

# The Territorialization of Vietnam's Northern Upland Frontier

## Migrant Motivations and Misgivings from World War II until Today

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Agricultural expansion and resource exploitation are reconfiguring the Southeast Asian Massif in important ways, with related in-migration to these uplands increasing rapidly. Within this region, the northern Vietnam frontier has an unusual migration history, including state-sponsored resettlement and spontaneous migration. While analyzing the reflections of 90 migrants, we investigate the patterns and processes by which Vietnam's northern uplands have been peopled with lowland migrants from World War II until today, revealing three key waves or temporal groups. Focusing on these groups, we compare migrants' everyday lived experiences during and soon after their journeys, with a range of unmet expectations, concerns, and tensions becoming apparent. This combination means that while the taming and territorialization of this upland frontier can be considered structurally complete, for migrant settlers their new home remains an ambiguous social space.

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■ **KEYWORDS:** frontier, migration networks, Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, state-supported migration, territorialization, Vietnam

### Introduction

Frontier regions in the global South are complex and dynamic physical and social spaces where cultures meet and goods and ideas are exchanged, negotiated, and contested (Alvarez 1995; Giersch 2006). Such locales can offer numerous economic attractions for entrepreneurs and state enterprises, with agricultural expansion and resource exploitation being two of the most common vectors of frontier development (Agergaard et al. 2009; Coxhead et al. 2002; Eilenberg 2014; Jepson 2006). Within the Southeast Asian Massif, frontier regions incorporating southeast China, northern Burma, Laos, northern Thailand, and central and northern Vietnam have been active trade sites for centuries (Michaud 2016; Sturgeon 2007), while recent cash injections in such areas, especially from China, are creating new infrastructure projects, trade opportunities, and cash-crop booms (Nyíri and Tan 2016). Moreover, state-endorsed regional development programs like the Greater Mekong Subregion aim to better connect countries in and beyond the Southeast Asian Massif via new high-speed communication and transportation links. With this program alone, the Asian Development Bank and regional governments are pouring more than \$14 billion into infrastructure, including telecommunications, roads, and energy projects crisscrossing the region's frontiers (Glassman 2010; S. Turner 2013). Such transitions and the population movements they encourage into these uplands also raise numerous concerns over



land grabbing, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of ethnic minority communities already in situ for generations (Michaud and Forsyth 2011).

Within the Southeast Asian Massif, the uplands of northern Vietnam are no exception to these trends. While there are excellent reviews of broad migration processes in Vietnam (Đặng Nguyễn Anh et al. 2003; Guest 1998; Zhang et al. 2006) and historical migration patterns to the north and to Vietnam's Central Highlands during specific time periods (Hardy 2000; Winkler 2005), we know comparatively little about how Vietnam's northern uplands have been populated with lowland settlers since World War II, the fluctuations in state involvement, and what the everyday experiences of migration were like for those involved.<sup>1</sup> As such, the aims of this article are twofold. First, we investigate the patterns and processes by which Vietnam's northern upland province of Lào Cai, located on the border with China, has been peopled with lowland migrants over the past 70 years, revealing three key waves or temporal groups of migrants. Second, while focusing on these three temporal groups, we compare and contrast migrants' everyday lived experiences during and soon after their journeys.

To address our aims, we first outline our conceptual framework, drawing from frontier and territorialization studies and migration network theory. We then contextualize our study by briefly reviewing recent "development" in Vietnam's northern uplands, before analyzing the routes, experiences, and reflections of three waves of migrants from the end of World War II onward. Taking a biographical approach, we draw from in-depth semistructured interviews completed between 2015 and 2019 with 90 Kinh (lowland Vietnamese majority ethnicity) migrants who moved to either Lào Cai City or one of the eight current districts of Lào Cai Province (Figure 1). Ten migrant residents were interviewed in Lào Cai City and each district headtown, namely (from west to east): Bát Xát and Sa Pa (both in districts of the same name), Phố Lu (Bảo Thắng District), Khánh Yên (Văn Bàn District), Mường Khương, Si Ma Cai, Bắc Hà (in their like-named districts), and Phố Ràng (Bảo Yên District) (see Figure 1). Interviews were completed by the first or third authors in Vietnamese or English following a semistructured interview guide developed by all three authors. We interviewed 48 men and 42 women, aged between 28 and 87. Using a purposeful chain-referral sampling approach after establishing initial contacts in each district, we sought to interview individuals who had arrived in the uplands during different decades. In addition, we interviewed ten individuals (six women, four men) born in these towns as the children of earlier migrants, and two state officials familiar with migration patterns to the province, for a total of 102 interviews. The first author has also observed and discussed changes in the province during yearly fieldwork since 1999.

While providing a case study to extend knowledge of migration patterns in this specific frontier region, we hope that this article will also contribute to broader debates regarding migrants' ongoing engagement with their homelands, and diversity and stratification within migration flows in the global South. As Mette Louise Berg and Susan Eckstein (2015: 1) have noted, these are debates about which our understanding "remains especially inadequate." We are optimistic that this work might also resonate with scholars working in other frontier locales, where state and migrant objectives can be both compatible and discordant.

## **Frontiers, Territorialization, and Migration Networks**

The concept of the frontier, often attributed to Frederick Jackson Turner (1894), initially spanned two divergent approaches. The first was the Western conquest of the United States, conspicuously defined as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" in the prairie landscapes,

**Figure 1.** Location of Lào Cai Province's headtowns and provincial capital. Map created by the authors.

while the second referred to the “fortified boundary line[s] running through dense populations” at Europe’s frontiers (F.J. Turner 1894: 200). Drawing on Turner’s North American conceptualization, Owen Lattimore (1940) later depicted China’s frontiers as sites where marginal lands and people were overtaken and tamed by Chinese modernity. Yet he also highlighted that such frontier development was a challenging, uneven endeavor, requiring extensive funding and labor. David Cleary (1993) extended Lattimore’s reasoning, noting that Brazilian frontier development included diverse patterns of economic structures and social relations. Recent scholars have continued to highlight this heterogeneity of frontiers, while also stressing the agency of those already in these “empty spaces” (Tsing 2003).

