach instead. Drinkwater stressed the importance of focusing on endogenous approaches through reflexive ethnographic fieldwork, analyzing the viewpoints of interviewees sensitively, and undertaking “dialectical tacking” (Drinkwater 1992, 376).<sup>5</sup> In so doing, it is possible to examine how diverse actors navigate and negotiate divergences in values and power, while attempting to integrate internalist (lifeworld) and ex-

ternalist (structuring) perspectives (Long 1984, 175; Granovetter 1985, 487; Drinkwater 1992, 378; Long and Villarreal 1993, 143). The refined actor-oriented approach of recent years (Long 2001, 2004) thus allows us to engage across spatial scales of analysis to better understand structures that influence daily livelihood decisions and to comprehend the “micro-foundations of macro-processes” (Booth 1993, 62).

### Everyday Politics and Resistance

There are two other factors that I also claim deserve greater recognition in helping us to understand the complexities involved in making a living in the Vietnam uplands: everyday politics and resistance. The livelihoods literature to date has underplayed the importance of acknowledging and understanding the everyday politics of rural, local individuals. In numerous cases of development policy and practice, a livelihood approach is utilized as a means to strategize economic development. By maintaining this focus, the ways in which and the reasons why local actors might shirk, sidestep, avoid, or resist proposed elements of market integration and “development” are frequently ignored. Yet closer investigations of rural communities across the Global South have revealed that many individuals and households respond in specific, locally and culturally rooted ways to economic opportunities that are not always fully engaged with the market (Scott 1976, 1985; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986; Bebbington 2000; Kerkvliet 2005; Dyson 2008).

Kerkvliet (2009, 232) defined everyday politics as involving “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.” He suggested that the core difference between everyday politics and official or advocacy politics is that the former entails little organization, remaining a low-profile and private form of behavior, carried out by individuals who are unlikely to consider their actions political. Kerkvliet (2009, 233) further suggested that everyday politics be divided into four categorizations, namely, “support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance.” As I will show, Hmong individuals and households comprise a complex set of actors whose everyday politics regarding livelihood decisions stretch across this spectrum.

Although the literature on rural resistance is wide-ranging, accounts of overt forms, such as social movements and protests, whether peaceful or forceful,

have tended to dominate (Sharp et al. 2000; Edelman 2001; Amooore 2005). What is of interest here, especially in the context of a marginalized group within a socialist state, are the everyday forms of more covert resistance that are possible. Kerkvliet enumerated types of resistance that closely mirror Scott's "everyday forms of peasant resistance." Scott's (1985, 1990) concept describes tactics that are undertaken to protect material and physical interests, acted out individually or collectively but never as openly declared, formal challenges. Actions such as covertly destroying farm equipment, quietly stealing landlord seeds or small portions of harvested crops, dragging one's feet and working slowly, picking crops at certain times of the day when they are heavier with moisture for those paid by weight, and so on aim to reposition the inequalities that are so glaringly evident to workers and small-scale farmers in their daily lives. It is exactly their clandestine approach that makes these tactics effective and that distinguishes them from more overt forms of resistance (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986; Kerkvliet 1990, 2005; Caouette and Turner 2009; Walker 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on these approaches, I illustrate that ethnic minority Hmong in northern Vietnam are conscious of the fact that they do not have the power to appreciably alter or openly resist the sizeable economic transformations occurring as Vietnam opens up to global market forces. Nevertheless, they are anything but passive and powerless actors. Hmong individuals and households are skillful at adjusting and diversifying their livelihoods to take into account current demands to gain cash income to supplement the subsistence part of their livelihoods. Yet Hmong reasoning and choices depend on a specific balance of current opportunities embedded in historically shaped cultural and social relations, and specific geographic variables. Hmong have become active in the contemporary trade networks investigated here while utilizing their culture and experience to make specific decisions that, in their own, original ways, include resisting an unwanted dependency on the market. I therefore endeavor to advance what Bebbington (2000, 496) has described as "the empirical bases of a possible counternarrative" to neoliberal development strategies and market integration, to "identify elements of feasible development alternatives" in the Vietnam uplands.

## The Hmong and Upland Power Dynamics<sup>7</sup>

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam officially recognizes fifty-four ethnic groups, including the lowland

Vietnamese (Kinh). This leaves fifty-three "minority nationalities" (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) totaling 14.8 percent of the country's population, a proportion that includes about 1.1 million Hmong (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2010; Lemoine 2005, 6; Michaud 2006, 258). In Lào Cai province, situated on the border with China's Yunnan province, there are approximately 400,000 people classified as ethnic minorities. I have undertaken fieldwork here since 1999, interviewing local inhabitants of Hmong, Yao (Dao), Giáy, Tày, and Kinh ethnicities involved with cardamom cultivation (approximately fifty individuals), textile trade (~ seventy people), and tourism (~ sixty people). I have also interviewed People's Committee state representatives at a range of hierarchical levels and of different ethnicities and have collected oral histories and life stories with long-term residents in the province, both male and female Hmong, Yao, and Kinh.<sup>8</sup>

### Livelihood Fundamentals

In postcolonial Vietnam, due to the insistence of the state, most Hmong are sedentarized, and those living in Lào Cai province tend to practice composite agriculture. Argued by Scott (2009, 5) to be part of the "last enclosure," the objective of sedentarization in the Vietnam uplands was "less to make [highland dwellers] productive than to ensure that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were. Everywhere they could, states have obliged mobile, swidden cultivators to settle in permanent villages." Nowadays Hmong composite agriculture involves a mix of permanent terraced rice paddy fields (or maize, depending on localized rainfall), rotating swidden plots (officially banned) and small gardens with the collection of forest products including fuel wood, herbal medicines, game, and honey (Kunstadter and Lenington Kunstadter 1983; Leisz et al. 2004; Vuong Duy Quang 2004; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009). Hmong households are also integrated into commercial circuits through selected agricultural intensification practices, including purchasing government-subsidized hybrid rice and maize seeds that supplement or replace their own traditional rotating supplies, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. Such commodities require cash income, and although this remains comparatively small in relation to the subsistence core of Hmong livelihoods, it is becoming an increasing part of Hmong livelihood equations.

