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“Forever Hmong”: Ethnic Minority Livelihoods and Agrarian Transition in Upland Northern Vietnam

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“Forever Hmong”: Ethnic Minority Livelihoods and Agrarian Transition in Upland Northern Vietnam*

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This article examines how ethnic minority Hmong farmers have adapted to, circumnavigated, or resisted state-sponsored agrarian change and other interventions in the northern Vietnam uplands over the past twenty years. Based on longitudinal research with Hmong informants, I examine to what extent their livelihood strategies have led to wealth creation or differentiation. The article highlights the most important transformations, as farmers conceive and voice them, to Hmong agrarian livelihoods over this period, the importance of longitudinal fieldwork to help unravel endogenous wealth definitions, and the complex impacts of state interventions on ethnic minority ways of making a living. **Key Words:** agrarian transition, Hmong, livelihoods, state intervention, Vietnam.

本文探讨少数民族苗族农民是怎样在过去二十多年，适应，绕行，或抵制国家所支持的农业变化和在越南北部高地的其它干预措施。基于对苗族信息提供者的纵向研究，我考察他们的生计战略使之创造财富或分化到了什么程度。文章强调农民所构想的最重要的转变，和说明在此期间对苗族农业生计来说，纵向实地考察的重要性，以帮助揭开内源性的财富定义，和说明国家对少数民族生活方式的干预的复杂影响。关键词：农业转型，苗族，生计，国家干预，越南。

Este artículo examina la manera como la minoría de cultivadores Hmong se han adaptado, soslayado o resistido al cambio agrario patrocinado por el Estado, lo mismo que a otras intervenciones en las montañas del norte de Vietnam durante los pasados veinte años. A partir de investigación longitudinal con informantes Hmong, examiné con qué extensión sus estrategias de vida han llevado a la creación de riqueza o a diferenciación. El artículo destaca lo siguiente: las transformaciones más importantes, según los cultivadores las conciben y las describen, experimentadas durante este período por el sistema de vida agrario de los Hmong; la importancia del trabajo de campo longitudinal para ayudar a desentrañar las definiciones endógenas de riqueza; y los impactos complejos de las intervenciones estatales sobre los modos de vida de una minoría étnica. **Palabras clave:** transición agraria, Hmong, medios de vida, intervención estatal, Vietnam.

Squatting on a small wooden bench in an ethnic minority Hmong house, beside my graduate student Christine and our Hmong translator friend Xi, we chat with Xi's aunt Pa. It's a cold, damp day in February in Lào Cai province, Vietnam, and twelve members of Pa's household, including many small children, squeeze around the fire which provides the main light, along with a dimly glowing electric bulb. I've known Pa for seven years and we talk about the changes that she's seen occur in the valley during her lifetime, and those she thinks have been the most important since her first child was born, twenty-one years ago. She immediately

starts talking about hybrid rice subsidized by the Vietnam government, locally called "Chinese Rice" due to the seeds' current supply route. She notes "before, we didn't grow Chinese rice, so we only had ten bags of rice to eat each year. Now we've changed [from traditional Hmong rice to hybrid rice] and we have twenty bags, so double the amount; but it doesn't taste good at all."¹ I ask what her family used to eat when they ran short of rice. Pa, with wry laughter replies "we didn't have anything to eat . . . the sweet corn gave us only one crop per year and we had no rice. We'd eat something . . . like potatoes from the mountain, that's what we'd eat. Only

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the rich people had enough corn. I only had a little bit, but if that wasn't ready to eat, I had to eat things from the mountain." Later, she comments that she has just depleted the household's annual rice reserves, six months short of the next harvest, hence she is using cash earned from cardamom to buy supplies. I ask if there are other differences now that are notable from the past, and she starts to list a number: "Right now, it's very different. Now there's money, the Chinese rice, some people go to school, and even if they are very poor, they still eat rice. Before, when I was a little girl, we all ate potatoes, we didn't know what VND 10,000 looked like. Before I had little coins, only little coins [French silver coins] . . . I had never seen [Vietnamese] money. Right now it's much better than before . . . now, even if the people are very poor and have a small house, they can eat rice." I begin to reflect upon the similarities and difference in Pa's responses compared to other Hmong farmers with whom I've been talking. While some, like Pa, see the current position as far more rosy than previously, others are not so adamant that all the changes have been for the better.

—Reproduced from field notes, February 2009, Sa Pa district

Over the past twenty years, noteworthy transformations have occurred in rural sectors within the Southeast Asian region due to the relentless commoditization of production, the commons, and social relations (Nevins and Peluso 2008). With greater and deeper integration into global market exchanges, access to land, labor, financial capital, and technology has been significantly modified. Some individuals have benefited considerably from greater commoditization and linkages to regional and global markets, with people forming innovative livelihood strategies. Others have seen agrarian change and the proliferation of wage labor result in increased dispossession and marginalization, especially for smaller landowners and agricultural workers. Increasing infringements on indigenous rights, diminishing access to resources, and escalating cultural conflicts have also transpired (cf. Peluso 1992; Putzel 1992; Moore 1998; Turner and Caouette 2009).