From a state perspective, frontier development in the Southeast Asian Massif is often regarded as the increasing inclusion of “unexplored or undeveloped” regions, or a “zone of not yet” into the national economy (*ibid.*: 5100; see also Agergaard et al. 2009; Scott 2009). State imaginaries frequently consider these “lawless and undeveloped” regions to be a potential safety valve to relieve population pressure elsewhere and boost agricultural output as part of an agrarian strategy. Concurrently, states can diffuse “potentially explosive peasant revolts through geographi-

cal dispersion and relocation of discontented elements of the rural population” (Shrestha et al. 1993: 789).

Such imaginaries have resulted in states in the Southeast Asian Massif attempting to make their uplands increasingly legible through different “scientific” approaches such as mapping, classifying, and registering land use rights (Scott 1998, 2009; Sowerwine 2004). State migration programs also often factor within the bureaucratic policies and regulations that become operationalized in such locations. As Rodolphe De Koninck (1996: 231) notes: “By ‘planting’ or ‘sowing’ peasants, and then ‘protecting’ them, many states have secured their territory.” All such processes can be broadly considered devices of territorialization (Johnston 1995). Nonetheless, local actors do not necessarily accept state control as hegemonic and “alternative claims in different spaces” can occur, with noncompliance and everyday resistance often rooted in existing social structures, cultural norms, and economic struggles (Sowerwine 2004: 99; Scott 1985).

Recent migration studies emphasize the heterogeneous nature of migration and “development” interactions in the global South. Frontier migration of nonstate actors like farmers, miners, and informal economy workers can be spontaneous or fairly systematically planned, revealing the importance of focusing on interactions across space and time, as well as political context (De Haas 2010). The situation in Vietnam’s northern uplands highlights this need to examine migration decisions along a continuum from voluntary to involuntary (Zhang et al. 2006). For instance, Vietnam’s planned resettlement programs of the 1950s and 1960s were a distinct form of mobility initiated and strongly encouraged by the state. Exploring the biographical narratives of migrants along this continuum of voluntary to involuntary movement, as we do here, helps reveal how the materiality of such mobility is imbued with tensions and inequalities.

Focusing on such embodied experiences, scholars drawing on migration network theory suggest that “migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin” (Massey et al. 1993: 448). Of interest for this study is how migrants initiate links with individuals or households in destination areas to potentially reduce risks and costs, and how such connections might also be maintained with others in places of origin. This focus highlights the importance of social ties and networks for migration decisions, behavior, and flows, and the agency of migrant individuals and households when formulating and organizing the migration process (Castles et al. 2014; Kothari 2003). Simultaneously, the approach also recognizes the importance of structures, including how the socioeconomic, political, institutional, and cultural context can enable or constrain migration decisions and flows (De Haas 2010).<sup>2</sup>

## Contextualizing Migration Flows to Northern Vietnam’s Upland Frontier since World War II

For over two hundred years, Vietnam’s northern uplands have been home to diverse ethnic minority groups, including Hmong, Yao (Dao), Nùng, and Tày, many of whom originally migrated from China (Michaud 2016). In the late 1800s, French colonial rulers worked to secure these uplands, and an area roughly corresponding to current-day Lào Cai Province, our case study, became the Fourth Military Territory. “France, keen to enforce in Indochina as elsewhere a systematic administration of *mise en valeur*, had learned from experience the importance of getting acquainted with the peripheral populations” (Michaud 2015: 348). As well as a number of French military outposts being established in these uplands, lowland Kinh migrants settled in small numbers to work for the French or engage in small-scale trade (S. Turner 2013).

After the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945 in the north, and independence from France in 1954, the DRV started to encourage lowland Kinh migration to the northern uplands in the 1960s. The government aimed to relocate lowland populations facing food shortages and limited industrial jobs to sparsely inhabited uplands considered empty frontier territories (Winkels 2005). This transfer of people was initially known as “clearing the wilderness” or “highland economic and cultural development” (Hardy 2003: 55). This was paralleled by the establishment of cooperatives and state forest enterprises in many upland areas, often on land formerly farmed by ethnic minority households. In the 1970s, these policies collectively became known as the New Economic Zones (NEZ) program (Vùng Kinh Tế Mới). Such state-controlled migration was also closely connected to the introduction of the Hộ khẩu in the mid-1950s, a household registration system regulating mobility through several mechanisms, including eligibility for state employment and access to basic services and benefits (Vũ Thị Thảo and Agergaard 2012).

While the ambitious goal of the NEZs was resettlement at the same pace as natural increase in the lowlands, this target was never achieved, with scholars noting considerable return migration, perhaps as high as 50 percent (Mellac 2010). However, it is estimated that about one million people in the north were convinced to move (Desbarats 1987), and after reunification (1975), this program was expanded into Vietnam’s Central Highlands. It has been suggested that the NEZ program was directly linked to populating frontier regions with state-sympathetic lowlanders, so as to “demographically dominate” upland ethnic minority populations (Scott 2009: 12) and secure “these remote areas for the revolution” (Hardy 2003: 151). James Scott (2009: 12) adds: “Internal colonialism, broadly understood, aptly describes this process.”