Hmong harvest one rice crop annually in Sa Pa district due to high elevations and cool temperatures.

From April to May, rice paddy fields are plowed and fertilized (organically from buffalo dung and ash or chemically). Plowing is completed by men, women, or children directing buffalo, because the terraces are too steep for mechanical plows. Households then sow the rice seeds as the first rains begin, typically in March or April, and the seedlings grow until May when they are transplanted (Figure 2). Harvesting occurs at the end of September through October. Hmong households experiment with different rice seeds to maximize yields and taste. Hmong traditional rice, both “normal” and sticky, is strongly preferred for its taste and for customary rites and feasts, but households also recognize the benefits of hybrid varieties.<sup>9</sup> Households take advantage of these new hybrid rice breeds selectively, balancing the ecological limits of their land with taste and cultural preferences (Bonnin and Turner forthcoming).

In Sa Pa district, maize is grown predominantly for livestock feed, but in mountainous, rocky communes it is more central to local livelihoods and diets. Like rice, households usually cultivate several corn varieties, both traditional varieties and hybrids. Additionally, women grow supplemental food crops such as beans, taro, pumpkins, and cucumber in small home gardens, and Hmong shamans and healers maintain a specialized medicinal herb garden. Women are also in charge of hemp and

indigo plots, as well as the fabrication, dyeing, and embroidering of hemp clothes.

Finally, livestock are an important part of Hmong livelihood portfolios. For Hmong households, a buffalo is a primary form of livelihood insurance and a symbol of social status and wealth. Buffalos are raised chiefly for plowing fields, for exchange among kin, and to be sacrificed during specific rituals such as funerals; ducks, chickens, pigs, and goats are used for household consumption, rituals, or payment of shaman visits. When a household needs cash urgently these livestock can be sold, but only in extreme emergencies will a buffalo be traded.

### Upland Power Dynamics

The Vietnam uplands in which these daily livelihoods take place are a product of socioeconomic tensions and political power struggles. These closely reflect what Scott (2009, 20) recently noted regarding the wider Southeast Asian massif:

The postcolonial lowland states have sought fully to exercise authority in the hills: by military occupation, by campaigns against shifting cultivation, by forced settlements, by promoting the migration of lowlanders to the hills, by efforts at religious conversion, by space-conquering roads,



Figure 2. Hmong plowing fields and transplanting rice in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province. (Color figure available online.)



bridges, and telephone lines, and by development schemes that project government administration and lowland cultural styles into the hills.

Since independence in 1954, the Vietnamese state has been committed to fully incorporating all northern highland societies into the Viet Nation, the Communist State, and the national economy (McElwee 2004). This incorporation is accomplished by the persistent extension of infrastructure, national education in the Vietnamese language, economic reorganization, and market integration. The following are two examples: Although in theory the law guarantees ethnic minorities the right to use their own language in schools, in practice teachers in Lào Cai province are overwhelmingly Kinh and do not speak a minority language (Corlin 2004; Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong and Baulch, 2007). Hmong, Yao, and Tày minority students therefore frequently tell me that they are instructed to speak Vietnamese at school. Second is the telling integrationist language of a state decree regarding marketplace development to 2010. It has among its objectives: “To put marketplaces’ operation [*sic*] into order and discipline, actively contributing to socio-economic organization and management, boosting goods sale for the convenience of consumers and raising the effectiveness and efficiency of State management over marketplaces” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2004, 3).

Upland ethnic minorities are not well understood among the lowland Vietnamese majority, often depicted as backward or lazy. As authors of the World Bank’s *Vietnam Development Report 2008* observed, “Government programs to reduce ethnic minority poverty are often built on the assumption that activities which worked well for the Kinh and Chinese majority should also work well for ethnic minorities. When they do not, lack of understanding can lead to the conclusion that the target beneficiaries are backward, or unmotivated, or lazy” (World Bank 2007, 21; see also Hickey 1993; van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Sowerwine 2004). Such ethnocentric perceptions are strongly shaped by the fact that in a country where the majority highly values recollecting and commemorating the past, few minority cultures have indigenous archives and are thus categorized as “peoples without history” (Escobar 1995; Turner 2007). These groups’ voices are frequently silenced, with only the material culture aspects of their lives put on stage for official ceremonies and cultural television programs.

Economically, the Vietnam state’s renovation package known as *Đổi mới*, decreed in 1986 at the Sixth National Congress and implemented over the following years,<sup>10</sup> concluded thirty years of collectivization in the north of the country. Although Hmong informants explain that collectivization in the highlands was only ever partly successful—largely due to a lack of lowland Kinh cadres willing to police it there—its gradual removal was accompanied by two additional transformations that affected highland livelihoods. First, the state introduced a ban on cutting forest timber, either to sell or to establish new fields. Second, a countrywide ban on cultivating opium for commercial purposes was launched. Both decisions were decreed in 1993, jointly resulting in a decrease in the commercial revenues obtainable by Hmong households from the sale of wood and opium.