This agrarian transition is not new to Southeast Asia or to the Global South more generally. Encompassing a broad range of processes linking a country's agricultural sector to the market economy to a greater extent than experienced previously, these transformations

not only affect those directly involved in agricultural production but have numerous consequences for entire rural-based populations, leading to complex local-level changes in people's livelihoods (Hart, Turton, and White 1989; Borrás, Kay, and Akram-Lodhi 2007). In tandem, such processes have often created new sites of struggle where counterhegemonic movements and resistance take place, whether overt or covert, in highly innovative ways (Scott 1985; C. P. White 1986; Edelman 2001; Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Amoore 2005; Kerkvliet 2005). One such site is the uplands of Vietnam, where we are witness to upland ethnic minority farmers, such as Pa, who have their own takes on how to engage with the agrarian transition and increasing market integration, enveloping their culturally rooted understandings of success and wealth.

My aim in this article is twofold. Focusing on the Hmong, the most numerous ethnic group in Lào Cai province, Vietnam, I aim first to give voice to Hmong residents' own understandings of the most important livelihood diversifications they have made over the past twenty years. Second, I interpret whether Hmong farmers consider themselves better or worse off than twenty years ago due to agrarian transition processes and state involvement in the Vietnam uplands, following endogenous definitions of wealth. Conceptually I build on debates regarding the agrarian transition in Southeast Asia (see, among others, Hart, Turton, and White 1989; Peluso 1992; Rigg 1994, 2001; Bernstein and Byres 2001; Turner and Caouette 2009),² the diversification of rural livelihoods (Chambers and Conway 1992; Ellis 1998, 2000; Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg 2004; Niehof 2004; Turner 2007), and infrapolitics and covert resistance (Scott 1976, 1985; Kerkvliet 1995, 2003, 2005, 2009; Turner 2011). Via this longitudinal study, I explore how Hmong farmer interviewees have adapted to, circumvented, or resisted state-sponsored rural and agrarian transformations over the past two decades. The article offers critical insights into how state interventions have brought about neither important wealth creation nor greater social differentiation among the Hmong households interviewed. This highlights the variation in processes of agrarian change in Southeast Asia, complicating conventional interpretations of

this transition. The fundamental ways of assessing well-being among the Hmong through endogenous wealth definitions continue to be reflected in culturally rooted, semisubsistence terms rather than in capitalist market-oriented or “modernist” consumer requisites.

Hmong Upland Farmers in Vietnam

Vietnam is home to fifty-four officially recognized ethnic groups, including the Kinh ethnic majority lowland Vietnamese. Of fifty-three ethnic minorities (*các dân tộc thiểu số*), representing 14.3 percent of the country’s population of 85.8 million, the Hmong number 1,068,000 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2010). The northern highlands of Vietnam, including Lào Cai province where this research is located, were most likely first inhabited by ethnic minority groups of Hmong and Yao and also smaller numbers of Tày and Giáy (Michaud and Turner 2006).³ Archival evidence and oral histories completed with Hmong elders suggest that Hmong households arrived in the region around the 1820s (Michaud and Turner 2006).

Before their migration south, Hmong farmers predominantly practiced swidden-based subsistence agriculture in southern China. As they moved into Vietnam, Hmong livelihoods increasingly became those of sedentarized peasants, focusing chiefly on rice or corn production as their annual staple crop (Corlin 2004; Turner and Michaud 2008). Nowadays, wet rice, or corn and dry rice in drier areas, are integral to Hmong livelihoods, yet many households maintain a swidden plot and collect forest products such as fuel wood, herbal medicines, game, and honey. Monetary exchange opportunities have long been part of the Hmong economy, with trade between inhabitants of neighboring valleys and beyond. From the 1800s onward this included a trade in opium, until the Vietnam state banned its cultivation in the early 1990s. Hmong livelihoods were also previously supported by selling forest timber until the state also prohibited such practices during the same period (DiGregorio, Pham Thi Quynh Phuong, and Yasui 1996; Table 1 highlights the main government decrees and interventions relevant to this study).

The collectivization process that placed all land in state ownership and management occurred in the northern Vietnam uplands in the

early 1960s. Although officially only a small residential land plot and family garden could be privately operated, with all remaining lands managed by cooperatives or run as state enterprises, in reality collectivization was never efficiently implemented in the uplands. The persistence of cultural prejudices, superstitions, and fear among many Kinh lowlanders of highland minority cultures resulted in a lack of Kinh willing to settle in the highlands to oversee collective logistics (Corlin 2004). Highland minority interviewees explained that during this time they tended to continue their subsistence ways, including rice terracing, as well as swidden agriculture. During the Socialist period, the northern uplands also became the stage for the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war.⁴ In a period of intense poverty and hunger for many residents, many ethnic minorities survived by collecting a variety of wild forest foods and retreated to the forests for shelter if necessary to avoid the warfare.