The Sino-Vietnamese border war briefly disrupted the government’s migration plans.<sup>3</sup> In February 1979, Chinese troops entered Vietnam, with fighting in the uplands concentrated in Lào Cai Town (Lào Cai Province) and Đồng Đăng (Lạng Sơn Province). Despite Vietnamese resistance being stronger than the Chinese had anticipated, Chinese troops advanced 40 kilometers into Vietnam, destroying infrastructure and housing (Donnell 1980). While the main hostilities only lasted one month, it took until 1988 for Vietnam and China to officially reopen the border to trade. Meanwhile, in December 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party introduced *Đổi Mới* (economic renovation), signaling a shift from a centrally planned to a more market-oriented economic system. With *Đổi Mới* came more variety of migration flows throughout Vietnam, and spontaneous and often circular or temporary migration increased in volume after the Hộ khẩu system was also reformed. Simultaneously, the NEZ program waned (Winkels 2005).

Since the mid-1990s, Lào Cai Province has experienced a dramatic rise in financial investment accompanied by increasing spontaneous migration. The province boasts a strategic location straddling the Red River (Sông Hồng) valley, and is centrally positioned in one of the Greater Mekong Subregion’s (GMS) North-South Economic Corridors, stretching from Vietnam’s port city of Haiphong to Kunming in Yunnan, China. The GMS has brought infrastructure, telecommunications, resource extraction, and urban expansion to the province as a whole, although the main focus has been on the province’s capital city (Fau et al. 2014; S. Turner 2013). A highway inaugurated in 2014 has halved travel time from Hanoi to Lào Cai City to four hours, while Sa Pa, a mountain resort town 35 kilometers southwest of Lào Cai City, has seen a dramatic growth in popularity among lowland Kinh middle-class tourists (topping one million visitors in 2016) (Michaud and Turner 2017). Concurrently, responding to accelerating urbanization in the lowlands since the mid-1980s, the Vietnamese state has introduced policies such as the 1998 Urban System and Development Strategy to 2020. This promotes the economic development of small and medium-sized urban centers, such as those in Lào Cai Province, in an effort to slow the growth of Vietnam’s largest cities (World Bank 2011).

Nowadays, the eight small towns and provincial capital where we completed interviews range in population size from 5,000 in Bát Xát, the smallest district headtown, to over 113,000 in Lào Cai City. Table 1 shows that by 2009, the percentage of Kinh in each district headtown was already much higher than the percentages of Kinh in rural communes, while from 2009 to 2017 Lào Cai City and the district headtowns of Bát Xát, Bắc Hà, and Sa Pa witnessed rapid demographic growth. The causes of these patterns, revealed during our interviews, are analyzed next.

### Three Migrant Waves: Motivations, Arrival Patterns, and Trying to Settle

Three different waves of migration to this frontier region quickly stood out from our interviews: (1) from the end of World War II until Vietnam's reunification in 1975; (2) between 1976 and 1995, involving two subsets of migrants, those arriving between 1976 and 1985, before *Đổi Mới*

**Table 1.** Populations of Lào Cai City and district headtowns, 2009 to 2017.

	2009			2010	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 <sup>a</sup>
	Total Pop.	No. of Kinh	% of Kinh	Total Population					
<b>Lào Cai City</b>	<b>98,363</b>	<b>76,197</b>	<b>77.47</b>	—	<b>107,619</b>	<b>108,872</b>	<b>110,218</b>	<b>111,987</b>	<b>113,339</b>
<b>Bát Xát District</b>	<b>70,015</b>	<b>12,711</b>	<b>18.15</b>	—	<b>71,653</b>	<b>76,290</b>	<b>77,499</b>	<b>77,499</b>	<b>80,360</b>
Bát Xát Town	3,583	2,974	83.00	—	4,117	4,453	4,512	4,738	4,969
<b>Mường Khương District</b>	<b>52,149</b>	<b>6,305</b>	<b>12.09</b>	—	—	<b>57,642</b>	<b>58,593</b>	<b>59,584</b>	<b>60,812</b>
Mường Khương Town	4,546	1,329	29.23	—	—	8,207	8,280	8,302	8,423
<b>Si Ma Cai District</b>	<b>31,323</b>	<b>2,130</b>	<b>6.80</b>	—	<b>34,442</b>	<b>34,973</b>	<b>35,760</b>	<b>36,162</b>	<b>36,528</b>
Si Ma Cai Town	4,253	1,386	32.59	—	4,944	5,115	5,171	5,204	5,229
<b>Bắc Hà District</b>	<b>53,587</b>	<b>8,257</b>	<b>15.41</b>	<b>57,998</b>	—	<b>59,831</b>	<b>60,909</b>	<b>61,537</b>	<b>62,512</b>
Bắc Hà Town	4,253	2,908	68.38	5,004	—	5,244	5,158	5,204	5,292
<b>Bảo Thắng District</b>	<b>99,974</b>	<b>64,342</b>	<b>64.36</b>	—	<b>106,705</b>	<b>107,785</b>	<b>107,039</b>	<b>108,501</b>	<b>110,520</b>
Phố Lu Town	8,559	7,740	90.43	—	9,386	9,468	9,474	9,944	9,939
<b>Bảo Yên District</b>	<b>76,415</b>	<b>20,063</b>	<b>26.26</b>	<b>77,536</b>	—	<b>81,660</b>	<b>82,856</b>	<b>83,781</b>	<b>84,610</b>
Phố Ràng Town	8,074	6,335	78.46	—	8,196	8,691	8,755	8,803	8,878
<b>Sa Pa District</b>	<b>53,549</b>	<b>9,815</b>	<b>18.33</b>	—	<b>57,756</b>	<b>58,961</b>	<b>59,176</b>	<b>60,276</b>	<b>61,498</b>
Sa Pa Town	8,975	7,997	89.10	—	9,791	9,963	9,963	10,197	10,651
<b>Văn Bàn District</b>	<b>79,220</b>	<b>12,708</b>	<b>16.04</b>	<b>80,033</b>	—	<b>84,271</b>	<b>84,709</b>	<b>86,078</b>	<b>87,316</b>
Khánh Yên Town	5,644	3,100	54.93	5,162	—	5,537	5,692	6,134	6,327
<b>Province of Lào Cai</b>	<b>614,595</b>	<b>212,528</b>	<b>34.58</b>	—	—	<b>671,481</b>	<b>677,684</b>	<b>686,234</b>	<b>697,495</b>

Source: Lào Cai Statistics Office (2018).