Hmong households in Vietnam have never been autarkic and as a result of these bans, Hmong have turned to a variety of new initiatives to conserve access to supplementary cash incomes. This approach could be called “productive *bricolage*,” encompassing a variety of ways that farmers integrate subsistence agriculture, production for barter or sale, and nonagricultural activities for cash income (Batterbury 2001, 438). Predominant contemporary cash channels include cardamom cultivation, textile production, and guiding tourism treks.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the trading activities of upland actors in Lào Cai province have become progressively complicated since the late 1980s due to a number of policy changes in addition to those already mentioned. In 1988 the Vietnam–China border was reopened after the 1979 invasion by Chinese forces into Vietnam’s northern highland border provinces, and Sino–Vietnamese relations were normalized in 1991 (Womack 2000, 982; Schoenberger and Turner 2008, 670). Then, in 1993 the government abolished permits required for tourist travel by foreigners outside the country’s principal urban centers. In 1994 the U.S. trade embargo was lifted, followed the next year by U.S. “normalization of relations” with Vietnam. The reopening of the border with China allowed cross-border trade to flourish (although small-scale, illegal trade had continued during the border’s official closure). This increased access to neighboring China, along with rising world prices for nontimber forest products harvested by highlanders, such as cardamom, has created new economic opportunities. In the same decade, with autonomous tourism becoming possible for the first time since the French colonial era, a tourism “boom” in the highlands has attracted the involvement of highland minority individuals. In Sa Pa

district, young, female highlanders now act as trekking guides, and young and old women alike sell textile commodities to tourists. But how exactly do Hmong individuals engage with these sources of cash income?

## Calculating How and When to Accumulate Cash

### The Price of Spice: Cardamom Cultivation

Black cardamom (*Amomum aromaticum*), a nontimber forest product for which there is increasing demand in China and elsewhere in Asia, represents a central source of cash income for a growing number of Hmong (and Yao) in the northern Vietnam highlands. In Sa Pa district cardamom grows wild in the Hoàng Liên National Park and surrounding forest. Yet recently, as international demand has grown, Hmong whose hamlets are relatively near the forest have begun to intensively cultivate this spice. Requiring less labor than rice and maize, cardamom cultivation does not compete with other seasonal work requirements, hence its potential to complement existing household livelihood portfolios.

Assessing this cultivation through the livelihood asset pentagon, cardamom seedlings are usually donated within kinship groups for those wanting to enter this trade, keeping financial capital requirements to a minimum. In turn, social capital is important for accessing seedlings, plots, and knowledge of specific trade opportunities. Human capital, including the knowledge and skills required to tend to the plants and dry the pods in the most opportune manner, is also vital. Underlying these is the importance of natural capital, especially Hmong household access to specific, choice locales, discussed later.

Cardamom returns help upland households, especially those with limited land or with fields located in areas with less productive microclimatic conditions, to cover seasonal food deficits. In June and July, at a crucial period of the year when households can run low on wet-rice supplies and are relying increasingly on maize, dry rice, or potatoes, Hmong cardamom cultivators will often be extended credit by local Kinh or Giáy shopkeepers in return for a promised proportion of their cardamom crop. The cash from these advance credit sales is commonly used to buy essential rice supplies. Nevertheless, such exchanges are far more financially rewarding for the shopkeepers, who can insist on low prices from Hmong cultivators at this time. These relationships reflect Kerkvliet's (2009, 235) findings in the

rural Philippines where "creating and maintaining networks in order to have access to land, labor, money, and emergency assistance is a big part of people's everyday politics."

For those able to meet their yearly rice needs, following the regular cardamom harvest in August and September, purchases of meat, salt, cooking fat, small treats for children, and monosodium glutamate are made. Larger returns from cardamom are used to purchase household items such as oil, blankets, and cooking pots or are saved to buy motorbikes, building materials, fertilizer, and seeds. Households also use their proceeds to make ritual and ceremonial purchases, which help strengthen kin and community relations, such as paying the bride price (cf. Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009, 396).

**Cardamom Concerns.** Despite the fact that important cash returns can be made from the cultivation of cardamom in comparison to other cash sources available to Hmong households, it is interesting to note that not everyone is attracted by the prospect of becoming implicated in this relatively lucrative trade. During interviews, what was openly apparent was the central importance, above all else, of subsistence rice production for Hmong livelihood portfolios. This is followed by preferably owning, or at least having access to, one or more buffalo for plowing rice fields and having a solid house that accommodates all of the family members wishing to reside therein. The production of cardamom is never valued above these.<sup>12</sup> In Sa Pa district in 2005, households reported producing between 70 and 100 kg of cardamom on average, with a farm gate price of around 56,000 VND/kg.<sup>13</sup> In 2007, this price had risen to 80,000 to 100,000 VND/kg, falling back to 60,000 to 65,000 VND/kg in 2008 and 2009. Such fluctuations in financial returns keep cultivators wary of increasing their reliance on this trade, alongside unease that not all Kinh and Giáy intermediaries are trustworthy. Heavy rains and cold winter conditions in 2008 and a drought in 2010 also resulted in marginal returns and raised a number of concerns during yearly interviews about the continued viability of this activity. Moreover, the cultivation of cardamom is physically taxing, requiring multiple trips to the forest for the period of the harvest that not all Hmong cultivators (typically men) are eager or necessarily capable of doing. These trips are required because of apprehension over the possible theft of cardamom crops. As a result, some cultivators sleep for up to a week at a time at their fields during the harvest

season, and others harvest their crops earlier than the optimum time to avoid thievery.