Then, following the initial stages of *đổi mới* (economic renovation) in the mid-1980s,⁵ the Vietnam government abolished permits required for travel by overseas tourists outside the country’s main cities in 1993. Relatively independent tourism in Vietnam thus became possible for the first time since the French colonial era, and the resultant tourism influx to the uplands drew a small number of highland minority individuals into the capitalist economy through the sale of their textiles and trekking guide employment. Others turned their hand to the expanding trade in nontimber forest products such as cardamom (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009; Turner 2011).

More extensively, Hmong households have been pulled into the monetary economy through government programs that provide state-subsidized hybrid rice seeds (Pa’s “Chinese” seeds). These seeds are only available in government distribution centers, and transactions take place in cash, further fueling the market integration of these uplanders. It is important to note, however, that despite these monetary exchanges, Hmong household members who I interviewed had never felt inclined to abandon their semisubsistence livelihoods (see Bonnin and Turner forthcoming).

Placing these livelihoods in the context of upland–lowland relations, upland ethnic minorities in Vietnam are little understood by

Table 1 Timeline of selective government decrees and interventions relevant to the Vietnam northern uplands

Date	Vietnam government decrees and interventions
1960s	Democratic Republic of Vietnam extends agricultural collectivization to the northern mountains.
1979	Border war between China and Vietnam.
1981	Households assigned output quotas and allowed to retain harvests exceeding quota.
1986	Communist Party officially begins to liberalize the economy and shift to more market-oriented planning, known as <i>đổi mới</i> .
	Hoàng Liên Sơn Nature Reserve established, Decision 194/CT.
1988	Resolution 10. Scaling back of the cooperative system. Cooperatives terminated annual contracts, allocated shares of wet-rice land to households based on labor capacity.
1991	Law on Forest Protection and Development (also known as Forest Protection and Development Act). Defined three types of forests: protection forest, special-use forest, and production forest. Different regulations for each.
1992	Program 327, implemented over 1993–1998, aimed at forest restoration and protection and the establishment of special-use forests. Followed by Program 661, 1998–2010, which became the basis for the Five Million Hectare Reforestation Program (5MHRP; not detailed in this article). The export of round-wood, sawn-wood, and rough-sawn flooring planks banned and official felling to be reduced by 88 percent. Logging in watershed protection and special-use forests, and forest exploitation in seven provinces in the north halted.
1993	Government bans opium production via Resolution No. 06/CP 29-1-1993. Land Law: Citizens could receive twenty-year renewable tenure rights on land for annual crops and fifty-year rights for perennial crops and forest land. Land rights could be leased, exchanged, transferred, inherited, and mortgaged.
	Independent overseas tourism allowed again in uplands.
1997	Permanent logging ban imposed in special-use forests and a thirty-year logging ban instituted in critical watersheds.
1998	Government Decree 20/1998/ND-CP introduces subsidies for commodities such as hybrid seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, kerosene, iodized salt, and basic medicines in communes classified as upland and ethnic minority areas (“Zone 3” communes).
1999	Subsidized rice seed program introduced in Lào Cai province.
2002	12 July: Hoàng Liên Sơn becomes a National Park.

lowland Kinh, often characterized as “backward” (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Koh 2002; Sowerwine 2004; World Bank 2009). Concurrently, the Vietnam state actively attempts to bring these upland inhabitants directly within its gaze. The state extends its reach across the uplands by encouraging fixed agriculture, cash-cropping, and mono-cropping. Raw materials are extracted from the periphery, and transportation linkages and education in the dominant language extend into the highlands (Mackerras 2003; Cribb and Narangoa 2004; McElwee 2004). Other projects to integrate upland ethnic minorities into the Viet nation include household registration and local political organization (Rambo 1997; Vu 2003; Scott 2009).⁶

Since 1999 I have completed more than 200 in-depth interviews and oral histories regarding social-cultural and economic change, livelihood diversification, and economic decision making in the northern Vietnam uplands. In 2009, specifically for this project, I undertook

in-depth, conversational interviews focusing on livelihood and broader changes in the district with fourteen Hmong aged between nineteen and eighty, all of whom I had initially interviewed between six and eleven years earlier, as part of an informal livelihood “restudy.” I completed oral histories with another six Hmong individuals able to recall details of livelihood changes over the previous twenty years, with whom I had not spoken previously. I also reinterviewed longtime Kinh residents who were first interviewed in the late 1990s (albeit not the focus of this article). Since 1999 I have visited Lào Cai province (population 614,000, of which 23.7 percent are Hmong; Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2010) every year between May and July except during 2002 and 2008, with longer stays between January and June in 2007 and 2009. All Hmong interviewees in this article are resident in the upper Mường Hoa river valley situated in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province (see Figure 1). Such a methodology, building on thematic and axial coding, provides



Figure 1 Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province, Vietnam. (Color figure available online.)

detailed insights into how livelihoods have been constructed, negotiated, and experienced over time as part of everyday social life, in what could be considered a “marginal” place.