<sup>a</sup> Data for 2017 estimated by Lào Cai Statistics Bureau officials.

(economic renovation), and those arriving in the decade following, 1986–1995; and (3) after 1996, when a notable period of economic growth in the province commenced.<sup>4</sup>

### ***First Migrant Wave: 1945–1974***

Interviewees from what we distinguished as the first wave of Kinh migrants after World War II reported that while part of the NEZ process, they were often also motivated by the dream of easier access to land and new farming opportunities. Their physical move was facilitated by “scout teams” (*Phái đoàn tiền trạm*), namely Kinh officials who identified possible farming sites and decided upon their suitability for households from their lowland province (Figure 2 details migrant sending provinces). The structure and role of these teams was described at length by Mr. Lê,<sup>5</sup> who had been a member of one:

Our migration was arranged officially. We worked through the General Bureau/Ministry of Reclamation [Tổng Cục Khai Hoang], and with an introduction letter from the Bureau of Food [Tổng Cục Lương Thực], they agreed for our group to move here. Before moving, a group of 10 commune board members led by the Communist Party Secretary in Nam Định Province came here as a scout team, and I was in this group. We visited different districts in Tuyên Quang Province [southwest of Lào Cai]. There were some suitable places, but others weren't as they didn't have water. When we visited Na Hang [district in Tuyên Quang Province], the team didn't like it because it was a mud swamp and we didn't want to farm that land. So we moved here [Bát Xát District] in 1963.

It remains debatable whether this migration was voluntary (albeit state-sponsored) or somewhat coerced, but “nationalistic duty” certainly appears to have played an important role, mentioned by over half the interviewees who migrated at this time. State propaganda drew a rosy picture of upland conditions for prospective migrants, but upon arrival, nearly all interviewees found their new reality was nothing like what they had been promised. Yet, they explained, they dared not go against the wishes of officials in their home communes, and felt pressured to move and then stay. Mr. Đàm, who also moved to Bát Xát District in 1963 from Nam Định, explained: “They encouraged me, but in fact we didn't want to move. Thirty moved here, but only five stayed. We set up a cooperative, but it was so hard and others left again for our homeland. The state encouraged us a lot, talking about a better and bright future, they didn't really force us. But when we moved it was too difficult and miserable.”

A very different cohort also arriving after 1954 were people marked “capitalists” (*tư sản*) due to connections with the French during colonial times. These individuals were forced into new occupations in the uplands by the state. Mr. Sơn, who had been studying medicine at the Université Indochinoise in Hanoi, was sent to fell trees near Sa Pa Town, which he noted was “backbreaking work.” It was only in the late 1980s that he was able to move into private business, establishing one of the first hotels for international tourists in Sa Pa after Đổi Mới.

More “desirable migrants,” relocated as part of the NEZs, were usually provided with free state transportation and access to land, and sometimes fifteen kilograms of rice per person. Yet, despite initial government support, life was tough. Interviewees detailed how these subsidies, and the quality and farm-readiness of available land, varied tremendously. Local transportation to new sites depended on the resources available in receiving communes, ranging from trucks and vans to horses or just having to walk. Roads were either a mix of stones and dirt if following routes that French military personnel had upgraded to be accessible by motor vehicles, or remained dirt tracks and footpaths. One interviewee, Mr. Thanh, who moved from Hà Nam Province to Bát Xát District in 1963, explained: “The roads were soil and it was really hard to

travel from one place to another . . . Plants and bush covered the very small roads. When we walked, our hands had to pave the way to move forward!" Moreover, houses were rudimentary, tending to be made from bamboo and mud bricks.

Others remembered the lack of educational facilities, explaining that in the 1960s there were no secondary or high schools in any of Lào Cai's rural communes receiving migrant families. Children thus walked long distances to access schools (if available) in larger towns. One interviewee, Ms. Vũ, born in Bảo Thắng District in 1971 after her parents' arrival, noted: "It was so hard when we studied compared with now. We only had a primary school nearby and then we had to go to Phố Lu Town to continue studying. In the primary school the tables were broken and the blackboard was shiny and blackened by using the inside of a dead battery so that the teacher could write on it." Another interviewee, Ms. Đỗ, who moved to Bát Xát Town in the early 1960s, lamented that her children were unable to go to secondary school because none were built until 1966.

The majority of migrants resettled in remote areas where they had been allocated land and continued farming livelihoods, albeit in collectives. Mr. Đào recounted his parents' move to the uplands in 1949: "When my parents were in their homeland, they were farmers, so when we moved here, my parents continued farming, growing rice and fruit trees; but now for the collective." A few others migrated to work in state-organized forestry cooperatives or other state positions such as railway work. Often these nonfarming positions were allocated to army veterans, as Mr. Dương, an 87-year-old, explained: "I finished serving in the army and was transferred to work at Phố Lu railway station. The state sent me here. Other army people came here to be drivers for state enterprises." Over half the interviewees arriving at this time also spoke of informal trade networks beyond state collectives, with a lively barter of vegetables, chickens, and hemp at weekend markets with ethnic minorities or other Kinh, as well as an illegal trade of other agricultural products and wood.