An idiosyncrasy that makes cardamom livelihood choices even more complicated for cultivators living in Sa Pa district is that about three quarters of the district is located within Hoàng Liên National Park, designated a protected forest since 2002 (Le Van Lanh 2004). Most of the plots where interviewees harvest cardamom are within park boundaries, as the old-growth forest provides prime conditions. This area, patrolled by local park authorities, is legally offlimits for the harvesting of any forest products, as well as timber felling, necessary for Hmong cardamom cultivators to prepare fires to dry the fruit *in situ* (the dried product is lighter to transport and fetches a higher price). Needless to say, numerous different forms of evasion are part and parcel of the Hmong everyday politics of cultivation: Crops are planted away from well-known routes that authorities use; cultivation times are carefully planned to avoid confiscations; fires are lit as discretely as possible in mountain valleys, and so on. Such struggles over access and rights between Hmong cultivators and local park authorities reflect a social interface replete with covert resistance.

Moreover, due to such uncertainties over access, theft, fluctuating prices, and poor returns due to climatic fluctuations, some Hmong cultivators and those considering this trade option have decided against it, foregoing the potential returns the crop could supply. Indeed, over two thirds of Hmong farmers interviewed about this crop expressed reservations over cardamom cultivation, with many actively working to diversify the cash component of their livelihoods in other ways.

### Embroidered Textile Transactions

With the opening of the uplands again to overseas independent tourists in the early 1990s, a few (initially elderly) Hmong women identified an opportunity to sell their colorful and “exotic” cloth once more, as they had during the French colonial period. Tourists were keen to purchase “authentic” cultural artifacts such as full pieces of embroidered hemp clothing (Michaud and Turner 2000, 2003). Hmong women grow, spin, and weave these as part of their gendered livelihood portfolios, with segments then intricately batiked and embroidered with motifs that have symbolic meaning for their producers (Mai Thanh Son 1999, 13, 24). If we consider these activities through a livelihood lens, Hmong women are well endowed with the human capital—cultural knowledge and skills—needed to produce these goods, and the financial capital outlay is

minimal. Yet tourist demand for Hmong textiles, along with rising demand from exporters, quickly outgrew the capacity of local women to generate sufficient supplies themselves. These circumstances inspired enterprising Hmong women and (fewer) men to explore villages increasingly distant from Sa Pa—far into neighboring provinces—by motorbike or local bus, in search of used textiles. These entrepreneurs now act as wholesalers for Hmong selling in tourist spots such as Sa Pa town and surrounding Hmong villages visited by tourists while trekking (Figure 3).

Interviews that I completed from 1999 to 2010 with more than seventy individuals involved in the textile trade reveal that this trade has become increasingly complex, with numerous actors involved. For instance, in the late 1990s Kinh shopkeepers and tailors residing in Sa Pa town started to create and sell novel designs of pseudo-traditional highlander clothes such as waistcoats and shirts, incorporating sections of Hmong fabrics. A cross-cultural trade network hence transpired, with local Hmong selling secondhand clothes to these Kinh tailors. As demand increased, Hmong from other districts and provinces (such as Yên Bái to the south, and Lai Châu to the west) began to travel to Sa Pa to wholesale their goods and those of acquaintances from neighboring villages. Hmong and Kinh residing in or near Sa Pa town refashion these textiles, either selling them directly to tourists or “lending” the goods to other local Hmong women to sell on a commission-like basis in the local market or itinerantly.

There is also an important cross-border, transnational dimension to this textile trade (Turner 2010). Hmong women describe their travels to border markets and nearby towns in China to purchase industrially made textiles and braid to be incorporated into clothing designs for Hmong consumption and tourist items. Some of these cross-border traders sell their goods directly to customers, mainly other Hmong women, from stalls in upland markets; others act as wholesalers for highland traders who operate in a number of highland marketplaces in Vietnam such as Sa Pa, Bắc Hà, and Mường Khương (Figure 1). For these traders, financial as well as social capital—social networks, trust, and linkages—have become increasingly important.

Since the new millennium, a small number of Kinh and Tày men and women shopkeepers have also been designing innovative wall hangings, bags, and cushion covers incorporating Hmong designs. The owners of these enterprises ask Hmong women to embroider small pieces to the dimensions they request, in a loose “outworker” arrangement. Although mainly for sale in shops in Sa Pa, these goods can be found in Hà Nội, Hội



**Figure 3.** Hmong women textile traders in Sa Pa town marketplace. (Color figure available online.)

An, Hué, Hó Chí Minh City, and as far away as France and the United States thanks to overseas merchants who buy in bulk annually.

These examples are only a few of the complex trade networks operating for both unprocessed and finished Hmong textile commodities as of 2010. These trade networks incorporate a web of sociospatial interactions, including an intricate variety of actors of different ethnicities. The scale of the transactions has spread dramatically from the early 1990s, becoming increasingly complex, with far-reaching international linkages now possible. This has resulted in new permutations of livelihood capitals being required for

Hmong involvement in this trade. These networks have also brought together Kinh and Hmong to trade products at a rate never before experienced for goods other than those for immediate consumption and never before involving Hmong women to such a degree.

***Resisting Formalized Arrangements.*** On the surface, it would appear from the preceding investigation that Hmong women are becoming fully engaged in the market economy through the small-scale manufacturing and trade of their textile products. A more nuanced analysis of these women's decision-making processes, however, reveals a complex picture of involvement

as well as disinclination to wholeheartedly enter the market economy. Although I do not want to suggest that the textile trade embarked on by these Hmong women is unimportant for their households—especially for those women who are widowed or separated—it is clear from interviews that, with a central focus on semisubsistence livelihoods in their hamlets, the textile trade is not viewed as an essential part of most household livelihoods.