1988–1999: “Opium Farmers Can’t Make Money Anymore”

Hmong interviewees divided the changes that they have experienced regarding livelihood diversification, agrarian transition, and mar-

ket integration into two broad time periods. First, from the official reopening of the local Vietnam–China border in 1988 until the late 1990s, their main foci were the reduction of opium cultivation, the tree-felling ban, rice paddy expansion, and outside development initiatives. Second, from the late 1990s debates and concerns emerged over hybrid rice, infrastructural changes, and inflation.

Repeatedly, the most important long-term livelihood change that Hmong interviewees raised was the reduction of opium cultivation,

common in the region until the early 1990s and used as a source of cash income for ethnic minority cultivators.⁷ Before the cultivation of this crop was banned in 1993, via Resolution 06/CP, one “could go to the villages and buy it, which some Kinh did, or it was available in the Sa Pa marketplace in the weekends” (Bang, Kinh informant 22 March 2009).

Lue (20 February 2009), a Hmong male farmer born in 1954, married with ten children, was an excellent source of information regarding changes over the past twenty years, including those involving opium, timber felling, and rice production. He attempted to compare the income he gained from opium cultivation twenty years ago to current terms. Before 1993, he explained, he could harvest “two big bowls⁸ of opium each crop, with one crop a year. That’s about 2 kilos in one year. . . . One bowl or 1 kilo equaled VND 300,000, but it’s VND 300,000 back then—soooo much money! It’s not like right now.” As we tried to decipher what that would equate to by today’s standards, Lue continued, “that’s a lot of money . . . before I had many animals such as buffalo. . . . Right now, one big buffalo costs VND 14 million. Before, it was just VND 125,000 for a big one.” Lue continued to suggest that such a markup would put his previous annual opium crop income at approximately VND 33 million (US\$1,870) today.⁹ When asked how they had utilized the returns from opium sales, Lue explained, “When I grew opium I gained a lot of money, and with the money I bought silver and we made silver necklaces for the girls and women. Every day you had money. The people who smoked the opium—they didn’t know how to save money.”

When the resolution to halt opium cultivation came into force in the valley, Lue recalled, “I remember one time many police came to this village to check every family. They stated, ‘Stop growing opium, if you do not stop we will take your buffaloes, your pigs, your horses, all of them will be taken. We will go up to your room [rice storage], and we will take it all.’” Not surprisingly, Lue noted that this had caused considerable resentment among local Hmong residents, as their revenues declined rapidly.

At the same time it became illegal to cut forest timber for sale, halting what had been a lawful trade of *per mu* (*Fokienia hodginsii*, Fujian Cypress). This highly sought-after, rot-

resistant wood has been used in China and Vietnam for centuries to make coffins (Centre des Archives d’outre-mer 1898). Lue recalled that the enforcement of this ban and the opium ban occurred simultaneously, commenting, “Twenty years ago, they told everybody to stop making opium. So the people kept going to the mountain to get wood for the Vietnamese people, for building houses, the *per mu* . . . the Vietnamese people [officials] came and saw we had lost a lot of mountain, and they took a lot of people to jail . . . the Hmong then lost their job clearing the wood to sell in the market.” Although an illegal trade in this wood has continued, with ethnic minorities using a variety of means to get *per mu* to eager Vietnamese and Chinese customers, the income it can provide to Hmong households has declined significantly, as the risks of being caught rise.

Indeed, members of poor Hmong households—endogenously defined by Hmong as those who cannot grow or purchase enough rice to support their households through the year—continue to trade wood illegally with private Kinh traders. Lim, an elderly Hmong woman I interviewed (personal communication, 28 June 2006), explained how one of her sons occasionally cut forest trees for wood but only “very far away in the forest, close to [X],” a hamlet located deep in the National Park. Lim was very concerned that the authorities might arrest her son but noted they had little alternative to make ends meet, an approach with which other Hmong interviewees concurred.

One way by which Hmong farmers diversified their livelihood strategies immediately following the bans on opium and timber felling was to open up more land for rice paddy. Lue explained, “When the government stopped the opium, the opium farmers can’t make money any more. The whole village, everyone came together, to talk and speak . . . then we went to the mountain to clear it to make rice paddies for growing rice and to plant sweet corn.”