This first wave of migrants noted that they struggled to stay connected with their homelands, and few had enough money for a visit home during their first years post-relocation. If they could scrape together the resources, they usually returned with gifts of cassava, sugar, and bamboo shoots, unable to afford the customary monetary gifts at Tết (Vietnamese lunar new year). Mr. Lê, introduced earlier, elucidated: "We were very poor. We didn't have anything, didn't have enough food to eat, we were very hungry. We lived here for five years before we visited our homeland. In 1970 my mother passed away and it took five days before I knew because we didn't have telephones like today. The news was sent on paper through the post office and if they hadn't delivered it to me I wouldn't have known."

Intriguingly, we found that a daily reminder of one's homeland was sometimes provided through the naming of new upland villages. Mr. Thanh, introduced earlier, who migrated to Bát Xát District, explained: "About 50–60 households from Ngô Khê Commune, Hà Nam Province, all moved here by train . . . This village is called Ngô Khê to remember the name of our village in our homeland." Others combined the names of sending and receiving locales, as Mr. Định, who arrived in the uplands in 1964, explained: "Đông was the name of a small village already here and Thái is from Thái Bình Province, our homeland, so after we settled we decided to make our village Đông Thái."

While poor living conditions and infrastructure caused some migrants to return home, others were determined to stay, concerned that returning would negatively affect their family's reputation. As Ms. Hoàng from Thái Bình Province noted of her migration to Bắc Hà District in 1970:

When we moved, on days one and two we stayed in Lào Cai Town in a guest house. We were so happy, as we thought it would be much better than our life in the countryside. But the third



day, we moved here. The more we traveled, the more we cried; it was so wild, with lots of high slopes. But my mother was afraid that if I came back, my father would hit me and it would make them shy and embarrassed in the village, so I told her that once I left, I wouldn't come back, please don't worry.

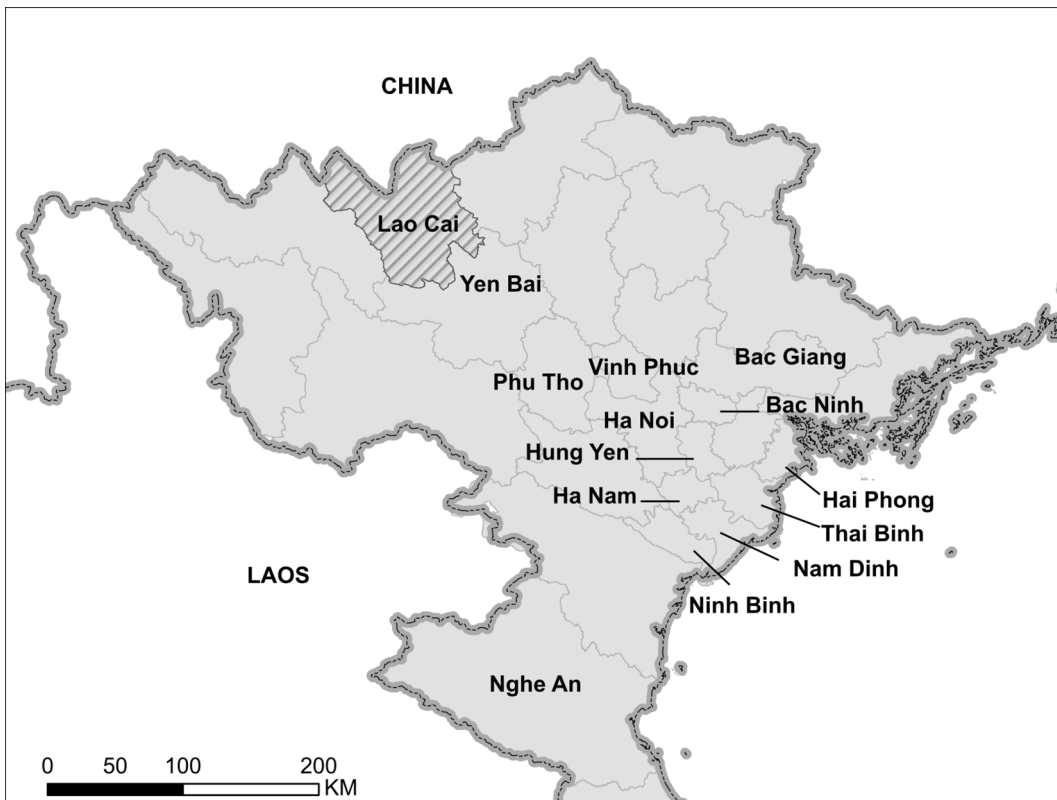
Nonetheless, reflecting more generally on this wave of migrants, Mr. Nguyễn, a migrant to Bắc Hà District, estimated that about one in three migrants did return home after a short time in the uplands, unwilling (or unable) to be part of the state's consolidation of these uplands.

## ***Second Migrant Wave: 1975–1995***

### ***Pre-Đổi Mới: 1975–1985***

After the Second Indochina War, or the American War as migrants called it, interviewees noted that scouting teams were still used to determine relocation sites, yet extended family and village networks began to play a more central role in many migration decisions. For instance, Ms. Thứ, who moved to Mường Khuông District in 1985, noted: "I'm from Vinh Phúc Province. I had a friend who introduced me to the idea of coming here. So my three sisters and I came." Indeed, all single women interviewees who migrated as part of NEZ initiatives had moved with relatives or other young female friends, with social networks deemed to protect them from perceived risks. Often, interviewees who moved during this period explained that they had initially discussed upland opportunities with migrants returning to visit their hometowns for

**Figure 2.** Home provinces of interviewed migrants. Map created by the authors.



festivals or other special events. A few wondered aloud whether the stories they heard had been exaggerated to “show off” to those who had remained behind. Indeed, a number who moved to the uplands based on such reports were thoroughly unimpressed by the reality they faced upon arrival. Some resorted to illegal actions to literally put a roof over their head, as Ms. Hồng, who had moved to Văn Bàn District in 1979, whispered: “At night, I stole pine bark in the hills to make a roof for my house. I couldn’t do it in daytime as I’d be punished immediately.”