For instance, Hmong women embroidering small patches for Kinh and Tày shopkeepers all stated that they do not want to embroider more often, nor do they wish to become involved in more formalized arrangements. These Hmong women explained that they create these pieces to pass the time as they sit on the side of the road attempting to sell goods to passer-by tourists or in the Sa Pa town market if they have a stall there; that is, if they are not already busy twisting threads, as part of the hemp production process, or embroidering clothes for Hmong New Year when every family member must wear their newest and finest outfits. These interviewees also made it clear that during periods of more intensive agricultural labor demands, tasks in the rice fields are always prioritized. Additionally, these women noted that although they can continue this embroidery in their hamlets if family circumstances require, they will forego these economic returns.

Without doubt, Kinh and Tày shopkeepers often complain of unreliable supplies and frequently try to stockpile embroideries, revealing discrepancies in values and interest at the social interface between the different actors involved. We see that wider market demand for these pieces and the shopkeepers' tactics meet a discontinuity in the interests and behaviors of the embroiderers. For a large number of the Hmong women involved, this is a selective choice, taken up as opportunities and favorable circumstances coincide. Moreover, even though this form of livelihood diversification allows individuals and households to cope better on a day-to-day basis, in the minds of the women themselves it is not indispensable. In this case, kinship-based agricultural labor demands, household-oriented clothing production, and other obligations have forged a local, everyday politics of the allocation of resources, including that of their time.

### Trekking Adventures

The third cash income source to have arisen for Hmong since the 1990s is the direct involvement in

tourism. In a turn of events that is rather unique to Sa Pa district—and therefore should not be considered a venture necessarily open to highlanders elsewhere in Vietnam—the introduction of open international tourism since 1993 has resulted in a number of young Hmong women<sup>14</sup> working as trekking guides in the district. Backpackers, the tourists that Hmong guides and textile sellers interact with most frequently, arrive in the highlands wanting to experience an ethnic marketplace or two and a trek to a minority village (Michaud and Turner 2006). Going for a hike among the local rice terraces is a highlight of these expeditions and tourist interactions with highlanders are increasingly via their Hmong trekking guides. About forty Hmong (and fewer Yao) young women act as guides, with remarkably fluent English due to their daily interactions with Western tourists on Sa Pa town's streets and in their own villages. These women, generally between eighteen and twenty-eight years old, work either in a loose agreement with a specific hotel or tourism agency in Sa Pa town or as "freelance" guides for a number of establishments. In 2010 these guides cited earnings of between 70,000 VND and 150,000 VND a day for a trek, with this increasing to 250,000 VND for an overnight trek including a home stay in one of the local villages (home stays run by Tày or Yao households but not Hmong to date). On top of this, sizeable tips from appreciative overseas clients often double their daily income.

These Hmong guides are well equipped with self-financed cell phones, backpacks, and hiking shoes. Again, applying a livelihoods lens, they have a unique blend of human and social capital that allows them to enter into this activity: Their human capital includes their capability to speak English, and their social capital has allowed them to learn the tricks of the trade from kin and close friends and obtain work referrals with hotels and tour agencies. Yet, although in local terms they are able to make an important income, there is less evidence of this income when one visits their family homes. Instead, the financial gains are largely spent on the costs of accommodation in Sa Pa town (where a number, mainly those without young children, stay in shared, small rented rooms), food, cell phones, and clothing. Nevertheless, cash is occasionally passed on to the family for emergency medical costs and to help cover rice shortages and fertilizer costs. At times it is also used to pay for extra agricultural labor for the family, so that the young women can continue guiding while others prepare fields and plant rice or maize in their absence. Still, guides have confided that this last

arrangement is often frowned on by their parents, who prefer that the young women themselves come back to the hamlet to lend a hand.

***Trekking on Their Own Terms.*** In the mid-1990s, in a push to increase state regulation over the local trekking industry, the local Vietnamese authorities decided that trekking guides in Sa Pa district, Kinh and ethnic minority alike, should undergo training and possess a guide license. Training was set up with the help of well-intentioned international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and potential guides dutifully attended weeklong instruction sessions. That is to say, those aged eighteen and above, the state-approved age of guide employment, whose labor was not needed in the village, and who had access to transport to Sa Pa that week, attended. In a reaction that would resonate with any teenager around the world, those already guiding but younger than eighteen resented this limit on their freedom to gain some cash and therefore faked their age while renewing “lost” state identity cards to attend training sessions and acquire a trekking guide license. The young women’s everyday politics included, in this case, clear evidence of an “everyday modification” of what the authorities expected, conveying indifference to official rules and processes (Kerkvliet 2009, 237). Interestingly enough, a year later the guide license process had been quietly dropped, perhaps in this case showing accommodation on the behalf of state officials at this social interface.

Within their loose work arrangements, previously outlined, all of the Hmong guides I interviewed explained how, at times and as they see fit, they will call in sick or just state that they are unavailable for the hotels with which they are connected. This often occurs if they consider that their labor is required in the family’s fields, when they feel the need to spend time making new clothes for themselves and family members for Hmong New Year, or if they have a more interesting opportunity. Given that tourists seldom ask for a specific guide because they themselves have just arrived in the area, this does not appear to have caused any hard feelings with Kinh or Western hotel employers to date. For instance, having worked over the Hmong New Year period in January 2009—a festival not followed by tourists to the region—a number of the guides decided among themselves that they deserved a few days holiday and signaled that they were unavailable to the hotel managers for whom they worked. Other guides prefer to remain “freelance,” giving themselves even greater free-

dom over their pick of customers and treks on any given day, despite the potential for less stable income. Here again Hmong individuals enter into livelihood diversification strategies that allow them the flexibility to “bail out” if and when they desire, on their own terms. Their commitment is partial, and they negotiate their employers’ expectations in subtle ways, through socially and culturally constructed actions.