Not all livelihood diversification strategies have been devised locally, however, and further interventions from the outside have included incentives for ethnic minorities to grow fruit trees. In the late 1990s, Hmong households in a number of communes of Sa Pa district were given fruit seedlings (mostly plums) for income generation.¹⁰ With little competition

when the program began, fruit prices were high; but when the trees started to bear fruit simultaneously, prices fell and many abandoned this commercial production. Local Hmong also faced a limited market because no infrastructure was provided for fruit processing and there was strong competition not only among themselves but from plum growers in Bắc Hà district to the east. Before long, most individuals involved in Sa Pa district decided that the low returns did not warrant the time and labor spent and returned to semisubsistence rice farming (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2011).

1999–2010: “People Might Have More Money Now, but the Prices of Everything Have Gone Up”

To the outside observer like myself, a number of visible changes have occurred in Sa Pa district since 1999. The major transportation artery that runs down the valley has been tar-sealed after a long period of (deadly) dynamite blasting, and from this route run a series of smaller roads and footpaths, increasingly becoming all-weather routes. Tourist trekking paths have become more formalized, some with paved stone walkways, although others remain dirt tracks, yet widened and signposted in English. Home stays for tourists have been built in Yao and Tày hamlets targeted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), although Kinh tourist operators in Sa Pa town consider Hmong households “too dirty” to receive their trekking guests (Kinh interviews 2007, 2009). Channeled water has been available in the valley for over ten years, and the number of houses this reaches has expanded, and new, two-story, concrete-block schools have replaced former one-story wooden ones.

One peculiarity that makes livelihood options more complex for those living in Sa Pa district nowadays is the fact that about three quarters of the district is located within Hoàng Liên Sơn National Park. All households located within this “protected forest” have been theoretically prohibited from collecting plants and animals, lighting fires, or grazing animals within park boundaries since 2002, and such households do not hold legal title to their land (Hoàng Liên Sơn National Park director interview 26 May 2006; Le Van Lanh 2004).

This state-sanctioned, internal territorialization, “excluding or including people within particular geographic boundaries, and about controlling what people do and their access to natural resources within those boundaries” (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 388), means that agricultural extensification in the valley has not occurred to an important degree during the past ten years, although small new terraces are still visible here and there if one looks carefully in tributary valleys. In one of these larger valleys—and notably still within the park—a sizable infrastructure construction project is underway to build a hydroelectricity dam. Access roads have destroyed many fields, for what locals argue is minimal compensation. When asked for whom the electricity will be provided, opinion is divided between China and local consumption; informing local residents of state plans nearby is not a priority of the local People’s Committee. Additionally, although new, larger schools have been built, there does not appear to be an important increase in attendance among Hmong children.¹¹ Indeed, education in the Vietnamese language (enforced in local schools) is not commonly seen as central to the well-being of Hmong children, and Hmong parents often explained that the skills children learn working beside them in the fields and at home are more vital to Hmong livelihoods and culture. In addition, young Hmong who had been to school reported that the teachers often only instruct for a few hours and then return home to Sa Pa town, with teachers sometimes absent altogether. Such irregularity certainly does not convince Hmong parents that their children need formal schooling, when their labor, however minimal, is helpful at home (see also World Bank 2009). Access to medical care does not appear to have changed considerably over the past ten years beyond better road access, with local clinics still understaffed and poorly equipped.¹²

It is interesting to observe that although over half (twelve of twenty) of the Hmong respondents explained that their households have more monetary income now than ten years ago, the majority of these (nine) also declared that things are more expensive now, so they do not perceive themselves as “better off” financially. Lai (2 February 2009), a Hmong woman with two small children elucidated, “People are now earning more money but things cost



Figure 2 Hmong farmers transplanting hybrid rice in Mùong Hoa valley, Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province. (Color figure available online.)

more now. So things just about even out with the past. If people aren't able to make money now by trekking or selling things, then I think that a family would be worse off." One oft-repeated example of increasing costs concerns buffalo. The region was hit by a severe winter in 2008 and many households lost precious buffalo, essential for plowing fields but also important for cultural rituals and ceremonies. As Bao (1 February 2009), another Hmong woman with two children noted, "A buffalo is more important than having a motorbike." Now in short supply, buffalo prices have risen dramatically, reflecting Lue's earlier comments. Furthermore, May (15 February 2009) remarked that "people might have more money now, but the prices of everything have gone up too, so people are not necessarily that much better off. Eight years ago, *phở* (noodle soup) for lunch in the market was 1,000 [VND]; now it's 10,000. So a family that doesn't have many funds can only just afford that before they go back home." May also explained that the Hmong bride price has fallen victim to inflation, with prices rising

steadily. Whereas this "used to be 2 to 3 million [VND], now it's about 8 to 10 million as well as chickens, rice alcohol, and pig meat." Nevertheless, seven Hmong interviewees did note that their increased monetary income was leading to the purchase of new commodities. Those with smaller amounts purchased treats for children, lightbulbs, kerosene, and meat, while those with more cash purchased agricultural inputs.