The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war directly impacted a number of migrant interviewees. Those in Sa Pa Town recounted how the majority of Kinh residents walked five or six days to Yên Bái, south of Lào Cai Province, to evade Chinese forces, staying there for nearly two months before it was considered safe to return home. Similarly, Ms. Ly, who had settled in Bảo Thắng District with her husband in 1975, recounted: “In 1979 we experienced the Chinese war. There was nothing to eat so we had to return to Nam Định Province for a while. When we came back [to Bảo Thắng], the houses and everything were destroyed. We had no rice or cassava and we were scared all the time; we had to be prepared to leave in case the Chinese attacked again.” Yet, by the second half of 1979, the Vietnamese government was once again encouraging lowlanders to migrate to the uplands, with the political motives being made clear to potential migrants. Ms. An, who moved to Mường Khương, directly on the border with China, in late 1979, explained: “The government needed people to live here to keep our land and our country safe, because after the war it was so ravaged, only hills and mountains left, no houses or people.”

Links with one’s homeland continued to be important during this period, but once again migrants struggled to find appropriate gifts to take back with them on visits. Ms. Ly, introduced above, lamented that she never had sufficient funds to give her parents: “In 1976 my father was sick and I went home to see him, but I was very poor. I didn’t have money, so I told my father, ‘I don’t have money, I only could buy some sugarcane, so please have some.’ But he couldn’t chew as he was old and his teeth weren’t good. When I was returning here, he even gave *me* some money for transportation because he had been a teacher, so he had some pension.” Relatedly, the lack of good communication infrastructure with the lowlands was an ongoing concern for a number of migrants, and more than one mentioned receiving news of important events in their homeland after a significant delay, causing much heartache.

### *Impacts of Đổi Mới: 1986–1995*

After Đổi Mới was implemented, networks of family and friends continued to increase in importance in migration decision-making equations, while the NEZ policy and China border war no longer factored as important motives. Those choosing to move during this decade often had a number of family members already in the uplands and felt the pull of economic opportunities, such as the reopening of cross-border trade and a growth of mining. Mr. Lam, from Vĩnh Phúc Province, who moved to Bảo Yên District in 1990, explained: “When I moved here, I had many relatives living here already who told me what I could do . . . About 100 people came from my same commune.”

Yet migrants continued to face difficult circumstances upon arrival and complained of a lack of infrastructure. Over two-thirds arriving at this time noted poor road conditions, the limited availability of foods to which they were accustomed in the lowlands, and an unstable supply of electricity, or none at all. Upon arrival in 1991 with her husband, Ms. Yên from Bắc Ninh Province remembered: “It was really difficult to buy vegetables, we had to wait for the Sunday market. If we wanted to buy dried salted fish, it was hard to find. The fresh fish brought up here [from the lowlands] wasn’t fresh at all, the food was very miserable.” For some, the lack of infrastructure was just too much and they migrated again. Ms. An, introduced above, explained: “In

1993–1994, the houses were built with black oil-paper and bamboo. We were all very poor. It was tough! So many people couldn't stay, they just left.”

### *Third Migrant Wave: 1996–Present*

Since 1996, the migration patterns of interviewees have represented two main flows. First are a cohort of spontaneous economic migrants drawn by flourishing cross-border trade as well as rapidly growing tourism opportunities, especially in Sa Pa, and to a lesser extent Bắc Hà (see Table 1). With independent international tourism allowed again from the early 1990s, overseas tourists began to venture to Sa Pa Town to trek to nearby ethnic minority villages and visit minority markets. Lowland Kinh tourism also grew, but more with the aim of enjoying cooler temperatures and local vegetables and fruit, than ethnic minority cultures. With the 2014 completion of the highway and a cable car to the top of Fansipan mountain, the highest peak in the country, lowland tourists now arrive by the bus-, train-, and SUV-load (Michaud and Turner 2017). Many Kinh migrants who settled in Sa Pa during this period are capitalizing on the tourism boom, building and operating hotels, restaurants, and other tourist facilities in the town.

Over two-thirds of interviewees arriving after 1996 already had relatives settled in the uplands who encouraged their move, providing information and initial resources (accommodation, a loan of a motorbike, details of opportunities). Mr. Thiên, a carpenter who moved to Bắc Hà District in 2001, stressed the importance of family ties: “It was difficult to earn a living in our homeland, Phú Thọ Province. I’m a good carpenter so I moved here to work. I had a sister who’d been working here for a while and she was doing well, so she offered me a house to live in at the beginning, before I could buy this one. But I’ve had no support from the state because I’m a spontaneous migrant [*di cư tự do*].”

Mr. Tầm, from Nam Định, who moved to Bắc Hà in 1980, reflected upon this migration flow more broadly and in rather patriotic terms: “Before 1979, migrants moved here as groups following the government policy but after 1979, more ‘free migrants’ came here. For the past four to five years, people have come from Vĩnh Tường District, in Vĩnh Phúc Province. It is easy for them to do business here, they don’t have any support from the state but they make themselves rich and make our country stronger.”

A second migration pattern involves state employees, including teachers, forest rangers, People’s Committee officials, and those working in other government departments. These individuals receive a number of benefits if accepting a post to a northern borderland district (see Figure 1). Ms. Hoàng, introduced earlier, who moved to Bắc Hà in 1963, observed: “Now the government supports teachers to attract them to come to mountainous areas to work. They get 35 percent extra salary!” Ms. Hoạch, who moved to Si Ma Cai District in 2010, added: “Teachers and state officials have high salaries and a lot of priority in the borderland area.” In 2000, the establishment of a new administrative district, Si Ma Cai,<sup>6</sup> and the designation of its new headtown, attracted an influx of state officials along with public services, new roads, and administrative buildings (SRV 2000). Mr. Vân, from Yên Bái Province, listed a number of the benefits he received as a state official posted to Si Ma Cai:

I came in 2000, when Si Ma Cai and Bắc Hà were divided. I graduated from university and volunteered to come here . . . The salary is several times higher than in the lowlands, and people who have just graduated can get very high salaries. Here we get 200 percent subsidies on top of our regular salary in three border districts: Mường Khương, Si Ma Cai, and Bắc Hà. All the bosses in my office receive VND 30,000,000 [\$1,330] per month,<sup>7</sup> a very high salary, and the government provides land and a house. We have nothing to worry about!