## Rural Renegades?

The Vietnamese state is committed to expanding its control over the country’s borderlands and frontiers, integrating the Vietnam uplands and their predominantly non-Kinh inhabitants into the nation and steering them toward market integration as quickly and thoroughly as possible (Michaud 2009; Scott 2009). Against this setting, “Subordinate people struggle to affirm their claims to what they believe they are entitled to based on values and rights recognized by a significant proportion of other people similar to them” (Kerkvliet 2009, 233). In all three of the preceding cases, the decision-making processes of the individuals and households involved, rooted in endogenous Hmong values, rights, and situated knowledges, have resulted in specific engagements with the market that are not all-encompassing. That is, Hmong individuals and households have expressed their agency and refused to abandon semisubsistence agricultural livelihoods to engage fully with economic capitalist opportunities, representing negotiations and struggles at this critical interface. Hmong women involved in the textile trade and with guiding treks undertake these activities because they enjoy being able to socialize in the market or on treks, they gain some funds to help out the household, and, in the case of the young guides, they take pleasure in the interactions with people from all over the world and the added freedom, for a specific period of their lives, of being able to live in Sa Pa town rather than in the hamlet. Overwhelmingly, though, interviewees are clear that when more labor-intensive periods of crop preparation and cultivation arrive, they return to their responsibilities in the home and fields. Although some also mention using cash income to hire laborers for a day or two, more often than not, at some period during the year they also return home for specific duties such as field preparation, rice transplanting, or the sowing of their house garden. Without a doubt, during these periods marketplaces are considerably less

busy, and Hmong itinerant traders are conspicuously absent from the streets of Sa Pa. For cardamom cultivation, here again the decision to enter this trade is negotiable, with families often deciding that the risks—economic, physical, and political—outweigh the perceived returns. In sum, although some Hmong men and women have resolved to enter into specific trade opportunities, they are also willing to pass them up when other responsibilities they deem more fundamental call or when the risks seem too great.

This approach to analyzing livelihood decision making grants recognition to the existence of “multiple social realities” (Long 2004, 15). Hmong individuals and households make judgments that result in a selective involvement in the market, which makes up only one element of the pluriactivity of their livelihoods. These Hmong livelihoods include a diverse range of strategies that factor into their everyday politics: At times they invite the market economy, utilizing the opportunities that come their way for extra cash income; at other times they steer clear of any greater reliance on market structures and prospects. Indeed, Hmong individuals and households have manifold reasons to engage in and also disengage with the market economy at specific times and places. Using culturally and socially rooted judgments, they resist in their own, innovative ways, becoming involved in the market beyond an extent that is appropriate and relevant for them.

The fact that Hmong interviewees do not wish to become wholeheartedly caught up in the market integration tendencies that are reaching the Vietnam uplands at a greater speed than ever before is unmistakable, even beyond the cases presented. For instance, Hmong in Sa Pa district maintain a preference for hemp-made clothing made with natural dyes that are extraordinarily time-consuming to make, notwithstanding that cheap synthetic clothes are available in local markets. Many maintain a stockpile of traditional rice and maize seeds that produce a lower yield than the widely available state-subsidized hybrid seeds, preferring the taste of the former and acknowledging its cultural significance. They prefer to have their children born at home with the help of fellow Hmong women rather than at the “modern” state hospitals that are fairly accessible these days. They blend local indigenous knowledge of herbal medicines and shaman practices with what is on offer at the local state-run clinic. And they would rather their children learn life skills in the home and fields than learn to write Vietnamese at formal schools. The list goes on. These examples all point to an everyday politics

and negotiation of a social interface that includes not only compliance—seen as necessary at times to avoid the intense gaze of the Vietnamese state (for example, sending some of the family’s children to school for a limited period)—but also subtle, under-the-radar forms of everyday resistance to full-speed market integration and the Vietnamese state’s “development” ideals. This is not to say that Hmong are unresponsive to the monetary opportunities that they see around them, and certainly those in dire need due to illness or death in the household, marriage separation, or buffalo illness often have limited options. Overwhelmingly, though, Hmong invoke these possibilities *on their own terms*—terms informed by cultural understandings of appropriate livelihoods and an everyday politics of how to construct and negotiate their everyday lives.

This cultural resistance strategy of Hmong actors, much like that taken up by the Yura of Central Bolivia (Rasnake 1988) and peasants in western Guatemala (Smith 1984) and western Colombia (Taussig 1980), allows them to deal with domination by powerful groups who have denigrated them and labeled them “backward” for centuries. The efforts of Hmong to forge appropriate livelihood approaches have included a reformulation of economic life as they see fit and the emergence of local resilience measures in the face of capitalist expansion in the uplands.