New rice seeds were the most commonly cited change noted over the past ten years by all interviewees (Figure 2). Beginning in the late 1990s, the Vietnamese government subsidized hybrid rice seeds in specific communes classified as upland and ethnic minority areas (Zone 3 communes), a program that reached Lào Cai province in 1999 (Oxfam 2001). Also subsidized under 1998 Government Decree 20/1998/ND-CP are important commodities such as kerosene, iodized salt, basic medicines, and agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides. Although the program was developed through a national-level framework, the

provision of this support varies widely in practice at provincial, district, and commune levels.

Hmong households have adopted the subsidized rice seed option at different times and to different degrees. The majority of Hmong interviewed for this project (fifteen of twenty) said that, on the whole, the new rice program is a “good thing,” with more households now having enough rice to see them through the year, via this intensification of production for self-consumption (very little rice grown is sold). Yet, interviewees were quick to express a number of reservations over this shift in livelihoods that, in sum, is increasing vulnerability and leaving them less food secure. Interviewees were highly cognizant that a new assortment of vulnerabilities is being superimposed by the subsidized rice program over existing, long-term livelihood concerns.

Part of the widespread apprehension among interviewees centers on taste preferences, increased reliance on the government, and the need for cash to buy farm inputs. As one male Hmong farmer noted, “The biggest change I’ve seen is that the government now sells rice [seed] to us. This rice is better than Hmong rice for production; but we all think Hmong rice tastes better” (Xang 31 January 2009).¹³ Indeed, everyone interviewed stated that their own traditional rice tastes better than “Chinese rice.” As one young Hmong woman I have known for a number of years remarked, “We’ll eat it if we have to, to get through the year” (May 15 February 2009). One of her older relatives, Shu (27 June 2009), elaborated: “Hmong rice tastes better because it is stickier and nicer to eat. But Chinese rice produces more so that makes people think that it is better.” Again and again, Hmong interviewees noted that if possible, taking into consideration food security, land holdings, and the number of male heirs that land has to be divided among, they would only grow Hmong rice.

This preference for Hmong rice is not only due to taste. Traditional rice, especially sticky rice, is important for a number of ceremonies and celebrations such as Hmong New Year. The window of opportunity for sowing traditional rice varieties is also wider than for hybrid rice, allowing labor to be shared among households. Furthermore, the stalks of traditional rice can be fed to buffalo after harvesting, whereas hybrid rice stalks are too tough.

Thus, farmers now have to find other appropriate feed sources, traveling to other districts and even other provinces in their search, resulting in greater human and physical capital expenditure and environmental stress.

The financial costs of cultivating hybrid seeds are far greater than traditional varieties, as these new seeds not only have to be purchased but require additional financial capital outlays for fertilizers and pesticides. Not unexpectedly, therefore, Hmong interviewees consider their traditional rice to be far more practical because “you can save some seeds and grow from those each year” (Bao 1 February 2009). Hybrid seeds have also been found to be susceptible to a broader range of diseases than traditional rice in the region, requiring additional pesticides, and other concerns revolve around delays in delivery of seeds and availability of specific seeds suitable for local climatic conditions. Due to such uncertainties, some local farmers are now resorting to buying seeds external to the government program, to plant more appropriate seeds at an optimal time (see Bonnin and Turner forthcoming for more on the state’s hybrid rice program).

Hmong farmers are now working to avoid depending on one particular approach to rice procurement and cultivation, instead trying to reduce risk by counting on a diversity of coping strategies, regardless of the government’s hard sell of the hybrid seed program.¹⁴ A composite approach to livelihoods, involving the adoption of new practices, but a firm resolution to uphold others embedded in local indigenous knowledge, has been decided to be the most prudent course.

Concluding Thoughts: Hmong Differentiation?

Numerous calls have been made by geographers for greater recognition to be given to “the local embeddedness of agricultural practices and rural identities” (Marsden et al. 1996, 364; Whatmore 1994; Rigg 2001). Thus, although careful studies of livelihoods in Javanese rural villages in Indonesia (e.g., Alexander and Alexander 1982; Hart 1986), ethnic Thai villages in Thailand (Hirsch 1989), and lowland Vietnamese villages (Kerkvliet 2003, 2005), among others, have confirmed that rural

communities in Southeast Asia often involve exploitative relationships and undergo wealth differentiation and stratification as the agrarian transition unfolds, it is clear that such findings are not necessarily replicated in upland Hmong rural hamlets. Hmong hamlets are monoclanic, consisting of about three to eight households, and exogamy is strictly upheld. Hmong in northern Vietnam continue to be a lineage-based, acephalous socially organized group. There are no chiefs, village headmen, or kings, and decisions that need to be made outside the household are usually made by older men via consensus decision making. Although the Vietnam state appoints Hmong to local People's Committees, the limited power of these individuals within Hmong communities is widely recognized, and such positions seldom result in chances to exploit opportunities for accumulation. The Vietnamese state also organizes Hmong hamlets into larger state-sanctioned hamlets (*xã*), often grouping together monoclanic Hmong hamlets to produce multiclanic units of administration. Hmong interviewees seldom relate to these *xã* as part of their decision-making processes.