Nonetheless, hinting at nepotism within the state sector, Mr. Vân added that nowadays, “it’s very difficult to find a job in a state office or company here. All the relatives of high officials, they’re the ones that get the jobs here now.” Perhaps this helps strengthen state loyalties on the border, given that this program appears to be a new territorializing project, somewhat reworking past models.

Not surprisingly, interviewees who migrated after 1996 were far more positive about the infrastructure available in recent years, noting that government policies such as Program 135 (to alleviate poverty in mountainous areas) had done much to improve services and facilities. Instead, complaints tended to focus on personnel in local government facilities, especially medical staff and their lack of training. Interviewees were aware that despite state bonuses for being stationed in the uplands, medical staff try to move to larger cities quickly, where they can make more money through private practice or bribes. Ms. Hoạch explained the situation in Si Ma Cai District in 2018: “The electricity, water, and hospital are okay, while the school here is better than Tiên Hải District, Thái Bình Province, my lowland village. But the dentist here isn’t well trained, so I have to travel one hundred kilometers to fix my tooth decay.”

A new dynamic also arising during this period has been onward migration within the uplands to more populated settlements. Nearly all interviewees knew of migrants from previous decades who had become fairly wealthy in an upland rural district, often through trade (sometimes illegal), and had then moved to Lào Cai City. As Ms. Yên, introduced above, who moved to Bắc Hà District in 1991, bluntly put it: “If people get richer, they move to Lào Cai City.” Mr. Yến, from Nam Định Province, who arrived in Bảo Thắng District in 1979, added: “Lào Cai has become a city because so many people shift from places like here to there; all the rich people have moved to Lào Cai [City].”

### **Frontier Commonalities?**

Across this frontier province, Kinh migrant livelihoods have become increasingly diverse, especially since the mid-1980s, ranging from state-sector jobs, private businesses, and the urban informal economy to cash cropping and semisubsistence farming. As such, there is limited evidence of a single “frontier development” thesis when focusing on the everyday lived experiences of Kinh migrants, especially over the past 30 years but even, as our interviewees described, before that. As Cleary (1993: 338) explains with regard to the Brazilian Amazon, ignoring the sphere of local agency means that classical frontier theory overlooks “much of what turned out to be important as the frontier evolved: the informal economy, towns and cities, and a multi-layered, emphatically non-monolithic state.” Nonetheless, as Cleary continues, “some interesting commonalities cut across the underestimated variation” (*ibid.*).

The first commonality we found was the degree to which first- and second-wave migrant interviewees were unprepared for the comparatively tough conditions that awaited them, regardless of which upland district they moved to. Among interviewees who remained from these waves there was also a shared feeling of pride that they had “stuck it out,” as well as an acknowledgment that to return home in the initial years would have dishonored both their family and state officials pushing propaganda regarding the patriotic virtues of an upland move. Second, we found social networks grew steadily more important over time, especially for second- and third-wave migrants, as the NEZ program lost traction. These networks underpinned migrant decision making, with settler reports of upland opportunities convincing others to make the move, and prior waves of settlers supporting new migrants upon arrival with accommodation, employment opportunities, and local knowledge.

Third, Kinh migrants in the first and second waves were generally unaware if their land had been previously farmed by ethnic minorities, with migrants forming new clusters of village houses, rather than mixing with already established minority hamlets. Kinh arriving in the third wave were more likely to move into urban areas, and hence generally had little initial interaction with minority populations. Indeed, migrants arriving during any of the three migration waves to any district had little to say about their non-Kinh neighbors. Migrants considered these uplands relatively empty spaces ripe for “development,” and had few interactions with ethnic minority inhabitants except for small-scale trade. In recent years these interactions have slowly increased to also include a limited number of ethnic minority individuals being employed by Kinh across the province (generally as farm laborers, construction workers, or in hotels) (for more on minority-Kinh relations in Lào Cai Province, see S. Turner et al. 2015; S. Turner and Oswin 2015).

A fourth commonality notable across this upland space was the degree to which migrants attempted to maintain strong links to their homelands. Indeed, the upland Vietnam frontier might be settled physically, but it appears far less so symbolically and emotionally. Upon arrival, upland migrants not only tried to improve their physical situation, but also attempted to improve their psychological state, as many experienced feelings of isolation and dislocation far from their homelands. To cope, interviewees explained that they established or joined “homeland groups” [*Hội Đồng Hương*] organized at the commune or district level. At group meetings, often held on a meaningful anniversary, such as the date most people had migrated if part of the NEZ program, or the date of a lowland festival, migrants gathered to maintain a sense of belonging and connection to their homeland, the significance of which appeared to become amplified through such groups. Among many first- and second-wave migrants especially, lowland homelands have taken on “a metaphorical or discursive space of belonging and identification,” and migrants maintain a strong sense of attachment to their ancestral village (Brickell 2011: 27; see also Schlecker 2005). For some interviewees, this has continued for over 50 years (albeit still a relatively short time according to Vietnamese multigenerational time frames).<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, for third-wave migrants, their sense of place attachment was more heterogeneous. Some were intent on establishing families and creating a local sense of belonging, while others, especially those under 40 years old, were less sure they would remain long-term, usually stating that it depended on their business success. Another aspect playing into the indecisiveness of recent migrants was the less than welcoming comments some had heard earlier migrants make of them. Interviewees who had arrived prior to 1986 had some rather harsh commentaries regarding newer migrants outside their social networks, disparaging them as “just here to make money” and “greedy,” while playing up their own patriotic duty of having moved during more difficult times. This was by far the most consistent theme that emerged regarding relations among the different migration waves, and points to the importance of understanding “micro-social milieus” to interpret the experiences and adaptation of migrants, and their place attachment (Berg and Eckstein 2015: 4).