By utilizing the framework advocated in this article it is possible to analyze the everyday social processes by which market integration, policy interventions, and state decision making are negotiated within ethnic minority lifeworlds. Accordingly, we have a clear example of how “the term resistance draws attention not only to the myriad spaces of political struggles, but also to the politics of everyday spaces, through which political identities constantly flow and fix. These struggles do not have to be glamorous or heroic, about fighting back and opposition, but *may subsist in enduring, in refusing to be wiped off the map of history*” (Pile and Keith 1997, xi, emphasis added). In other words, by drawing on an actor-oriented livelihood approach and undertaking a social interface analysis we can determine that Hmong are circumventing being relegated to Karl Marx’s “dustbins of history.” Yet, despite the mention of Marx, I consider an actor-oriented approach more relevant to the Hmong case than (neo)Marxist approaches that, as noted earlier, have been critiqued for their incapacity to explain place-specific development disparities, alongside their dismissal of individuality and narrow focus on capital–labor relations (Arce 2001; Hebinck,

den Ouden, and Verschoor 2001; Benediktsson 2002). Being a lineage-based, acephalous social organization or stateless society, I suggest that Hmong livelihood practices are more along the lines of Stern's (1987) "resistant adaptation," whereby "indigenous peasants adapt themselves to cultural values and institutions imposed on them by powerful external actors while also preserving many elements of their own culture" (Korovkin 1997, 91). An actor-oriented analysis allows us to pinpoint how this is happening and the consequences for local individual and household livelihood negotiations.

So what does all this mean for development practitioners who might wish to assist Hmong livelihoods? As Scoones (2009, 184, emphasis added) rightly argued, the livelihoods literature is "replete with classifications and typologies, often contrasting ideal types with alternatives with pejorative ascriptions. But who is to say that, for example, [near-] *subsistence farmers*, poachers, border jumpers or sex workers are pursuing inappropriate livelihoods in need of rescue, discipline or transformation?" Livelihoods are frequently framed as moving in positive or negative directions, with numerous assumptions made regarding what constitutes a "positive" or "negative" livelihood. Statements regarding who is in need of transformation through "development" are seldom directly critiqued.

In the uplands of Vietnam, Hmong negotiate, accommodate, oppose, and contradict state interventions. These interventions resonate with the state's specific evolutionary route to development, entrenched in centuries of political antagonism, historical misunderstandings, and precise state trajectories in which Hmong livelihoods are deemed in need of "development" (Tapp et al. 2004). Hmong knowledge, agency, and livelihood practices are practically ignored. As Corlin (2004, 314), also writing on the Hmong in Vietnam, candidly stated, "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" (see also Leepreecha 2004). To move away from such a framing, a more nuanced understanding and recognition of Hmong everyday politics and resistance, social interface negotiations, and livelihood decision making is vital if appropriate policies—if and when required—are to be implemented. To do so requires development agencies (albeit state approved in Vietnam) and Vietnamese government authorities to be willing to acknowledge different cultural values, necessities, and priorities. It calls for a shift toward research and policy initiatives

based on detailed ethnographic study, a greater understanding of cultural particularities, and negotiated participatory approaches. It requires an understanding of Hmong as members of a society who do everything they can to choose their involvement with outside processes and how these decisions are (re)interpreted vis-à-vis their largely subsistence livelihoods.

More specifically, for nontimber forest product and small-scale textile initiatives it is doubtful that any government-backed, large-scale technological interventions would find support or converts among local Hmong; whereas perhaps—*perhaps*—facilitation on the part of NGOs to realign the dynamics whereby (non-Hmong) intermediaries reap the financial benefits of these networks might be appropriate. (I suggest NGO rather than state involvement due to lingering suspicions of state-directed development initiatives in the uplands, in part due to earlier collectivization campaigns; see Rambo 1997.) With respect to trekking, I contend that the young women guides have a system in place that, as it currently stands, suits them well—as they note themselves—and outside attempts at "support" would be conceived as unwanted interference, as experienced in the past. Whether such nonmainstream understandings and approaches can develop beyond initial trials<sup>15</sup> in a socialist country with a government that is determined to push for global market integration via an increasingly neoliberal agenda, while maintaining a firm centralized political grip, is yet to be seen.

Indeed, the authors of the World Bank's (2007) *Vietnam Development Report 2008* observed (in a somewhat surprised tone) that:

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. (21)

The question therefore remains as to whether state officials and development practitioners can concede, in the face of localized modernities, that at times upland ethnic minorities already have their livelihoods figured out, that these are entirely rational given the local cultural context, and that uplanders do not consider themselves in need of "rescue, discipline or transformation" (Scoones 2009, 184). Minority approaches, carefully developed and molded over the centuries, are not about openly fighting back and opposing the state, the



market, and development interventions that arrive in the uplands. In Vietnam, this would be suicidal when faced with powerful rivals. Instead, subtle, everyday livelihood negotiations and resistance tactics have resulted in a social interface that reflects an enduring defense of local forms of knowledge and culturally appropriate adaptations regarding how one goes about making a living the Hmong way.

In sum, I advocate that livelihood approaches need to be more attuned to recognizing and analyzing elements of local everyday politics, everyday forms of resistance, and critical points of intersection between differing values, interests, and knowledges. Combined with carefully completed ethnographies, such a move could conceptually advance rural livelihood debates (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008, 339). Important insights can be gained into how macropolicies are negotiated at the local level, how marginalized groups reinterpret the rules of the majority through purposive action, and how knowledge and power are mediated and transformed through culturally appropriate frames. The development policy alternatives that emerge need not aim at decentering the state, an unviable approach when working with ethnic minorities in a socialist regime, but they can seek to challenge the subordination of alternative knowledges and interpretations (Slater 1997, 274). By extension, these alternatives would heighten the possibility of policies truly supporting, rather than undermining (inadvertently or otherwise) those vital spaces in which ethnic minorities are striving to craft their livelihoods and give meaning to their lifeworlds.