Important Hmong cultural norms, everyday practices, infrapolitics, and indigenous knowledge mean that the degree of stratification found in Southeast Asian lowland rural communities, due in large part to the agrarian transition, is difficult to find in these Hmong hamlets. The introduction of hybrid rice, accompanied by the other changes profiled earlier, including expanding state territorialization, prohibitions, and inducements, have not brought about "shifts in patterns of control over the means of production" (B. White 1989, 26) or notable inequalities in wealth among the Hmong households I interviewed. Because there has been such a widespread push from local People's Committee the extension agencies and NGOs for upland farmers to convert to the hybrid rice crop, there are few who have not done so to some degree. Because all families have been integrated into the monetary economy to some extent for decades—such as via opium or tree felling—they are adept at finding routes by which to gain the cash necessary to buy the government-subsidized seeds, if they so wish. Although this can certainly be a struggle, different routes taken include cardamom cultivation, collecting other forest products, textile

production, or renting out part of their land for use by others. Local, endogenous definitions of poverty are based on whether a family has enough rice to see them through the year, from one harvest to the next, and this classification has not changed over twenty years. What has emerged instead is a new relationship between traditional and hybrid rice, with those families able to still grow a proportion of traditional rice considered more wealthy than those who have converted over all their fields. That is, those resisting the agrarian transition to some degree are considered to be doing better (albeit marginally) than those adopting its cause.

Increased inequalities in access to land due to rice conversions have also not occurred as observed elsewhere; for example, in lowland communities experiencing agrarian change in Indonesia (B. White 1989). Like many upland ethnic groups in the Southeast Asian massif, Hmong tradition stipulates that land be divided among sons upon marriage, and this has continued to this day. Although parents can therefore find themselves sharing out land among up to five or six sons, these sons are then expected to provide for their parents. It should be noted, however, that Hmong households in this valley are facing an element of land squeeze due to the establishment of the National Park, Kinh farming expansion (e.g., large-scale vegetable plots now visible throughout the valley), continued state-supported infrastructure development such as the dam noted earlier, and increasing population pressure (Turner 2011). To date, however, this has not resulted in landlessness.

The core ways in which Hmong farmers endogenously define well-being and wealth continue to be reflected in semisubsistence terms rather than a shift to capitalist, market-oriented explanations. Hmong I have interviewed in Sa Pa district and elsewhere in Lào Cai province share long-term economic interests—insofar as a lineage-based, acephalous socially organized group can do so—of semisubsistence livelihoods and access to their central means of production; namely, land. To date, the very small minority with no land tend to be opium addicts, and such individuals are usually tolerated, housed, and fed by extended family members. Production is based on human need rather than profit, with the concepts of well-being or happiness being, as a young Hmong

woman explained to me in 2007 and others have noted since, “a big enough house for everyone, enough rice fields to feed everyone, and some buffalo.” Proletarianization has not occurred, although a few male Hmong work part time as wage laborers, and likewise a small number of young women work in Sa Pa town as trekking guides, whereas older women sell textiles in the local market. Nevertheless, when farming duties call, they abandon these tasks and return to the household (Turner 2007). Although the introduction of hybrid seeds can be considered an important state-sponsored, agrarian transition for Hmong livelihoods, farmers have a number of concerns regarding the implementation of this program and are devising a range of coping strategies and livelihood diversification techniques to adapt to as well as carefully resist certain expectations. On the whole, there has been a notable lack of wealth creation or differentiation in these hamlets due to state-supported agrarian change.

If one turns to take a macro, quantitative approach, data from the Survey on Household Living Standards (VHLSS; from 1992 to 1993 and biennially from 1997–1998 to 2010) reveal that the “northern midlands and mountainous area” is consistently the region with the highest numbers of households experiencing poverty and, although decreasing, this decline has slowed since 2006 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2008, 21–24).¹⁵ Ethnic minority regions are therefore considered to be “lagging behind, even as the rest of Vietnam prospers economically” (World Bank 2009, 47). The agrarian transition thus appears to have had little impact on broader indicators of poverty in these uplands. At this scale, ethnic relations have not changed significantly over time either, with Kinh still holding fairly prerogative views of Hmong and other uplanders, as well as Kinh households in the uplands more likely to have improved their living standards, according to VHLSS data (World Bank 2009).