### Concluding Thoughts: Complete Territorialization?

While focusing on the patterns and processes by which Lào Cai Province has been peopled with lowland migrants over the past 70 years and comparing migrants’ everyday lived experiences, perhaps the most insightful commonality we found across both time and space was the high

level of state involvement in the peopling of Lào Cai's districts with lowland Kinh. Can we thus conclude that the territorialization of Lào Cai Province has been achieved? Structurally, the Vietnam state has certainly consolidated power over these uplands since World War II. While the state's role was obvious with regard to the NEZs, territorialization has continued in more subtle ways via programs providing incentives for state-sympathetic, lowland migrants to settle in borderland districts, and policies to encourage economic development and investment across the province.

Earlier waves of somewhat coerced migration, relying largely on the promise of rural opportunities and state propaganda of dedication to the nation, have shifted to a new wave of migrants either with large state bonuses to keep them loyal, or with aspirations rooted in new economic opportunities. All such waves align with the state's strategic agenda to spatially transform the frontier. It should also be noted that contrary to recent large-scale Chinese investments seen in Laos, Cambodia, and Burma, supported by local officials, to date there are no large-scale Chinese investments in Lào Cai Province to encourage (or manipulate?) this territorialization project (Qian and Tang 2019). Having experienced one thousand years of occupation by China in the first millennium AD, as well as more recent Chinese incursions onto its soil, it is not surprising that Vietnam state officials see frontier development in a very different light.

At the same time, local, covert opposition to this territorialization project should not be ignored, and in local imaginations we suggest it is not necessarily accepted as a done deal. It would be wrong to overlook migrant actions, albeit fairly small-scale, that have often worked against the central state's goal to enfold these uplands firmly within state control through different articulations of territorial rule. Many migrants have avoided the state's gaze while engaging in barter, smuggling, the trade of illegal substances, or trafficking. As just two examples of the many we heard, Ms. Bảo, who arrived in Sa Pa in 1978 as part of the NEZ scheme, noted that her husband was involved in smuggling *pơ mu* (*Fokienia hodginsii*; a conifer prized for its durability for building houses and coffins) until he was caught in 1991. In 2019, Mr. Khanh, a Kinh migrant who arrived independently in Sa Pa in 1998 to work in the tourism sector, explained how he creates opium poppy alcohol for local clients and tourists, with ethnic minority cultivators visiting his house late at night to trade the illegal raw commodity. We also heard numerous stories of livestock and alcohol smuggling to China, pesticide smuggling back to Vietnam, and local adaptations of policies to fit migrants' needs, such as "cooking the books to appear a poor village" in order to maintain state subsidies. While the official rhetoric is that local officials are trying to crack down hard on such illicit or illegal activities, there are numerous opportunities for local officials—migrants themselves—to individually benefit from under-the-table payments or bribes (Sa Pa District interviewees).

Along with the close connections that many migrants maintain with their homelands, there is a certain fluidity to the psychological taming of this frontier. It is a locale where many migrants are not too sure they belong, and many still think of moving on. Moreover, it is a site where transgressions against the state are not uncommon, with the legitimacy of the state somewhat challenged. This frontier region thus remains an ambiguous site "where opportunity and possibility are intimately linked to resistance and official unease" (Cons and Eilenberg 2019: 3). Of course, one could argue that individuals resist state efforts elsewhere in Vietnam too, yet it must be remembered that this is an international frontier with a dominant neighbor with whom the Vietnamese state has an ongoing uneasy relationship, and where an ongoing territorialization project appears to have been pushed for decades. As the population of this frontier diversifies further, the political and social ramifications will become increasingly complex. How the state will respond, on China's doorstep, is yet unknown.

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## ■ NOTES

1. This article does not focus on the experiences or reflections of ethnic minority populations who were already living in this region. We are certainly not ignoring their voices; they are the focus of other articles and ongoing research.
2. We are very aware that gender plays an important role in migration decision making. We found that when talking about a household's initial decision to move (with either a man or women interviewee), they noted that women had deferred to their husband's decision regarding migration if there were disagreements. However, we have not probed these disagreements nor women's possible resistance strategies at this stage of research (cf. Hoàng Lan Anh 2011).
3. Among other causes, this conflict was due to China's displeasure over Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia to uproot the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam's treatment of Chinese nationals within Vietnam, and soured relations due to Vietnam's pivot from China toward the Soviet Union for political and military direction.

4. It should be noted that spontaneous international migration was not a viable option for the majority of rural Kinh in northern Vietnam until government restrictions on overseas travel were slowly lifted from the mid-1980s onward. While international migration has grown rapidly in recent years, especially labor migration within Asia, most migrants still relocate within the country (Coxhead et al. 2015).
5. All first names are pseudonyms with the appropriate gender title.
6. In 1966, Bắc Hà District was divided into Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai Districts, before the two were merged in 1975, to revert back to Bắc Hà District. In 2000, Bắc Hà was once again split into Bắc Hà and Si Ma Cai Districts.
7. As a comparison, monthly salaries of state university professors in Hanoi are about US\$200–400.
8. To some degree these findings echo those of international migration scholars working with a transnational framework who argue that migrants remain engaged with their homelands rather than being fully assimilated into new societies and breaking all ties (Glick Schiller and Levitt 2006).

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