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## Notes

1. These five assets, also known as the *asset pentagon*, constitute the core of many livelihood studies (Carney 1998; Bebbington 1999). Briefly, *human capital* includes capabilities such as skills, education, ability to labor, and health (Sen 1984, 1987; Chambers 1995, 1997; Ellis 1998). *Physical capital* refers to infrastructure, such as

buildings, transportation, and electrical supplies. *Natural capital* includes renewable resources such as nutrient cycling and ecosystem services; and nonrenewable environmental resources including minerals and soils (Bury 2004). Financial capital covers accessible supplies of cash, such as earned income, pensions, and remittances. Social capital refers to the linkages, trust, and social networks accessed by individuals or groups to “get by” or “get ahead” (Portes 1998; Turner and Nguyen 2005). For critics of the asset pentagon, see Conway et al. (2002) and Toner (2003).

2. A *household* has been defined as “a person or co-resident group of people who contribute to and/or benefit from a joint economy in either cash or domestic labour” (Rakodi 1998, 7), a group often based on kinship. Numerous livelihood authors contend, however, that although individual household members might be involved in decision-making processes, this is seldom on an equal basis, particularly with regard to gendered negotiations. Households are not necessarily cohesive, and household livelihood strategies can be grounded in multiple motives, sometimes multilocational as well (see Rigg 1998; Long 2001; Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg 2004; de Haan and Zoomers 2005).
3. Ethnonyms used here are the most widely recognized in international usage, founded on ethnolinguistic divisions. In Vietnam, nevertheless, Hmong are officially named ‘H’mông.’ For ethnological information on Vietnam’s national minorities see Condominas (1978) and Dang, Son, and Hung (2000).
4. The latter two forms would fit within Batterbury’s (2001) category of “voluntary diversification.” For further discussions on diversification approaches, see Davies and Hossain (1997), Bryceson (2002), Start and Johnson (2004), and Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos (2006).
5. Drinkwater (1992, 376) defined *dialectical tacking* as “our pendulum movements [as field researchers] from immersion in the views of others to a reflection of those views in an attempt to grasp them more fully . . . it is a learning spiral, in which our understanding advances as we tuck and discover that earlier conceptions we held are misplaced or incomplete.” See Drinkwater (1992) for more on the contribution of hermeneutics to actor-oriented approaches.
6. Such an approach is not without critics. White (1986), Hart (1991), and Korovkin (2000) disagree to different extents with aggregating a wide range of farmer practices and labeling them all resistance. White (1986), for instance, argued that there are distinct differences between farm laborers and those whose position has been strengthened by land reform (Bernstein and Byres 2001). Another influential critic, Popkin (1979) argued that peasants are constantly motivated to raise their subsistence level through long- and short-term investments in both market and nonmarket exchanges. He contrasted the rational, self-interested, and utility-maximizing peasant with the moral economy view of Scott and the latter’s peers, who suggest that maintaining subsistence levels and minimizing risk take priority.
7. For details of the history of the Hmong in the Southeast Asian massif see, on northern Thailand, Tapp (1989); on Vietnam, Michaud (2000); on Laos, Lemoine (1972)

and Ovesen (2004); on China, Tapp (2003); and on the transnational history of the Hmong in this region, Culas and Michaud (2004).

8. Interviews with ethnic minority individuals were undertaken with the help of Hmong and Yao interpreters, often local women who have become proficient in English from practicing with tourists. Those with Kinh were undertaken with Kinh interpreters (state researchers for interviews with state representatives; local Kinh residents for private individuals), or by the author alone.
9. Hybrid seeds are known locally as “Chinese rice,” with most imported from neighboring China. These seeds are distributed either via government-subsidized systems (since the late 1990s) or by private traders in local markets.
10. Debate continues as to whether this transition took place rapidly or gradually, due to differing views regarding state and society relations (see Fforde and de Vylder 1996; Fahey 1997; Kerkvliet 1995).
11. Some households also gain cash income via alcohol production and sale, which both men and women undertake, although this is more common in districts where more maize is grown. Some Hmong men also buy and sell buffalo, but the larger livestock markets are east of the Red River.
12. Thus, although a favorable year of cardamom returns can help toward the purchase of a buffalo, or wood for construction, no Hmong I interviewed would think of reducing their labor in the rice fields and concentrating instead on cultivating cardamom for cash to buy rice. The principle of comparative advantage does not work here, partly due to cultural norms and partly due to the perceived risks involved.
13. In U.S. dollars, the returns rose from \$3.50/kg in 2005, to \$4.80 to \$6.00/kg in 2007, then returning to \$3.50/kg in 2008 and 2009. Cardamom prices are for dried fruit.
14. Why only young Hmong women and not men are involved in tourism trekking is an interesting question. The women guides state that this is because Hmong young men are too shy and do not have the confidence to approach overseas tourists. An examination of livelihood portfolios and Hmong customs would also suggest that fathers insist on their sons remaining in the hamlet to learn a number of life skills such as caring for buffalo and other livestock, carpentry, plowing, game hunting, forest product collection and cultivation, and iron smithery. There is thus a gendered, culturally rooted understanding that young men have less spare time than young women, regardless of the fact that the latter sow and harvest rice, prepare maize fields, and create hemp clothes, in addition to daily household tasks (for more on Hmong gender divisions, see Symonds 2004).
15. Since the mid-2000s, one foreign-operated, small-scale business, Indigo, has been supporting fair-trade textile production involving ethnic minorities; and one nascent fair-trade business, Sa Pa Essentials, has been doing likewise for nontimber forest products. Both appeared to be struggling to make ends meet as of May 2010. The politics involved with another, larger, state-supported “fair trade” organization in Lào Cai province are such that I would be reluctant to call it truly “fair,” but that is another story.

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