Yet comparing Hmong household livelihoods to those of others is not necessarily a very productive exercise if one wants to understand their endogenous livelihood approaches, diversification strategies, and means to improving welfare. Detailed in-depth interviews and oral histories, repeated and cross-checked, reveal that social identification and wealth classification for Hmong farmers are culturally based,

reflecting certain adoptions of, but also resilience to, both the market and social integration practices of the Vietnam state. It is clear that the agrarian transition is being played out in very specific ways in these upland communities. Perhaps Lue, the Hmong farmer we met earlier, summed it up best, when he noted quietly, “We have a different language and different communities and traditions. Yes, we are living in Vietnam, we get the name that we’re Vietnamese people, but we are never Vietnamese people . . . we are always and always forever Hmong” (20 February 2009). ■

Notes

- ¹ Pa estimated that one bag was 50 to 60 kilograms of unhusked rice. These twenty bags were feeding twelve people in her household.
- ² Initial models of the agrarian transition were criticized for being overly unilateral, too specifically focused on political economy, and Eurocentric (see, among others, Buttel and McMichael 1988; Bernstein and Byres 2001). In recent decades, the agrarian transition has come to refer to larger societal changes, especially the shift from societies with agriculture as their core income source to those based progressively more on industrial production and services (Harrison 2001; Rigg 2001; Akram-Lodhi, Borras, and Kay 2007).
- ³ In Vietnam these first two groups are officially named H’mông and Dao (Zao), respectively, but ethnonyms used in this text follow the most widely accepted international usage, based on ethnolinguistic divisions (see Condominas 1978; Dang Nghiem Van, Chu Thai Son, and Luu Hung 2000).
- ⁴ Chinese forces invaded Vietnam’s northern frontier in 1979 to protest against Vietnam incursions into Cambodia, as well as the treatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. Local people fled the invasion that disrupted livelihoods and caused widespread damage to infrastructure (Donnell 1980). The Vietnamese state officially reopened the border in 1988, followed shortly after by the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1991. When asking Hmong informants what the most notable changes have been over the past twenty years, the reopening of the border was a local, “tangible” temporal marker.
- ⁵ There is debate regarding whether this transition took place gradually or rapidly due to differing views regarding state and society relations (see Kerkvliet 1995; Fforde and de Vylder 1996; Fahey 1997).

- ⁶ Although I do not directly engage with Scott's (2009) "Zomia" debates in this article, many of the Vietnam state's actions noted here can be considered attempts to reduce the "friction of distance" between the Vietnam uplands and lowland rulers and to expand "state space" (see Scott 2009; Michaud 2010; Turner 2010).
- ⁷ It should be remembered that the historical cause of opium cultivation in the Vietnam uplands, and indeed across the Southeast Asian massif, was largely colonial pressure. Initially, the British were largely responsible for the production and demand for this crop, marketing it to the Chinese population; later, the French colonial government in Indochina and American interests in China and Southeast Asia played a vital role.
- ⁸ Our interpreter nodded toward two bowls, from which we had just eaten, of about 25 cm diameter.
- ⁹ In 2008 the average monthly income in the north-west provinces was US\$14 (VND 275,000). However, given the semisubsistence nature of Hmong livelihoods, such comparisons are not that helpful (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2008).
- ¹⁰ Similar projects also occurred in other northern upland provinces such as Bắc Kạn (Alther et al. 2002).
- ¹¹ Based on a 3 percent enumeration sample of the 1999 Census, Baulch et al. (2002) calculated Hmong primary school enrollment to be 41.5 percent (51.5 percent of boys and 31.5 percent of girls). These data are not yet available for the 2009 census.
- ¹² In 2008 and 2009 I witnessed misdiagnoses based on the most rudimentary examinations and disparaging behavior toward Hmong women seeking help at the Sa Pa district and Lao Cai provincial hospitals. I was told that the situation is similar at hamlet clinics.
- ¹³ Hmong interviewees estimated that from 10 kg of hybrid seeds they grow 600 to 800 kg of rice without chemical fertilizer and depending on climatic conditions (Pa 26 February 2009). If one applies fertilizer, and with the right climatic conditions, this can rise to 1,200 to 1,500 kg of rice (Shu 26 June 2009; Houa 27 June 2009).
- ¹⁴ This includes posters pasted on community buildings and homes promoting hybrid seeds, calendars distributed to households with similar advertising, local loudspeaker broadcasts in local communes and towns, and extension service officials visiting local communes to extol the merits of the seeds.
- ¹⁵ The "expenditure poverty rate using the World Bank and GSO poverty line" places the percentage of those classified as poor in the northern midlands and mountainous areas at 64.5 percent (1998), 47.9 percent (2002), 38.3 percent (2004), 32.3 percent (2006), and 31.6 percent (2008; General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2008, 24). This

hides differences among ethnic groups, including migrant lowland Kinh. In 2009, a World Bank Country Social Analysis noted for ethnic minorities in the country as a whole, "In 2006, the poverty rate for ethnic minorities was more than five times higher than for the Kinh and Chinese, up from 1.6 times higher than Kinh and Chinese in 1993. . . . Although ethnic minorities comprise only 14.5 percent of the population, they constitute 44.7 percent of Vietnam's poor and 59 percent of the hungry" (World Bank 2009, 49).

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